

Educating for Citizenship: Transformational Pedagogy in the  
Neoliberal University

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## **Abstract**

This study extends the research on relationships between pedagogy and transformational learning in the neoliberal university. I argue that whilst neoliberalism in higher education is a well-researched topic, the relationship between pedagogy and neoliberalism has received less focus. I contend that universities are places where a commitment to democratic citizenship can be fostered through appropriate pedagogy within student groups to support the collectivity required to address some of the very serious societal threats such as social injustice that we all face.

In this project, I use a narrative methodology to generate data with 15 sociology students and recent graduates. I analyse this data thematically to create 4 themes which reflect how students position themselves in relation to a consumer and/or contributor identity, whether they have an individual and/or collective orientation to learning, whether they are motivated to learn by instrumental and/or self-development outcomes and whether they value objective and/or subjective knowledge. I analyse and use these themes using well-established understandings of critical pedagogy, but I develop the idea of 'neoliberal pedagogy' to capture and define the way that pedagogy can become infused with neoliberal characteristics. These characteristics are influenced by the technical-rationality of neoliberalism and include consumer-led, self-interested, measurable and auditable, outcome focused, competitive, objective understandings of knowledge and unquestioned reproduction of power in classroom settings whereas critical pedagogy encourages deep transformational learning by questioning power and inequalities.

The findings contribute to knowledge by exploring the interrelationships between student positioning, pedagogy and transformational learning. They point especially to the significance of experiencing higher education individually and the importance of subjective emotional knowledge in transformational learning. They also add to arguments that critical pedagogy is required for transformational learning and suggest that pedagogy in universities is not currently dominated by neoliberal pedagogy despite the neoliberal context of higher education.

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## **Dedication**

This doctoral work is dedicated to Betty Pye (1910-2013) who paved the way.

**Author's declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Signature:

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Background to this research project**

I write this thesis as a lecturer and doctoral student in a higher education institution in England. I have been a lecturer for almost 10 years, originally recruited on a 'teaching only' contract to bring social work practice experience into the classrooms of a social work programme. Over time, I noticed my growing unease at what I perceive to be the increasing but subtle promotion of practice that values the administration and bureaucratic processes (Ball, 2015) which support teaching rather than pedagogy itself, concerns that are not unique to me (Irvine, 2012). This is an all too familiar experience; I ultimately moved away from social work practice because of the rational-technical frameworks (Schön, 1987) that local authorities value at the expense of what I believe is effective and ethical practice (Pye and Paylor, 2017). It was fascinating but troubling to note the similarities within these two professional settings and unsurprisingly, this resulted in awareness that neoliberalism has a role in shaping both contexts. This is of great interest to me as I identify strongly as a social worker because of my past experiences, and social work values and neoliberalism are incompatible (Feldman, 2023). It is within the resulting struggle that this research project was born.

This project is essentially a study of how students experience the relationships between pedagogy and transformational learning in the neoliberal university. It therefore brings together my love of teaching, my concerns about neoliberal contexts and my beliefs in the power of education for positive and profound personal and societal transformation. My motivation for undertaking this research grew from my experiences of being an educator within higher education, specifically my perception that the context of my role restricts opportunities for creative, responsive and therefore transformative pedagogy. My social work roots have instilled in me a belief in the moral and social responsibilities of all to fight injustice in our world, and I believe that through transformative education we can raise critical awareness for both emancipation and empowerment to promote collective responses to social, epistemic and climate injustices. I feel I have a responsibility to contribute to such transformative learning and to understand, explore, make visible and resist processes that I encounter within my educator role which I perceive limit pedagogy to a simplistic idea of knowledge transfer. This sense of responsibility is emboldened by my own experiences of transformational education, both in relation to my social work education more than 20 years ago and within my current doctoral studies programme. It is clear then that I am far from an objective researcher, I hold beliefs, views, experiences and values that influence this research, and I will detail these further in chapter 4.

## 1.2 The English higher education context

At the time of writing, there is significant concern about the future of higher education in England as high numbers of institutions face serious economic shortfalls (Booth and Halterbeck, 2025) resulting in programmes of redundancy (UCU, 2025). The scale of this problem is creating a tangible sense of insecurity and uncertainty about and within universities in relation to their financial viability. Care should be used when using the language of ‘crisis’ in any circumstances, but especially within higher education which has a history of framing challenges as crises (Tight, 2024). However, it is difficult to see how the current situation is anything but a crisis, and one which has been on the horizon for some time (Jones, 2022).

The context of these challenges is the neoliberalisation of higher education which forces universities to operate within a market logic, framing students as consumers who now pay for their education, seen as a commodity, at great personal cost (Tomlinson, 2017; Evans, 2020). This marketization has pushed universities towards competing for students because student fees are needed to fund the ‘business’. Regulation of universities happens largely through measuring, quantifying and auditing activities in quantitative metrics which are translated into various ‘league tables’ and made public to fuel the sense of competition in the sector (Peseta et al, 2017). Influential management consultants are employed to offer perspectives on the future of higher education institutions in which there is little acknowledgement of the public and civic impact of universities (Shore, 2024). Neoliberal discourse encourages students to think in competitive terms about their own self-interested individual success (Marginson, 2024) to enable them to secure well paid employment beyond their degree so they can both contribute to our capitalist economy whilst paying off their student debts. The popularity of some arts, humanities and social science subjects which are considered less likely to lead directly to specific employment seem to be those under more threat in the current financial crisis because without student fees, disciplines are not financially viable in a neoliberal context. This has prompted calls for a greater awareness in the contribution of these disciplines to our society (The British Academy, 2024).

This marketization of higher education has renewed questions about the purpose of universities. The need for students to gain employment to pay their debts has resulted in a more instrumental focus on employment outcomes at the expense of considering the more difficult to measure civic and citizenship contribution that higher education makes to our societies (Watson, 2014). This can reduce the potential of universities to lead the way in development of transformative knowledge, instead favouring the reproduction of existing knowledge to support the status quo thereby failing to disrupt inequalities and injustice in our societies.

### **1.3 Research questions**

At its heart, this project is about pedagogy in a higher education context. My specific area of interest is pedagogy that fosters transformative teaching and transformational learning. This interest arises from my role as an educator and my desire to ensure that I am working with students to create such opportunities within my own pedagogical practices. I chose sociology as a focus for this study because research has previously indicated that sociology students experience transformational learning (McLean et al, 2015; Abbas et al, 2016; Muddiman, 2018) and that they have a citizenship orientation (Muddiman, 2020). Thus, it was hoped that the data generated could build on this knowledge to enable exploration of what this transformation is, how it happened and what it potentially means for the participants' futures. The below research questions frame this study:

1. In what ways do sociology students feel they are transformed through their experience of pedagogy?
2. What aspects of pedagogy do sociology students feel support transformative learning?
3. How do sociology students feel their pedagogical experiences has/will influence their future sense of citizenship?

These questions are answered in the final chapter of this thesis.

### **1.4 Use of theory and research design**

Chapters 3 and 4 give an in-depth analysis and rationale for my use of theory and research design; here I will give an introduction and overview. This is a study motivated by the desire to understand more about transformative learning in the neoliberal university from the perspective of students. It is a qualitative project which used a narrative approach (Riessman, 2008) to generate data via conversations with 15 participants, all of whom were either sociology students or very recent graduates of sociology at a single English university. I place a great deal of value on hearing from students because during my time as an educator, this has been a source of insightful learning for me, especially in matters related to pedagogy. This is why I chose to generate data with students as participants in this research. The research site is where I am both currently employed as a lecturer and enrolled as a doctoral student. Chapter 4 will address the 'insider researcher' position that I inhabit in this study (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007).

I analysed the narrative conversations thematically (Riessman, 2008; Braun and Clarke, 2022a) and this resulted in 4 themes being created from the data. The themes represent my interpretation of recurring patterns of discussion from our conversations relating to the self-positioning of students influenced by context and discourse in their learning experiences. I use a theoretical and analytical framework

constructed of neoliberal pedagogy and critical pedagogy to categorise the experience within these positionings and explore them in relation to participants experiences of transformational learning. The learning that I have gained from working with participants in this study will influence my pedagogical practices when I am aiming to create transformative learning opportunities.

### **1.5 Contribution to knowledge**

My contribution to knowledge has four elements mentioned briefly here before a fuller exploration in chapter 9. By building on existing work which explores the transformative potential of sociology, it extends the insight to both teaching practice, theory and philosophy which supports transformative learning within a neoliberal university. The result is insight into how student positionality in relation to their identity as a consumer, orientation towards learning, motivation for learning and the value placed on the epistemic stance within their learning, their pedagogical experiences and experiences of transformation are all interrelated. Firstly, the significance of individualism as an experience in higher education and secondly the importance of subjective emotional knowledge are both specifically offered as contributions to knowledge arising from this project.

Thirdly, I develop the concept of 'neoliberal pedagogy' in the creation of my twofold analytical framework. It is a term used occasionally by Henry Giroux (for example 2020) to capture how neoliberalism is reflected in pedagogy. I have developed this expression into a defined term to more precisely assert how the neoliberal university shapes pedagogy. Although there is much work on neoliberalism in higher education, there is little on its direct impact on teaching (Tight, 2019) so the development of this term gives language to debate and explore neoliberalism and pedagogy.

Fourthly, I contribute to the arguments that critical pedagogy is strongly related to student experiences of transformational learning. I provide evidence that critical pedagogy does exist within the neoliberal context of the university thus demonstrating that so far, pedagogy has not become entirely dominated by neoliberalism. I suggest that critical and neoliberal pedagogy seem to coexist despite the tensions in their philosophies and practices suggesting that educators are finding ways to enact critical pedagogy within the neoliberal context of the university.

### **1.6 Limitations**

This is a small-scale qualitative study meaning the findings are not generalisable. It was subjectively driven by myself as the researcher and as will be clear already, I have biases and agendas which have shaped both the topic of this research and its design. However, as explored in chapter 3, the research paradigm or interpretive framework within which I am situated means that it would be inauthentic of

me to have approached my desire to generate knowledge about transformational learning in the neoliberal university in any other way.

There are practical aspects of this project which restrict any claims I can make widely. Firstly, the focus on students from one discipline within one university means that findings can only be attributed accordingly. Secondly, all participants were self-selecting and contributed to this study by responding to a generic invitation. Out of the 15 that took part, 14 had experienced transformational learning. It would have been very interesting to hear from more students who had not had this experience, if they exist. Also, one of the findings from this research indicates that participants identify strongly as people who want to contribute positively to society (chapter 5). I am aware that this disposition might be why these participants chose to be part of this research. Finally, I want to acknowledge here that the way I use my chosen framework in the analysis of my data has limitations, but I explore these and offer a rationale for its use in chapter 4 rather than here to enable the discussion of this within the context of my research design.

## **1.7 A note on language**

Language is open to interpretation, and I therefore want to be explicit about the phrases and words I have chosen to use in this thesis if they have been used in specific ways. Below explains my use of some of my key terms.

### **1.7.1 Lecturer / educator**

Lecturer, educator, pedagogue, facilitator and academic are terms that can be used in the context of learning and teaching almost interchangeably. I use the term lecturer when referring to my own academic position because this reflects my job title. However, I prefer the term educator when referring to a person who has a responsibility to facilitate learning and teaching and as a result, this is the term most used within this thesis. I tend to use the term academic when referring to a person employed by a university in the context of them having a range of responsibilities aligned with a typical role within a university such as research, engagement, leadership and administration. I may use the term pedagogue and facilitator occasionally, usually to avoid overuse of the term educator as I see these three terms as very similar.

### **1.7.2 University / higher education institution**

I use these terms interchangeably throughout this thesis although I do recognise that not all higher education institutions are universities. I have used the words higher education institutions to include universities, but if I am referring to an issue specific to universities, I have used university/ies.

### **1.7.3 Pedagogy, neoliberal pedagogy and critical pedagogy**

I use 'pedagogy' to capture the philosophy, theory and practice of teaching. 'Pedagogy' when used in this thesis refers to more than teaching methods. It also includes the beliefs and theory about knowledge and the purpose of education which underpin and surround learning and teaching activities. I therefore understand and use the term 'pedagogy' to represent how teaching is not a neutral practice; it is imbued with the beliefs and ideology of the enacting educator. This is further explored in the following chapter (2.4). I use the term 'neoliberal pedagogy' to reflect pedagogy that is infused with beliefs and practices that mirror neoliberal principles, for example viewing education as a product to be imparted to the buying student customer and educational success being quantified by measurable outcomes. 'Critical pedagogy' is used in this thesis to describe pedagogy that is instilled with beliefs that education is both political, empowering and emancipatory and its role is to raise awareness of oppression and inequality. These two terms are further explored in chapter 3 (3.4.2 and 3.4.3).

### **1.7.4 Teaching and learning / learning and teaching**

I use teaching and learning or learning and teaching to refer to classroom-based practice. I change the order of these words as I see these two activities as one, each in a reciprocal relationship with the other. One does not come before the other in a position similar to that described by Ashwin (2009).

### **1.7.5 Transformative / transformational learning**

These two terms are also used deliberately to signify the difference between the potential, that is transformative and the actual, transformational learning. As I go on to explore in chapter 2 and beyond Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) as developed by Jack Mezirow (1997; 2009) forms part of the theoretical framework of this study so when referring to this theory specifically, I will capitalise and include a citation.

## **1.8 Structure of thesis**

The thesis is structured to share the story of this project in a coherent and logical way. Following this introduction, which is designed to set the overall scene of the research project, the second chapter explores the extant literature on higher education in relation to neoliberalism, the purpose of higher education and pedagogy within universities. Chapter 3 outlines my interpretive and theoretical framework and chapter 4 the research design. Chapters 5-8 are findings and discussion chapters combined to avoid abstracting the findings from my interpretation of them. These 4 chapters explore student positionality in terms of their:

1. identity as consumers and/or contributors

2. orientation to learning as individual and/or collaborative
3. motivations for learning as developmental and/or instrumental
4. epistemic stance as valuing subjectivity and/or objectivity

and relationships with pedagogy and transformative learning. Chapter 9 is the conclusion and will draw together the overall findings from this study to answer the research questions.

### **1.9 Chapter summary**

This introductory chapter has set the scene of this research project and explained what is to follow in this thesis. Given the current (and I would say genuine) crisis in English higher education, which is live as I write, this is a timely piece of research to explore and illuminate how universities are currently teaching students and for what purpose. It generates data from conversations with sociology students to gather insights into how transformational learning happens within the neoliberal university and offers a unique perspective in its consideration of student positionality in this. It confirms critical pedagogy as enabling transformational learning and I remain motivated by hope as an “*ontological need*” (Freire, 1994, p.16), that even within the current crisis of the neoliberal university, pedagogy can support students to become critically informed citizens of the future.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this literature review, I draw on the extant literature which is relevant to this study to both provide a context for this research and to provide the foundations from which I have developed the theoretical framing and research design which are covered in the following two chapters. Below, I start with an overview of the context of English higher education. My argument here is that neoliberalism has devalued some of the more traditional aims of higher education in its pursuit of measurable outcomes linked to employment increasingly becoming the primary purpose of higher education. The second section of this review questions the purpose of higher education by exploring the concept of citizenship as an equally, if not more important aim for higher education than the more instrumental employment focus that I argue has been developing for some time. I argue that supporting students to develop a sense of citizenship is vital if higher education wants to be socially responsible. The final section of this literature review focuses on pedagogy, which is the formal route through which learning, whatever its focus or purpose, takes place. Of course, this is far from the only way that students learn and develop in higher education contexts and whilst the focus here is on formal learning contexts, learning also takes place through friendships, relationships and the wide array of social opportunities available to students at universities.

### **2.2 Context of English higher education**

#### **2.2.1 Where are we and how have we got here?**

At the time of writing, higher education in England is facing significant difficulties (Jones, 2022). The most immediate and pressing challenge is financial, critically understood to be a failure of the market logic universities have been forced to operate within (Habib and Hastings, 2025). There appear to be very real threats to the sustainability of some higher education institutions and programmes within them. Whilst this is an unsettling time for all involved, it does provoke important questions about how the crisis has arisen and what are possible solutions. It reignites questions about the purpose of higher education and how universities relate to wider communities and societies. Although conditions for exploring these questions are perhaps not ideal, it is important that debates are had as this is not the first crisis that the sector has faced and universities have a history of adaption and development in the face of difficulties (McLean et al, 2018).

Numerous scholars have provided critical analysis of the likely trajectory of higher education within the wider political picture of the UK over many years, so the current situation is unlikely to be a surprise for those working in this field. This makes it no less distressing, but understanding how it has come

about is certainly helpful. The higher education sector in the UK, and globally, has experienced enormous change since the 1990s which saw so called massification of student numbers, and in England the resultant high fee and loan regime. However, we can see the beginning of the expansion trajectory much earlier than the 1990s triggered by beliefs that increasing numbers of students attending university would constructively reshape higher education and positively impact on communities who would benefit from increased numbers of graduates (Cantwell et al, 2022). Following a period of relative calm immediately post war, in the early 1960 as part of a plan for development of both wider society but also for economic reasons, growing the higher education sector began. The publication of the Robbins Report in 1963 which recommended this expansion was based on the recognition of increased desire and that higher education should be available to all those who wanted to access it. Indeed, the institution where the research for this project took place, Lancaster University, was opened in 1964 as one of a number to help increase access to higher education. Interestingly, the Robbins Report also included reference to how the expansion should not interfere with *“maintaining a commitment to the civic purpose of higher education”* (Annette and McLaughlin, 2005, p.84) indicating the value placed on this purpose within the early days of the sector expansion. In the 1980s, questions started to arise about the funding of the expanded sector and the now infamous introduction of fees in 1998 followed the 1997 Dearing Report. Since then, funding arrangements have been different across the 4 nations with England increasing fees significantly compared with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Despite concerns about whether this would make higher education unattractive, research indicates that it has not deterred students (Wakeling and Jefferies, 2013) and latest data available suggests there were 2.9 million students in UK universities in 2023-24 and an entry rate of 36.4% of UK 18-year-olds in 2024 (Bolton, 2025). Although these are UK figures rather than English, it is apparent that the cost associated with higher education has not reduced the interest in attending university and, as Bristow et al (2021) share in their research, young people who go to university see it as a normalised stage of their life course. The Dearing Report also contained reference to the need for coherent strategies to enhance teaching as more people accessed universities. Although the effectiveness of these strategies has been criticised (Trowler et al, 2005) this indicates that almost 30 years ago there was a belief that teaching and learning as an activity should receive greater attention within the massified higher education system where students are now making a significant personal investment in their education. The theme of teaching and learning will be returned to below.

### **2.2.2 Marketisation and consumerism**

There can be no doubt that the introduction of fees and loans, which replaced a model of grant funding, is one of the most significant shifts in higher education policy in the UK. The Browne Review,

which reported in 2010, actively encouraged universities to compete for students (Bristow et al, 2021) in a move that cemented the vision of higher education as a market. As students now pay for their own education they can be understood as consumers who are buying a product. The expectation is that they will behave like consumers and 'shop around' for the product that works for them. This consumer focus is extremely significant because it promotes competition within the sector, individualisation of the experience of higher education and understandably leads to students wanting a 'return' on their substantial financial investment. This return is generally understood to mean gaining meaningful and well-paid work beyond their degree thus contributing to instrumentalism within higher education. Employment in the UK is precarious following societal changes from a largely industrial to service-based society. A purely instrumental focus on employment as the desired outcome of a university experience is devaluing as graduates and non-graduates alike will face uncertainty and a lack of security in current economies (Prokou, 2008).

The payment of fees also means that students potentially see their engagement with higher education as a personal self-development investment which is designed to benefit them as individuals by way of increased employment opportunities. If students were funded through the state, they may well feel invested in, potentially prompting a sense of duty to contribute to wider society through a sense of citizenship. The failure of nations to recognise the 'public good' generated by higher education enables the primary focus to remain on the individual benefits gained via a university education (Marginson, 2024). Henry Giroux, writing in the North American context is a vocal scholar connecting the dangers of 'corporate culture' within the academy based on the self-interested individual at the expense of universities foregrounding their socially democratic responsibilities. One of his critiques of marketisation is the way that this has reduced space for genuine discussion and debate about the 'social', power, governance and citizenship because of its promotion of competition and the self-interested individual (Giroux, 2002).

How students see themselves in the marketized sector is complex and multi layered and they do not necessarily position themselves as consumers (Budd, 2017; Reynolds, 2022). However, research does appear to demonstrate that students recognise their education as a 'private good' in which outcomes that benefit them individually are important (Tomlinson, 2017). Empirical research by Reynolds (2022) demonstrates that this picture cannot be simplistically understood and the policy language used to frame students as consumers is not always welcomed by students. This research indicates that whilst 'value for money' is of interest to students because of their significant personal investment and a strong motivation for engaging with higher education is to increase employment opportunities, a purely instrumental approach is not what they want from their education. They value opportunities to pursue their own development and transformation as people not simply as future employees.

### **2.2.3 Neoliberalism in higher education**

The neoliberal project, which began in political terms in the UK in the 1980s is a belief system that prioritises market forces as the means of enabling efficient and effective development of all aspects of society including higher education. It embraces competition, supports individual success at the expense of a collective and, through claims of empowerment, holds individuals responsible for challenges they face in their lives (Sayer, 2016). Whilst it can be understood as a stepping back of the state in line with classic liberalism in order to promote individual freedoms, it is better understood as a shift in state function to support conditions for measurement of activity, processes and outcomes (Olssen and Peters, 2005) which then enable a self-governing, 'survival of the fittest' culture which does not need state leadership or responsibility. The consequence of this is the devaluing of collectivity, inclusivity and community instead promoting ways that individuals might be able to better one another.

Neoliberalism has understandably received huge attention in scholarly work on higher education especially in terms of its influence on policy, structures and governance. Its market logic explains how and why we operate in the 'knowledge economy' and it "*promotes the fictitious commodification of...knowledge*" (Jessop, 2017 p.858); that is even knowledge is monetised. However, care is needed when using this term. Neoliberalism is so pervasive in the literature about higher education that it becomes 'unseen' and vague. In using neoliberalism as a concept in such ways, we can, inadvertently contribute to its continued acceptance as the only way of being (Rowlands and Rawolle, 2013). Neoliberalism has shaped our public and private lives so deeply that it is not always recognised and seen – it is hegemonic. It requires critical thought to recognise and identify the ways that neoliberalism has shaped higher education to avoid the unhelpful use of this concept to attribute all problems in higher education to it uncritically in a way that could implicitly suggest all was well in higher education prior to its influence (Tight, 2019). To avoid this vague use of the term, above I have explored the role of neoliberalism in the marketisation of higher education and below I consider its influence in 'measuring' university work.

### **2.2.4. Measuring academia**

Instead of public sector organisations being run on understood and assumed values of public 'good', neoliberalism requires a form of micro-management based on organisations meeting targets and objectives to demonstrate performance and efficiency (Olssen and Peters, 2005). This is perhaps the most tangible everyday impact of neoliberalism on higher education because it requires processes, activity and outcomes to be measurable and auditable. This is premised on beliefs that it is both possible to measure everything and that it is desirable to do so because it helps make all aspects of higher education transparent, visible and, importantly, auditable. This is despite very real concerns

about how such practices can offer a distorted view of both individual institutions and the sector as a whole (Ashwin, 2020). In terms of governance, this explains the relationship between neoliberalism and new public management (NPM) or managerialism in higher education (Winter, 2009).

Returning to the point made above, if students are consumers, they must be able to 'see' what they are purchasing (Gunn, 2018). University and subject league tables, exercises such as the Teaching Excellence Framework and Research Excellence Framework, number of citations and grant income gained are just some examples of the ways academic work is measured. This continues despite evidence that simple metrics are at best unhelpful, at worst misleading when it comes to measuring complex activities, process and outcomes (Wilsdon et al, 2015). A very serious concern with this culture of measurement and audit is the way shapes practice within universities; it is not neutral, by existing it exerts influence. There is evidence that it leads to performativity (Ball, 2012) because academics feel compelled to change their practices to comply with measurement and audit regimes even if professionally this is recognised as problematic. For example, the requirement to seek feedback from students about their experiences of teaching could influence how and what subjects are taught. This is because challenging methods or topics could be avoided because students might give negative feedback (Bristow et al, 2021) which can have serious consequences for individual lecturers, especially when promotion applications must include such information. In terms of research, it can lead to the privileging of quantitative methodologies over qualitative and a desire to carry out 'unfunded' research in a bid to resist the increasingly controlled grant application and award process (Edwards, 2022). Academics can become so subsumed within neoliberal ways that it changes their practices and the way they work with and relate to colleagues (Ball, 2015). However, the impact of neoliberalism on pedagogy and teaching practices has been given relatively little attention (Tight, 2019) both empirically, and from the perspective of students, perhaps because we do not always recognise its presence. This study aims to contribute to this understanding by exploring the relationship between neoliberalism, pedagogy and transformational learning from a student perspective.

## **2.3 Purpose of higher education**

### **2.3.1 What are universities teaching for?**

As outlined in the introduction, the purpose of this project is to deeply explore the experiences of learning from a student perspective and to use these insights to contribute to the debates about teaching or pedagogy within the current English context of higher education. The neoliberal version of the purpose of higher education is that universities should be primarily focused on producing individuals who will be the workforce of the future which justifies the current loan-based funding system (Barr, 2020). In this vision higher education is likely to have an individualising, instrumental,

consumer and objective focus to facilitate an employment focused outcome. The shift toward this vision is underpinned by an orientation that knowledge should be useable and applicable rather than developed for its own sake (OECD, 2018). It has grown from the late previous century when the so-called skills agenda found a place within massified universities as a mission to translate knowledge into something explicitly useable (Barnett, 2007). This focus on the application of knowledge in the form of skills is a response to the demand for growing relationships between universities and the employment sector (Prokou, 2008). It can be clearly seen in the government discourse of centralising a skills-based rather than knowledge-based education with the newly created executive agency Skills England that officially came into being in June 2025 (for example, Department for Education, 2025)

Although I am not suggesting that English universities are currently only focused on employment related outcomes for students, traditionally, their purpose was less instrumental and based around developing students as intellectual and critical thinkers in order to benefit wider society (Zgaga, 2009). However, care must be taken to avoid viewing this traditional purpose in idealistic terms. It was positive for the predominately white, middle/upper class males whom universities catered for, but they were places of elitism and exclusion for many. There is a robust argument that higher education should be for developing critical and engaged citizens to support democratic civic participation for all (for example Giroux, 2020) and that this involves supporting students in their developmental journey towards ethical ways of being which includes an awareness of their personal and social responsibilities (Watson, 2014). Viewing the purpose of higher education in a binary way as being either about instrumental outcomes or personal and societal development and engagement is far too simplistic. It is more useful to think about how universities should have a role developing students individually and collectively for both reasons of gaining meaningful employment and to contribute to society through positive citizenship (McArthur, 2011; Veugelers et al, 2014; Ingleby, 2015).

### **2.3.2 Pluralistic purposes of higher education**

Most would acknowledge the potential of the less instrumental impact of higher education to include graduates feeling a sense of fulfilment, confidence, agency and willingness to contribute to society for reasons of wanting to do good. The instrumentalist view stated above can be understood within Beista's three purposes of education as being about 'qualification' and less instrumentally about 'socialisation' and 'subjectification' (Beista 2010; 2020). Whilst not without criticism (Coelho et al, 2025), this three-purpose theoretical framework is a helpful way to think about education, particularly in relation to how these three aspects intersect. There are concerns about whether students can experience socialisation and subjectification, that is finding ways to become part of their cultural and social worlds and be an autonomous and critically thinking 'subject' within universities which are focused on 'qualifications' or instrumental outcomes. However, an (un-systematic) search of English

university's vision/mission/goal type statements available online reveals that language of citizenship and related concepts such as civil and civic life are included in many of such statements. This suggests that higher education institutions recognise that they should be at the very least 'seen' to be contributing more widely to society than simply through the development of a capable workforce. Perhaps this is one way that universities feel they are able to hold onto their traditional and historical role of providing education for the benefit of both individuals and for wider society (Zgaga, 2009) and as contribution towards their overall social responsibility (Grant, 2021).

### **2.3.3 Citizenship in the context of higher education**

I am using the language of citizenship here to mean a personal orientation towards a willingness and confidence to contribute to society through democratic activities with an aim of achieving social good, fairness, inclusivity, justice and respect for others (Hoskins et al, 2008). Therefore, an education which aims to develop a sense of citizenship promotes inward (or reflexive) and outward critical awareness within individuals to enhance their appreciation of rights and responsibilities. To clarify, I am not necessarily referring here to 'citizenship education' which generally refers to planned teaching that aims to specifically and explicitly support students to understand citizenship, but I am referring to an education that is underpinned by the value of citizenship. In practice, this is an education in which critical thinking and reflection is key to enable students to consider new or familiar knowledge from different perspectives. I am giving space to explore this concept of citizenship here for two interconnected reasons. Firstly, because I am using this term to capture the sort of learning that I theorise promotes a commitment to social, climate and epistemic justice (Bamber et al, 2018; Misiaszek, 2016). It is difficult to confidently claim that a neoliberal higher education sector can really educate in ways that aim to address these injustices which I would argue are the most important matters facing our social and physical world. This is because in blunt terms, neoliberal approaches are individualist, competitive, extractionary and promote growth at all costs. Because of these beliefs, my argument within this thesis is that an educational approach that supports the development of citizenship is not only positive but essential for all our futures. Secondly, to draw attention to this more societal focused education as something different from an individually, instrumentally focused education.

The concept of citizenship, or active citizenship, is contested, varied and constructed within specific contexts (Veugelers et al, 2014; Kennedy, 2007). Within the context of neoliberalism, with its focus on individual rights, privately focused challenges and reduced value on social collaboration, it is not surprising that active citizenship is sometimes understood from an individual perspective (Clarke and Barnett, 2022) and that the 'place' of citizenship activity, the public sphere, is not seen as valuable (Misiaszek, 2016). Citizenship can be framed along neoliberal lines in which individualisation and

consumerism become defined as positive citizenship (Muddiman, 2020). In this context, citizenship can be understood as an individual socialisation process which potentially reproduces existing circumstances rather than a more critical, political and collective embodied citizenship (Biesta, 2009). So, whilst citizenship as a concept is generally understood to be well meaning, it has the potential to be exclusionary if not understood as diverse, inclusive and pluralistic (Annette and McLaughlin, 2005).

Within a consumerist, marketised and measured higher education sector, students are likely to find themselves focusing their energies on their own individual success rather than the broader citizenship related thinking (Raaper, 2021). However, there is evidence that engagement with higher education influences citizenship orientated behaviour (Hoskins et al, 2008; Simon et al, 2025) and could be influencing students and graduates' political attitudes, which is connected closely with citizenship in terms opportunities for engagement in democracy (Fryer, 2023). Yang and Hoskins (2020) demonstrated that higher education does appear to encourage participation in citizenship through voting intentions but not through more personally committed forms of citizenship such as volunteering and protest. This research cautioned against assuming that higher education was a casual factor in students and graduates presenting as citizenship orientated. However, as Simon et al (2025) found in their recent study, informal socialisation at university is central in the shaping of attitudes indicating the importance of relationships and social contexts of any learning environment. There is therefore clear evidence that higher education, whether through formal or informal means, has an impact on the social outlook of individuals who experience it. I would therefore argue that if higher education wants to impact positively on the social world, a commitment to supporting students to become citizenship orientated should be considered to be at least as important as preparing students for employment.

#### **2.3.4 Citizenship as transformative**

Giroux (2002) argues that the explicit connection between how neoliberalism and the resultant corporate competitive culture within universities means that the spheres and places for discussion about citizenship, what it means, and how collective solutions can have a place when working with personal challenges are reduced because education has become about personal good and individual success. In several publications (for example Giroux, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c, 2020 and 2014) he fiercely argues this point, focusing on how education has a role in countering hegemonic and dominant views that the social world is about the 'personal' at the expense of encouraging everyone within educational settings to consider the role education should play in contributing to fair and just societies through the promotion of critical thinking and action. Giroux argues that critical pedagogy is required within educational contexts to promote this critical thinking and to counter the hegemony of neoliberalist ways of understanding our role within societies. Supporting students to consider how their

experiences of being embedded in a neoliberal world with its focus on self-interest and the personalisation of problems could be experienced as a threshold concept whereby students experience a completely transformed view (Meyer and Land, 2005), in this case in their analysis of social difficulties and their role with society. As Mezirow (2009) indicates in his Theory of Transformative Learning, the experience of dilemmas, whereby students/people start to assimilate new understanding which do not align with previously/currently held understanding is part of the early stages of experiencing transformation. This is likely to at least be disorientating, if not emotionally troubling highlighting the relevance of experiencing emotion as part of powerful learning (O'Toole and O'Flaherty, 2024). In the neoliberal context, learning which is orientated towards citizenship issues, including raising awareness of the power of community, collectivity, collaboration, inclusivity, democracy, hegemony and the power of dominant discourse and matters related to social, epistemic and climate justice could very well be experienced as transformative. In its most extreme, education based on such philosophy, theory and practice constitutes a paradigm shift about the very nature of what it means for the survival of communities on our planet in the face of our finite resources (Stein et al, 2022).

### **2.3.5 University as a place for citizenship learning**

Although the online world provides an outlet and opportunities for engagement in citizenship (Raaper, 2021) in ways that transcend and disrupt traditional physical boundaries, geographic location remains important in terms of places for citizenship to 'happen' because citizenship is relational to location and context (Clarke and Barnett, 2022). Whilst citizenship sits within local, national, global and planet spheres (Misiaszek, 2016) it is generally experienced nationally and locally. This is because it is usually national contexts that oversee rights, and local spaces tend to be where the opportunities to actively participate in democratic activities are located (Biesta, 2009). These principles can be applied to a university where students' rights are protected and there are a range of ways that students can participate in citizenship orientated activities.

The concept of citizenship in relation to higher education is not one dimensional and applies to employed staff as well as students. It includes thinking about how members of staff enact and model citizenship in the context of their work (Albia and Cheng, 2023), how citizenship is potentially 'taught' to students through helping them understand how democratic processes work and how students learn to experience citizenship by being a member of a university and of wider communities (Yang and Hoskins, 2020). We should not forget about the more informal ways peers might influence students' ways of thinking about the world too (Strother et al, 2021) reminding us that university learning opportunities are far from confined to formal classrooms. However, from the perspective of pedagogy, opportunities to practise and experience ways of being, ways of using knowledge and rethinking held

understandings within the classroom can be helpful in developing critical engagement with some of the very real and complex issues (for example climate injustice) that we face (Keys and Heck, 2024). For example, collective discussion, reflection, debate and conversation can be used to as experiential experiences to provide opportunities for experiencing democracy, conflict, different perspectives and disruption of hegemonic understandings. So, whilst universities are an excellent place for learning about citizenship, as mentioned above, this kind of learning can also be unsettling for students.

### **2.3.6 Should higher education be transformative?**

Explicit consideration of how to develop citizenship in higher education is presented here as positive and essential because of my beliefs that this is necessary to challenge injustices within our societies. Here, I am also suggesting that supporting students to develop a citizenship orientation is likely to be experienced as an opportunity to think very differently to the individualistic, consumerist, instrumental and objective narratives that shape higher education. That is not to say that all students are wholly aligned with such narratives, but more to recognise that this framing of higher education is powerful, and we should expect that students will, to some degree, have been influenced by it. Educators who feel a responsibility to support students to critically appraise the influence of neoliberalism on their learning experiences and who wish to encourage students to think beyond the aims of the neoliberal agenda to one that is more socially inclusive, just and respectful to all are likely to adopt a critically pedagogic approach as a philosophy and theory which is potentially transformative. However, tension exists in the intention to promote transformative thinking about how we contribute to the social world. There is a risk that educators who push for this transformed way of thinking could engage in the very pedagogy that they are aiming to critique, that is using their power to coerce students into thinking that aligns with their own beliefs rather than supporting a genuine transformed outlook of students (Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023; Hoggan and Kloubert, 2020). Educators must seek to avoid controlling the outcome of such learning experiences for students if they are committed to the values of such a critical pedagogy but also be aware of the potential impact on students of this sort of transformative pedagogy which could be profoundly unsettling.

## **2.4 Higher education teaching and learning**

### **2.4.1 Pedagogy and the neoliberal university**

Pedagogy is defined here as the philosophy, theory and practice of teaching or facilitating learning. Pedagogy therefore encompasses far more than teaching methods and techniques. Giroux (2020, p. 81) describes pedagogy as a “*moral and political practice*” because of its potential to transform students’ way of seeing the world but also because the way students experience pedagogy, or the type of pedagogy they experience, will shape and influence who they are and become as current and future

citizens. Pedagogy therefore involves the development of the whole person through their engagement with knowledge within the social, economic and political context of any learning situation. Teaching and learning are not neutral activities and as Barnett (2012) points out, as the world becomes even more complex and uncertain, pedagogy should involve an acknowledgement of this to support the development of future citizens to live and function in such contexts.

This conception of pedagogy may feel unfamiliar in the current neoliberal university which can restrict the possibilities and potential of pedagogy to comply with audit and measurement regimes (Heany and Mackenzie, 2017). This potentially influences pedagogy to be considered along positivist lines of teaching-assessment-outcomes, a limited and reductionist conception of pedagogical aims. There is also an expectation that people with teaching roles within neoliberal universities are active in the development of new ways of teaching to improve outcomes. New pedagogical approaches seem to have been developed along neoliberal lines and connect with the idea that students are consumers (Grant, 2017) pushing forward an instrumental agenda which focuses on the outcomes of higher education and less on the process of the learning and development that students experience and the role of pedagogy within this (Tomlinson, 2017). In the extreme, this can lead to ideas of an 'entrepreneurial pedagogue' designing teaching materials that could potentially be sold/purchased. Whilst there can be no doubt that it is appropriate for educators to always strive to develop ways of teaching that are helpful to students, new methods of teaching are often requested or expected by a range of people including employers who increasingly have influence on how and what is 'taught' within universities, especially in relation to professional qualifying programmes (Pye, 2024).

As the sector expanded to include more and more students from a range of backgrounds who now pay high levels of fees, there has been a growing focus on teaching in higher education driven by 'value for money' arguments (Wong et al, 2023). In addition, the process of 'unbundling' of the academic role which has been prompted by the need to audit and measure all aspects of activity in the university contributes to communities of academics who are highly motivated to focus on effective teaching rather than having to also be world class published researchers (McFarlane, 2011). The literature around teaching and learning is vast and growing with a long history and it could be argued that this knowledge base has never been so important as those of us with teaching focused roles strive to ensure that teaching is inclusive and relevant for students and society.

#### **2.4.2 Pedagogical philosophy, theory and practice**

There are a range of theories developed over a long history that help us think through how learning can take place for example, behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism, humanism and social learning theory (Bates, 2016; Geertshuis et al, 2024). The interplay between the theoretical belief of an

educator and their teaching philosophy will shape their pedagogical practice and influence what they are aiming to achieve in classroom settings. In this sense, educators themselves construct their own approach to their pedagogy and teaching based on a range of factors such as past experiences and philosophical and theoretical beliefs about their role in the context within which they work (Vereijken and van der Rijst, 2023). This highlights the importance of critical reflection in teaching so that educators are critically aware of their own influences (Brookfield, 2017). For example, whilst I recognise that I am an advocate of a broadly constructivist approach to teaching, I recognise that I also draw on humanistic theory (Rogers, 1980) and critical pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1970) because of my belief system shaped by my past experiences. In addition, I use principles of active learning (Chiu and Cheng, 2017) and experiential learning (Kolb, 2015) to enact my constructivist/humanist/critical position in teaching settings. I include this here to demonstrate the constructed and subjective potential of pedagogy albeit recognising that others may approach teaching practices from a more rational-technical perspective. Teaching and learning are complex, contextual and situated and I would argue it is helpful to accept this (Haggis, 2004) rather than try to oversimplify it by suggesting it can be reduced to a set of methods and techniques.

For educators who are committed to providing students with opportunities for developmental learning, their pedagogical practices are likely to prompt reflection on students' sense of being in the world and relationships within it through enabling an ongoing process or experience of being, becoming and finding authenticity (Barnett, 2007). This describes a transformative education which prioritises students' sense of themselves rather than solely the outcome of their degree through their engagement with disciplinary knowledge (McLean et al, 2018). Mezirow (2009) would say that the experience of transformative learning involves engagement with new knowledge which changes our existing frames of reference. The role of knowledge is therefore the key within this process. It is within a relationship with a body of knowledge that transformational learning happens (Ashwin, 2020) because this knowledge provides a resource from which we can draw information, judgements, comparisons to confirm or challenge existing understandings, viewpoints and experiences.

Learning can therefore be unsettling and sometimes it is purposefully so, such as within pedagogies of discomfort (Zembylas and McGlynn, 2012). Critical pedagogy points here to how learning about oppressive structures (which includes systems of education) that operate in our society can be both troubling but ultimately liberating for those oppressed by them (Freire, 1970). Within this perspective, prior knowledge and experience are fundamental to learning, as is the active use of new knowledge. This is broadly a constructivist understanding of learning which frames learning as the active construction of knowledge by students as opposed to a purely acquisition or 'banking' (Freire, 1970) approach which suggests students should be 'filled up' with new knowledge in a relatively passive way

(Ashwin et al, 2020). I would argue this approach to learning is neoliberal. This idea of passive transmission has been criticized as 'surface level learning' rather than the 'deep level learning' that is understood to be developmental, transformative and therefore enables students to construct and apply their new and disciplinary knowledge in a range of situations (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Entwistle, 2009). This constructivist perspective of learning is widely adopted within higher education (Qureshi et al, 2023) and tends to be the approach suggested to educators undertaking their own developmental programmes to achieve expected teaching statuses within higher education (Kushnir and Spowart, 2021). It also aligns with the current focus on 'student-centred learning', which prompts a focus on students and their required learning opportunities rather than on what educator may bring in terms of their expertise (Glavind et al, 2023) although can also promote individualism, a characteristic of neoliberal approaches. However, critical pedagogies with their transformative aim are not without their criticisms (for example Webb, 2013; Pace, 2024; Goodwin, 2025). Care must be taken to consider the impact of potential transformation on students. Whilst it may be well meaning, enabling students to understand oppressive social structures can be extremely unsettling and result in feelings that are deeply burdensome. If students come preoccupied with the role of power in society, this could, unintentionally, become a barrier to learning.

#### **2.4.3 Situated and contextual learning**

Regardless of the philosophy that underpins learning and teaching, as Ashwin et al (2020, p.25) point out, learning is always relational because a relationship with the object of learning within the specific context is integral to the learning. Relationships and context form crucial elements of any learning experience. Psychological theories of learning focus on what individuals learn, a position encouraged in neoliberal contexts, a point returned to in the following chapter. However, if learning is understood as an active constructive process the role of others and context is key thus drawing attention to how learning is socially situated (Boud and Bearman, 2024) and most effective when students work relationally within group settings (Beckett and Hager, 2018). As mentioned earlier, Simon et al's (2025) research demonstrated the power of social situations on forming attitudes. This situated experience enables participation and eventually influences identity as one becomes a member of the group (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Formal social and collaborative learning experiences usually take place within disciplines in universities and engagement with disciplinary knowledge is essential for transformative, engaged and meaningful learning (Ashwin, 2024; Ashwin et al, 2024).

The concept of discipline is important in this study because this research is located within the discipline of sociology. There is evidence to suggest that there are ways of 'doing' a discipline although it is also important to note that disciplines themselves are not necessarily uniform across institutions (Spurling, 2014). The changing nature of higher education has possibly resulted in disciplines having a reduced

influence on the practice of those who locate themselves within a discipline (Trowler, 2014; Trowler et al, 2014). However, recent research confirms the powerful nature of engaging with disciplinary knowledge and its relationship with disciplinary identity formation in relation to sociology (Ashwin et al, 2014; McLean et al, 2015). Research has also demonstrated that sociology students tend to have more focus on the importance of their own development than desiring a purely instrumental outcome from engagement within the discipline (Muddiman, 2018) which further supports my argument that the nature of the discipline is important when considering student experiences of learning. Disciplines potentially influence students to develop a disciplinary identity, or students already have a developing sense of themselves that leads them to be attracted to a discipline. Students' identities, whilst complex, are an important consideration in higher education contexts because how students position themselves has a relationship with their learning experiences (Ashwin et al, 2020). How people perceive themselves in an academic context is constructed through the stories or narratives we have about ourselves (McAdams, 2018). This makes narrative research, which is the approach used in this project, helpful in higher education especially when discipline is relevant as it can serve to provide insight into understanding the experiences of being a student in a particular context (Tilley, 2025; Towers and Towers, 2024), an argument further developed in the following chapters.

## **2.5 Chapter summary**

This literature review has engaged with the scholarly work based around three main topics. Firstly, I have argued that the current context of higher education is one shaped by neoliberalism. This has resulted in a marketized sector in which students can be understood to be consumers who are individually focused on the outcome of their degree. Universities have become 'measured' environments to help them to compete in the market. Secondly, I have argued that the purpose of higher education is increasingly thought to be about employment outcomes for students. This translates to students being understandably self-interested at the expense of a more citizenship orientation in which they feel motivated to think about what they contribute to societies beyond economics. Here I am arguing that whilst employment is of course important, supporting students to become critical thinkers and actors is essential if universities really want to fulfil a social responsibility of contributing to tackling social, climate and epistemic injustices. Developing this outward looking or citizenship orientation in students could be experienced as transformational for students. Finally, I have argued that higher education is a place for the development of socially aware citizenship orientated students. Whilst acknowledging the informal learning that takes place at universities, I have suggested that the pedagogical approaches used within formal learning environments have a powerful role in determining the type of experiences and outcomes that students gain from engagement with higher education.

## **Chapter 3 – Research Paradigm and Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this third chapter I will build the theoretical framework drawing on some of the previously discussed literature to locate and frame the research. I will start with an explanation of my philosophical positioning and related research paradigm including how this has influenced the methodological choices made in this study. I will then move on to explore neoliberal pedagogy, critical pedagogy and transformational learning which are used as an analytical framework within this study.

### **3.2 Philosophical positioning and research paradigms**

#### **3.2.1 Ontology, epistemology and axiology**

All research studies involving the social world are steered by beliefs about the nature of how reality is understood and how we can learn and know about human activities within it. As I am leading this research study, I must be as reflexively aware as possible about how the beliefs and assumptions that I have about the social world shapes and influences this research. Here I want to ‘set out’ my position because making views and beliefs explicit enables readers to track the coherence of my philosophical position, methodology and the research design used.

There is no simple list of different research paradigms or absolute universal agreement about the boundaries around them in social science research. I am using the term research paradigm to denote the position that a researcher holds formed by the intersection of their philosophical views about the nature of the world, how we understand it and therefore how we can generate knowledge about it (Cohen et al, 2018). Research paradigms are also known as interpretative frameworks, that is the framework we use to make sense of whatever is being studied depending on the philosophical position of the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). I believe that research paradigms are comprised of four dimensions; ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Ontology relates to beliefs about the nature of reality and epistemology relates to the nature of knowledge and knowing about reality. Axiology is the understanding that research is shaped by values and includes the values of the researcher, the theory used, the influence of the other elements of the paradigm or interpretative framework and the social and cultural norms of those involved in the research (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). Methodological beliefs are influenced by the other aspects of the research paradigm and shape beliefs about the most appropriate way to research a particular phenomenon (Pring, 2015).

This research is located within the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, that is one which believes ontologically that the world is subjectively experienced and socially constructed through interactions with it and meaning created through the interpretation of these constructed experiences (Crotty,

1998). In alignment with this ontology, my epistemological position is that subjective lived experiences of the social world are valid forms of knowledge which are constructed and interpreted through experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Axiologically, working within this framework or paradigm supports the surfacing of peoples lived experience and considers people experts of their subjectively constructed experiences also recognising that the values of the researcher will also influence the methods of data generation and interpretation. I find that attempts to neatly define my ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions which shape my research paradigm are reductionist because they overlap and influence each other; they are a framework best considered as a complex web of views and understandings which result in a set of beliefs that align with the research paradigm of interpretivist/constructivist.

### **3.2.2 Methodology**

Methodology, the fourth element of any research paradigm, must align with and contribute to the paradigmatic assumptions as set out above. Therefore, the methodology used within an interpretive/constructionist framework must harness methods of hearing people's experiences, recognising the constructed nature of these experiences including the co-construction of them within the research itself. The methodology used in this study is narrative inquiry. Narrative ways of working are imbued with a theoretical belief that people's stories are valid, legitimate and expert ways of knowing, and the meanings attached to experiences are valid and legitimate subjective constructs. This methodology therefore aligns with an interpretive/constructionist paradigm (Rou and Coetzee, 2022) and my beliefs, formed through my experiences of being an educator, that people's experiences provide knowledge from which we can all learn.

## **3.3 Methodology - Narrative Research**

### **3.3.1 What is narrative research?**

Narrative research or inquiry is a term used to describe a wide and varied field of research steeped in beliefs about how people's stories give insight into subjective experienced phenomena. It is both a theoretical and methodological approach to researching subjectivities. It is impossible to define narrative research coherently in a way that would suit all narrative scholars because its theoretical underpinnings and practices are contested. It has within it approaches that are potentially realist, postmodern and constructionist (Reismann, 2008) and for some it is a way of understanding psychological phenomena, for others social phenomena and for some both (Tamboukou et al, 2013). There are different views about how narratives should be studied; structurally, for their content or context or a combination of these (Tamboukou et al 2013). Further, some scholars will take a 'whole life' approach and some focus on specific aspects of life experiences shared through a story (Rau and

Coetzee, 2022). The differences and the nuances of application within this field, along with the different underpinning philosophical positions (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2006) mean that narrative work is “*characterised by diversity but also fragmentation*” (Stanley and Temple, 2008, p. 276). Below I will aim to explore narrative research from the perspective of its use in this study rather than trying to give a full picture of the whole field. It is worth noting that I am focused in this research on the spoken word, hence the use of the terms ‘speaker’ and ‘listener’, but narrative research has been expanded to include documents, written materials of all varieties as well as objects, artefacts and visual materials (Riessman, 2008).

### **3.3.2 Narratives are co-constructed and contextual**

Narrative research has grown from the 1970s alongside the belief that people share their valuable subjectivities through stories and narratives (Collado and Boden-Stuart, 2023). This belief contributed to the ‘narrative turn’, an orientation in social sciences towards the use of stories and narratives as a way of understanding people within the social world and the interrelationships between them (Goodson and Gill, 2011). This focus on subjectivities was in response to the dominance of positivist research (Squire, 2013) which is widely critiqued as an approach to understanding people in the social world. Traditionally, narratives were thought to be a representation of an internal phenomena, that is they are individual and work to enable a person to share or communicate a story to represent their internal and individual state. However, adhered to purely, this theoretical understanding of narratives fails to consider the role of the listener or audience. An alternative theory is that they are co-constructed with the listener through the process of sharing them; the listeners presence influences the narrative, and the listener is responsive to the narrative. In this view, narratives are not ‘natural’ in that they already exist because they are constructed with a purpose in a context and this purpose can be to communicate something about, for example, their sense of identity within the particular narrative conversation. I was drawn to narrative research because of past experiences of co-constructing an understanding with students when exploring their pedagogical experiences (Pye, 2025a). These experiences demonstrated to me how co-construction results in rich and insightful data influencing my decision to use a narrative design in this research project. However, narratives are not simply co-constructed between people, context influences and shapes the narrative which are co-created in the moment. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identify what they call three ‘commonplaces’ of narrative inquiry, a focus on temporality, sociality and place. Temporality refers to the belief that all experiences have a relationship with the past, present and future. Sociality relates to the belief that personal and social conditions are relevant. Place reminds researchers to pay attention to the importance of location and context of the inquiry. So, narratives are composed within a context which includes the dominant discourses within the context (Riessman, 2008), which in this study is the

discipline of sociology and English higher education. From this perspective, a narrative or story will be much more than the speaker's neutral reflection of their experiences of the world (Squire, 2013). This is essential because this research project is situated within the neoliberal context of English higher education as outlined in the previous chapter.

### **3.3.3 Narrative research and experience**

The key feature of narrative research is that it considers experience (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2006) and the stories that people construct of their experiences as a way of making sense of them (Riessman, 2014). The word 'narrative' in the field of narrative research is used interchangeably with the word 'story' although for some these have different but interconnected meanings. Narratives are what is produced when a speaker sequentially connects a series of events into what would broadly be recognised as a story and shares this with a listener. In narrative research, it is acknowledged that the speaker is making decisions about what and how to share the story to ensure their narrative communicates the elements that the speaker wants to be heard. Narrative research is therefore a way of gaining insight into experiences (Colla and Kurtz, 2024). It prompts people to recount or re-tell stories of their experiences which are constructed in such a way to enable meaning making within the particular context (Rau and Coetzee, 2022). Stories are a method of self-expression, representation and a way of culturally making sense of experiences (Fraser, 2004). A speaker is therefore thought to be "*engaging in living, telling, retelling and reliving stories*" (Connolly and Clandinin, 1990, p.4). They are therefore interpretations and constructions of experiences, as Mishler (1995, p.117) says "*it is clear that we do not find stories; we make them*" thus connecting with the argument made above about how stories are co-constructed with a purpose in a particular context. I remained aware through this study that research focused on experiences can potentially be transformative in itself for participants as they were encouraged to deeply reflect on their experiences (Mayo, 2013).

### **3.3.4 Narrative conversations and analysis**

Above I have argued that the generation of narratives or stories is a purposeful and collaborative act and can serve to enable identity construction and deconstruction within a specific contextual setting. This means that the creation of stories requires relationships with the listener and context so that there is some common understanding of social norms and conventions within a narrative conversation (Salmon and Riessman, 2013). This commonality is important to me as a researcher as it to some degree enables a 'flattening' of power within the research interview. I am uncomfortable with using power in an interview situation to 'interrogate' a research participant. I am aware this is because of my past professional experiences which I explore further in the following chapter. It means that I prefer the language of 'narrative conversations' or 'narrative discussion' than 'narrative interviews' and that within such a conversation, I try to avoid controlling the discussion and to position myself as

much as is possible as a co-participant within the discussion which narrative interviewing encourages (Riessman, 2012). Although writing about social work rather than specifically about research, Fraser (2004) points out how narrative methods may appeal to those who seek to democratize professional conversations because of how they value the stories as a construction of lived experiences. This is why narrative work can be valued especially by people who traditionally have had their voices dismissed (Phillips and Bunda, 2018; Kim, 2016).

Analysis of the narrative can generate interpretations of how relationships and context shape the narrative and possibly give insights into relationships and contexts that go a step beyond simply reporting on the words used in the narrative conversations. As Gubrium and Holstein (2018, p.40) say *“Interview narratives are artfully assembled, discursively informed and circumstantially conditioned”* giving a researcher opportunities to investigate and theorise how and why. This approach harnesses subjectivities of both people within the conversation to consider their influence on the generation of the data, recognising that both parties make choices about what they say within the conversation and that these serve some sort of purpose within the interaction. I am aware that I have been drawn to narrative work because of this harnessing of subjectivity which aligns with my philosophical position which rejects the idea of objective ‘truths’. In his influential work, Elliot Mishler (1995) discusses three broad models of narrative analysis; one which is focused on language in terms of how sections of speech or text are used to represent events with a focus on the temporal ordering of them. The second category reflects narrative analysis that focuses on how language is used to construct a narrative. Both of these have a linguistic focus. His final model is on the purpose or function the narrative serves which applies to this study because the interpretive/constructive nature of the paradigm in which this research is located means there is a recognition of how the narrative is constructed in a context. Riessman (2008) offers an outline of *how* to conduct narrative analysis focusing on either content of the narrative, the structure of the narrative or how the narrative is performed. This study will use a thematic analysis to explore the content of the narrative with an awareness on the role of the context of this study which is outlined in both the introduction and literature review chapters of this thesis. Chapter 4 will detail both how the narrative conversations were used to generate data and the steps taken to analyse the narrative conversations.

### **3.4 Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.4.1 Use of theory and binary frameworks**

Any research project is influenced by theory whether implicitly or explicitly. So far in this chapter, I have explored how my philosophical beliefs about the nature of the world and knowledge, my ontological and epistemological views, and my values (axiology) influence the research paradigm or

interpretative framework in which I am located as a researcher. In this section of this chapter, I will outline how theory is used as a framework to help structure and make sense of the focus of this study (student experiences) within the research paradigm. In this study, I am interested in gaining insight to the experiences of students to help understanding of if and how they experience transformative learning whilst at university. The methodology chosen enabled the generation and interpretation of meanings constructed within a narrative conversation. Interpretation drew on theorisation of how learning can be facilitated to provide a theoretical backdrop/frame against which the data was explored. The theoretical or analytical framework is primarily constructed of neoliberal pedagogy and critical pedagogy.

Below I outline these two elements of the framework I have used and in the following chapter I share how this was operationalised when working with the data. However, there are limitations in the use of this framework which I want to acknowledge here. I am conscious of the risk of using binary frameworks to construct false and oversimplified dichotomies. They fail to acknowledge the reality of nuance and continuum within and between neoliberal and critical pedagogies. Although I am working with these as pedagogies with very different philosophical and theoretical foundations leading to very different practices, I also recognise that pedagogical practices can be located somewhere in between them. However, this binary framework allowed me to make visible the comparative and distinctive aspects of neoliberal and critical pedagogy in how they are enacted within classrooms. I am using this binary framework as a heuristic tool (Huffman and Tracy, 2017) to help me surface differences in pedagogy which ultimately enables me to answer my research questions. In practice, this provided a method through which to notice aspects of pedagogy that participants talked about and for me to interpret them as potentially aligned with neoliberal or critical pedagogical experiences.

### **3.4.2 Neoliberal pedagogy**

As explored in the previous chapter, neoliberalism and its relationship with higher education has been thoroughly examined in research literature and it is through a theoretical lens of neoliberalism that this research took place. However, much of the written work on this topic is a critique of how neoliberalism is realised in the governance of universities, its role in creating the higher education market and its use of performance targets and metrics to shape the so-called measured university (Peseta et al, 2017). The direct impact of neoliberalism on pedagogical practices is less well understood (Tight, 2019) and in the exploration of students' experiences of teaching and learning, an aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of how neoliberalism has influenced pedagogy in ways that are perhaps not always seen. The term 'neoliberal pedagogy' does not appear to be in common use, but I attribute it to Giroux (2020, p.7) who uses this term to describe an approach to education which he sees as reflective of our neoliberal times. Here I am expanding the use of this expression to outline

in specific terms what pedagogy that is imbued with neoliberalism looks like in practice. The purpose of this is to construct a picture of what neoliberal pedagogy is to use as a framework for working with the data generated from the narrative conversations.

Neoliberal pedagogy is characterised by consumer-led, self-interested, measurable and auditable, outcome focused, competitive, objective understandings of knowledge and unquestioned reproduction of power in classroom settings. They are influenced by the technical-rationality of neoliberalism (McLean, 2006). The consumerist framing of students, despite evidence that students themselves do not fully embody consumerism, creates pedagogical approaches designed to 'deliver' education as a product. This means that students must be able to 'see' what they are purchasing so the various league tables and evaluative processes that sit around teaching and learning become very important as ways of quantitatively measuring and auditing 'what works' so that students can choose an institution/programme that is deemed successful in meeting its stated outcomes. In my experiences of being an educator, being able to provide measurable evidence of pedagogical success has become more important than evaluating whether students have experienced high quality transformative learning experiences which are almost impossible to measure in a quantitative way. Neoliberal pedagogy also then perceives students as passive recipients of knowledge who arrive on their degree programmes ready to absorb an existing body of knowledge. This pays no attention to potential for the co-construction and transformation of knowledge within learning settings, or that some knowledge is privileged so should never be uncritically considered. It serves to reproduce existing knowledge, and this existing knowledge can be 'delivered' through a transmission style of pedagogy which sees the educator as the expert holder of knowledge to be shared. Neoliberal pedagogy does not recognise students as subjective experts of their own experiences who will have a great deal to offer to all within a classroom setting thereby removing any opportunity for emancipatory or empowering co-work between educators and students (Evans, 2020).

Neoliberal pedagogy is interested in outcomes because these are deemed to be quantifiable for the purposes of measurement as explained above. In relation to the outcomes of programmes, this leads to a focus on employment being the most important outcome of higher education because this is easily measurable and aligns with neoliberal ideas that good citizenship is contribution to the market economy. This also aligns with the promotion of self-interest and competition within neoliberal higher education classrooms as students are encouraged to compete for success so they can operate in an ever more challenging employment context. Students are encouraged to be self-interested at the expense of recognising their potential to contribute to the learning of all within the classroom. Employment is understandably very important for students who are seeking a 'return' on the considerable financial outlay they have personally made to complete their degree programmes. This

instrumentalist focus in higher education can explain why students who arrive at the start of their degree with a desire to use it to generally 'do good' can become more narrowly focused on the instrumental outcome of their degree overtime (McArthur et al, 2022).

The slavish use of learning outcomes in individual modules and at programme level is also a characteristic of neoliberal pedagogy (Hussey and Smith, 2002). Whilst most can see it is important for students to understand the purpose of any teaching and learning activity, neoliberal approaches now use learning outcomes as a quality assurance tool (Addison, 2014). Learning outcomes were originally discussed in relation to the idea of constructive alignment (Loughlin et al, 2021) which argued for an alignment between what is taught and assessed in learning contexts in line with the purpose of the particular teaching and learning. However, neoliberal use of learning outcomes and constructive alignment has focused on the word 'alignment' and ignored 'constructive'. It implies a linear and reductive approach to teaching and learning which is efficient, rational and technical. It does not support the complexity of learning or recognise the importance of emotion in learning. Neoliberal pedagogy suggests we can predict a neat and objective outcome from learning experiences and pays no attention to the value of unintended learning (Grant, 2017). Neoliberal pedagogy expects a plan to be made and followed in relation to teaching to ensure the alignment of teaching and outcomes. In my experience, such plans are set out in programme and module documentation. Educators are expected to comply with this documentation which does not allow or enable appropriate experimentation or risk taking in teaching settings. Educators are restricted in their practice to what is understood to 'work', and deviation from this could risk poor evaluation which, because of the requirement for audit, can be at great personal risk to the individual educator.

My discussion of neoliberal pedagogy here is blunt and has a negative tone. I am aware that my values and beliefs about the purpose of education, my experiences of teaching, and my perceptions of appropriate and ethical ways of supporting students to develop educationally mean that I see many problems with neoliberal pedagogy. However, I am also aware that for some, neoliberal pedagogy may represent successful translation of a positivist view of pedagogy into higher education, particularly for those who value the reproduction of knowledge (Craddock, 2019). I make this point in the interests of being transparent about my own biases. My concerns align with Giroux (2020) who argues that neoliberal approaches to pedagogy, those I am calling neoliberal pedagogy, reduce opportunities for critical understanding of the social world. Without critical awareness of the social world, students and graduates will be less able to become socially responsible citizens which I would define as being willing to contribute to the transformation of societies to address social, epistemic and climate injustice rather than become people who contribute to the reproduction of our current unjust social world. I am

concerned that pedagogy in universities is becoming dominated by such pedagogies, and this project seeks to investigate this concern.

### **3.4.3 Critical pedagogy**

Unlike ideas of neoliberal pedagogy, critical pedagogy is a field with a long history and tradition developed from Critical Theory (McArthur, 2010). Its founder is widely considered to be Paulo Freire who outlined a radical approach to education in his classic text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). Here, he suggested a fundamentally different conception of pedagogy to the traditional 'banking' approach to teaching by claiming that learning environments should be democratised and recognition given to the expertise that students bring to such spaces. He believed that the primary role of pedagogy should be to support the raising of 'critical consciousness'; that is to support students to develop a critical awareness about structural inequalities. Scholars such as hooks (1994), Macrine (2020), McLaren (2009), Apple (2000), Giroux (2020), Shor (1996), McLean (2006) and Mayo (2013) have contributed to pushing thinking forwards, sometimes in utopian terms (Webb, 2018), to consider how education and pedagogy can transform societies through the raising of awareness of power, structural inequalities, discrimination and oppression. Critical pedagogy occupies an opposing position to the philosophy, theory and practice of neoliberal pedagogy discussed above (Giroux, 2020). Despite critical pedagogy being closely related to the critical theory associated with 20<sup>th</sup> century European scholarship, North American writers have been decisive and proactive in using the term 'critical pedagogy' to capture the fundamental ideas of Freire (1970) meaning that much of this literature is identifiable as North American (Lampert, 2016). However, critical pedagogy is and should be by its nature a diverse field perhaps better termed critical pedagogies to reflect the range of its relevance to different communities. Recognising its richness and diversity should not mean its fundamental principles of critical awareness and change for social justice are not unifying factors for all who drawn to any form of critical pedagogy (McArthur, 2010).

Chapter 2 discussed the direct relationship between citizenship orientated education and critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is characterized by understanding students as engaged citizens who arrive at university with a range of valid experiences and subjective knowledge which they should be invited to use to contribute to everyone's learning. It is a pedagogy that therefore works relationally, situationally and contextually; it is inclusive, collaborative and democratic and rather than presenting a set of knowledge to learn, it co-produces and transforms existing knowledge. It is therefore personally developmental, complex and untidy; in this type of pedagogy, it is not possible to reduce learning to a set of easily measurable outcomes. Teaching should "*embody uncertainty*" (Barnett, 2007 p.137) to truly 'teach' for uncertain times. Educators are not simply transmitters of knowledge, they must be empowered to use their role to recognise that pedagogy is not neutral and, through this

approach they can help students see connections between classroom learning, their own experiences and the broader social structures within which they sit (Giroux, 2025c). Knowledge is generated through such practices rather than transmitted. Its key aim is to harness this collaborative culture to raise critical awareness, or critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) by considering difficult social issues such as structural inequality including how education can reproduce unfairness (Cachelin and Nicolosi, 2022) and support students to understand how they have potentially also experienced discrimination and oppression. It engages with ideas of resistance and hope and locates learning in real world experiences (Seal and Smith, 2021). Its aim is transformation rather than reproduction with an emancipatory aim of enabling students to reject hegemonic dominant narratives which reproduce inequalities (Giroux, 2025b; McLean, 2006). It supports students to be independent, autonomous and critical thinkers. Critical pedagogy therefore values subjectivities although it has been criticised for its lack of rigour in its mobilisation of subjective emotional knowledge (Zembylas, 2013).

The above description of critical pedagogy is rather abstract because critical pedagogy is a philosophical approach, a moral practice, a pedagogical paradigm which cannot be reduced to a simple toolkit of 'best' teaching practices. This is one of the main criticisms of critical pedagogy. Unlike neoliberal pedagogy, it is not underpinned by positivist ideas of 'what works' for effective teaching which, despite attracting criticisms do at least provide an educator with tangible pedagogical ideas. Critical pedagogy has been criticised for failing to move beyond its own theory (Skelton, 2024) and when it does so, honest reflections of its application reveal that it is far from a welcomed and easily used approach in a classroom setting (Shor, 1996). However, Freire's (1970) view of what has come to be known as critical pedagogy is far from abstract and remains open for contextual development. He emphasised the importance of what he called 'praxis', that is action informed by deep critical awareness and a commitment to continued reflection and dialogue with others to further inform action. Theories of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015) which involve students learning by reflecting on and connecting experiences with theory to inform action can help with educational models to operationalise Freire's thinking into practice within educational settings. If the experience in focus is characterized by inequalities and injustice which are relevant to the context, this can provide a powerful experience on which to reflect and theorise with others in the tradition of critical pedagogy. For example, in a classroom setting, an experience of comparing traditional literature or research to support dominant narratives in a relevant disciplinary context could be compared with the use of literature from a feminist or Indigenous perspective to demonstrate a totally different perspective which is rarely promoted. Transformative Learning Theory provides a theoretical outline of how engaging with different perspectives can be transformative for individual students.

### 3.4.3.1 Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) draws on the influential work of Jack Mezirow (1997) who is widely thought to have coined the term 'transformative learning'. He theorised that human beings seek to understand meaning and that we do so through interpreting our experiences based on our held understandings. This, according to TLT, helps us reconstruct our new experiences into new understandings. We organise our beliefs and experiences through 'frames of reference' which are "*structures of assumptions and expectations on which our thoughts, feelings and habits are based*" (Mezirow, 2009, p.22). Transformative learning is learning which transforms these frames of reference. A frame of reference has two elements, a 'habit of mind' and the resulting 'point of view' (Mezirow, 2009). Habits of mind are thought to be the orientating habitual ways we think that are often unconscious that have been shaped through our experiences within our cultural context. These habits can therefore be hard to change, unlike the resulting points of view. Points of view are the articulation of our habits of mind but are much less deeply engrained than our habits of mind. Change in habits of mind are profound and change our frames of reference. This is transformative learning. The role of critical reflection as a method of examining assumptions, beliefs, experiences, values, information is core to the process of transforming habits of minds and frames of reference. Mezirow initially mapped a 10-phase process, increased later to an 11-phase, of how this transformation happens starting with a new and disorientating experience which, in its disorientation, cannot be understood within existing frames of reference thus launching a process of questioning held frames of reference by individuals (Mezirow, 1997). Over time, Mezirow himself along with other scholars have developed this work to address the concern that TLT was overly rational at the expense of including the role of emotion in transformation, especially in the early phases of the process as suggested by Mezirow (Carter and Nicolaidis, 2023). Mezirow has since sought to position his theory as a theory that should be subject to ongoing development (Kitchenham, 2008).

TLT has been criticised for its lack of attention to the role of empathy and experience and its apparent focus on individual change which is assumed to be positive (Taylor and Cranton, 2013; Hoggan, 2016; Hogan and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). However, the ability to think autonomously does not mean that learning is an individual endeavour and Mezirow (1991) theorises about the important role of discourse for transformative learning. Discourse here refers to the opportunity for a learner to explore, challenge and talk out and through ideas with others; learning is therefore social (Calleja, 2014) and similarities can be drawn with critical pedagogy which is underpinned by a belief in collaboration in critical awareness raising. TLT provides a theory about how critical awareness and thinking can be developed through the opportunity to challenge unacknowledged frames of reference held by individuals. However, TLT does not explicitly state its aim to be about the changing of frames of

reference to have a critical understanding of unacknowledged power and systemic inequalities within our social world (Wang et al, 2019). Here I am theorising that critical pedagogy can be enacted through TLT collectively and experientially within learning environments. Although TLT places the focus of transformation at the individual level I recognise that it is helpful to remember that critical pedagogy can be enacted at different 'levels' of our society (McArthur, 2010). Here my focus is on individual students to reflect its relevance to the current arrangements of higher education. Focus on the individual could be critiqued as being neoliberal but people who experience individual transformation together can be drawn together for collective action (McLafferty Bell et al, 2019) indicating that such a profound learning experience can actively contribute to feelings of community and solidarity. Critical pedagogy enacted through this collective transformation, can serve to create spaces for deep critical consideration of our social world which, unlike neoliberal pedagogy with its focus on reproduction of hegemony and instrumental outcomes, increases opportunities and motivation for students to recognise their own potential to be citizenship-orientated and contribute to more just societies. Taylor and Cranton (2013, p.44) suggest that TLT should be recast as a "theory in progress" to recognise its own developmental nature and I hope to contribute to that progress.

### **3.5 Chapter summary: revisiting and alignment of my research paradigm and theoretical framework**

All research is shaped by the researchers philosophical and theoretical beliefs and assumptions. In this chapter, I have explored the non-linear relationship between my ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological beliefs to explain my positioning in a constructivist/interpretivist research paradigm. This means that I embrace subjectivity in the research process, believing that data should be generated rather than 'found' in a co-constructed process and interpreted through the meanings that, in this study, students connect with their experiences of learning. I have outlined in some detail how and why a narrative approach to data generation aligns with who I am as a researcher in an effort to ensure a transparent alignment within the research paradigm or interpretive framework. Key aspects of the narrative approach used here are the beliefs that the narrative is co-constructed within a specific relational and contextual narrative discussion, and that the discussions are a method through which to gain an insight into participants' meanings and interpretations of their experiences (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). The data is in the form of stories or narratives and has been analysed or interpreted to construct themes, patterns and therefore meaning. Narrative work emphasises the importance of the relationship between participant and researcher therefore attention to ethics and power has been important throughout (Clandinin, 2022).

The use of theory and research paradigm influence each other; they have to align theoretically and methodological. As I have explained in this chapter, my theoretical framework is constructed of a suggestion that a neoliberal approach to teaching could be termed 'neoliberal pedagogy' which can be considered alongside well-established ideas of critical pedagogy. This framework aligns with my research paradigm because it indicates an unfixed and constructed context for higher education teaching and learning influenced by ideology and related policy. This aligns with my beliefs that social experiences are constructed and subjective depending on their context and that we can understand something about this context and experiences within them through exploring meanings related to experiences. The use of neoliberal and critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework provides a structure which the interpretation of the generated data can be explored within. The following chapter will detail the research design of this study including specific explanation of how the theoretical framework will be used when working with the data.

## **Chapter 4 - Research Design**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this fourth chapter I will set out details of the specific research design of this project. This chapter will first outline the research setting and influence that I have as the researcher before describing the details of the research plan. The rationale for using a narrative approach will be covered and I will explain the use of the framework to support the analysis and interpretation of the data before giving a brief summary of the themes generated. In this chapter I have aimed to be as reflexive as possible to enable the reader to gain some insight into the ways this research has been shaped by my own subjective positioning.

### **4.2 Research setting**

#### **4.2.1 University**

According to the Office for Students (2023), there are over 100 universities in England. This research project is located in just one of these universities, a so called 'plate-glass' institution which describes itself as northwest based research-intensive and opened in the early 1960s as a response to the planned growth of the higher education sector. The data for this research was generated via narrative conversations between July 2024 - December 2024 with sociology students in this university. At the time of the research, I was a member of staff within the same department as the sociology programme although I did not teach on this programme and sat within a different discipline team.

#### **4.2.2 Discipline**

My research explores sociology students' experiences. Sociology has a well-established history in British universities with a tradition of focusing on matters related to inequalities. It grew alongside the developing higher education sector in the 1960, benefiting from the expansion of institutions giving homes to departments for sociology (Halsey, 2004). I chose sociology as the discipline for this study because existing research indicates that despite the variations in exactly what students might study (Manza, 2023), sociology students experience transformational learning (McLean et al, 2015; McLean et al, 2013). Although this does not guarantee that participants will identify with the transformative nature of sociology, it increases the likelihood thus allowing the potential for exploration of the relationship between transformational learning and pedagogy in relation to sociology.

### **4.3 Researcher influence**

#### **4.3.1. Positionality and subjectivity**

Failure to deeply question who I am as a researcher in terms of my ontological, epistemological, axiological and theoretical beliefs risks confusion or lack of alignment my research design, interpretive

framework and methodology as discussed in chapter 3. Here reflexive analysis has raised my awareness of how my subjective experiences have played and continue to play a role in the shaping of this research. Reflexivity is used and interpreted in several different ways (D’Cruz et al, 2007) but I find Fook’s (2016) relatively simple interpretation of what it means to be reflexive, that is the ability to recognise one’s own influence, to be accessible and functional. Applying this interpretation to my research surfaced three ways in which who I am has influenced this research project.

Firstly, my own student experiences have been profoundly transformational, and I can trace my beliefs about the power of education back to these experiences. It has left me with beliefs that experiencing transformative learning can be liberating, emancipatory and empowering, especially for those who have felt disadvantaged by their social position in society. These beliefs mean that I hold assumptions and biases about education which have been live throughout this research project. I am predisposed to believe that learning experiences which are transformational are both positive and desirable for all. Secondly, prior to becoming a lecturer, I was a social work practitioner and manager. Through these roles, I was exposed to social injustice daily. As Pérez (2022) argues, educators who have experiences which involve facing, and in my case dealing with, injustices are very likely to feel they must use their position to help others see and understand the suffering and disadvantage in our communities through use of critical and transformative pedagogies. Thirdly, I am very influenced by the work of Carl Rogers and his Person-Centred Approach (Rogers, 1967; 1980), also because of my time in social work practice. This humanistic way of working is founded on principles that people are experts of their own experience and that the embodiment of empathy, congruence and positive regard enables the formation of productive and respectful working relationships. This is done through non-judgemental empathic and active listening (Rogers and Farson, 1957). Working with others in this relational orientated way to create a space for stories to be developed is familiar territory. It therefore aligns axiologically with the value I hold on the importance of hearing, affirming and validating people’s experiences and that my presence in the construction of stories around experiences is a part of the process. This has influenced my methodological approach to this study because a narrative approach aligns with person-centredness in its commitment to creating space for people to tell their stories and validating these stories. However, I have also remained aware that conversations in this study are taking place in a research context rather than within a therapeutic relationship. These past experiences of social work practice are why I have been drawn to a narrative approach.

#### **4.3.2 Insider research**

My past experiences have influenced both the topic of this research project and the methodology I am employing in the inquiry. However, my current position as a higher education lecturer based in the department where this research took place is also relevant. I initially took a rather simplistic approach

to this situation, assuming that I could firmly identify as an 'insider researcher' because of the very 'close' nature of the research and setting to my own position as an employee within the department (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). I was unfazed by this because, unlike researchers who identify with a positivist research paradigm who would find the lack of objectivity allowed here troubling (Mercer, 2007), I can see the relationship between insider research and my own constructivist/interpretivist paradigmatic beliefs meaning that I embrace (and celebrate) how being close to a research context allows the harnessing of knowledge of it to support the research process.

However, delving further into the literature resulted in a realisation that my assumed position was not straightforward and that it would be more accurate to understand 'insiderness' as a continuum (Trowler, 2014). This is for two reasons. Firstly, unlike talking to peers or colleagues (Lewis and Quinnell, 2024), having conversations with students is not always considered to be insider research because students occupy a different position to my lecturer position in within this study. It is suggested that perhaps this research is better understood as sitting within the context of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Healy et al, 2013). However, SoTL usually (although not always) involves students that the researcher works with and/or own classroom practices, so this did not 'fit' for this research. Secondly, on a related note, ethnography or self-ethnography is argued to be a helpful approach when researching our "*home-base*" (Alvesson, 2003, p.176). Again, because I am not researching my own classroom experiences, I am not able to embark on self-ethnography in relation to pedagogical practices although I can draw on my subjective experiences of the practices and culture of the department in which I both work and which is home to the focus of my study.

Dhillon and Thomas (2019) point out that insider/outsider research can refer to more than a simplistic understanding of a shared location with the research project and understanding insiderness/outsiderness as a continuum has given me the opportunity to benefit from positioning myself different in relation to different aspects of this research. For example, the topic of this project can be understood as a dimension of this continuum (Mercer, 2007, p. 4) and therefore my own experiences of transformational learning can be used to contribute to the narrative conversations. Further, having an insider perspective of how the department is practically administered and organised helped with the arrangements required for this project. Recognising my outsider position in relation to the participants in the study meant that although I did not have existing relationships to build upon, they hopefully felt able to talk openly about their pedagogical experiences. It has also reduced any possible difficult ethical challenges that can exist in insider research because I do not know enough about participant's sociology programme to identify specific members of staff or modules when they talked about their experiences on their degree.

## **4.4 Ethical research principles**

### **4.4.1 Research ethics**

Ethical approval for this research project was gained from Lancaster University, the site where the research was undertaken. Approval was gained prior to data generation and included methods for ensuring participants gave their informed consent to be involved and their stories used in the research, information on withdrawal from the study and steps taken to protect both their data once generated and their anonymity. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this thesis.

### **4.4.2 Authenticity, transparency and trustworthiness**

The nature of this research is interpretive. I am therefore not aiming for accuracy in the data analysis in a positivist sense, instead I am working with awareness that my interpretation is subjectively influenced, and this is an integral aspect of my research approach. It aligns with my philosophical, theoretical and methodological position. It is therefore essential that to be ethical, I continue to strive for reflexivity (Braun and Clarke, 2022a) throughout the research project, and this means committing to being authentic and transparent in work to understand how my own subjectivity influences my practice, as I have aimed to be in section 4.3 above. It also means the explicit recognition that both researcher and participants are located within a specific institution which forms the meso context of this research (Polletta, 2012) and that the micro context is that as someone with the title of 'lecturer', participants are likely to perceive I hold a level of power and authority within the data generation process regardless of how hard I work to attempt to flatten this power. This recognition allows trust in the research process for everyone involved; researcher, participants, readers and users of the research findings.

## **4.5 Research design and process**

### **4.5.1 Research design**

This research project is a qualitative, narrative study. Data for this project was generated through narrative conversations. This term will be used rather than the more common 'narrative interviews' in a bid to reflect that the underpinning philosophy was to have a discussion or conversation rather than a transactional interaction. This was important to me because of my beliefs that experience is a valid form of knowledge and I was keen to form an understanding of students' experiences from a collaborative conversation. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is not possible to give a simple summary of what narrative research involves because of the different views about this (Squire et al, 2013). However, it is generally accepted that the principle of this methodology is to enable participants to communicate subjective life experiences through the construction of narratives within an interaction (Collado and Boden-Stuart, 2023). The story generated between the speaker and listener

becomes the focus or 'object' of interest in this form of narrative research because the constructed narrative is understood to represent experiences and meanings within a context which can then be interpreted (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006; Rau and Coetzee, 2022).

#### **4.5.2 Data generation**

##### *4.5.2.1 Narrative conversations*

As will be clear from the above, I agree with Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p.12) about the impossibility of objectivity in research:

*The qualitative researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world. Rather the researcher is historically and locally situated within the very process being studied*

In fact, I believe that the subjectivity of the researcher should be considered a strength and be embraced as part of the data generation and analysis. In line with this view, I approached the narrative conversations with the understanding that the narrative would be created within the conversation between me as the researcher and the participants, not that it already existed within the consciousness of the participants and my role was to excavate it. I used 3 prompts (Kim, 2016) (appendix 1) to stimulate the conversations and these were shared with participants prior to our meeting to try to create a sense of equality with the conversation. I used these as prompts rather than questions to avoid a transactional conversation because I know from past experience that creating a comfortable space for discussion rather than a space that feels integratory is beneficial for enabling people to tell their stories. This allowed me as the researcher to take an active and receptive role (Riessman, 2012, p.368) to contribute to the co-construction of the narrative through active listening skills (Prout et al, 2020) whilst balancing my value position that participants are experts of their own experiences and, when required, prompting the exploration of particular experiences relevant to this research project. This meant that I was able to pay attention to micro stories (Cresswell, 2008, p.512) that were relevant to contextual factors that participants indicated had a relationship with transformational learning within the neoliberal context of their studies. They therefore linked the personal with the political context (Ledworth, 2009) which was a key driver of this research from the perspective of how the neoliberal university was potentially shaping student experiences of learning. It also meant that the narrative conversations were feasible and specific enough for the purposes of the research (Mueller, 2019) whilst aligning with my axiological position of narrative research must value participant voice (Johnson et al, 2023).

#### 4.5.2.2 Participants

Participants were invited to take part in this research project by email invitation from a Professional Services colleague sent to the relevant years' graduates and to the three cohorts of sociology students from the following academic year. This was to avoid me as the researcher knowing who the targeted students and graduates were and having their email addresses. It was also hoped that this would reduce any sense of pressure that students and graduates might feel to take part. The invitation included students who were studying sociology along with another subject as a joint major. Sampling was therefore purposeful as sociology students and graduates were required to answer the research questions (Meyer and Mayrhofer, 2022). However, participant involvement was self-selective and 15 volunteered to be involved. Participants were given a £10 voucher as an acknowledgement of both the time that they gave and their expertise shared. Narrative conversations took between 45 and 80 minutes. Participants were given the option to either meet in person or meet online via Microsoft Teams; 9 opted for in person and 6 opted for online. All conversations were both audio and video recorded and the transcription function within the software used created a transcript of the conversation. The below table outlines who the participants were.

Participant	Gender	Class	Ethnicity	Year	Age	Programme
May	Female	Middle	W/B	BA1	20	Sociology and Film
Chloe	Female	Working	W/B	BA1	19	Sociology
Eva	Female	Middle	W/B	BA1	18	Sociology
Lily	Female	Middle	W/B	BA1	25	Sociology
Rosie	Female	Middle	W/B	BA2	19	Sociology and Criminology
Grace	Female	Middle	W/B	BA2	19	Sociology
Erin	Female	Middle	W/B	BA2	20	Sociology and Criminology
Josh	Male	Middle	W/B	BA3	21	Sociology
Jessica	Female	Middle	W/B	BA3	22	Sociology and Criminology
Lucy	Female	Middle	Chinese	BA3	20	Sociology and Criminology
Sarah	Female	Working	Asian/Chinese	BA3	24	Sociology and Film
Holly	Female	Working	W/B	Graduate	23	Sociology
Adam	Male	Middle	W/B	Graduate	23	Sociology

Olivia	Female	Working	W/B	Graduate	25	Sociology
Emma	Female	W/M	W/B	Graduate	21	Sociology

**Table 4.1: The profile of participants**

Although information about age, year of study, class, ethnicity and gender were recorded, it became apparent within the analysis of the discussions that the relatively small number of participants made it difficult to work with these features as categories. Of note though is that the gender balance represented here roughly reflects the sociology programme from which these participants were drawn, a point returned to in chapter 8. Where these categories are relevant in the findings, I have included it in the discussion in the following four chapters. For example, there are some points that seem to be made more strongly by graduates and some interesting points raised by the first-year female participants that appear connected to both their gender and that they are relatively early in their sociology journey.

### **4.5.3 Data interpretation**

#### *4.5.3.1 Coding and theming*

There are a range of ways that narratives can be analysed, for example thematically, structurally and dialogically (Reissman, 2008; Frost, 2009) depending on the focus of the research. In this research, I used a thematic analysis, specifically reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022b) because this approach allowed me to generate themes in the data based on the patterns of meaning students gave to their experiences. It also values subjectivity and active use of reflexive awareness. The phases of the data analysis are outlined below. Although they are represented here as a linear process with distinct steps, the reality is that the analysis stage was lengthy, untidy and iterative. This meant that I became very ‘close’ to the data.

*Phase 1* – The first phase was a period of deep re-familiarisation with the narrative discussions. This involved watching and listening to the recorded discussions, whilst reading the transcript to correct errors in the automatic transcription. Although not part of any stage of Braun and Clarke’s (2022b) reflexive thematic analysis phases, in this first step I used some of the questions outlined by Fraser (2004) as a ‘way in’ to begin working with the data, for example, questions about how I felt about each narrative, what are the main points in each story and how did each micro story within the narrative start, unfold and end.

*Phase 2* – Once I was confident that the transcripts were an accurate reflection of the conversations, I uploaded them individually into Nvivo. As is the case with narrative analysis, the transcripts were worked with separately to analyse each story as a whole initially (Reissman, 2012). I developed the

initial codes for each transcript individually, recording these in Nvivo. I returned to the transcripts several times to refine, change and develop codes, keeping notes of what I was doing as a record. Within this process I was very aware of how my views about pedagogy and the neoliberal university were present as I constructed codes.

*Phase 3* – In this third phase, I began the process of actively searching for ways to combine and connect codes in a process of initial theming. I was very aware of my developing intended analytical framework at this stage (Braun and Clarke, 2021) which was both prompted by the developing themes but also influenced what I was ‘seeing’ in the data. There is a further note on this below. Themes were developed across all the 15 transcripts.

*Phase 4* – Along with phase 2, this fourth phase was the most intricate and time-consuming aspect of the data analysis and involved reviewing the initial themes whilst developing them into themes that were useable for this project. It involved returning to the codes and reviewing and refining them as I developed the themes so that I could be confident I was authentically interpreting the data in a coherent and systematic way.

*Phase 5* – At this stage, I interpreted what the themes were and did for the research, along with naming them. That is, I developed a view about how to use the themes in relation to answering the research questions. At this stage the themes became active and connected back to the research questions.

*Phase 6* – This final stage of reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2022b) involves the developing of the research narrative around the themes, or the writing up of the research. As they point out, the data remains open to interpretation even at this stage and my consideration of what themes mean and say continued as I wrote.

#### *4.5.3.2 Data ‘closeness’*

The idea of becoming close to data when using an analysis methodology like reflexive thematic analysis with its focus on coding data is well accepted (Saldaña, 2021). However, in the spirit of transparency, I also want to acknowledge two other ways I spent time working with the data alongside the reflexive thematic analysis, neither of which will form part of this thesis but enabled me to feel at points completely enveloped by the data. Although this was demanding, I feel sure that it contributed to deep data analysis. Firstly, I experimented with creating composite narratives (Johnston et al, 2023) from the 4 groups of students depending on their year of study because I wondered if this might enable interpretation which took into account the temporal nature of their programmes of study. However, this resulted in a sense that some voices overshadowed others in the drawing together of the composition and that my presence in the writing of the composition was too strong thus drowning out individual participant voice. I therefore decided that whilst a useful exercise, it was not an approach

that fits with this study. Secondly, I also spent some time analysing my role within the narrative conversations. I have made it clear that my research approach means I believe in co-constructed narratives and to feel confident that this is what I did in an ethical and effective way, I analysed the transcripts outside of Nvivo by noting the ways that I contributed to the narrative. I used a framework of concepts from active listening and motivational interviewing (Prout et al, 2020; Miller and Rollnick, 2023) to explore my role, noting on the transcript when I engaged in simple reflection, amplified reflection, validation, re-framing and affirmations. This has given me confidence that I achieved my aim of being appropriately active within the data generation without over influencing the discussion and provided a further opportunity for me to 'get to know' the data.

#### *4.5.3.3 Analytical framework*

As explored in all three previous chapters I have a concern that neoliberal pedagogy is or could become dominant in teaching environments. The purpose of this research is to explore transformational learning in this context to investigate if transformational learning is happening, in what ways, how and what it means for student' futures. The use of my analytical framework provided a structure through which to interpret the narrative conversations with a focus on participants' perceptions of opportunities for transformative learning and the kinds of pedagogical practices these were associated with.

As outlined in the previous chapter, I constructed a two-part framework for analysis and interpretation of the data using established understandings of critical pedagogy and developing the idea of neoliberal pedagogy into a defined pedagogical approach. Critical and neoliberal pedagogies are dichotomous in their philosophy and theoretical underpinnings and using them gave me a comparative analytical framework to use to systematically. The two-part framework merged into the data analysis from phase 3 of the data interpretation as mentioned above. In practice, this happened because as I developed the four themes from the codes, I perceived that the themes themselves had aspects of neoliberal and critical pedagogy within them. The development of the term 'neoliberal pedagogy' served two interconnected and reciprocal purposes here. Firstly, it supported the analysis of my data because within the analysis process, it became apparent that I needed a useable term under which to categorise what I was interpreting from the data. Secondly, as my use of the term developed, it contributed to the data analysis by providing me with a lens through which to interpret the data. I used my framework deductively from this stage to help me notice aspects of data which were relevant to the focus of the study, namely aspects or features of pedagogical experiences that aligned with the underpinning philosophy and theory and/or the practices of critical or neoliberal pedagogy. This required rigorous analysis and interpretive depth to contrast and therefore illuminate the differences and alternatives in pedagogical approaches but ultimately enabled me to analyse relationships

between pedagogy and transformational learning. It required me to remain as reflexive as possible to avoid interpreting the data through only a lens of neoliberalism which I was aware I could do given my concerns about the influence of neoliberalism on pedagogical practices. It was this reflexivity which drove me to look for alternative explanations for the patterns that I was noticing in the data and resulted in me drawing in ideas of critical pedagogy to help categorise and then analyse the data. My analysis included, on occasions, noticing what was absent in the data as well as what was present.

#### **4.6 Themes**

I generated four themes from the data which I am calling student positionings. The use of the concept of 'positions' is in the tradition of Positioning Theory (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003; Harré et al, 2009) which theorises that people are positioned by themselves and/or others in a particular context through interactions and discourse. It therefore aligns well with the use of a narrative methodology and can be used to consider how pedagogy can shape positioning but also how positioning can influence responses to pedagogy. It was originally proposed by Davies and Harré in 1990 and has since been developed as both an explanatory and analytical theory to acknowledge how positions in the classroom can be fluid, socially constructed and influence behaviour (Green et al, 2020; Symonds, 2021). How students position themselves is used as a structure through which to identify and discuss the findings of this research:

1. Student learning identity
2. Student learning orientation
3. Student learning motivation
4. Student epistemic stance

The below table summarises how each of the four positionings has two aspects when related to pedagogy, one which aligns with a more neoliberal pedagogical approach and one which aligns with a more critical pedagogical approach. I constructed these from the data by developing each theme or position and then working with that theme to notice aspects of pedagogical experiences that could be interpreted as more aligned with neoliberal or critical pedagogy. This analysis indicated that fixed binary positions (for example consumer or contributor) were not reflective of nuances, so the positions have been used to represent opposite ends of a continuum rather than a purely binary model. The following chapters will explore the relationship between these, and participants' experiences of transformational learning.

<b>Student Positioning</b>	<b>Neoliberal Pedagogy</b>	<b>Critical Pedagogy</b>
Learning identity	Consumer	Contributor
Learning orientation	Individual	Collective
Learning motivation	Instrumental	Developmental
Epistemic stance	Reasoned-objectivity	Subjective-emotional

**Table 4.2: Student positioning and pedagogical type**

#### **4.7 Chapter summary**

This research design chapter has provided an overview and analysis of the factors that have both influenced this research project and outlined the practice of the research itself. It is closely related to chapter 3 in its continuation of transparent discussion of how the research was reflexively influenced and interpreted. This chapter has also brought the analytical framework of critical and neoliberal pedagogy into a tangible form and in doing so has summarised its use in the data interpretation and analysis and presented the findings from this process. The next four chapters will discuss the findings by exploring the relationship between student positioning, pedagogy and transformational learning experiences before a final chapter concludes this research project.

## **Chapter 5 – Student Identity: The Consumer - Contributor Continuum**

### **5.1 Introduction**

As this is the first of four findings and discussion chapters, I firstly explore participants' perceptions about whether they have experienced transformative learning whilst on their degree programme. I will then go on to analyse what this might suggest in terms of the pedagogical approach they have experienced and its relationship with their sense of transformation. I use the two-part framework of neoliberal and critical pedagogy in all findings and discussion chapters to explore the four themes created from the narrative conversation data and this chapter does so with a focus on how students appear to identify themselves on what I am calling a consumer-contributor continuum.

Neoliberal pedagogy positions students as consumers, a view that has become increasingly mainstream within policy over the last 15 years (Jones, 2022). This positioning frames knowledge as a commodity or a product which students are purchasing to use for their own competitive future benefit, a position which potentially diminishes deep student learning (Harrison and Risler, 2015). In this context, it fails to recognise the contribution that education makes to democracy (Nussbaum, 2010). Critical pedagogy positions students not as consumers but instead as active participants and contributors in their own and everyone else's educational journey, as Halx (2014, p. 252) says it is a *"pedagogy that expects much from students."* Their knowledge, ideas, thoughts, values, experiences and beliefs are understood to be valuable and to contribute to everyone's learning in the classroom (Seal and Smith, 2021). In this chapter, I explore the relationship between participants' pedagogical experience, identity as 'contributive' or 'consumerist' and their expression of transformational learning.

### **5.2 Sociological knowledge is contributive**

#### **5.2.1 Transformative learning and sociological knowledge**

The starting point for this chapter and the next 3 chapters, is to address the question of whether participants experienced transformational learning in their sociology degree. The data generated from the narrative conversations indicates that out of the 15 participants, 14 feel they had or are experiencing transformative learning and I am presenting a quotation from each year group to demonstrate this:

*...it's definitely made me realize a lot of things. It's like I didn't even like know I was ignorant to like how important like structures are in society and not just individuals and so many inequalities in the world are caused by and a lot of things that aren't caused by what you think*

*would be. The, I think the main part is just there's so much, there's so many inequalities. And different challenges to people who don't even realize. Because maybe you don't see it in your own life or it's just so deeply hidden by, by people that don't want you to see, and once you have seen it, you can't unsee it (May BA1)*

*I do think like it has affected me so much personally I think like you know, and I find myself, you know, in debates with, you know, with, you know, I'll look at like my parents, they had such a different upbringing to me, and such a different, you know, experience and be able to be like, this is why they have that experience. And these are the factors that contribute to the way they are. And it's the way like and even just looking at like nature versus nurture. It's a huge thing, and I do think going forward, sociology will affect my relationships. You know, my intimate relationships, my relationships with my children. Like I do think it does because it forces you to be so reflective (Rosie BA2)*

*I didn't really care about society because I just thought my life is pathetic enough like I can't even take care of my own self. So, I think studying sociology did change the way I think (Lucy BA3)*

*You're looking at the individual as well as the structure, and that's something that you can, will continue to be able to kind of juggle that individual structure micro, macro, holistic, pinpoint and stuff for the rest of my life (Holly graduate)*

Participants have engaged deeply with their studies to experience this kind of transformation, and this is unlikely to happen when students identify solely as consumers (Bunce and Bennet, 2021). The nature of their transformed view is aligned with studying sociology, that is the developed critical awareness of societal structures and their relationships with communities and people (Abbas et al, 2020). This finding supports previous work by Muddiman (2018) and Ashwin et al (2014) which also demonstrated that sociology students report that they experience transformation in this way thus providing a position from which to explore how and why this transformation happened.

Within the participant group, there was one who did not feel that studying sociology was transformative:

*I feel like now my brain is fully developed at 25 I feel like I'm quite happy, confident in who I am....I don't feel the need to sort of impress or you know do things. So I don't feel like it's going to change me that much. I've enjoyed the opportunities....I made some friends, which is nice. But I wouldn't say as a person it's going to change me (Lily BA1)*

I will refer to Lily several times throughout the findings and discussion chapters because she provides an alternative perspective to the majority of the participants. She was secure in her worldviews and was also the only participant who stated that the motivation for doing her degree was explicitly to improve her job prospects. She felt that sociology was too abstract and had taken the first steps in changing her degree programme at the time of our conversation.

### **5.2.2 Sociological knowledge is precious and should be used**

From the 15 participants in this study, 14 stated that the sociological knowledge they have developed gives them an important insight into the challenges that our societies face. There is therefore a belief that sociology as a discipline can and should contribute to understanding the role of structures and systemic inequalities within our world. In this sense, participants feel that sociological knowledge should be applied; it does not exist for the sake of itself:

*I think people need to practise sociology (Holly graduate)*

Sociology is also understood as a degree choice for people who want to use this knowledge for the benefit of others:

*....people go into this degree for reasons. They really wanna [sic] make a difference. Make an impact (Olivia graduate)*

There was also recognition that sociology should be understood as a discipline that should collaborate with others to have positive impacts on societal challenges:

*I just think that sometimes when we are talking about like really broad societal problems, I think there's a danger in just kind of looking at it through the lens of 1 academic discipline. I think what we need, we need to do it from every discipline. I mean, sociologists, scientists, chemists, biologists, physicists, environmental science, philosophers as well (Olivia graduate)*

Participants understand sociology not just as an academic discipline removed from the social world. They see it as a body of specialist knowledge that should be used for social good. Sociology therefore is attractive to students who have a sense of wanting to contribute something positive to the world,

or students that see their citizenship as more than engaging in consumerism (Giroux, 2020). Important here is that the 'use' of this knowledge is not equated with capital or economic gain; there is no mention of knowledge being a financial commodity which is a neoliberal pedagogic perspective. It is understood as a way of seeing the potential in reciprocal and collective support for each other, or as a citizenship orientated way of seeing social life:

*I think a lot of people don't appreciate the impact that society and community has... we are all so intertwined with each other, and we have such big influences on each other and things like, like social care and social infrastructure and education and health policy are so much more intertwined they are not separate things (Jessica BA3)*

Participants have a sense of social responsibility and they want to celebrate the potential of sociological knowledge:

*So I just felt like we, as sociologists, like we need to be a bit more kind of like proud in what we do and a bit more out there because I think it... it's a bit shy as an academic discipline kind of holds back a bit, but it needs to really like, you know, take centre stage a bit more and just put yourself out there (Olivia graduate)*

The significance of this is that 14 participants, regardless of where they are in their sociology degree, believe that sociology has a role in society. They do not believe that this specialist knowledge is something that should be restricted to those who have 'bought' their degree. This suggests that this group are not entirely influenced by the neoliberal context of higher education and resulting neoliberal pedagogy and are not identifying solely as consumers in line with existing research but instead see the contribution that sociology could make to societies.

### **5.3 Participants are generous with their knowledge**

#### **5.3.1 Desire to share knowledge with family**

Participants in this study have a similar perspective when thinking about the sociological knowledge that they have gained personally. They do not perceive that they are gaining knowledge for their personal benefit, they instead feel motivated and excited to use it for the benefit of others. Some participants talked about the joy in being able to share their knowledge with their families:

*...you you can learn the kind of background knowledge from, from university and then you also like maybe uh, we think about it and uh, maybe you can come up with some new concepts and then like this can bring back to your own family (Lucy BA3)*

Rosie describes here how she used an important family gathering to share her amazement and what she had learned:

*I remember when I first started like even my degree I came home at Christmas. I was like "guys..." (Rosie BA2)*

It is perhaps not surprising that participants would want to share what they have experienced positively in terms of their learning with people they feel close to, indeed who may even be financially supporting them through their degree and people who they may expect to be receptive to their new knowledge which might be very different from the way they have previously understood the world. However, Josh describes how he does not share some sociological knowledge despite wanting to because he does not want to upset his family:

*I can't talk to my family members about how I think everyone's being exploited and life's really fragile.....that is the biggest frustration I have because I wanna [sic] be like you should be aware of this and like I wish I could put just a little few drops of what's going on in my mind in your mind because you would be making very different decisions (Josh BA3)*

Josh wants to protect people from the knowledge he now has, perhaps he is worried about the consequences of raising critical consciousness in those close to him which indicates how disruptive, painful yet powerful he perceives this knowledge to be (Zembylas, 2015).

### **5.3.2 Desire to share and use knowledge to benefit others**

Participants also feel compelled to find ways to share their transformed understanding of society with others beyond family. Josh goes on to talk about how he now understands collectiveness and solidarity as core to human existence and that he wants to be someone who promotes this:

*But actually you want exactly the same things as that person over there does. And for me, that's so important to share that message (Josh BA3)*

As noted in the previous chapter, two of the participants are also studying film alongside sociology. It was notable in the narrative conversations that those participants talked explicitly about film as a medium through which they can share their sociological knowledge with the aim of raising critical awareness:

*I've always wanted to help people. But whether that would have been through like making documentaries or just making like film, hidden messages or whatnot.... But what I do know is that sociology has definitely solidified that view of what I wanna [sic] do and also narrowed it down...I wanna [sic] make films. (May BA1)*

Emma talked about how she might use her knowledge to help deal with conflict situations that arise:

*But I'd like go into a situation and I'd be like, right? But why is he doing that?....I would always stand back and go like this is how that persons like been raised or..., if there was any kind of if, if everyone kind of has the flat drama, but I, I, I did get called like the mediator in the flat (Emma graduate)*

Participants position themselves almost as facilitators or conduits through which sociological knowledge can or should flow into the society for the benefit of others. They have a sense of responsibility to use their education which I and others (for example, Watson, 2014) believe should be the core purpose of higher education. Participants' generosity around using their knowledge appears to be motivated by a belief that the knowledge is powerful and transformative and they are keen for others to also access it because they hope it will contribute to others understanding the social world and its inequalities from a more structural or systemic perspective. This positioning is unlikely to have been stimulated and/or supported by experiences of neoliberal pedagogy which frames knowledge as a personal gain to be used for competitive advantage. Instead, participants are motivated to take on a 'public intellectual' role (Giroux, 2020) which involves responsibility to use knowledge to contribute to a socially just and democratic society. This kind of aim is core to critical pedagogy but developing critical awareness is only one aspect of critical pedagogy, educators must also support students to understand how to use their awareness (Giroux, 2004). Freire (1970) says that raising critical consciousness includes action; critical consciousness is not simply observing from a safe distance. It includes a process of taking action and then reflecting further in a practice, or praxis that is aligned with experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2015). Participants here are motivated to put what they have learned through their experience of transformation into action in what appears to be a contributive or citizenship-orientated identity.

## 5.4 Participants are citizen orientated

### 5.4.1 Paid and voluntary work

The desire to be generous with their new knowledge resulting from their transformed understanding appears to indicate a commitment to active social responsibility. Participants demonstrate praxis through their paid and voluntary work too. Lucy here talks about a placement she did with people who describe themselves as learning disabled describing how she aimed to democratise the relationship:

*You're learning from the people that you're supporting as well. So, I think it's kind of like.... interpersonal (Lucy BA3)*

Increasing numbers of students must take on paid work whilst being a student to complement their income due to the increasing cost of living (The Sutton Trust, 2024). Several participants talked about how their paid work outside of university was influenced by their sociological knowledge. Erin makes the point that the work she wants to do always involves working with people in a caring and supportive way rather than being about earning potential:

*....in the support worker role. I had a pub job for, like a month when I was like 15. So it wasn't for me..... I just really like getting to know somebody. To know you're making a difference in a way like I'm earning the same amount of money I could be earning in a restaurant.... But I enjoy this more..... it's always been something a bit more....my degree is supported and enforced it (Erin BA2)*

As mentioned in chapter 2 in relation to citizenship and students, there can be a tendency to forget that students remain citizens whilst being students (Brooks et al, 2022). Several participants within this study talked about the potential to use any spare time they had on their degree to engage in activity that benefited others, that is citizenship-orientated activity:

*I'm on my college JCR, which means I think I'm surrounded by a lot of student politics and a lot of like JCR and SU and things like that....I think that's like one of the huge driving factors because look, you know all these roles are voluntary. You know, I think that's.. it's that.. it's that drive for change I'm going to go out and campaign the government. It's actually like, okay, I'm going to do something that's going to change stuff for my peers (Rosie BA2)*

These are participants who appear to have a desire to be active in ways that contribute positively to their communities, be that in terms of paid or voluntary work, both within the university community and beyond. They want to use their position for the benefit of others rather than to seek competitive advantage to succeed or increase their earning potential.

#### **5.4.2 Future desire to contribute**

Participants in this study appear to have a contributive disposition or identity, that is they want to use their knowledge in ways that is helpful and supportive to others. This is both through their willingness to share knowledge but also through activities in the types of paid and voluntary work they undertake. This desire to be a contributor for good extends into their future plans. This is both in terms of the type of employment they hope to gain, but also a more general sense of wanting to be someone who contributes to the public good. They appear to have a current and projected sense of social responsibility stimulated by their studies in terms of employment:

*I mean, I think it's definitely kind of convinced me that I want to work with people and, you know, different cases of different people. Like I want to really apply that critical thinking and you know, and get to, like, get to experience those different perspectives and things like that like that like that. It's definitely taught me that that's what I want to do (Emma graduate)*

*But I do think like as much as our jobs are important, it's learning more than your job identity and not letting it kind of govern you know what, you kind of give to society though at the same time it's wanting to give something because you learn about like all these concepts of you know, how society is affected. It's like, well, I wanna [sic] change just... the world (Rosie BA2)*

Participants see that their ability to contribute to society positively is more than just through employment opportunities. They also see that they can contribute more generally through the sort of person they become which has been shaped by their studies:

*I feel like it helps me to be a better member of society, a better father, a better partner, a better friend (Adam graduate)*

*I don't want to shuffle off the mortal coil until I feel like I've actually done something useful... I feel like a personal like commitment to equality and, you know. Commitment to, to community and things like that (Jessica BA3)*

This is a group of highly motivated people who have engaged deeply with their studies of sociology to have reason to be motivated to be positive members of society. They do not identify solely as consumers which aligns with recent research by Gupta et al (2025) who argue that students actively reject this framing. In fact, in this study, participants appear to position themselves as current and future contributors or active citizens, albeit with an emphasis on what they can do individually rather than collectively, a point which will be explored further in the following chapter.

#### **5.4.3 Concerns about their agency**

Having reported above on the prevalence of the desire to contribute to society, it is also true to say that some participants felt that whilst this was their aim, they were not confident about how to go about putting their sociological knowledge into action or that it will have the intended impact. Olivia felt that this translation of how to use sociological knowledge could have been included in her programme:

*What I think would have been good, as if, like there were more kind of practical applications to really to live for that impact (Olivia graduate)*

In a point returned to in chapter 8, participants felt the emotional burden of their transformed understanding of the world in the sense that they felt compelled to try to make a positive difference, but they also had a sense of limitation about what could be achieved whilst taking a realistic view that they could at the very least share their knowledge locally:

*Do I feel personally individually that my, my voice makes a difference? No. From a whole world... But do I feel that I can influence a number of people that may be able to influence other numbers of people? Yeah, I do. So I think on a smaller scale, yes (Josh BA3)*

Some participants connected their desire to contribute positively to society in terms of challenging injustice as activity that should happen through their future employment. Again, employment is an area discussed in more detail in chapter 7 but is relevant here because participants see employment as the medium through which they can use their sociological knowledge for good. However, this means that finding employment that enables this is essential and some participants had a concern about whether this would be possible in a neoliberal world:

*Part of the reason I chose sociology is because I am interested in people and I'm aware of people and I'm aware of, I'm just socially aware, and it's been built on in the degree and stuff and kind of I think that will be beneficial in every way in my future. Whether it be employment I, I just like that even though it doesn't necessarily lead directly into a set job (Grace BA2)*

The participants in this study overwhelmingly identify with the idea that they want to use their sociological knowledge for what they perceive to be the benefit of others in a citizen-orientation. It is notable that they perceive employment as an activity through which they can use their knowledge for good rather than a personal gain. They do not appear to be focused on their competitive ability to achieve instrumental outcomes for their own benefit as might be expected within a consumerist context although there is no evidence of a collective desire to contribute, a position which aligns with neoliberal individualism (Raaper, 2021) and will be returned to in the following chapter. This suggests that the discipline specific knowledge has mitigated the influence of the neoliberal context (Muddiman, 2020) thus demonstrating again the importance of student's engagement with knowledge for transformation (Ashwin, 2020). Lily is the one participant whose perception is different to the other 14 participants. She appears to have a fixed position in terms of her outlook and sociological knowledge has not penetrated this. She is dissatisfied with her degree programme having already taken steps to change it. She is disengaged from sociology, perhaps either because she does not have a personal reason for studying it (discussed further in chapter 6) or her dissatisfaction has resulted in her absence of motivation (Ashwin et al, 2024). She has not experienced a sense of transformation in terms of her believing in the power of sociological knowledge to contribute to society.

## **5.5 Personal gain and competition**

### **5.5.1 Experiences to 'get ahead'**

As explored in chapter 3, neoliberal pedagogy frames educational experiences as those designed for personal gain. This is underpinned in England by the discourse of students as consumers because of the fee and loan regime potentially prompting students to think instrumentally about their degree because they understandably want a return on their investment (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). This context could create pedagogical practices that are transmission orientated and reproductive because knowledge is seen as commodified and objective. It is suggested above that participants in this study do not identify as consumers demonstrated by their strong desire to want to share the knowledge they have developed either literally as knowledge or through action. However, a consumerist

positioning was not entirely absent from narrative conversations. For example, Lucy here talks about the importance of being competitive and how her placement experience can be used for self-gain:

*I think studying here makes me feel more kind of like this place is nice....so I think all my like kind of like actions are kind of getting myself....like make myself be more competitive.....people would question, like, why you chose this placement. You're not getting paid....I would say it is a practical experience to like learn more about yourself because I learned quite a lot about myself...what kind of jobs are more suitable, it does help me to build up connections with people, like my destination now is like linking back to that organization (Lucy BA3)*

These comments made by Lucy could well be prompted by neoliberal pedagogy focusing on the importance of being able to 'sell' oneself to ensure opportunities arise after the degree is completed. Grace also talked about using her time wisely to develop her skill set:

*Like also because it's not too strenuous on the contact hours, I'm able to be developing my own skills outside and so I'm learning something I'm interested in. But then I'm also really involved in societies and other things because I have the time to develop other skills (Grace BA2)*

It is interesting to note that within the narrative conversations, the idea of skills did arise and participants such as Grace made the point about the value they placed on developing skills because they had a sense that this is what they needed to demonstrate for future success. This can be understood as how a university degree can be commodified as 'usesable' knowledge for future employment (Tomlinson and Watermeyer, 2022) thus aligning with neoliberal perspectives.

### **5.5.2 Fees**

There was very little evidence in the narrative conversations that students aligned themselves wholly with a consumer identity. Other research has also demonstrated that there is not a causal or a linear relationship between the context of consumerism and how students see themselves within it (Budd, 2017). There was just one participant who mentioned tuition fees in all of the 15 conversations:

*I went into third, year, really bitter resentment, resentful towards this degree because like, like, I don't know what I'm doing this for. Like I'm spending all this money on tuition fees and for what? What am I doing? What am I gonna [sic] really gain from it? (Olivia graduate)*

Olivia goes on to say that the feelings that she expresses here changed as she secured a plan for her future beyond her degree. So, whilst powerful at the time, this emotional response was temporary; these feelings arose and then dissipated. However, the above quotation does capture feelings of disappointment when the 'product' bought is not perceived to have been worth the investment. The consumer discourse remains influential in the context of higher education, and it is therefore understandable that it will arise. The fact that it was not a central element to the conversations suggests that participants were not predominately exposed to neoliberal pedagogy which remind students of their consumer status.

### **5.5.3 Individualised classroom experiences**

Despite the suggestions made above that participants in this study have a contributive identity this did not translate into responsibility to contribute within teaching environments. This is analysed in relation to students having an individual orientation towards their learning which is the focus of chapter 6. As Eva and Adam explain here, learning is very personal:

*It just gives me I don't know an outlet to just yap and talk all the time.... I feel like a lot of the times in education, your opinion, your thoughts and just talking.... just thinking about things that "don't matter" in quotation marks aren't seen as important, is very discouraged. But I then, in sociology it's very personal, especially being erm being a woman (Eva BA1)*

*But like I guess it's more like what I've learned, like not only like skills for like sort of career wise and like professionally, but it's like more about for me at least it's been more about like personal growth and personal development (Adam graduate)*

The relevance here is that this personal orientation towards learning aligns with neoliberal pedagogy which encourage a self-focus at the expense of a more collaborative and contributive approach in classroom settings. Participants in this study did not appear to recognise how they could, through their engagement within classroom settings, contribute to the development of everyone else in the setting. Their focus was on their own learning and how they could use the classroom environment for this purpose. Their learning had to have a personal meaning:

*But I didn't like this module at all because I just didn't see how it was relevant to anything. It just seemed a bit pointless, like it just didn't seem... I don't know. I kind of put the sense of like why am I doing this kind of thing? Like what has this got to do with anything (Olivia graduate)*

It is interesting to consider here that participants have a strong sense of social responsibility to use what they perceive to be transformational knowledge for the good of others. But this position does not appear to translate into the classroom environment where they appear to position themselves as consumers of knowledge for their own benefit, a finding that aligns with other research that indicates the neoliberal context of higher education cannot be completely ignored by students (Gupta et al, 2025). Perhaps they perceive classrooms to be a place of personal gain from which to 'consume' knowledge with the idea that they will then 'contribute' it in other settings such as conversations with family/friends and in employment settings. This suggests that a consumer identity is subtly supported in the classroom through neoliberal pedagogy that promotes individualism but perhaps their identity as a contributor outside of the classroom could be brought into the classroom through critical pedagogy resulting in a desire to contribute to everyone's learning in classroom settings.

### **5.6 Disciplinary context, motivation and pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy is transformative (McArthur, 2010) and here 14 of 15 participants have developed a transformed understanding of the social world and how this understanding can be used for social good, although as the next chapter will discuss, this transformational journey was prompted by experiences prior to their degree programme. Participants have not simply consumed sociological knowledge for their own benefit; their transformation appears to be that they see their new knowledge and themselves as contributory in relation to society and citizenship.

Questions of why and how this transformation has taken place are central to this research project. Transformative learning is understood to happen when students engage with a body of knowledge (Ashwin, 2020) and participants in this study have engaged deeply with sociological knowledge to challenge their own frames of reference to experience transformation (Mezirow, 2012). Their engagement with sociological knowledge has not happened in a transactional, reproductive and self-beneficial way which would align with neoliberal pedagogical approaches. It is therefore tempting here to infer that students must have experienced critical rather than neoliberal pedagogy within their sociology degree but drawing such a neat and causal conclusion would fail to acknowledge the complex relationship between disciplinary context, student motivation, transformation and pedagogy.

Given the nature of sociological knowledge, which as previously mentioned, includes thinking through the impact of structural inequalities on people and communities, it is perhaps not surprising that being enabled to take a macro view of societies to understand the micro has resulted in profound learning for these participants (McLean, 2006). They say they have found pedagogical practices which value their subjective knowledge and experiences and create safe, collaborative and inclusive learning environments, all of which are principles of critical pedagogy (Seal and Smith, 2021) to be central to their learning, points explored in more depth in the following chapters. This suggests that there is a relationship between the type of pedagogical experience they have had when studying sociology and this outward, societal focused view which Muddiman (2020) also found to be a feature of those who had studied sociology. Critical pedagogy is after all closely related to critical theory (Giroux, 2025b), and critical theoretical perspectives tend to be core to English sociology (Halsey, 2004). However, it would be remiss not to consider the role of the participants themselves in this picture, particularly as critical pedagogy is founded upon the valuing of knowledge they bring into the learning setting and the potential disruption of this knowledge (Jayaraj, 2020). There are a range of life and specific university experiences which will have influenced participants' (Simon et al, 2025) identity in relation to the consumer-contributor continuum and critical pedagogy encourages this self-analysis and reflection. As explored in chapters 6 and 7 participants indicate that they were drawn to sociology because they felt it would help them to individually self-develop their understanding of the social world thus suggesting that student motivation and orientation to learning are important when analysing the relationship between discipline, pedagogy and transformation, a point that Muddiman (2018) also makes. Bunce et al (2017) also found that discipline choice relates to whether students position themselves as a consumer with students who do more likely to choose STEM subjects. 14 participants suggest that sociology has caused or strengthened a contributor identity, and it could be theorised that it is the interplay between this positioning, sociological knowledge (Ashwin et al, 2024) and critical pedagogical practices that advocate for the use of this knowledge for transformative understandings that catalyses this contributor identity in 14 of the 15 participants in contexts outside of the classroom.

## **5.7 Chapter summary**

Positioning of students as consumers is core in the neoliberal university and resultant neoliberal pedagogy. The findings here find very little evidence that students see themselves in this way, in fact the argument in this chapter is that students appear to identify as people who have a responsibility to contribute to society in socially just ways rather than be consumer orientated citizens. This suggests they have not been subject to, or have at least resisted neoliberal pedagogy, and this is supported by the types of pedagogy that they say have been helpful which are those which align with critical

pedagogy. However, it is not possible to conclude by saying participants here want to be contributive citizens because they have experienced critical pedagogy. This ignores what the students themselves bring into the learning environment, and it is likely that the participants here were already motivated to at least understand society rather than to gain a competitive advantage in employment situations prior to their degree demonstrated by their own motivations for studying sociology, a point which chapter 7 will go on to explore.

There is also an emerging picture here of participants wanting to contribute to wider society, even if they are little hesitant about how to do this but holding a more consumerist position in classroom environments. Their position or subjectivity changes depending on context (Symonds, 2021). This suggests that the neoliberal context of the university remains powerful in shaping experiences of pedagogy so that whilst there is no evidence here that neoliberal pedagogy is being enacted to encourage students to position themselves as individual consumers in relation to their role in society, it is less clear in relation to their role as students within classroom settings. This will be explored and analysed in the following chapter. Returning to the point made at the beginning of this chapter I am suggesting here that the use of a continuum to help understand this contributor-consumer identity is useful because participants appear to occupy an unfixed position; they move on this continuum depending on their context. The neoliberal context of the university appears to encourage or enable a consumer identity even when more generally, participants seem to hold a contributive and citizen-orientated identity.

## Chapter 6 - Student Orientation to Learning: Alone Together

### 6.1 Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapter, I am reporting and discussing findings in 4 chapters, all of which use the theoretical perspectives of neoliberal and critical pedagogy as an analytical framework to explore the participants' experiences of their sociology degree, specifically their perception of opportunities for critical, transformative learning. Within the narrative conversations, there was considerable reference made to the individualised nature of participants' educational experiences. A neoliberal pedagogy positions education as individualised, built upon a theoretical view that personal responsibility and competition between students develops initiative and breeds 'success'. Critical pedagogy is shaped by a contrasting theoretical position and emphasises democratic processes for collectives of people to work productively together to benefit all members of that community. In terms of teaching and learning experiences, this translates into students feeling valued as a member of the group and a shared sense of responsibility for inclusion rather than a self only focus (Giroux, 2020). This chapter uses these two different pedagogical theoretical framings to explore the relationship between pedagogy, participants' experience of transformation and their individual or collective orientation to learning.

### 6.2 Sociology as an individual project

#### 6.2.1 The role of the 'disorientating dilemma'

This chapter will start by exploring the significance of how participants became sociology students. Out of the 15 participants, 9 had studied sociology at A Level, 1 as part of mandatory teaching in high school, 1 as part of an access course and 4 had not studied sociology at all prior to starting their degree. Out of the 11 who had studied sociology before their degree, there was unsurprisingly clear evidence that this was a significant factor in why they went on to apply to study sociology at university, for example:

*Well firstly, it's been really enjoyable, I've loved it. I've loved the subject of sociology since I did it at A Level (May BA1)*

And within the group of 4 who had not studied it before, researching what sociology involved prompted the desire to study it:

*And when I looked at a sociology course and I kind of looked at what you'd study, I was like, oh, my god, this is a subject of what I love (Holly graduate)*

What was also evident within the narrative conversations is a relationship between participants' emotional connections with sociology, explored further in chapter 8, expressed as 'love' for sociology and participants' personal experiences. For example, Adam explains sociology here as the knowledge he needed to make sense of his own life situation:

*...basically it was kind of like an inquisition into my own, sort of like, mental health and psychology (Adam graduate)*

For Josh, sociology helped explain and/or validate his experiences or observations of the social world:

*I've thought about this, and I've noticed this, and I've probably thought about it a lot, but I didn't have a term for this or even though there was study behind it. So that was kind of quite enlightening (Josh BA3)*

Although participants started their educational engagement with sociology at different points, either in school/college or in university, their interest in sociology consistently began prior to their sociology degree. The decision to study sociology at degree level was carefully thought through and based on one of two experiences. The 4 participants who had not studied sociology pre-university had all had individual personal experiences of the social world which left them curious and perhaps even puzzled, questioning what they were seeing around them and the assumptions that they held about the social world. Sociology was chosen as a subject which could help make sense of these experiences. Of the 11 participants who had studied sociology pre-university, it appears that for 10 participants' their experiences of studying sociology in school or college prompted critical re-assessment of personal experiences which resulted in an appetite for more sociological knowledge. These personal experiences for both groups of participants align with Mezirow's (2009) concept of a 'disorientating dilemma'. A disorientating dilemma is an experience which cannot be made sense of through the use of existing knowledge therefore prompting questioning of assumptions and beliefs which are used to make sense of experiences. It forms the first phase of the process of Transformational Learning Theory (TLT) (Mezirow, 1997) outlined in the theory chapter of this thesis. For example, here Chloe shares her disorientation at realising she was being treated in particular ways because of her gender:

*And I was just like, completely kind of oblivious at that age that like, what women have even had to go through that because I was like, very much like, this wasn't, this wasn't like, oh, you're different to your brothers or anything it wasn't until I actually started like experiencing it outside the home. I was like, oh, why am I being treated differently? I don't like it (Chloe BA1)*

Following this initial phase of Mezirow's TLT, further stages outline what, theoretically, follows this sense of disorientation; self and critical examination (phases 2 and 3) and recognition of discontent and exploration of potential new actions to help (phases 4 and 6). For participants it appears that choosing to study sociology was a planned action aligned with phases 6 and 7 of Mezirow's theory to explore their developing awareness of the relationship between people and societal structures and how these create inequalities. This indicates that the process of transformational learning based on critical awareness started before they began their sociology degree, but the degree continued their thinking:

*It kind of reinforced ideas that I had (Josh BA3)*

*I would say it was developed. I think I was kind of on the journey there already and kind of did that, but I think it kind of only enriched that and enhanced it (Holly graduate)*

*I sort of already had this and it sort of just reaffirmed the beliefs that I had whilst opening me up to new perspectives (Eva BA1)*

### **6.2.2 Orientation to sociology is individualised and personal**

The significance of the role of the disorienting dilemma is threefold. Firstly, the decision to study sociology at degree level appears to be personally and individually motivated by the dilemma for almost all (14) participants. Sociology is seen as a subject which can help explain these personal experiences and this is the reason for doing a sociology degree. It also relates to the discussion in the next chapter about sociology students being motivated to study sociology for reasons of personal development. The decision to study sociology is one taken with a sense of individual responsibility which, for some participants, eventually weighed heavy especially when thinking through what it might lead to in the future (explored in chapter 7). For example, Olivia talked of her profound embarrassment when, part way through her degree, she regretted her decision:

*I mean really it was up to me to actually secure my future, and I haven't managed to do that with a sociology degree and it's caused huge panic..... I should note it's nothing to do with the sociology degree I just felt extremely ashamed of myself that having not realised all of this sooner and picked up more kind of economically sensible degree (Olivia graduate)*

Secondly, applying TLT, transformed ways of considering the social world which acknowledge structural unfairness have begun prior to university level study. The experience of their degree may continue to

transform their views, beliefs and understanding and grow their critical awareness, but this transformed understanding started prior to the degree; the degree was chosen to continue a way of thinking that had already begun. Identity is important in the transition to university (Briggs et al, 2012) and it appears here participants are developing an aspect of their personal identity based on their emerging 'gaze' (McLean et al, 2013) which is attentive to the relationships between people and society. Participants, at the point of entry to their sociology degree, seem to be pursuing a sociology degree as a 'personal project' (Ashwin et al, 2016) to try to understand their experiences of the world so far and verify their related developing personal identity (Jary and Lebeau, 2007).

Thirdly, for 14 of the participants the decision to study sociology does not appear to have been based on any thinking about what the degree might lead to in terms of future employment and career, a point Olivia's comment above painfully captures. This is explored further in the following chapter but also aligns with the participants in this study not identifying themselves outside of the classroom as consumers discussed in the previous chapter. Lily is the one participant who says she chose sociology as a route to employment, and it was also Lily who did not appear to have experienced a disorientating dilemma.

### **6.2.3 The Project of Self**

This intense self-focus has been theorised by Giddens (1991) in work known as the 'project of self'. This theory draws together ways people are thought to have to 'invent' themselves through a process of identity formation in late modernity when traditional social structures no longer influence identities in previously expected ways. People are thought to continually reflexively assess themselves in line with social contexts and experiences to help form, change and adapt self-identity to be able to cope in the continually changing world. Although there is criticism of how Giddens (1991) assumes that all will have the agency and opportunity to reflexively adapt one's identity (Zhao and Biesta, 2012), participants here appear to be choosing sociology as part of their project of self to help investigate and understand their own experiences referred to above as disorientating dilemmas. In some respects, because university is framed as a natural or expected 'next step' for such a large proportion of those who have completed secondary education (Bristow et al, 2021), the opportunity to study sociology as part of an ongoing reflexive project of self is provided by the educational system which frames education as a private project rather than as a public good (Marginson, 2024) thus fuelling the sense of education being a personal and individual experience.

Participants in this study, with their individualist and personal reasons for wanting to study sociology have therefore not escaped the influence of neoliberalism. The personal project of self aligns with the

neoliberal focus on individualism (Tight, 2019), and, in an educational context, neoliberal pedagogy (Giroux, 2020). Formal education systems are based on individualistic notions of learning (Hager and Beckett, 2024) and previous educational experiences influence students' perception of future educational experiences (Crook et al, 2024). It is therefore understandable that participants are approaching their studies with an individualistic focus which excludes any explicit awareness of how their participation and collaboration will contribute to the educational experiences of others. This individualism possibly reflects the neoliberal pedagogy they have already experienced. However, participants' personal and individual projects are fuelled by a desire to gain knowledge of the social world indicating that they are concerned and interested in the world beyond themselves and as demonstrated by the previous chapter, they do have a sense of social responsibility. This demonstrates that although there is serious concern that neoliberal pedagogy jeopardises the development of critical thinking (Giroux, 2020), here participants have not lost their curiosity about the social world. This suggests that there is potential to develop such outward looking views collectively because sociology students share an interest in a critical understanding of the social world.

### **6.3 Finding my people but not a community**

#### **6.3.1 Sociology and discipline identity**

Discipline identity for sociology is thought to be based on three aspects. Firstly, students gain an understanding of what sociological knowledge is, for example, understanding how sociology helps explain the complex relationship between people and society. Secondly, students see how this knowledge is applicable in their own lives and thirdly, students can use this knowledge to engage in sociological thought, writing, discussion and analysis; they can 'do' sociology (McLean et al, 2016). The previous chapter demonstrates that participants in this study want to 'do' sociology for social good and that a sociology discipline identity is based around a critical way of viewing society. One participant described this as having a "*secret insider knowledge*" (Grace BA2) which she could use to make sense of the unfairness in the world and herself within it. The recognition of how some groups of people face discrimination, including themselves, was mentioned or discussed by 14 participants when they talked about what sociology is demonstrating that this critical awareness or consciousness (Freire, 1970) is a feature in how these sociology students understand the social world. Lily did not indicate any such awareness. Some participants raised questions about whether the discipline identity means that they are only being exposed to a particular way of thinking:

*That's other thing with sociology, and I don't think it's a problem with sociology, but it's very much true that seminars, especially now, seminars are echo chambers (Josh BA3)*

*People, lecturers that are choosing to like, to do sociology often come from similar perspectives and I'm not saying that's right or wrong, I think it's just kind of a fact. There's a lot more push on liberal and progressivism and stuff, which I think is great, but it's also like you feel like you're missing another side to things (Grace BA2)*

Despite these concerns about insularity, this supports the participants' view that having a 'gaze' related to using sociological knowledge is a bonding or even binding factor amongst sociologists. 14 of the 15 participants all appear to relate to this discipline identity, Lily being the one participant who did not. Having an identity is more likely to result in a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012) and feelings of belonging are more likely to result in a positive and successful university experience (Hunt et al, 2024). This discipline identity is clearly very important and possibly even offers refuge for those who have not felt their critical views have previously been validated, a point returned to in chapter 8. It indicates that participants do feel 'part of' something which involves others who share similar view of the world despite their individualistic notions about the purpose of education.

For some participants, there was a gendered aspect to the adoption of their discipline identity, particularly in the female first-year participants. Out of the 4 first years involved in this study, 3 of them made specific reference to how their awareness or experiences of gender inequality resulted in a sense of belonging in sociology because of the importance of being with others who recognised and validated that gender inequality exists:

*just thinking about things that "don't matter" in quotation marks don't aren't seen as important is very discouraged. But I then in sociology, it wasn't really... it's very personal especially being erm, being a woman (Eva BA1)*

Cameron and Rideout (2022) argue that the move to university, both literally and metaphorically is a time of extreme challenge for first year students which could explain why this sense of belonging around gender was particularly strong for 3 out of the 4 female first year students. Interestingly, almost all participants (13 including both male participants) referred to their awareness of gender inequalities and the importance of feminist thinking to help understand the structural challenges that women face in society. This appears to be a specific area of understanding and awareness that binds most of the participants and was the most commonly used example of how society is not equal. This is despite previous research, albeit with a much larger sample size, indicating that feminist knowledge is not always part of a sociology discipline identity (Abbas et al, 2016). The idea of sociology as a 'gendered'

discipline will be returned to in chapter 8 in the context of exploring participants' epistemic stance of subjective emotions being central to their experiences.

### **6.3.2 Belonging and identity**

Despite the individualised and personal motivation for embarking on a sociology degree, all participants talked about the value of their relationships formed through their connections with others both in terms of the fellow students and university staff. An aspect which several participants talked about either explicitly or implicitly was the importance of feeling reassured that they had found others who had similar beliefs, values and/or experiences to them:

*When you do find it and you've been thinking like that and it's not been appreciated, that was so important to me to be able to...for it to be appreciated....like I... sort of not being told that you're like not crazy (Eva BA1)*

*It's so comforting that it's like all sociological and it's all like, you know, all looking at it (Rosie BA2)*

This confirms the importance of a 'sense of belonging' for a positive university experience (Huang and Cockayne, 2023) based on the belief that they will be with likeminded others on their programme sharing a discipline identity. However, this sense of belonging is complex and if used uncritically can be framed as a state that students are individually responsible for finding through adapting themselves to 'fit in'. Some students may find this 'fitting in' easier than others if we fail to consider how a 'norm' or the conditions required to 'fit in' may exclude or at least disadvantage some students. This can create a situation where some students may feel individually responsible for their state of belonging (Ajjawi et al, 2023), thus building upon their previous experiences of education being individualised. There is also a relationship between a sense of belonging and personal identity (Antonsich, 2010) understood as how being with others perceived to be like minded can help strengthen a sense of personal identity and vice versa. This can improve the social integration of students when theorising identity as changeable and situationally influenced (Noyens et al, 2019). This idea of personal identity as shaped by context demonstrates the importance of interactions with others for example staff and peers within a disciplinary context (Scanlon et al, 2007) and people self-identifying with others in a discipline builds a discipline identity.

### **6.3.3 Belonging and university-based identity**

In addition to the sense of belonging and identity participants have in relation to joining a sociology degree, all first-year participants also talked about the bond they felt generally with the university experience in terms of the spaces they spent their time in:

*Both in the library and lecture theatres. As soon as I go in there, I'm not really...nothing's really distracting me. There's nothing else that.. my mind's not like wandering all the time and just there like I know that like the reason I'm here (May BA1)*

*...because it's a campus uni you are sort of always at uni..... but like uni is different school, I think that school is a place where you specifically go to do the work so it's feels more like a chore (Eva BA1)*

Some participants seemed to interpret their desire to be in learning spaces through the experiences they had during the global Covid-19 pandemic where they had to complete their studies online, an experience that they talked about negatively. This appears to have resulted in participants valuing physical locations that they associate with learning. Place plays a role in shaping an overall identity as a student (Carter et al, 2018) and therefore the importance of physical spaces for students in creating a sense of belonging remain significant.

### **6.3.4 Belonging and identity but no community**

Although participants felt they were with “like minded” (Eva BA1) people when joining their sociology degree and in spaces they associated with being a student, surprisingly, these did not automatically result in a feeling of community. In fact, some participants shared feelings of disappointment in the lack of community they experienced in their degree:

*I've actually found it quite difficult having someone to share that experience with. I find that there's not much camaraderie in this, in the actual sociological course. Like I know two people by name (Jessica BA3)*

It appears that the sense of belonging that participants seemed to relate to in terms of their discipline and the university generally does not translate into an active sense of community offering mutual support to each other. In fact, what appears to happen is participants continue to feel alone and individualised which is a concern given the strong evidence of the importance of friendships at university (Brooks, 2007). Olivia talked about this being related to her perception of class:

*I've looked around and I saw that most people doing sociology can afford to do sociology because most people are international students, rich parents, so it doesn't matter so much to them if they don't end up getting a good job at the end of their degree because they have that safety net to fall back on (Olivia graduate)*

Olivia also aligned herself with the subject of sociology and talked about a sense of belonging and identity because of the alignment of her own “*values and morals*” with the discipline but she did not feel that she belonged with the group of people studying sociology explicitly related to class (Brooks, 2007). Josh talked about feelings of frustration that sociology students did not appear to want to form a community and suggests formal intervention is needed:

*So maybe the idea of integrating sociology students better at the start. I mean, you can't force people to integrate... that's not how integration works.... So, if there's a way that you are able to force people to get to know people (Josh BA3)*

These feelings were held by participants who had graduated or were in their third year. It appears that the positive anticipation of being part of a likeminded community held at the start of the degree changes over time. It is difficult to explain this change because it would be reasonable to assume that the discipline identity and sense of belonging evident in this group of participants would result in a feeling of community (Haddow and Brodie, 2024). Past educational experiences play a significant role in shaping how students approach current learning experiences (Ashwin and Trigwell, 2012) so perhaps an explanation here is that students are unsure how to form a community because their past educational experiences have been modelled on a neoliberal pedagogy which emphasises self-reliance rather than collectively. McArthur et al (2022) note how students can become more instrumentally focused through their degree as the pressure to think about what follows the degree accelerates. Perhaps this self-focus has happened for these participants. Further, the modular structure of the degree which, although promoting choice (which is an aspect itself of a neoliberal pedagogy explored further in chapter 8), serves to disrupt the sociology student community because students are not consistently with the same peers throughout their degree.

Students participating in a community based on democracy, respect and challenge of discrimination is a central tenet of critical pedagogy because it enables students to experience ways of being which will support them to be critically engaged citizens (Giroux, 2020). Josh's quote above reflects that there had been some fairly gentle efforts by staff to bring people together with the hope of forming a sense of community but that these had not been successful. Josh is wondering about a more directive

approach by staff. Research evidence demonstrates the opportunities that working closely with students creates in terms of forming a community (Smith, 2025). This would align with critical pedagogy which advocates for intervention rather than a 'free market' model of neoliberal pedagogy. It is argued here that failure by staff to actively intervene will serve only to keep the status quo which leaves students to feel individually responsible for creating their community thus fuelling the sense of individualism as discussed above. A lack of interventionism also risks students who have less agency because of structural disadvantage being excluded from any community or having to adapt to 'fit in' as mentioned above. Critical pedagogy aims to actively mitigate this by recognising and working to address power in the classroom thus giving students the opportunity to practise creating inclusive democratic communities. However, the reality of attempting to 'flatten' power in classrooms should not be underestimated as explored from lived experience by Shor (1996) who documents the very real challenges of attempting to practice critical pedagogy.

## **6.4 Interventionism and participation**

### **6.4.1 Facilitated collaboration**

Despite the lack of community experienced by participants within their degree programme, there are numerous points made in the narrative conversations about the value of working closely with their student colleagues in facilitated situations, mainly seminars and workshop type teaching events. There was no evidence of a sense of competition between the students in facilitated environments which is a feature that has been observed elsewhere (Brooks, 2007). Participants are committed to these sorts of learning situations because the opportunity to engage in discussion exposes them to different perspectives:

*...in particular I have really liked the seminars..... I think for me personally, one thing is like just being able to talk through a topic will really help us like understand it and like just feeling other people's perspectives on some level (Chloe BA1)*

*I love other people's opinions, like I just always think I love when someone says something. You're like, wow, I haven't thought about it that way (Rosie BA2)*

Participants indicate that this sort of learning opportunity is where they felt their most significant learning takes place. This demonstrates that opportunities for collaboration are valued which aligns with the vast literature on the requirement for social interaction for learning including TLT (Mezirow, 2009). TLT requires this social and collaborative opportunity because it frames learning as reconstructive, that is, it theorises that adults learn through communication and reflection with others

to develop our frames of reference to make sense of the issue under focus. This practice of sharing, reflection and discussion is clearly collaborative; it must involve other people and cannot be individualistic. Participants were able to articulate clearly what kinds of activities within seminar/workshop spaces they found supported this discussion-based work. They found working within smaller groups on a specific task helpful along with anything that involved some form of interaction or active engagement. The active thinking together built a sense of purpose, relationship and identity (Becker and Hagger, 2018) which created a feeling of community in the seminar/workshop:

*It's hard to put like your finger on. It's the atmosphere. It's the vibe. Yeah, it's the energy in the room (Adam Graduate)*

The learning environment and its atmosphere is significant as participants also indicated that unproductive learning encounters occur when, for example, seminars felt “awkward” (Lucy BA3). It was also acknowledged that students have a role to play in creating a productive atmosphere indicating an awareness of their responsibility to participate:

*This really depends on myself of whether I feel comfortable enough, because like some student colleagues or like some tutors, just like not giving you the kind of safeness (Lucy BA3)*

Participants wanted to be part of an engaged and consistent seminar group because it was felt this was more likely to build relationships and therefore create the atmosphere they needed to feel they could contribute. Their belonging to the group or community needed to feel ‘authentic’, that is it is not something that can be imposed or approached in an instrumental way (Haddow and Brodie, 2014). Facilitators therefore need to embody the philosophy of critical pedagogy which positions students as agentic actors within the seminar/workshop. Interestingly, although participants talked about how positive it was to have a wide range of people in seminars who have a range of different perspectives to share, they did not favour exchange students being part of the seminar because of the disruption caused when they left. Participants would also rather students who are not willing to contribute to discussions do not come to seminars, indicating that they saw value in a wide range of perspectives in the seminar to aid their individual development, not because they recognise they could also contribute to the learning of others:

*Getting it down to the small group was amazing and the seminar tutor she was incredibly flexible with us and I think she allowed us to just talk about what we were we wanted to talk about and it was.. we were always kind of relevant (Grace BA2)*

This suggests that participants are still very much influenced by neoliberal pedagogy which positions students as consumers to 'take' knowledge and not as contributors to other people's educational experiences as mentioned in the previous chapter. Their emphasis was on how helpful they found the encounter in terms what they took from it in terms of their individual learning. They appeared to subjugate themselves by a failure to recognise the value of their own contributions. In a culture where there is little if any explicit focus on the 'public good' of higher education (Marginson, 2024) this is unsurprising. Students do not have a fixed approach to learning, rather their approach in any given setting depends on how they understand the environment they are in (Ashwin and Trigwell, 2012). This indicates that there is considerable scope for educators to facilitate a learning environment which aligns with critical pedagogical principles such as democratised discussions and a critical engagement with knowledge by inviting students to practise contributing to the development of a community. The facilitators relationship with the seminar/workshop group is seen as the driving force behind the creation of a positive atmosphere and therefore is key to embodying critical pedagogy:

*My seminar leader.... She's very clear, knows what she's talking about. She's clearly very knowledgeable. She can talk incredibly well. She's very, erm what's the word....she can communicate very effectively....articulately (May BA1)*

*I feel like we sort of know her as a person, as not just a tutor like she might say, what even just she said she was going to do at the weekend like it's, you know, it's really nice. I do know she sort of sees us as just people, not students or 18-year-olds (Lily BA1)*

*I wasn't made to feel like less important than her in the room or like I was, you know what I mean? Like she really felt like she created like an open, safe sort of space for people to chat (Adam graduate)*

The above quotes reveal that skills in communication, relationship building and the willingness to relinquish power were all valued by participants as approaches which helped create a positive learning environment. Facilitators here can be seen to modelling democratised ways of interacting and working with each other, a key feature of critical pedagogy. An example of this is the flexibility and responsiveness in seminars with value being placed on exploring issues together that were important

to the group at the time rather than the session being fixed on a curriculum as Grace suggests above. Here the significance is on who has the power to request what was explored in the discussion. This aligns with the concept of students participating in the decision about what to focus on within the classroom. Although most research has focused on students taking an active role in the setting of curriculum, there is evidence here of this happening on a more localised scale within teaching sessions. This allows for whole groups to be part of the negotiation and decision making rather than a select group of students who act as representatives for the whole group as is often the case when students are asked to help shape the curriculum overall (Bron et al, 2022). This enables all students who are present to be part of the negotiation thus have the chance to practise relevant negotiating and communication skills, in line with critical pedagogy. This could suggest that the role of forming a community using critical pedagogy within smaller teaching spaces is important to the participants especially because the programme overall did not appear to create a sense of community. This highlights the importance of educators who are in the role of seminar/workshop leads/facilitators.

#### **6.4.2 Unfacilitated collaboration**

Participants also talked about the value of collaborating with peers in informal and formal ways without the intervention of a member of staff. For example, May described the value of talking topics through with a peer in informal settings:

*Every week after a seminar, me and my friend will walk back to our college together we'll always discuss what was just going on in the seminar (May BA1)*

This demonstrates the importance of the opportunity to reflect with peers in informal ways. There can be no doubt that learning opportunities are not exclusive to classroom settings as Olivia says:

*There's so many factors that play, that kind of change and shape your personality...will be hard to really say if it was sociology, or if it was like friends, like relationships, like experiences like, because obviously there are so many like competing variables that kind of have that impact (Olivia graduate)*

Several participants also talked about the value of group work as an example formal collaboration with peers despite the known problems with group work (Brooks, 2007):

*I do think that's where group work is great as much as it's everyone's despised thing at university because...it does work like this, but sociology, it does work that collaboration. But is it a pain? Absolutely (Rosie BA2)*

There is value in group work when the group are committed to working together from the perspective of both learning from one another and requiring individuals in the group to have to share and explain their thinking which is thought to be a very powerful way of learning:

*I had a really good sociology group last year....just us four girls and we just got it banged out. Had it all together. We did a meeting every week and we just, and it, and we all committed to it as a group rather than one person leading....yeah, collaborative (Jessica BA3)*

*I think for me a method of learning I find really helpful is, is teaching it. So learning and teaching it back so that is a big part of a good project is are you having to explain it to your group (Jessica BA3)*

These findings align with Cameron and Rideout (2022) who also found that collaborative learning was found to be very useful for the same reasons as Jessica says here. However, again, participants' focus is on their individual development, there was no mention of the desire to support other people's development through their contributions. This desire for collaboration is still individualistic. In addition, the reasons that group projects were seen as problematic is the perception of unfairness because of the potential for the grade to not reflect who is perceived to have done the most work:

*Half of the grade is based on this group project and it's not individually marked (Grace BA2)*

Here then we see a sense of competition when collaboration is expected or required when there is no intervention by a skilled facilitator. This demonstrates that whilst there are some promising signs that students want to collaborate, their individualistic reasons for doing so remains dominant. Intervention from staff is required to ensure that collaboration and collective approaches are not just an 'add on' to an educational experience which is steeped in individualism (Boud and Bearman, 2024).

## **6.5 Chapter summary**

This chapter analyses the extent that individualist positionings of participants disrupts opportunities for participants to work in collaborative and collective ways to experientially learn ways they can contribute to a fair and democratic society, which is the aim of critical pedagogy. This chapter suggests

that the influence of neoliberal pedagogy experienced prior to university understandably influences students' orientation to learning. The individualist nature of past educational experiences are evident in participants' motivations for choosing to study sociology as a personal project. Being with likeminded others and embodying a discipline identity provides a sense of belonging but does not translate into a sense of community. If the idea of a continuum were used here, participants would be predominantly located on the individualist rather than collaborative position; they are predominantly learning alone alongside others.

The opportunity to be fully engaged in a democratic learning community is a key aspect of critical pedagogy and serves to support students to experientially learn the skills of democratic citizenship (Giroux, 2010). Individualised learning assumes that knowledge is held within individuals and does not harness the potential of how learning through collaboration creates shared knowledge (Boud and Bearman, 2024). The individual experiences of participants are deeply embedded in individualistic actions and inactions, demonstrating the need for skilled intervention in group settings to support the development of collaborative, democratic and supportive communities where students recognise their responsibilities to all not just themselves. There is evidence of success in seminars/workshops in some of these aspects of critical pedagogy and it is of note that participants appear to really value these experiences. They say these are where they experience a continuation of transformative learning which began before they started their degree. The significance of intervention by a skilled educator to facilitate this form of powerful learning cannot be underestimated if we want to ensure that we support students to be responsible citizens of the future.

## Chapter 7 – Student Motivation for Learning: Self-Development for Transformation

### 7.1 Introduction

In this third findings chapter I explore the relationship between student motivation for studying their sociology degree, their experiences of transformation and pedagogy again using the framework of neoliberal and critical pedagogies. Neoliberal pedagogy positions students as needing to be 'taught' using a fixed curriculum, aim to meet pre-defined outcomes and the educator is considered the powerful holder of expert knowledge which they must transmit to students, an approach which Freire (1970) called the 'banking' approach to learning. These features of education are founded on beliefs that education is a "saleable commodity such as a credential or a set of workplace skills" (Giroux, 2014, p.16). Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, positions students as agentic beings seeking transformational development, especially in terms of their ability to think independently, not forgetting that self-development could be an instrumental outcome too. Critical pedagogy is more interested in offering students' experiential experiences within the classroom which help them to be ready to be engaged citizens.

### 7.2 Embracing the challenge of higher education learning

#### 7.2.1 Difference between A Levels and higher education

It is accepted that the transition to university from school or college can be a time of extreme challenge for both national and international undergraduates (Jones et al, 2020; Bristow et al, 2021). Participants in this study talked about the challenge of what they perceived to be a change in type of educational experience. This seemed to be particularly prevalent in the 10 participants who had previously studied at A Level (9 had studied sociology at A Level) indicating that for these participants, the educational approach used on their programme felt quite different and unfamiliar to that which they were used to. For example:

*When I first started..., the first topic was the sociological imagination so, so that kind of threw me a bit because it was like nothing I'd really done at A Level before (May BA1)*

*It was very uncomfortable coming from doing A Level to doing a degree.... you're so used to being in the A Level classroom way of being told this is the topic. This is the theory. This is who said it. This is who disagrees. This is the next theory. Very like kind of structured in that way...you're expecting a similar kind of thing (Grace BA2)*

However, participants appeared to adapt quickly and despite the challenge, they tended to welcome this change. This seems to be explained by the move from what they perceived to be a rigid,

transactional and passive educational experience to one where they find benefit in the more subjective and invitation to be a little more independent in their thinking and reflections:

*I feel like at sociology A Level I didn't get as much of a chance to express my own opinion, even in that essays I was writing whereas here like I've just begun writing some of my essays, and it definitely feels like I'm allowed to share my opinion (Eva BA1)*

This suggests that participants experienced their education prior to university to be based on neoliberal type pedagogical practices and whilst difficult at first, participants very quickly enjoy the opportunity to think independently rather than reproduce knowledge.

### **7.2.2 Learning to learn**

It appears that learning experiences prior to university were based on the expectation that there were facts that participants were expected to learn and recite in an assessment situation in order to successfully complete their further education. Participants, especially graduates, were unimpressed with this kind of learning which is aligned with an instrumental neoliberal pedagogical approach:

*I'm like the one thing I can definitely say that I've taken away from my degree is that I've not kind of just sat there, been given information, had to relay it because that's the one thing that's I've always kind of hated about school (Emma graduate)*

This is a very different experience to education that promotes a transformational experience by encouraging engagement with bodies of knowledge rather than expecting the reproduction of knowledge (Ashwin, 2020). It is interesting that participants perceive their school or college experience to be transactional. It is not clear if they had a sense of dissatisfaction at the time or whether the experience of university provided a comparison which prompted reflection on previous learning experiences. What is clear is that they are delighted and excited by the opportunity to develop their own abilities in thinking, especially critical thinking, rather than being expected to comply with what they describe as almost a rote learning experience:

*I do think that university is a lot more self, self-sufficient I just feel like A Level they put you in like one way and then like this is where you can take it, this is where you are gonna [sic] get the marks. Whereas like I could take it somewhere slightly differently, which I really enjoy (Erin BA2)*

It is to the credit of these participants that they have been so readily willing and able to embrace a different kind of learning experience to that which is familiar to them. The significant element of this difference is the expectation that they take a much greater degree of responsibility for their own learning; that is, they see that their role has moved from passive to active:

*before I started this degree, I wouldn't think that much...or like, I would just kind of try to follow everything possible....I would love a guideline to live!...I'm really good at math, but I rather like this because like it's a formula, so it can explain. But like studying sociology makes me have to find more options and then like to open the mindset that things can be different (Lucy BA3)*

Participants recognise that they have an active role to play in their education. They are dismissive of the “*spoon feeding*” (Holly graduate) they have experienced before or believe happens in other higher education settings. This indicates that they understand their sociology degree to be about developing thinking for themselves rather than being given a set of facts to memorise. The delight that participants share in this opportunity for self-development is at the expense of a more instrumental approach to learning which is what they have previously experienced. Perhaps participants in this study are subtly experiencing critical pedagogical approaches demonstrated by the relative freedom to engage with bodies of knowledge in ways that support their learning rather than their restrictive pre-university experience of learning to reproduce knowledge. Despite the range of challenges facing higher education in the UK, some autonomy around content, methods and pedagogical approaches still exists albeit within a landscape of expected compliance with cross-sector and institutional standards and ‘good practice’ guidance (Pye, 2025b). This relative freedom within higher education does mean that facilitators and educators can approach their teaching with ideas of critical pedagogy in mind despite the neoliberal context, and the evidence here suggests that this is what participants want because they are keen to develop themselves rather than solely gain a degree to demonstrate their credentials. They appear to have a strong learner identity rather than an identity as a consumer (Bunce-Taylor et al, 2023). However, this finding is not entirely aligned with other research. For example, Bristow et al (2021) found that students tended to default towards an instrumental approach and this was theorised to be because of the complex interaction of individualism and the framing of students as consumers within higher education. The general lack of holistic consumer identity in these participants was explored in chapter 5, but both chapter 5 and 6 indicate that there are very subtle aspects of a consumer positioning and the related individualised orientation which seems to suggest that whilst participants do not identify within consumerism outside of the classroom, in the context of their higher education learning, they do see themselves as individuals wanting personal gain from the experience in the form of self-development.

## **7.3 What outcome do participants want?**

### **7.3.1 Self-development and sociological understandings**

Participants in this study overwhelmingly stated that what they really want from their higher education was a developmental experience which helps them to grow their own thinking. Josh was grateful that one of his lecturers tried to encourage students from their first week of study to move beyond approaching university study in an instrumental way:

*The one thing that stuck with me, which is a really good way.....he said, like “you don't need to prove anything to anyone now at university like you've got here. So, proving yourself is not important it's about just enjoying your study” (Josh BA3)*

Returning to the point made in the previous chapter about the relevance of ‘disorientating dilemmas’ and TLT (Mezirow, 2009) is helpful here. 14 of the 15 participants in this study appear to have had personal experiences that prompted a desire to expand their knowledge of the social world and themselves within in it; that is, they were at least open to, if not seeking out, a transformative experience. It seems likely then that the motivation to study sociology is curiosity about the social world based on their experiences of it. That is not to say that this developmental motivation is the only motivation, participants also want to develop themselves in ways that will support their future employment prospects, a point returned to below. But, perhaps students who are drawn to sociology based on their experiences have this as their primary motivation rather increasing their job prospects which is maybe a more central aim for students studying in other disciplines (Muddiman, 2018). It is perhaps for this reason that some of the neoliberal pedagogical characteristics of higher education, which are also elements of the ‘student experience’ agenda (Morrish and Sauntson, 2019), did not feature in the narrative discussions.

### **7.3.2 ‘Student experience’ – the significance of what was not discussed**

Over recent times, efforts have been made to try to find ways to measure teaching and learning quantitatively. This is so that tangible ‘evidence’ to prove that educational outcomes have been met is available and therefore auditable (Gunn, 2018). These outcomes serve to enable quantification and measurement to translate higher education into a commodity which can be ‘bought’ (Ball, 2012). This promotes the importance of administrative tasks that accompany teaching such as standardised module planning documents, seeking student feedback, visible and fixed curricula, clearly stated learning outcomes and assessments which explicitly test that the learning outcomes have been met (Jackson, 2000). These practices, which are framed as increasing the consistency and quality along with ensuring ‘value for money’ for students, are aligned with the ‘student experience’ agenda which, amongst other things, aims to ensure that students feel they have some say over their experience and

have been treated fairly in relation to their learning, teaching and assessment experiences. No one would argue that these are not positive aims. The difficulty with the concept of the 'student experience' is its reductive and rational-technical nature in oversimplifying how students may experience university. In doing so it also promotes and possibly forces a performative engagement by academics and is used in the neoliberal agenda of the commodification of higher education (Pötschulat and Jones, 2020). However, despite these critiques, in the current context of higher education the 'student experience' agenda remains and thus so does the emphasis on administrative activities and sometimes performative practice by academics to aid compliance.

Given the importance given to these administrative aspects of pedagogy, it was unanticipated that participants in this study, when asked about their experiences, did not talk in any great detail about these features of their education. Only 1 participant mentioned tuition fees which is especially surprising as 11 of the 15 narrative conversations took place after the increase in fee announcement by the Labour government in November 2024. No participants talked about the expectation that they evaluated their experiences to improve teaching or how their degree was judged in league tables. 12 out of the 15 participants mentioned assessments in some way, but only as a passing comment; they did not substantially discuss the purpose and practice of being assessed to prove themselves against pre-determined outcomes. One participant mentioned learning outcomes but did so as an example of helpful pedagogical practice, not as a set of criteria she was aware she had to meet and would be assessed against:

*I've noticed quite a lot they will say what we're going to do in that lecture, sort of like maybe the learning outcomes. And I think that's quite helpful (Lily BA1)*

The types of administrative tasks mentioned above are aspects of neoliberal pedagogy which, in their most extreme, try to reduce pedagogy to an efficient process which makes visible attributes or pieces of knowledge that students will gain from completing a particular programme or teaching activity. This reductionist approach to pedagogy builds limits around what is seen as 'useful' learning rather than promoting an unbounded intellectual inquiry which has no end point (Collini, 2012) and therefore provides powerful opportunities for students to develop thinking in ways that they would not do otherwise. As Freire (1992, p.82) says "*teaching is a creative act, a critical act and not a mechanical act*" which beautifully captures the difference between critical pedagogy and neoliberal pedagogy. Combined with other aspects of critical pedagogy, such as connecting learning with the experiences of students and ensuring that these experiences are considered valid knowledge, classrooms can become spaces of transformation (hooks, 1994). Whilst this is not necessarily an easy or comfortable experience, students can, through this developmental approach experience transformation in their

understanding resulting in a deeper and more critical view. It is striking within this study that despite academics being encouraged to perhaps take a reductionist approach to their pedagogical practices, participants seemed unaffected or unaware of them. It could be that academics have found ways to comply with the bureaucratic elements of their teaching role whilst still facilitating learning experiences with relative freedom to meet what participants in this study want; that is, an experience which is self-developing rather than instrumental. It could also be that in comparison to participants previous education experiences, some of the aspects of teaching that academics find reductive still offer relative creativity for students. But what is significant here is that in the absence of any discussion about the characteristics of neoliberal pedagogy such as measurable learning outcomes, fixed curricula, evaluation forms and process driven assessments, participants are indicating their lack of interest, awareness or value placed on them. This further suggests that they see value in the less formulaic critical pedagogy because they want to develop themselves as critical people rather than be concerned with instrumental outcomes of higher education study.

### **7.3.3 Employment as an outcome**

The higher education sector in the UK in recent years has seen the growth of the so-called employability agenda (Arora, 2015), areas of work within the university that have grown to support students directly into employment to satisfy measurement regimes which require related metrics to feed into the various league tables. The prominence of this agenda in universities further fuels the debate about the purpose of university and whether, in its most instrumental form, universities should be training providers producing the next batch of people to contribute to a capitalist economy. This perception is in direct contrast to ideas that universities exist to promote and support the development of people into active citizens through their own personal development, an 'outcome' that is hard to provide evidence of in ways that satisfy the public who inhabit a world that promotes individual instrumentalism (Collini, 2012, p.199). This connects closely with the complex debates about whether higher education should or could be understood as a public or a private good (Marginson, 2018). Some suggest that because students essentially buy their higher education through the student loan/fee system, this positions them as consumers who are investing in their own future (Reynolds, 2022) thus they want a return on this investment in terms of gaining a 'good' job which is a 'private good', rather than a sense that they have benefited from a wider public service and so wish to feedback back into that society. Framing students explicitly as consumers aligns with the framing of higher education as instrumental (Bunce and Bennett, 2021). However, it is well acknowledged that the positioning of students as consumers is complex (Budd, 2017) and students do not necessarily welcome this holistic positioning (Gupta et al, 2022), as discussed in previous chapters. None of the participants in this research overtly discussed their degree outcome in terms of gaining a degree and their hoped

classification to use solely as evidence of achievement or capabilities. This further suggests that participants were not predominately instrumental in their orientation to their learning. There was discussion about what they see as their life next step beyond their degree and for some this did relate to employment. They had and are investing their time in their studies to develop themselves and they hoped this would help open employment opportunities:

*And actually it's motivated me to apply for things that I would not have otherwise thought to do, like I've been doing applications for, like, the civil service, everything (Olivia graduate)*

This supports the suggestion by Ashwin et al (2024) that positioning the purpose of higher education as either instrumentally about gaining employment or as about personal development is not helpful because analysis of student views demonstrates a complex relationship between the two.

#### **7.3.4 Self-development and employment**

Whilst participants do not generally appear to be instrumentally motivated, they all discussed employment and/or future plans in the narrative conversations. One of the 15 participants in this study did say that their sole motivation for doing the degree was to improve her employment prospects:

*But I feel like having the degree will make my sort of prospects wider.....but I wouldn't say as a person it's going to change me (Lily BA1)*

For Lily, this was a well thought through and considered career move based on her previous employment experiences which included low pay and limited prospects. Lily is also the participant who had decided to change her degree programme because so found sociology to be too “*airy fairy*” and was clearly frustrated with the expectation that she worked with “*theories*” and not “*actual facts*”. Whilst Lily’s position can be seen as an ‘outlier’ within the participant group, her perspective is extremely helpful for adding further weight to the theory suggested here that students who are drawn to and then stay with sociology become interested in this subject because of their own personal experiences which lead to this desire to explore the social world for a more personal understanding rather than for very instrumental reasons of employment.

Although the other 14 participants did all discuss their thinking about their future plans, these were not always from the perspective of expressing a desire to gain employment after their degree

completion. Indeed, Rosie indicated that she found it odd that there was such a focus on employment from the start of her degree:

*And I do think a lot of people worry so much about careers, and I do even think you see it in the uni like, you know so much about careers. I remember in first year I remember being asked in my first academic advisor [meeting]... "what do you plan to do?" I was like "get a degree"*  
(Rosie BA2)

The amount of discussion within the narrative conversations about future plans and employment aligned with the degree journey. Those who had either completed or were in their final year with no firm next step plan understandably expressed the most amount of worry about their future. Out of the 8 participants who had graduated or were in their final year, 5 were going on to further study although interestingly only one within the field of sociology. 3 had no firm plan in place and this was stressful for them. However, despite the clear disappointment for the participants who had not yet found a next step, this did not change the fact that see value in their developed understanding:

*Obviously I've had a few interviews for jobs...I always get the question and I'm always really quick to say, like "I like absolutely loved it, I really enjoyed it".....I loved learning about new things and learning about new people and you know, applying the things I learned to these different situations and that's kind of what I've come out doing and just in everyday life* (Emma graduate)

This indicates that although there is some presumption that higher education should be about gaining employment (Ashwin, 2022) participants, even when anxious about their future, still held onto the joy of their transformative and developmental experience of their sociology degree. That did not mean that gaining employment was insignificant for them. Indeed, it is the opportunity for personal transformation and development through their degree that they believe makes them desirable for employers. Participants were deeply frustrated that employers do not appear to value the type of personal and academic development work they have done to hone their thinking and critical analytical skills during their sociology degree which they see as transferable into any work setting:

*Sociology doesn't really get the plaudits it needs to and a lot of people, I mean, I know for a fact that I'm worried that employers don't look at sociology and go well, that's a great degree*  
(Josh BA3)

This chapter is arguing that participants in this study are largely rejecting of an instrumental approach to learning, instead favouring a developmental motivation. However, the developmental and transformational learning they seek does have a relationship with the instrumental outcome of employment as discussed above. Participants desire developmental and transformational learning opportunities because they equate these with an increased chance of gaining employment. Here it is argued that such opportunities are provided by critical pedagogical approaches (discussed further below) suggesting that it is critical pedagogy that supports employment chances for graduate rather than the instrumental neoliberal pedagogy that might be automatically aligned with the employment agenda. As Ashby-King and Anderson (2022) point out, critical pedagogues have a role in reassuring students of this reality and ensuring that students recognise and see the value of the transformative work they have done on their degree.

### **7.3.5 Critical awareness as an outcome**

The experience of studying sociology in a formal setting such as university has both continued the developmental journey for 14 of the 15 participants and validated that they were right to start it in the first place. All participants apart from 1 talked about the profound impact of learning to consider the world sociologically has had on them both personally in terms of considering their own experiences but also in the experiences of those around them. Within the conversations, there were numerous examples of how powerful applying their sociological thinking had been for them personally, for example:

*We started with family and seeing the functions of the family, and I just found it so interesting being able to like see how family impacts society and how we grow up and stuff...and I think it was the perfect example because everyone is in some kind of family. And doing that and then we went into doing education. And we all have first-hand experiences of these systems (Grace BA2)*

*...helped me form a much clearer like understanding of what that phenomena is if you get me like, I think like being able to hear it from like lots of different angles and perspectives helps me to like formulate the best sort of idea of like that phenomena....So like being able to hear him, lots of different interpretations like it only strengthens my own if you get me like, it's like oh didn't think about it that way (Adam graduate)*

*There's a lot of discussions about immigration, about identity at the moment and I feel every time I see the news, I still recall the kind of like knowledge and theory I've learned from*

*sociology. I'm trying to like kind of like use that to think of a new perspective on things (Sarah BA3)*

The narrative conversations were full of participants stating their joy and amazement at the depth of their learning in terms of how this helped them understand the social world. In this sense, the continued self-development appeared to be individualised; they largely describe a very personal transformation (Ashwin, 2022). However, several of the participants talked about their desire to translate this learning into action in terms of future employment which made use of their increased critical awareness to challenge the inequality that they have become increasingly aware of:

*It makes you want to use like my privilege to help other people (Erin BA2)*

As discussed in chapter 3, critical pedagogy includes action, it is not just a way of thinking based on critical consciousness or '*conscientizacao*'. It involves the interplay of reflection and action or praxis (Freire, 1970). As discussed in chapter 5, participants in this study not only desire developmental and transformational learning opportunities rather than instrumental, they are also interested in how to translate their learning into practice which attempts to challenge inequality thus moving their learning from being solely self-interested.

## **7.4 Pedagogy which supports transformation**

### **7.4.1 Not transmission style**

Perhaps connected to the desire and commitment for personal development is the clarity with which all participants were able to talk about what helped them learn. They were almost universally disparaging of lectures where they experienced a transmission style (Loughlin and Lindberg-Sand, 2023). This style of teaching is based on ideas of the lecturer knowing more and imparting their knowledge to students but as we can see from the above arguments, the participants in this research all came to their degree with a range of thoughts, experiences and views already; this is what brought them to sociology which helps explain why a transmission style does not work for them:

*And then for lectures I find I get along a lot better with lectures when I'm forced to, forced to engage. So, when there's like with slides.... sometimes if there's like full text, I can just copy and paste it and then because I'm not disciplined, I just zone out (Jessica BA3)*

They did say that if they must attend lectures, they would prefer these to be short (20-30 minutes) and be more of an orientation type session leading towards an opportunity for a more active learning experience. Sociology was seen as an applied subject by almost all participants, and they want a learning and teaching experience that reflects this, it is a subject that "*should be practised*" (Holly, graduate). They do not want to learn to recite facts in an instrumental way, they want to be supported

to develop their own thinking to understand issues in new ways and to be left with the ability to think critically:

*There's more priority on the students than the teachers it's more about forming your own ideas and talking to each other about what you've learned rather than being taught something (Eva BA1)*

*I was taught... I just need to pass this A Level. We need to do well and this is how you do well. Whereas I think now sociology... is so much more about like what I think and like reflective sociology and all that stuff. I'd say it's a lot more in depth. It's a lot more like, I think I personally reflect on my own views sociologically more than I ever did (Rosie BA2)*

Critical pedagogy encourages reflection and active dialogue with others which participants are seeking rather than the neoliberal pedagogical approach of transmission style teaching.

#### **7.4.2 Relatable and relevant**

Within the narrative conversations, one of the most consistent points made by the participants was the importance of developing an understanding of social issues which they perceive as being relatable and relevant to their own lives:

*That's so true because XYZ and another person goes, "oh my god, no, that exactly, that happened to me". And it really does kind of bring an excitement because this isn't dead content on a page. This is living thought and theory, and it's not just something like 2D, it's 3 dimensional and that's why you engage in the debate and experience (Holly graduate)*

*When we talk about those issues and we relate them, people, from my perspective, are going to enjoy it more because it means something and they're going to be want to be doing something and going to enjoy writing about it because it's something that they care about (Josh BA3)*

As Holly and Josh say here, there was a sense that what was being learnt was 'alive'; it mattered to participants, and they could actively engage with it because it was relatable and personal. Subjectivity (discussed further in chapter 8) is embraced in this approach to learning and student's views, experiences and opinions really matter.

*I think one of the things I most enjoyed about it was that like, you learn something and then you can see it in the world around me [sic] (May BA1)*

This finding aligns with Ashwin et al's (2014) research with sociology students which indicates the importance of student's relationship with knowledge, their 'personal projects' and developing a transformed view of the world and themselves with it. This is not a neoliberal pedagogical approach which expects students to 'bank' knowledge. It is learning that aligns with critical pedagogy which values and centralises student's experiences as part of the learning experience.

### **7.4.3 Useability**

Critical pedagogy aims to support people who are learning to connect their experiences with knowledge about society and social issues, debate it, critique it, and ultimately use it to develop their own knowledge (Seal and Smith, 2021). It is learning that is relevant and relatable to their lives as discussed above, but beyond this it helped participants make sense of their experiences:

*As humans we are interested in stuff that concerns us. I know it sounds really bad, but like we are, you know we are a selfish breed...for me when looking at my modules, you know, the stuff that interests me is a lot of the stuff that affects me, like our experiences, you know, student experiences, feminism, like our treatment of illness and mental health (Rosie BA2)*

This ability to connect the personal and the social was comforting, especially when their experiences had been challenging or upsetting. As Chloe says here, learning about gender discrimination was important for her to see that the way she had been treated was because of her gender, not a reflection of some pathological failing within herself:

*When like lads would do particular behaviours and stuff, I would be like...it's nothing like personal, it's just....so I actually think I found it more like a help pointing out the issue (Chloe BA1)*

Chloe also goes on to say that understanding this was a powerful step in being able to confidently challenge others who held what she feels were discriminatory views which she knew were not acceptable:

*It really helped us [sic] like... I've been really upset when I was little because I believe in something so much and someone would, like, argue with us [sic] or belittle us and I would have no defence I would just be like in my gut I know this is right..... I think it's helped really helped me like articulate my point..... it's just really what you believe in. Like it's fine to do, but like you have to be able to back it up. Be able to understand how to back it up. The way.. how to get your point across (Chloe BA1)*

It is moving to hear how for Chloe, experiencing critical pedagogy has enabled her to be active in her use of this knowledge, it has extended beyond her own understanding to prompt a willingness to challenge and debate with others. The use of knowledge into practice with the aim of challenging dominant structures is perhaps the ultimate aim of critical pedagogy (Giroux and Paul, 2002).

#### **7.4.4 Valuing everyone's knowledge**

Critical pedagogy should embrace principles of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007) despite recognised tensions especially from a decolonial perspective (McArthur, 2022). This belief that people's knowledge about their own experiences is valid and as important and worthy as knowledge generated by people in traditionally powerful positions:

*Like having those guests in there who like, weren't obviously like academics, but who are people who had real world experience of like, like being groomed by gangs and....I think one of them had been to prison and had, like, that kind of like just the, the life experience of, like, people who society usually likes to discard, like having them come in and speak to us about their experiences like it was just very powerful (Adam graduate)*

The experience Adam is referring to here seems to have had an impact on him both because of the learning gained from this particular experience but also because of the message that the educator who organised this session implicitly seemed to give, that is disrupting ideas about who's knowledge matters by handing over a teaching session to people who society does not always value. It is an example of this educator modelling actions needed to resist structural epistemic injustice (Nikolaidis, 2023). This valuing of everyone as unique individuals with a valid perspective is a sentiment that participants felt applied to them:

*It feels like I've come to uni and strengthened a core part of myself rather than trying to fit myself into a programme of study (Jessica BA3)*

*I felt like the department, like cared more about learning than churning out results (Holly graduate)*

This has clearly been positive for participants and further strengthened their feeling that they matter as people rather than students instrumentally gaining degrees. Neoliberal pedagogy does not have this care focus, instead see competition and rationality as methods to push students to succeed (Giroux, 2020). This will be explored further in chapter 8. Research demonstrates that students feeling personally cared about and valued is important for their engagement in higher education (Clegg and Rowland, 2010) which is aligned with principles of critical pedagogy which is based on values of respect and care (Gauna et al, 2024).

### **7.5 Chapter summary**

This chapter has explored the participants' motivation for embarking on their sociology degree. Using the contrasting ideas of neoliberal and critical pedagogies as an analytical framework, I have argued that participants in this study appear to have a strong self-developmental motivation for starting and completing their sociology degree. Again, if the continuum were used with self-development and instrumental motivations on opposite ends, this group of participants would be positioned towards the self-development end of the continuum although not firmly located there as the more instrumental outcome of employment was also important to them and is perhaps more so towards the end of their degree programme. This self-development motivation is aligned with critical pedagogy which aims to value and position students as autonomous beings who are able to develop their own critical thinking which they can then apply to the world around them. Students position themselves as seeking self-development and educators can enable this by also positioning students in this way drawing on critical pedagogy. Participants say here it is critical pedagogy which is transformative and therefore developmental. Educators must recognise the expert subjective knowledge that participants already have and be willing to work with and value this rather than position themselves as experts of a set of objective facts to transmit to students. This transmission approach to teaching is a feature of neoliberal pedagogy includes the requirement for tightly managed learning characterised by fixed curriculum, learning outcomes and assessments. In its wider influence of higher education, neoliberalism supports a reductionist and quantifiable approach to higher education to enable the 'packaging' of a university experience to appeal to paying customers, in this case students.

Participants in this study do not appear to perceive that the consistent and tightly controlled approach to learning is an experience they equate with the sort of learning they want from their degree programme. Participants overwhelmingly talked about the value of developing their own abilities, especially in relation to thinking critically. They see this as essential for the future and want learning

experiences which help this to happen. They do not want an instrumental approach to learning which several of them they indicate they feel they had prior to university. In the context of higher education becoming so steeped in the employment agenda, educators must remain conscious that students are not necessarily pursuing a degree for this reason. That is not to say that gaining fulfilling employment beyond their degree is not important to them, more that higher education must remain aware to different motivations that students might have and the role of critical pedagogy in supporting the development and transformation of students.

## **Chapter 8 – Epistemic Stance: The Value of Subjective Emotions**

### **8.1 Introduction**

The focus of this final finding and discussion chapter is on participants' epistemic stance within their pedagogical experiences. This relates to whether objective or subjective knowledge is valued, specifically whether subjective emotion, affect and/or feelings are recognised as valuable for and of learning or whether a more reasoned objective approach is valued (Gravett and Lygo-Baker, 2025). I will predominantly use the language of emotion within this chapter, but I recognise that others may use 'affect' and 'feelings' (Jackson, 2018). Neoliberal pedagogy is aligned with a positivist and objective approach to epistemology in which knowledge is understood to exist in a neutral relationship with people and pedagogical practices are focused on efficiency and technique (Giroux, 2020). As Burke (2015, p.391) says "*neoliberal imperatives re-emphasize techno-rationalist discourses of human capital and individual responsibility.*" However, neoliberalism is not emotionless. Provoking fear and resistance to social and moral panics is a tactic used to quell alternative perceptions to the dominant discourse (Giroux, 2020). Critical pedagogy positions the subjective lived experience of students as valuable (McLean, 2006) and Freire himself acknowledged the important role of emotion in the critical consciousness process (Darder, 2020) especially a transformed understanding of inequalities, oppression and disadvantages and the powerful ways that these are played out. Here the focus is on how enabled subjective emotions have a core role in the experience of transformed understandings.

### **8.2 Emotion as the core experience**

Acknowledging the role of emotions in learning is not new (Ali and Tan, 2022) although it remains rather unresearched and individually positioned (Connelly and Joseph-Sailsbury, 2019). Higher education tends to foreground cognition, reasoning and technical-rationality (Clegg and Rowland, 2010) and emotions reduced to questions about their influence on these (Loon and Bell, 2018). Arguments have been well made about the importance of avoiding a reductionist view of emotion in learning, instead recognising emotions as situated, constructed, complex with the role of peer validation being significant (Beard et al, 2007; Barrett, 2017). This points to the potential role of others when theorising about the role of emotion. As explored in previous chapters, the participants in this study have experienced higher education both as a personal and individual experience yet seem to crave the sense of being part of something collective.

It is no surprise then that emotion and feelings were so present within the narrative conversations despite no prompts designed to provoke a specific discussion about them. Participants demonstrated a remarkable willingness and ability to articulate how powerful emotions have been in their learning

experiences, even within a neoliberal context which does not necessarily celebrate this subjectiveness. Participants in this study talked about emotion as an embodied evocation of their engagement with sociological knowledge and less so about the actual feelings they experienced in the classroom as part of their learning which is more common in the extant literature on emotions in higher education. In this sense, participants talk about emotions as more of an outcome or response to their education and development. As Emma points out, emotions play a central role in experiencing phenomena that sociology foregrounds in our own lives:

*I think maybe how somebody responds to their degree, especially sociology, where it is very like emotive...it really, you know, touches on people's, your life experiences and things like that. I think a massive part of kind of clicking with that is having some kind of life experience with that yourself (Emma graduate)*

The following two sections will explore the emotions that participants feel are so central to their transformative experiences. Emotions here are conceptualised as constructed and generated within particular social, cultural and political environments rather than an entity contained within individuals (Boler, 1999). Understanding these emotions from this position enables questions about what they do as much as what they are (Leathwood and Hay, 2009). I am suggesting here that the development and identification of these emotions is a central aspect of the experience of transformation and participants' classroom experiences appear to have valued subjective emotions as both experiences and outcomes. At times, the rest of this chapter will refer to participants as a collective. However, when making points about participants and emotion in general this does not include Lily because she did not express any connection between emotion and a sense of transformation. She did talk about feelings of dissatisfaction with her degree, hence her reason for her desire to change her degree programme. As discussed in previous chapters, Lily offers an excellent alternative perspective to the other 14 participants in that she did not 'love' sociology as a discipline, and it is possible that this is because she had an instrumental motivation for embarking on her degree.

### **8.3 Emotions as a motivation**

#### **8.3.1 Love and passion**

Participants were quick to say that they feel love and passion for sociology as a subject as demonstrated by some of the quotations in 6.2.1 along with:

*I love that sociology can explain something. I love that when you were like sat in a class and someone was like and the teacher...so this is why this happened (Rosie BA2)*

*I'm doing sociology because I feel passionate about it and I enjoy it and I wouldn't change that for the world because there's not any other subjects where I'd go oh I really like that I have three years of a subject that I love. If I don't love it then there's no point in being here (Josh BA3)*

This indicates that their love and passion for sociology remains throughout their degree creating a profoundly emotional relationship with the subject likely to manifest in committed enquiry using sociological knowledge (Rowland, 2005). It appears that the personal and applied nature of the subject is deeply engaging. It gives the subject meaning and is motivating (Giroux, 2020). It is subjective and their own lived experiences feel valued in alignment with critical pedagogy. It supports students to feel validated.

### **8.3.2 Relief and belonging**

There are a range of emotions shared in participant conversations and there are some signs that the emphasis of these change over the time of their degree in relation to relief and belonging. First year students, who are all female in this study, convey a sense relief at finding their place – or a place where they feel comfortable and accepted which overtime appears to fade as explored in chapter 6:

*When you do find it and you've been thinking like that and it's not been appreciated that was so important to me to be able to...for it to be appreciated...like sort of not being told that you're like crazy, like being told that you're being too dramatic or you're like "it's not that deep" was told to me so many times and like this sort of just threw that out of the window and like sociology just threw that out of the window and now I'm like everything is that deep (Eva BA1)*

Their experiences prior to joining their sociology degree seem to be marred by a sense of exclusion and starting their sociology degree initially created a sense of belonging. This demonstrates the power of classroom spaces functioning as places of care and inclusivity (hooks, 2003). This aligns with research indicating that first year undergraduates had a sense of positive anticipation about joining a degree programme (Beard et al, 2014) and that female students can experience the university as a space of safety compared to their previous experiences (Quinn, 2003). The experience of becoming a student is both embodied with and influenced by emotions (Christie, 2009) and appears to contribute to their sense of identity as discussed in chapter 6.

### **8.3.3 Wonderment and value**

Participants talk passionately about how sociology as a subject enables them to see the world in transformed ways, and one which helps makes sense of their experiences:

*It's something so powerful that it cannot undo but change so much a lot of people get stuck in their whole, you know like, you know, family pressures and society pressure and I think it's, it's so such a powerful thing to be taught that you know actually change like so many views I do think.....I'm just a big sociology fan (Rosie BA2)*

*That's so true because XYZ and another person goes, oh my god, no, that exactly that happened to me. And it really does kind of bring an excitement because this isn't dead content on a page. This is living thought and theory, and it's not just something like 2D, it's 3 dimensional and that's why you engage in the debate and experience and that sort of thing (Holly graduate)*

This is the second use of the above quotation from Holly because it captures her delight in how relevant sociology is (7.4.2) as well as her sense of wonderment and value in it. The power of participants' transformation means they place a great deal of value on sociology as a subject, and as explored in chapter 5, feel transformation is something everyone should have access to:

*And I also just thought it was a very important subject in general. It just, a lot of it just has a focus on like helping being by understanding how maybe structures and society has such a damaging effect on the population (May BA1)*

*I think it just really matters to me to be in sociology like not only like because I'm interested in it but because it is important for the world for me as well (Eva BA1)*

Their experiences of studying sociology evoke emotions of or connected to love, passion, belonging, relief, wonderment and value. If we consider these emotions as learnt knowledge, they appear to be providing the evidence that these participants are studying a subject which is profoundly important to their own subjective self. It is enabling them to embed themselves in the discipline knowledge whilst valuing what they bring to their learning. Valuing these subjective emotions aligns with a critical pedagogical approach rather than a more objective neoliberal pedagogical approach.

#### **8.3.4 Empathy and compassion**

Whilst the narrative conversations were full of emotional content, the significance of empathy and compassion were particularly strong in the participants' views. This was in relation to how developing a critical understanding of society helped develop empathy and compassion for people:

*I really believe as well empathy is like important and sociology and I've always been very empathetic person.....and I feel like being empathetic and having like compassion to being [sic] is such a massive part of sociology (Eva BA1)*

*It's definitely made me a much more understanding and compassionate person I think like I think it's made me much more aware of all the little sort of stresses that can go on in different people's lives like for women or for people of colour or umm, you know, for, for people who are from, like, an underprivileged socioeconomic background (Adam graduate)*

Muddiman (2020) also found that developing empathy was considered an important outcome of studying sociology by students. This empathy and compassion seems to be the fuel behind the transformation that participants say they have experienced throughout their time studying sociology. One of the criticisms of TLT is that it is over reliant on rationality in terms of trying to make sense of experiences that do not fit with existing understandings (Taylor, 2001) and that it especially ignores the role of empathy (Taylor and Cranton, 2013). As a result, there have been calls for TLT to centralise the role of emotions (Ali and Tab, 2022) and participants in this study provide insight into the importance of this. The role of emotion both in terms of how they feel about sociology but also how their experiences of studying sociology stimulate emotional responses is central for these participants indicating that emotion must be acknowledged and worked with in classrooms to ensure that educational experiences are holistic (Beard et al, 2014) and relevant personally to the students involved. Existing research evidence demonstrates the importance of the development of empathy in relation to citizenship and the potential to prompt action (O'Toole and O'Flaherty, 2024). An objective reasoned approach which is more aligned with neoliberal pedagogy does not appear to be valued by participants here.

## **8.4 Emotions as a burden**

### **8.4.1 Hyperawareness and powerlessness**

Participants very much valued the knowledge that they gained throughout their degree, but they also described this as a burden because of the insight it has given them:

*It has made me a lot more cynical.....I just cannot take things as they are (Jessica BA3)*

*Now I am aware of everything that is wrong with all of it, inequality, discrimination kind of thing and hyperaware of all of this in every situation like I can see the inequalities playing out in every interaction and being aware of that and just completely powerless to do anything about it (Grace BA2)*

*It's almost like you become so aware of these things but at the same time it feels like you can do nothing about them (Rosie BA2)*

*I do feel very nihilistic sometimes about it because it's difficult knowing that I see all these and I think I think it's unfortunate being a sociology student because I am hyperaware of what's going on and that creates a real difficulty and a kind of a little sadness in my life....but there's very little I can do... (Josh BA3)*

Chapter 5 discusses how students are motivated to contribute in positive ways to society in a citizen-orientated way which is of course admirable and positive, but these feelings of hyperawareness and powerlessness indicate that these participants do not feel empowered to act on their knowledge despite a motivation to do so. Whilst the prospect of supporting students to be more understanding and kinder towards other people feels like the greatest success of any higher education programme, we should acknowledge the personal toll that this takes on students if they are left with feelings of hopelessness. Freire (1970) says that the development of critical consciousness includes action within ongoing praxis but this is something that these participants do not appear to have. Emotions then have a role to play in an education that is citizenship orientated because compassion and empathy provoke a desire to act:

*It's wanting to give something because you learn about, about like all these concepts of, you know, how society is affected it's like well I wanna [sic] change just the world (Rosie BA2)*

but the neoliberal university seems to create a barrier when it comes to praxis (Connelly and Joseph-Sailsbury, 2019). There is an individualism to how these participants feel and a way to mitigate their hopelessness is to ensure they see that kindness on an interpersonal level can be a way of making a difference positively when they feel hopeless about impacting on the structural and systemic inequalities in our society (Brownlie, 2024). However, this sense of individualism also points to the gap in collectivity and solidarity that these participants feel which aligns with the discussion in chapter 5 in how they see their potential contribution to society in terms of individually what they might be able to do, chapter 6 in relation to their orientation towards learning and the self-development focus of chapter 7.

#### **8.4.2 Frustration and fear**

Participants talked about frustration and fear stimulated by concerns such as how sociology is undervalued, worries about future employment, concerns about the limits of sociology:

*There's one time a person basically saying to me "it's a waste of time to learn sociology in the university because sociology is thinking of our society right? You gotta enter society to learn about sociology, you gotta [sic] work to lean about sociology" (Sarah BA3)*

*So it's kind of realization like oh, like I've done a degree that I really enjoyed and that I can use, but the opportunities aren't really there to use it (Emma graduate)*

*It does feel like we're missing what clearly a lot of people think. I think that's impacted by the kind of academic pool who are probably more likely to be coming from the liberal perspective (Grace BA2)*

Added to this, the critical understanding of the world can also lead to feelings of frustration with others and sometimes with sociology itself:

*I don't know how to describe it, it is that I know, I like know a lot of knowledge is from sociology but when I'm trying to like have a discussion with others about certain topics I just feel so desperate like I feel sometimes really like basic sociology... but it just doesn't make sense to other people (Sarah BA3)*

*It does feel a bit why am I doing this, it's a bit pointless a bit fluffy. Fluffy is the word (Olivia graduate)*

Neoliberal pedagogy does not position emotions, especially ones which may be interpreted negatively such as fear of failure as relevant to learning or as something that should even be valued, especially if it draws attention to an aspect of university that might not be deemed to represent personal success for participants. Neoliberal pedagogy requires a focus on competitive success for individual self-gain. In this context, it is significant that participants were so willing to talk about the role of emotion in their learning experiences (Jackson, 2010) and demonstrates that despite the neoliberal context of higher education, emotion including those which might be described as negative, remain a central aspect of participants' experiences.

#### **8.4.3 Discomfort and uncertainty**

Feelings of discomfort and uncertainty appeared to be emotions felt within classroom settings as well as being evoked by studying sociology generally. Participants acknowledged the difficulty of feeling such challenging emotions but also said that they could see the value of them:

*And embracing discomfort. I think you really need to teach people that it's OK to feel that level of mental... like ohh or like that you don't wanna [sic] think about it because it's too confused (Holly graduate)*

Adam here is talking about the discomfort of hearing from people with lived experience of trauma which is also discussed in chapter 6:

*There's something about allowing the material to connect to you on like a real, like... tangible is a good word, like a tangible sort of almost like emotional level as well. Like, like as a human. It like, yeah, it makes it stick with you. Like, that's what like you know, because I had a lot of lectures at uni and most of them are probably not really remembered. But like that one, that one sticks in my mind (Adam graduate)*

Work on the pedagogies of discomfort theorise about the role of experiencing unsettling or even distressing emotions in the classroom and whilst there is much care needed to ensure that such approaches to teaching are ethical (Zembylas, 2013), participants here seem to indicate that the experience of discomfort is powerful in terms of transformative learning (Carter and Nicolaidis, 2023). Craddock (2019) argues that indeed discomfort is necessary within transformative learning. This suggests that educators aiming for transformation should harness the role of emotion in learning, even when these are challenging emotions in what have recently been termed 'brave' teaching spaces (Trowell, 2025). Critical pedagogy is founded on such principles indicating that students here feel they have had this type of learning experience and very much value it.

## **8.5 Emotional wellbeing**

### **8.5.1 Emotion is felt individually**

The influence of psychology has framed emotions as individually experienced states which, in this context, also aligns the individual approach of neoliberal pedagogy. But emotions can be understood as social and political cultural practices (Ahmed, 2004) thus opening the potential for them to stimulate a sense of shared experience and one which creates connection with contexts beyond the classroom (Pekrun, 2019). I would argue that the explicit working with emotional responses to learning in the classroom environment could potentially disrupt the individualist orientation that participants bring to their learning and deeply explore why particular emotions are evoked in relation to particular issues as a way of critically analysing the role of culture and politics in the generation of emotion thus enabling emotion to become a more accepted knowledge type (Knight-Diop and Oesterreich, 2009). This can support development of critical self-reflection (Perry, 2021) and is of course aligned with critical pedagogy which values students holistically and places worth on subjectivity as knowledge.

Feeling emotion is an integral element of participants' experiences on their sociology degree. It explains why almost all participants connect so deeply with their degree experience. However, these emotions are felt individually and personally; there is no reference made to collective feelings which aligns with the individualised approach that participants seem to have on their programme unless it is very much facilitated to be otherwise as discussed in chapter 6. It seems that 'emotional work' could

be an aspect of studying sociology used to create a sense of community through the sharing of, for example, the burden of critical awareness. The individual nature of felt emotion is neoliberal and resonates with how distressing emotional experiences are deemed 'mental health issues' which are medicalised and pathologized to be about individual failure to cope. If we really want to create an environment where students feel enabled to acknowledge and work with their emotional responses to their experiences, educators must be enabled to create learning conditions that are conducive to this. TLT can be operationalised in ways that centralise the role of emotions in experiencing transformation and do this in ways that take a collaborative approach (Perry, 2021) to combat the individualisation of experiences of distress.

### **8.5.2 Student wellbeing**

The language of mental or emotional distress will be used here rather than the more common term of mental health. Language of mental illness, mental disorder and mental health will be avoided because of the concerns that framing mental/emotional distress as a health condition has in terms of individually pathologizing people who experience mental and emotional distress at the expense of recognising the role that social circumstances and conditions including past trauma play.

There is a wealth of literature that highlights and explores the growing concerns about students and their emotional and mental states and the requirement for universities to respond to this (Broglia et al, 2023). Whilst in no way wanting to deny or minimise the very real sense of distress that undergraduate students clearly experience within their degree programmes, it is also important to recognise the conditions that have enabled and encouraged an environment in which sharing and discussing how emotions, particularly negative feelings, have and are impacting on student's sense of wellbeing. Bristow et al (2021) explore this in some depth and offer an important view capturing the contradictory conditions of more openness but stigma around mental distress remaining. Language of the 'mental health crisis' in universities is widespread and there is no doubt that those employed in traditional academic and teaching roles are now expected to be equipped to deal with and support students with matters of emotional health in ways that were not part of the academic role in previous times. Universities have invested in specialised teams of expert supporters to be ready to work with students experiencing distress – the support of students has become mainstream within our university settings. Again, whilst not wishing to in anyway minimise the sense of distress that many students clearly experience, we should also remain alert to how the platforming of the concept of 'mental health' has meant that challenges that may have at one time been considered part of the undergraduate experience, for example being worried about a deadline or a particular assessment, are now categorised as indicators of individual students inability to cope when considered within a neoliberal context of competition and success (Brooks et al, 2022). As Bristow et al (2021) also point

out, there are other potential factors at play here such as how the massification of higher education means that more students than ever are accessing higher education and finding themselves in a context which feels unfamiliar and therefore difficult. Some of these points align with Furedi's (2014) work which critiques what he calls the 'therapy culture' in his concern that the desire to protect student's emotional vulnerabilities has developed at the expense of traditional academic and intellectual purposes of higher education. However, I do not agree with the view that the rise in focus on emotions, as demonstrated by the participants here, is something to deny or resist. Rather, I would argue that pedagogy that aims for critical and transformed thinking must harness emotion as inclusive practice. For example, pedagogies that are trauma informed are more likely to enable students who have experienced trauma to be able to engage in higher education (Harrison et al, 2023). Opportunities for inclusivity, such as the use of content warnings for example, are themselves rich material for collaborative critical reflection (Nolan and Roberts, 2024).

### **8.5.3 Pedagogy which harnesses emotion**

One of the striking features when exploring participants' experiences in line with neoliberal and critical pedagogies is that they talk positively about the features of their experience which align critical pedagogy. The one aspect that they seem to struggle with is a sense of individualism which they almost have as a default orientation. As explored in chapter 6, they are very keen to embrace a more collaborative approach, but they seem unsure how to do this without skilled facilitation. Ideas of student participation in terms of co-creation (Bovill, 2019) offers a tangible way to support the idea of genuine cooperation and collectivity in terms of teaching. This is a pedagogical approach that sits firmly in the critical pedagogy tradition. Using such an opportunity to explicitly and actively foreground emotion in such pedagogical partnerships (Hill et al, 2021) could have three key benefits. Firstly, the active working with emotion could support students to feel less individually emotionally distressed generally. It recognises the importance of interconnectivity and relationships in the classroom (Murphy and Brown, 2012) and a relational approach can be harnessed to create safety and bravery in classroom settings to actively work with emotion to help mitigate feelings of distress (Ali and Tan, 2022). Doing so could possibly help address the so called 'mental health crisis' as discussed above. Secondly, it could help foster the sense of collectively and solidarity amongst students studying the same discipline which is the aspect of critical pedagogy that is less visible in this study. Thirdly, in true critical pedagogical style, it allows educators and students to experientially work together to learn from the experience of democratic decision making and inclusivity thus providing the opportunity to develop these in preparation for citizenship.

## 8.6 Gender and emotion

### 8.6.1 Is sociology pedagogy gendered?

It is noticeable that female participants in this study outnumber male participants by 13 to 2 and whilst not an absolute representation of the gender split of the sociology programme used here, it is the case that it is usual for the majority of students on the programme to identify as female. This apparent gendering was not unnoticed in the participant group:

*And it's also like, you know, I think it's, I think there is a gendered element of it because a lot of these degrees are degrees that stereotypically would be seen as like, you know, more girls would do this degree than like maths and science, engineering (Rosie BA2)*

Pedagogy is gendered (Burke, 2013) and there is a history of the appreciation of emotion in learning in feminist pedagogies (Hey and Leathwood, 2009). Neoliberal pedagogy, with its reductionist, objective and technical practices and competitive and entrepreneurialism for self-interest philosophy and theory can be understood as a more masculine approach. There is evidence that disciplines are gendered (Morley, 2011) prompting questions about the interplay between gender, discipline and pedagogy. However, both participants identifying as male in this study enthusiastically talk about the importance of emotion and critical pedagogy in similar terms to their female peers suggesting no obvious difference in gender responses in this study.

### 8.6.2 Transformation and emotions

The findings from this study suggest that emotion is a central element of the discipline of sociology because emotional responses to engaging with the discipline body of knowledge appear to be part of the process of transformation that this engagement creates. As discussed above, participants very strongly see sociology as both being about connecting with their emotions and provoking an emotional response.

Given the gendered history of emotions and their use as a form of social control (Boler, 1999), it is fair to say that the expression of some emotions by women may be judged differently than when expressed by men because of the perception that some emotions should not be expressed by women, for example anger. The resultant constraint of emotional expression by women significantly disadvantages them if the argument made here, that is that emotions serve a purpose in transformational learning, is not accepted. This further adds to the argument that subjective emotions must be centralised in TLT to ensure that TLT itself does not become gendered and contribute to male hegemony.

## **8.7 Reasoned objectivity**

### **8.7.1 Rejection of reasoned objectivity in pedagogy**

The term reasoned objectivity is used here to denote an approach which values careful use of logic and neutrality to avoid the bias deemed to be present if personal feelings are involved. When applied to pedagogy, this results in a pedagogy that is founded on beliefs in rationality and logical processes, similar to neoliberal pedagogy in its approach to teaching being about the transfer of a set of accepted knowledge to students in a dispassionate way. As May says here, this is the sort of educational experience she had prior to university study and one that she did not find helpful:

*Like you were supposed, supposed to look at everything from an objective point of view and be unemotional about it. And I think being passionate about what you believe in is like very encouraged in sociology. And I feel like in some subjects it's not (Eva BA1)*

As discussed above, neoliberal pedagogy does not value emotion and lived experience because of their subjectivity. But, participants in this study centralise the role of subjective emotion in their experience of transformational learning. Rosie here makes the point that she thinks that the overemphasis on a purely objective approach to higher education is negative because it does not enable people to see the individual relevance of their learning:

*And it's like, you know, I think it's this idea to try and streamline, like efficiency, and like this, you know, another cog in the machine and like, it's all this stuff that I think is kind of affecting people's views on degrees (Rosie BA2)*

Emotions are part of the learning experience, they are not something that create a barrier to the learning (Dirkx, 2008). Explicit and active engagement with feelings and emotions require everyone to experientially 'sit' with those emotions in a process which has potentially transformative impacts of having to deeply question held understandings (Gravett and Lygo-Baker, 2025) and could build connections and a sense of community through shared experience. Working with individual subjectivities in such intensive ways is potentially unpredictable and messy. The neoliberal university is likely to struggle to value this kind of work because it is difficult to quantify or measure (Sutton, 2017).

### **8.7.2 Reasoned objectivity has its place**

There are aspects of participants' experiences on their sociology programme that they did value that could be categorised as being aligned with reasoned objectivity, and these relate broadly to the importance of a well organised programme. Despite the significance of the subjective emotional

aspects of their learning, they did not want these to exist in an unbounded structure. It was very important to participants that there was an objective logic to the way their degree ran with participants talking about how important their first-year sociology module was for providing the foundational principles for what was to come:

*The sociology 101 module.... it's just kind of like, get you into that insight of sociology...I like the module. I think it's kind of a very nice insight to..yeah, actually kind of like giving you the motivation to continue (Lucy BA3)*

They also felt that having a sense of coherence within their degree programme really helped and key aspects of this was consistency in lecturer in terms of seminars and lecturers, the same modules on the same day and clearly worked out block teaching when modules were team taught:

*I think is really helpful if you have lecture, nine and seminar at 11. So even if you haven't done the reading, you've got like an hour in between your lecture, you're not really forgetting much. And the lecturer takes the seminar so it's all very like, like cohesive. Yeah, it really works (Erin BA2)*

*The one thing I say, one or two particular things about this is that, when like, when the same person is delivering a whole block like....they have to rush through the topic or either they have to wait until like two or three weeks later until they come back for another like block of discussion on that, which is terrible. Nobody's going to remember that (Sarah BA3)*

The modular structure of the programme seems to have provoked mixed views. Some participants felt this led to a lack of coherence in the programme and some appreciating being able to focus on what was their area of interest:

*Last year I felt like they were more connected, but I feel like this year... they are more like within themselves (Erin BA2)*

*Second year I found it's been a lot more focused and you've got the, you know, seminar leaders and lecturers who are really interested like in their niche, especially in 3rd year as well. It's that really specific kind of focus. I found that really good (Jessica BA3)*

Modular degree structures are deemed to be neoliberal because this design is used to 'sell' choice to students in terms of what they study (Grant, 2017). However, as discussed in chapter 6, the lack a

consistent group for students to build a sense of community and collectiveness with seems to be to blame for the lack of community felt by these participants and thus a significant element of the individualised experience that they have had.

## **8.8 Chapter summary**

In this chapter I have explored participants' epistemic stance in relation to the value of subjective emotions within experiences of their degree. Participants overwhelmingly saw emotion as a key element of holistic learning and appreciated that what they brought and took from the learning setting in terms of emotional responses was valued in line with critical pedagogy (Seal and Smith, 2021). Returning to the idea of a continuum between objective and subjective epistemic stance, participants positioned themselves on the end which largely values subjective emotion within their programme experiences suggesting that they overwhelmingly felt emotion was a valid experience and outcome of their learning.

This chapter argues that emotions should be centralised in learning to avoid excluding some students, especially women, and that the explicit involvement of emotions could support students with a sense of wellbeing overall by enabling feelings of connections with their student peers. There is potential for this to mitigate the concerning rise in student wellbeing issues that universities are experiencing. The harnessing of subjective emotions could also serve another very important purpose, that is the possibility of connection and collectivity being fostered as a result of emotion. Participants here talked about their positive feelings towards sociology as part of their transformation, but they also are burdened by some less positive feelings, particularly a sense of hopelessness about how to contribute positively to the social world. Throughout this study, the theme of individualism has arisen with participants seeming to feel alone in their pursuits and not appearing to know how to form collectively form communities of belonging. Perhaps it is emotional knowledge that could be the connective tissue between individuals, forming bonds and relationships for collective support and action.

## **Chapter 9 – Conclusion**

### **9.1 Introduction**

In this final chapter I will firstly summarise the premise of this research project, before answering the research questions and discussing their implications. I will finish by stating my contribution to knowledge. This research project aimed to explore the experiences of sociology students' transformational learning within the neoliberal university and their associated pedagogical experiences. It was motivated by my concern that the neoliberal context of higher education is increasingly becoming reflected in pedagogical practices which are neoliberal in philosophy, theory and practice thus reducing opportunity for transformational learning (Craddick, 2019). This concern arose through my experiences as a lecturer which included being expected to comply with institutional practices designed to ensure that teaching is measurable and planned according to ideas of 'best practice'. The narrative approach used recognises the role of context and relationships in the generation of data (Riessman, 2008). The conversations took place metaphorically and physically within the context of the neoliberal university thus they contained reference to and were shaped by both the dominant discourse around both sociology and higher education and were enacted in ways that characterise higher education. For example, students shared their concerns about employment, and the individual conversations (rather than collective) were led by me as the lecturer. We used the commonality of our experiences and understandings shaped by our shared context to add depth to the data. The findings provided a rich insight from which to draw on to answer the research questions.

### **9.2 Research questions**

#### ***9.2.1 Research Question 1 - In what ways do sociology students feel they are transformed through their experiences of pedagogy?***

15 sociology students generously participated in this research study. 14 participants indicated that they had experienced what I am interpreting as transformational learning within the neoliberal university. This appeared to be related to their engagement with specific disciplinary sociological knowledge which enabled them to see the world through this knowledge, making connections with their own experiences to render this knowledge both relevant and relatable. They talk about sociological knowledge provoking a sense of awe and wonderment about how it enables them to perceive the world in new ways and to find understanding of circumstances that they have experienced which were previously puzzling.

Of particular interest is how 14 of the participants indicate that their experience of transformation started prior to their degree, but that studying sociology at degree level continued their transformation. It appears that they were purposeful in their decision to study sociology because they

believed that sociological knowledge could help them make sense of their social experiences so far. So, whilst it is true to say that sociology students in this study do experience transformational learning in the neoliberal university, their own self-development motivations for studying sociology suggest that they are particularly receptive to transformative learning. The neoliberal context of the university is not then preventing critical and transformational learning which prompts further questions about how and why this is the case.

Participants felt they were transformed in three ways. Firstly, in their development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). They enthusiastically expressed joy at how their developed critical awareness meant they could understand society from a structural or macro perspective that helped explain inequalities, unfairness and power, including how these phenomena may have impacted on their own lived experiences. Secondly, in their desire to share this knowledge once they had it in whatever ways they could and thirdly, in a related point, they wanted to use the knowledge they have to contribute to society in positive ways. That is, they appeared to be developing a citizenship-orientation through their engagement with sociology. Having said this, their engagement with sociological knowledge did not always generate a sense that they could act positively in terms of citizenship and some expressed hopelessness about the limitations of what they could do.

### ***9.2.3 Research Question 2 – What aspects of pedagogy do sociology students feel support transformational learning?***

Because I believe that transformational learning should be central to the purpose of higher education, I am reassured by participants' views that they feel they have experienced transformational learning. The concern that prompted this study was that neoliberal pedagogy, which values reproductive engagement with knowledge, may be enacted to such a degree that transformative pedagogies could not find a space in the neoliberal university. This study aimed to infer from students experiences the features or characteristics of the pedagogical experiences that they feel they have had. I cannot categorically say that participants in this study have experienced a wholly educational experience underpinned by critical pedagogy, but what I can say is their transformational experiences seem to point generally in this direction. Their desire for collaborative learning, despite this not always being achieved, the holistic acknowledgement of them as subjective emotional beings, the use of their knowledge and experiences as teaching material in a way that values them and their encouragement to use the knowledge they have for social good are all features of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2020).

### ***9.2.3 Research Question 3 – How do sociology students feel this experience has/will influence their future sense of citizenship?***

Participants appear to have a sense of duty to use the knowledge that they have gained as part of their transformation. They are generous with it and do not want to hold onto for reasons of personal gain;

they identify as contributors when outside of the classroom, that is people who want to contribute positively to future society or are citizenship orientated. There is evidence that some participants are already acting in ways that are citizenship orientated, and it can be theorised that this is likely to continue beyond their degree as it seems to form part of their identity. This is connected to the transformational experiences they have had whilst studying sociology and the resultant desire to use the knowledge they have gained for social good. This appears to be because the knowledge has been transformative rather than reproductive; they perceive a different version of the world than that which they have been socialised into seeing. Their desire to do good beyond their degree is both motivating and humbling.

### **9.3 Implications for pedagogy in the neoliberal university**

Several implications can be drawn from answering these questions. Firstly, in terms of transformation within an educational experience, these findings suggest that any transformation cannot be solely attributed to pedagogical experience. In this study 14 out of the 15 participants were drawn to sociology as a discipline based on past experiences, including past educational experiences, which translated into motivation to specifically study sociology. This reminds us that students come to their degree programme with relevant experiences and are potentially predisposed, in this case, to value sociological knowledge regardless of the type of pedagogy they encounter once they start their degree. This confirms the importance of educators knowing students holistically to facilitate learning that is meaningful and related to their motivations (Ashwin, 2020).

Secondly, the neoliberal university context is not resulting in pedagogy that is overwhelmingly neoliberal. There are indications here that pedagogy that is more aligned with critical pedagogy is being enacted and it is this critical pedagogy that students value and feel is supporting their transformation and development, a position that aligns with existing research (Jeyaraji, 2020; McArthur, 2018). Given the personal joy but also the potential social value of the transformation that participants gain in terms of it being related to their desire to be active and positive citizens, higher education must ensure there is a place for critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy as a practice can be seen as rather abstract, but I believe this leaves it open to interpretation and application to variable and different learning settings. To try to reduce critical pedagogy to a set of technical tasks would remove its very essence of being responsive to particular contexts (Biesta, 2015; Clegg et al, 2016). As difficult as it may be in a neoliberal context, educators must be enabled to enact its principles in ways that suit the students they are working with. This is an implication that will influence my own pedagogical practices.

Thirdly, one principle of critical pedagogy which was not evidenced here was the sense of community and collectivity that it aims to create (Seal and Smith, 2021). Participants in this study held on to an individualistic notion of education and individualism generally is a strong feature throughout this study. Participants want to contribute positively to society but seem to perceive this as something they do alone. They are motivated by self-development, which is positive, but it is also individualistic and could be self-serving for some students. They value their subjective emotional experiences but again from an individual perspective; there is no apparent awareness of how others may also at times experience difficult emotional responses and that collectivity could foster a supportive community. Significantly, in terms of pedagogy, they want to learn in collaborative environments, but this is framed from the perspective of their learning, not with a sense of responsibility or impact that they could have on others. They position themselves as consumers within a classroom setting. Whilst I am arguing here that neoliberal pedagogy is not dominant in the neoliberal university, the feature of individualisation is constant throughout this study and consumerism is evident within classroom environments. Democratic citizenship is based on people's willingness and capabilities in working together in inclusive and respectful ways (Giroux, 2014). For those in higher education who want to maintain this as the central aim of universities, this study suggests that educators would be well placed to actively seek ways to enable students to recognise what they contribute to everyone's holistic experiences in classroom settings to experientially practise citizenship. This has left me with a desire to explicitly work on creating classroom cultures which are genuinely collaborative in my own pedagogical practices. There is potential here for extension of the work on student partnerships (for example Holen et al, 2021; Bovill, 2019) to explicitly focus on partnerships between students to form collectives.

#### **9.4 Contribution to knowledge**

I outlined the broad ways this study contributes to knowledge in chapter 1 and here I confirm and expand this position.

##### **9.4.1 The significance of individualism**

Firstly, I build upon existing understanding about the transformative potential of sociological knowledge (McLean et al, 2015; Abbas et al, 2016; Muddiman, 2018), drawing out nuances in the relevance of student's positionality and its relationship with pedagogy when aiming for transformational learning. I add to the growing understanding of how students identify as individualistic consumers on a continuum meaning they can be a consumer in classroom settings, despite seemingly identifying as a contributive citizen outside of this context. Students have an individual orientation towards learning on their degree prompted by a desire to gain understanding of the social world but for personal reasons. Their motivation to learn is self-development and valuing

subjective emotional responses should be part of this holistic learning experience. However, this self-beneficial positioning is not fixed and despite their strongly individualist notions of higher education, they do want to contribute to society in positive ways. But this contribution appears to be framed as praxis that is individually enacted. Whilst I am suggesting here that neoliberal pedagogy is not dominant in the neoliberal university context, the neoliberal feature of individualism is strong and appears to be a foundational feature of participants' higher education experiences. Explicit mitigation of this is required to promote democratic and collaborative ideologies and methods to form collectives to address the injustices in our societies.

#### **9.4.2 The importance of subjective emotion**

There have been calls to centralise the role of emotion in TLT which has a history of being criticised for being too individualist and rational as previously discussed. This project extends this argument, providing insight into the importance of emotion both as part of and as an outcome of transformational learning. I am also suggesting here that the active use of subjective emotion within classrooms by framing it as a legitimate *shared* aspect of learning could be a route through which to foster more collectivity and solidarity to mitigate individualism in the classroom which this research reveals is an experience students seem to want but do not necessarily have. This focus on emotion as a shared experience is significant because framing emotion as only an individual experience could further contribute to the individualist experience that, according to this research, is an unwelcome aspect of the higher education experience. This is especially important if students feel the burden of hopelessness as part of their transformation provoked by increased critical consciousness.

#### **9.4.3 Neoliberal pedagogy**

I am aware of the language and concept of 'pedagogies of neoliberalism' (Macrine, 2016) which analyses the role of neoliberalism in reproducing dominant ideology hegemonically in a macro, structural sense. Here I have developed the term neoliberal pedagogy to analyse teaching at the micro level to capture the enactment of neoliberalism in classrooms. In doing so, I have illuminated what such practices look like and therefore made them identifiable. For example, this term can be used to identify, name and classify pedagogical practices that subtly promote individualism as an underlying principle of neoliberalism. Practices that are not named still exist, but by giving them a title or label we can then explore, critique and/or debate them as a visible phenomenon. Using the concept and language of neoliberal pedagogy, educators can explicitly consider or assess their own pedagogical practices through a neoliberal lens. This provides an opportunity for reflection on how or if the neoliberal context is exerting an influence in ways that have not perhaps been previously visible. For example, the development of this term both supported my data analysis and was supported *by* my

data analysis as it both provided me a lens through which to consider my data whilst the interpretation of my data confirmed the utility of this term when analysing pedagogical experiences.

In this thesis I am contributing to knowledge about the role of neoliberalism within universities. From the findings presented here, neoliberal pedagogy is not dominating teaching spaces although its presence is felt in relation to individualisation and consumerism as discussed above. Educator perspectives about the desire to resist what I term neoliberal pedagogy, and how to do so are appearing in literature (for example Pye, 2025b; Evans, 2020; Craddock, 2019). I am contributing to this knowledge by offering a student perspective on what pedagogical experiences they feel they have been exposed to and value.

#### **9.4.4 Coexistence of critical pedagogy and neoliberal pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy has a long and well-developed history, although less so in a European context (McArthur, 2010). By drawing on critical pedagogy in this research to analyse the generated data, I am extending arguments that the use of this disruptive pedagogy (Jayaraj, 2020) is not only a way to support transformational learning, but is also a way that we can reinvigorate universities as sites of critical challenge to hegemonic systems of power which enable educators collectively to reposition universities as places that offer hope and genuine contribution to the creation of fairer, more equitable societies. The prevalence of the individualist discourse in this project along with the participants' consumerist positioning within the classroom implies the presence of neoliberalism within teaching spaces in higher education. However, this research project indicates that these hegemonic aspects of neoliberal pedagogy are coexisting with critical pedagogy in what could perhaps be understood as an unlikely union given their ideological differences. Despite the tensions between these different pedagogical approaches, it appears that in practice the neoliberal context exerts an influence on pedagogy, but this does not prevent educators drawing on critical pedagogical practices to support the kind of transformative learning that the participants describe. My final contribution to knowledge is therefore a hopeful one because this project indicates that it is possible for educators to resist the dominance of neoliberalism by enacting aspects of critical pedagogy. Should this continue, higher education will remain transformational and continue to contribute to supporting students to be engaged citizens.

#### **9.5 Chapter summary**

This final chapter has first revisited the motivation and purpose of this research project to remind readers of the context of the study. It then answers the research questions set out in chapter 1 and explores the implications of the study with a focus on what this study suggests in relation to pedagogic practices in the neoliberal university before finally re-confirming its contribution to knowledge. It

concludes by highlighting the prevalence of the neoliberal feature of individualism in students' higher educational experiences despite evidence that suggests that pedagogy with a more critical orientation remains active in higher education classrooms. This offers hope for a future of higher education that is transformative and contributive to just and fairer societies.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Prompts used in narrative conversations/discussion

The text below in italics was shared on a Word document with participants via email prior to our narrative conversation/discussion so they had some insight into what we would hopefully cover.

#### *Prompts to use in discussions....*

*Prompt 1: Can you tell me about your experience of your sociology degree so far?*

*Prompt 2: What are your thoughts about your about teaching and learning experiences?*

*Prompt 3: What does doing this degree mean for you?*

#### *For information....*

*The above prompts are the general/overarching focus of our discussion, but I will no doubt ask more some specific questions or use further prompts depending on how our discussion goes.*

*Again, thank you so much for offering to be involved in this study. I really do appreciate it and will very much look forward to talking.*

*Jane*

## Appendix 2 – Themes and Codes

<b>Identity - Consumer/contributor</b>	<b>Orientation - Individual/collective</b>
Action Outside of uni Awareness Transformed - understanding Transformed – sharing Critical awareness Social change Contributive Knowledge Limits Consumer	Belonging Community Others/peers Perspectives Relationships A Levels Discussion Lectures/seminars Collaboration Facilitation Draw to sociology
<b>Motivation - Instrumental/developmental</b>	<b>Epistemic - Objective/subjective</b>
Realness/applied Relatability/applicability Future Employment Autonomy Sociology not valued Personal Transmission Active engagement Critical – social issues Past learning Self-development	Efficiency Organization Burden Gender Passion/love Fear Empathy/compassion Emotion Validation Consistency/order Gender

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