Identity, Invisibility and Social Forces

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This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for

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Abstract

This thesis explores the three threads of identity, invisibility and social forces in relation to 'non-traditional' students undertaking undergraduate study within an 'HE in FE' environment. The exploratory nature of the research required an inductive approach and thus the design of the research activity was informed by the principles of classic grounded theory methodology. Loosely structured interviews were used to elicit rich narratives from ten participants across a range of curriculum areas and levels of study. The five conceptual categories of participant 'biography', 'context', 'social engagement', 'use of technology', and 'identity/self' emerged though analysis of the coded data. Engagement with Lewin's concept of 'hodological space' (Lewin, 1997;1936) and subsequent diagrammatic analysis of the invisible 'life space' of each of the participants supported further theoretical analysis of the conceptual categories. This led to the emergence of the three core categories with greatest degree of reported psychic impact, these being 'biography', 'context' and 'identity/self'. Analysis of the properties within the category of 'identity/self' brought to the fore the importance of the reported role identities of participants, with a focus on 'identity standard' (Burke & Stets, 2009) and 'identity salience' (Stryker, 2008; 2002). The study, in engaging with these issues of identity, makes critical reference to recent policy documents, research reports and peer reviewed research, making an original contribution to knowledge through the subsequent foregrounding and potential impact of invisible or psychic social forces on the expectations, perceptions and actions of undergraduates studying within college based higher education.

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List of abbreviations

BECTA: British Educational Communications and Technology Agency

BIS : Department of Business, Innovation and Skills

BSP : Basic Social Process

DFES : Department for Education and Skills

DSA : Disabled Students Allowance

HEFCE : Higher Education Funding Council for England

HE in FE : Higher Education in Further Education

ICT: Information and Communication Technology

ILT: Interactive Learning Technology

LEA : Local Education Authority

MOD : Ministry of Defence

QAA : Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

VLE : Virtual Learning Environment

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis presents research activity that explores the concepts of identity, invisibility and social forces in relation to 'non-traditional' students undertaking undergraduate study within a college of further and higher education. This introductory chapter provides the rationale and the research question underpinning the study and then considers each of the concepts of 'identity', 'invisibility' and 'social forces' in turn. The chapter then examines the policy context and the nature of the institutional environment in which the research activity has been undertaken before providing an outline of the chapters that follow.

1.1 The purpose of the study

My professional role is that of a senior manager, in a college of further and higher education. The College has made the strategic decision to provide only vocational programmes with progression routes leading from the level of basic skills, through all subsequent levels, to Masters provision. I have strategic and high-level operational responsibility for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across all curriculum areas. I also hold responsibility for learning and teaching, including the development of technology-supported learning.

I have responsibility for the development and publication of both a Higher Education Strategy and a Learning and Teaching Strategy, each of which require regular review and updating. The two strategies are closely aligned and strongly promote the

development of technology supported learning to improve the student experience. I have ensured that these strategies have engaged with the expectations of 'HE in FE' provision as indicated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2006), in the provision of opportunities for those students who are described as 'non-traditional' and who might not otherwise progress to university, or indeed to higher levels of study. Non-traditional students were defined by HEFCE (1997) as those who had at least one of the following characteristics:

· from an ethnic minority group;

· had a long-term disability;

· possessed non-standard qualifications on entry to higher education;

· were aged over 25 years on entry to university;

· were from lower socio-economic groups of origin.

[HEFCE, 1997]

There are numerous studies and policy documents on the 'widening participation agenda', in particular relating to the issue of access to higher education (Gorard et al., 2007). There is also a growing level of research being undertaken into the institutional behaviours and wider student perceptions of the study experience (Tight, 2012), particularly as the Department for Business Innovation and Science progresses the development of new statutes, policies and expectations of higher education (BIS, 2011) and the subsequent raising of fee levels. While a section on the Policy Context, later in this chapter explores such matters further, it is, nonetheless evident that there has been relatively little research undertaken that focuses on the individual experience

of higher education (Tight, 2012) and still less on the experience of the individual situated in the HE in FE context.

My interest is focused on the experience of the individual student studying on undergraduate provision within a college of further and higher education. I am seeking to move away from generic perceptions and social structural considerations in order to better understand those aspects of lives, expectations and self-perceptions of individuals that might not be seen or understood by academics, tutors or managers. In so doing, I seek to make an original contribution to the field of research into the experience of non-traditional undergraduates.

Such an exploration is intended to support development of the perceptions of academic and support staff at the College, and across the wider HE in FE community, in relation to the individuality of student needs, and the subsequent iterative enhancement of the experience of non-traditional students as they progress to and through higher education. The research activity will inform my own professional practice and that of colleagues who work with undergraduate students across the college environment. My expectation is that this research activity will contribute to or even urge further areas for exploration within the sector, again from an individual student, rather than an institutional, perspective. My primary audience, therefore, will be fellow professionals in the HE in FE sector, both locally and nationally. Further audiences include those developing, designing and researching technologically supported learning opportunities, particularly in relation to 'non-traditional' students.

1.2 The research question

How do the social psychological processes associated with the concepts of self and identity influence the experience of non-traditional undergraduate students engaging in college based technology-supported learning?

1.3 The Key Concepts

The following three sections consider the key concepts of 'identity', 'invisibility' and 'social forces' and the way in which they underpin the research activity.

1.3.1 Considering Identity

My exploration of the concept of 'identity' was underpinned by reflexive consideration of my own ontological and epistemological perspectives. I take the position that both being and understanding are social in nature, but with a clear emphasis on individuality. I take a social constructivist perspective that embraces the notion of the individually constructed journey through ways of being in a social world, through iterative situated construction of meaning(s) through social interaction, whether with oneself or others. The emphasis on the individual social construction of meaning is presented by Moses and Knutsen (2007). They explore ontological positioning(s) implied by a constructivist epistemology:

> While many constructivists would agree that the physical world is material, concrete and given by nature, they are loathe to accept the same description of the social world. For them there is no clearly delineated social world: there are

many. Each world is created by human beings … in the sense that this world

has evolved as a result of human interaction in society, through history, with

ideas, using language.

[Moses and Knutsen, 2007 p.193]

I find myself comfortable with this presentation of the ontological co-existence of

physical and socio-cultural worlds. The extent to which individual social worlds can

exist, however, requires further thought. Individuals do not normally exist in a

personally encapsulated society and therefore it is important to consider the way in

which social worlds interact and interweave, a construct of being underpinned by

sociocultural concepts. Goicoechea and Packer (2000) search for such a resolution

between sociocultural theory and constructivism, thus extending the Vygotskian

perspective of social constructivism (Hirtle, 1996):

We will propose that the sociocultural and constructivist perspectives are not

two halves of a whole, but that the constructivist perspective attends to

epistemological structures and processes that the sociocultural perspective can

and must place in a broader historical and cultural context.

[Goicoechea and Packer, 2000 p.228]

There is, therefore a need to develop awareness of the way in which social processes,

or engagements, interactions and activities within the social world, work towards

definition, refinement and development of meaning and subsequent action within any

given context (Stryker, 2002).

Lindesmith et al. (1999) draw attention to the process of social engagement and interaction. The authors recognise the situatedness of experience and the two-way interactive influences between social structures and an individual's construction of meaning and bring to the fore the importance of the 'interplay among biographies, personal and social constraints, and the social order' (p5). Having socially situated the essence of being they posit that the 'central' object during such activity is 'self':

> Persons are both objects and subjects to themselves ...The world is in the person and the person is in the world ...the person, the world, the situation, and self-consciousness interact, interpenetrate, and plunge through one another in a synthesis of being, action, meaning and consciousness.
>
> [Lindesmith et al., 1999 p.13]

The implication of conscious and unconscious synthesis requires consideration of internalised and externalised processes inherent to the individual, the importance of meaning-making and the need for linguistic representation of such meaning, shared or otherwise (Blumer, 1969; Dewey, 1910). Blumer (1969, p.5) goes on to propose 'symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products …. the use of meanings by a person in his action involves an interpretivist process' thus initiating consideration of an epistemological framework which sits well with a social constructivist perspective and within which consideration of identity can be undertaken.

Stryker (2008; 2002) supports this deliberation; he posits the movement away from the holistic adoption of symbolic interactionism as a broad theory and looks, instead, to engage with symbolic interactionism as a frame of reference, choosing not to be defined as a symbolic interactionist but to recognise concepts pertinent to his own engagement with concepts of self and identity:

> The judgment being expressed is that symbolic interactionism is a frame of reference or a perspective .... it suggests that if sociology is to make headway in understanding social order and social change, the sociologist must comprehend the meaning of facts of the environment, of social relationships, and of intra-psychic 'forces' as these are provided meaning by the participants in interaction.
>
> [Stryker, 2002 pp.8-9]

To this end, there are key aspects of symbolic interactionism to which I refer in order to clarify and make sense of perspectives on self and identity without defining (or wishing to define) myself as a symbolic interactionist and without being exclusive in my engagement with a theory that tends towards the sociological. Indeed Stryker's assertion that 'any given frame of reference is not exclusionary' (2002, p.9) sits comfortably with my own perspectives and allows me to use symbolic interactionism as a reference through which I can develop my own theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978). Such principles of Symbolic Interactionism are thus considered to be meaning, symbolic representation (language and thought), reflexive situatedness of experience and engagement with social processes (Aldiabat and Navenec, 2011; Lindesmith et al., 1999).

Probably the most challenging concept to embrace, within the framework provided through engagement with symbolic interactionism, is the differentiation accorded to the use of 'I' and 'my self' (Aldiabat and Navenec, 2011) and yet this would appear to be central to each of the principles outlined above. 'I' is used in the subjective; it is an expression belonging only to the individual and for each individual there is only one occurrence of its use. The self is, however objectified, as is indicated in the use of the terms 'myself', 'yourself', 'themselves' and so on; the 'self', in this context, requires social recognition and reflexivity. Indeed William James emphasised:

Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as are there are individuals who recognise him and carry an image of him around in their mind. To wound any one of those images is to wound him. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinions he cares.

[James, 1890 p.294]

The notion of 'carrying an image' of an individual infers a process of shared meaning or understanding within the social context, of identification with or of the individual. Buckingham (2007) in introducing the term 'identity' puts emphasis on the concept of identification. He comments, in an apparently contradictory manner:

> Our identity is something we uniquely possess: it is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind…
>
> [Buckingham, 2007 p.1]

Buckingham's definition places an emphasis on the social nature of identification and an ongoing examination of position within the or more appropriately each social environment. My own interpretivist ontology leads me to assert that there is no engagement with reality that is without construction of meaning, a position underlined by the symbolic interactionist evocation of the development (linguistic or otherwise) of shared symbols, and that such engagement, whilst social in nature, differs according to the individual and their position on a continuum of social engagement. Identification for each individual, therefore, requires ongoing construction of and reflection upon 'meaning' around the 'self' within each and every situation, whether conscious or otherwise, thus implying the existence, for each individual, of multiple roles or identities.

This situatedness is important to the apparent paradox of identity, its complexity and apparent multiplicity. If the term is to be considered in both its noun form and as the process of identification (Jenkins, 2008; Buckingham, 2007) then there has to be consideration of 'self' as a situated object with the resultant self-categorisation of both the individual and the group.

I may struggle to "be myself" or to "find my true self,"… Yet I also seek

multiple identifications with others, on the basis of social, cultural, and

biological characteristics, as well as shared values, personal histories, and

interests.

[Buckingham, 2007 p.1]

Lindesmith et al. (1999) do not see an individual as having a single or solid-state 'self-concept' within a given situation, but as a being with multiple versions of self which are layered, and can be peeled back or discovered, each underpinning another in an onion-like fashion. They consider:

· phenomenological self: self communications through conscious thought

· interactional self: the self that is performed in a particular situation

· linguistic self: the one that links the expressions 'I' and 'me' to biography and
    emotion

· material self: linking to all that 'belongs' to the individual at that time

· ideological self: identification and subsequent roles adopted within and
    according to a given situation

· the self as desire: gender, race, experience, connecting to others

[Lindesmith et al., 1999 pp.13-14]

Having thus deconstructed the unitary concept of self, the authors purport that all of

the above are 'enacted in the situation and become part of the biography of the

persona' (p.14) thus emphasizing the extricable intertwining of each strand of self-

hood whilst acknowledging its complexity and its interconnection with social interactions.

The conceptualisation by Lindesmith et al. (1999) of biographical situatedness of identity, with its reference to ideology and desire, links self inexorably to actions and/ or behaviours. In writing on 'identity', Westen (1991 p.190) purports more explicitly, 'part of the affective dimension of identity is a commitment to values and ideals, and hence to various ideal sub-schemas', thus referencing the differing self-concepts experienced and resultant positions, and therefore commitments, taken by an individual at a given instance.

Jenkins (2008, p. 46) extends this conversation, clearly inviting consideration of choice, optionality within situations and outcome, 'Since identity is bound up with shared repertoires of intentionality (such as morality) and interactional networks of constraint and possibility, it is an important concept in our understanding of action and its outcomes both intended and unintended.' The reference to 'interactional networks' underpins Jenkins' assertion that identification alone does not imply resultant behavioural outcomes. He moves the reader to consider a range of factors and forces, eliciting consideration of reality, biography and social process, the complexity of group dynamics, and issues of social reciprocity and recursion.

The issue of recursion is underpinned by experience and expression, the way in which situations both influence and are influenced by individuals, their actions and perceptions (Lindesmith et al., 1999). The authors take this further by examining

Bruner's distinctions between concepts of reality, experience and expression and the implications thereof:

> *Reality* refers to "what is really out there" (Bruner, 1984 p.7). *Experience* refers to "how that reality presents itself to consciousness" (p.7). *Expressions* describe "how individual experience is framed " (p.7). A "life experience consists of the images, feelings, sentiments ... and meanings known to the person whose life it is ... a life as told ... is a narrative." (p.7) .... Representations must "be performed to be experienced" (p.7).
>
> [Lindesmith et al., 1999 p.7]

These distinctions as expressed bring together the intertwined nature of experience and expression, the way that experience is performed in the context of situated self and build on the work of Goffman (1959). Goffman expounds performance as 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants' (1959, p.26) thus implying, whether conscious or otherwise, both the process of expectation and a consequent and contiguous behavioural reaction that has the potential to impact upon the social process of identification and thus influence or 'frame' situated interaction (Goffman,1974).

Goffman (1974) further developed his articulation of situated performativity with an emphasis on the multiplicity of wholly or partially synchronous and asynchronous events that can occur as part of a temporal and spatial landscape of the experience, thus requiring consideration of the impact of such factors on shared understanding of

the frames employed. The inevitable invisibility of at least some such events in the context of performativity is of ongoing importance.

In consideration of the concept of selfhood, Jenkins (2008, p.50) cautiously recognises such invisibility, 'not everything going on in our heads and hearts is obvious to others'. Whilst endeavouring to find a balance in terms of invisible aspects of identity, Jenkins finds notion of the unconscious 'epistemologically and ontologically problematic', taking the stance that it is a 'rhetorical device' (2008, p.52) and cannot be proven. In addressing the same issue, Vogler (2000, p.1) brings together the domains of sociology and psychoanalysis in an attempt to show 'how unconscious psychological processes and strong feelings may now be articulating with sociological processes to form a mutually reinforcing loop'. Vogler is critical of Jenkins' decision to omit these dimensions of identity, 'he emphasises the external social dimension to a much greater extent than the internal dimension and omits the unconscious and emotional dimensions of identity entirely' (2000, p.21). In problematising the notion of culturally and socially moulded identities, Lawler (2008) also considers the degree to which identity is impacted by 'unknown unconscious motivations … hidden desires, fears and envies …' (p.9), seeing the Freudian concepts of the 'unconscious' and 'pre-conscious' as being fundamental to the consideration of identity.

> For Freud, we do have a consciousness: that part of us that we can directly
> know, and on which we can reflect. We also have a pre-conscious: this is
> Freud's term for that aspect of self which is not directly known and

understood, but which can be brought to mind. Most of what makes up the self, however, is unconscious.

<div align="right">[Lawler, 2008 p.85]</div>

In justification of her potentially contestable but hermeneutic consideration of psychoanalytical concepts, Lawler writes:

> It [psychoanalysis] posits a model of identity in which the unconscious has a central place and in which we can only know ourselves incompletely and with some difficulty .... it is important to realise that people are not simply cultural or social dupes, slotting neatly into assigned roles and places. The social world is messier than this and part of the messiness, it seems to me, derives from the messiness of the unconscious.

<div align="right">[Lawler, 2008 p.100]</div>

Goffman (1959) neatly ascribes differing types of behaviour to the framed nature of 'front of stage' activity that is designed for the audience as against that taking place outside the frame or in the 'back regions'. Any assumption that all such performances are orchestrated with the full awareness of the actor would be difficult to sustain, suggesting a need for engagement with Lawler's proposition. For Goffman then, performativity must involve contextually variable contributions of self at all levels of consciousness; the conscious framing of the image (or foregrounded aspects of identity), the accidentally disclosed pre-conscious elements (perhaps appearing like

orange peel caught under a shoe) and un-disclosed (consciously or unconsciously) backstage activity.

1.3.2 Considering invisibility

Dictionary definitions of 'invisibility' include such descriptors as 'impossible to see', 'not accessible to view', 'not easily noticed/inconspicuous' (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2003), 'not perceptible or discernable by the mind', 'concealed from public knowledge' (Collins English Dictionary, 2009). Therefore, in relation to the identity of undergraduates, considered aspects of invisibility include: the conscious and unconscious, disclosed and undisclosed, and that which is hidden or out of focus.

Goffman's allegorical adoption of stage performance is intended to provide a lens through which the nature of 'social encounters' can examined. His concluding chapter advises, 'it is concerned with the structure of social encounters – the structure of those entities in social life that come into being whenever persons enter one another's immediate physical presence' (p.246). Stacey (2005) extends this description of social encounter by referencing Mead's contemplation of such interaction as being inclusive of the 'action of a body directed towards itself as private role-play and silent conversation' (p.165). He asserts, 'conscious and unconscious communications apply simultaneously to interaction between bodies, the social, and the interaction of each body with itself' (p.168). Thus saying, he makes the proposition that all levels of consciousness take the form of social phenomena; he requires consideration of the

extent to which such levels, 'are inseparable, completely intertwined aspects of the same processes' (Stacey, 2005 p.160).

The degree to which each level of consciousness, or combination thereof, influences internal dialogue or social interaction and whether such influence results in altered perceptions and/or action remains outside the scope of this study. However, the impact, within the learning context, of the balance between deliberate action, undertaken with full awareness, and that unconsidered by the individual is pertinent to my exploration of the undergraduate experience. The extent to which such dialogue or activity is hidden from view or incorporated into front of stage performance (Goffman, 1959), whether explicitly or otherwise, is also of interest in my exploration of the invisible.

A normally hidden social phenomenon may be brought to into the frame through disclosure, being an action taken as a result of a conscious decision to inform another party of a matter pertinent to the shared situation and with a purpose. As such, within higher education matters of formal disclosure tend to be situated in the context of disability, and generally with a view to gaining support through the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), access to reasonable adjustments during study or other modes of support. The decision to disclose has been cited as being influenced by tutors, friends and family (Waters et al., 2012). Reluctance to disclose has been attributed to 'a fear of being discriminated against in admissions processes, especially for vocational courses; fear of stigma and prejudice, and of being seen as not suitable for higher education; not regarding themselves as disabled, or "not disabled enough" ' (Waters et

al., 2012 p.7). Other forms of purpose-driven disclosure may emerge when students make the decision to submit details of their personal circumstances, in confidence, when seeking mitigation or confirmation of extenuating circumstances in consideration of their assessed work.

Whilst introductory support mechanisms for 'non-traditional' students (e.g. study skills workshops) are commonly available in higher education institutions to address disclosed learning or study skills support needs (King and Widdowson, 2012), personal issues or influences impacting on the student experience that are not normally disclosed through one of the aforementioned formal mechanisms may suffer from a lack of institutional perceptual focus and thus may remain hidden from view, at least from those within the institution.

1.3.3 Considering social forces

In the context of this research activity, social forces are conceptualised as socially mediated influences, factors, barriers or drivers that result in potential or actual changes in the perception(s) or action(s) of an individual within a given situation. It was not intended that this conceptualisation should be rigid nor exclusive but, in addressing Blumer's critique (1969) of the term 'social factors', it should nonetheless anticipate the expectation of associated social interaction on the part of the individual or individuals. Blumer considered a range of factors that emerged from both the sociological and the psychological perspective:

The typical sociological scheme ascribes behaviour to such factors as status

position, cultural prescriptions, values, sanctions, role demands, and social

system requirements; explanation in terms of such factors suffices without

paying attention to the social interaction that their play necessarily pre-

supposes. Similarly in the typical psychological scheme such factors as

motives, attitudes, hidden complexes, elements of psychological organisation,

and psychological processes are used to account for behaviour without any

need of considering social interaction.

[Blumer, 1969 p.7]

Blumer's emphasis on the need for consideration of social interaction requires that the

concepts of 'social forces' and 'social processes' gain close alignment. This

conceptual alignment proposes then an iterative cycle of socially constructed realities,

cultures, structures, meanings, behaviours and actions that in turn have the potential to

act as forces that in turn work to further propagate the social processes in a given

situation.

Culture as a conception, whether defined as custom, tradition, norm, value,

rules, roles or such like, is clearly derived from what people do …. social

structure in any of its aspects, as represented by such terms as social position,

status, role, authority and prestige, refers to relationships derived from how

people act toward each other.

[Blumer, 1969 pp.6-7]

Callero (2009) writes of the variability and invisibility of social forces, 'social forces come in many different shapes and sizes and affect us in ways that are very often undetectable' (p.9). He considers the way in which social forces may be embedded in the past or present, or indeed 'deep in our psyche' (p.9) and the ways in which such forces impact upon choices, decision and actions, thus echoing Lewin's conceptualisation of the psychic influence of social forces (1997; 1936). Lewin's concept of an individual's 'life space' supported consideration of 'all the influences acting on them at a given time' (Sheehy, 2004 p.140). Lewin (1997) sought to consider the way in which psychic forces emerging from and impacting upon the 'psychological past', the 'psychological present' and the 'psychological future' could behave as driving or restraining forces in that moment and thus influence changes in perception or action.

> The clarification of the problem of past and future has been much delayed by the fact that the psychological field which exists at a given time contains also the views of that individual about his future and past. The individual sees not only his present situation; he has certain expectations, wishes, fears, daydreams for his future. His views about his own past and that of the rest of the physical and social world are often incorrect but nevertheless constitute, in his life space, the "reality-level" of the past.
>
> [Lewin, 1997 p.207]

Lewin's work on social forces further developed to consider group dynamics and 'Field Theory' (1943), but the emphasis of this research activity, and the extent of its

engagement with the work of Lewin, remained focused on the individual. In accordance with my position that individuals construct their own socially mediated meanings, the application of similar forces could be expected to differ according to the individual and their situation, leading thus to inductive exploration rather than a quest for generalisation.

1.3.4 The key concepts: an overview

The three sections, above, have presented considerations in relation to the concepts of 'identity', 'invisibility' and 'social forces', bringing to the fore essential theoretical constructions in relation to each concept.

These concepts, however, are neither separate nor distinct. The central construct of 'identity' embraces the twin concepts of multiple subjective, situated instances of identity (Jenkins, 2008; Buckingham, 2007; Goffman, 1959; James, 1890) and the objectified, reflexive self (Aldiabat and Navenec, 2011; Lindesmith et al., 1999).

The inevitability of engagement with 'invisibility' is drawn from the consideration of issues such as the internalised dialogue that takes place between the identity and the self (Jenkins, 2008), the levels of consciousness of reflections, perceptions and actions (Lawler, 2008; Vogler, 2000) and the effect of that which is unconscious (or subconscious) on performed identity (Goffman, 1959) or disclosure (Watson, 2012).

Themes that can be framed within the concept of 'social forces' are interwoven through the discussions on 'identity' and 'invisibility'. The consideration of social

forces as influences, barriers, social factors or social processes requires their recognition in the social construction of meaning (Stryker, 2002), the nature of their impact upon social interaction (Blumer, 1969) and their psychological impact on motivations, perceptions and/or actions (Callero, 2009; Lewin, 1997).

The section that follows moves away from direct reflection on these concepts and provides a brief exploration of the policy backdrop to the research undertaken, paying particular attention to the role of further education colleges who provide the higher education experience for 'non-traditional' students.

1.4 The policy context

The Widening Participation agenda is not a new concept for those working within Higher Education in the United Kingdom; 'a society committed to learning for life' was brought to the fore in the *Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* with the expressed requirement that Higher Education would need to 'encourage and enable all students - whether they demonstrate the highest intellectual potential or whether they have struggled to reach the threshold of higher education – to achieve beyond their expectations' (Dearing, 1997). The report put particular emphasis on the importance of widening participation and highlighted the need to support progression to higher education for those considered 'non-traditional'. It made links with the need for programmes of study at sub-degree level and thus prepared the ground for the subsequent development of Foundation Degrees.

The Future of Higher Education (DFES, 2003), *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy* (Leitch, 2006), *Higher Ambitions* (BIS, 2009a), and *Skills for Growth* (BIS, 2009b) provided successive policy drivers for both widening participation and work based learning, with Foundation Degrees continuing to be identified as effective mechanisms for delivering higher level vocational education whether as progression routes to Honours Degrees, as a fundamental part of Higher Apprenticeships or as continued professional development. The response of the College in which this research is situated has been to ensure that there is a wide provision of Foundation Degrees available for applicants, which run parallel to and are embedded within the vocational Honours Degree programmes validated across the majority of curriculum areas. Thus the Honours Degrees additionally address the widening participation principles inherent to the design and delivery of Foundation Degrees.

The Defining Characteristics of Foundation Degrees (QAA, 2010) highlights the need for programmes that enable academic attainment to be vocationally situated and flexibly delivered:

> Foundation Degrees are designed to appeal to learners wishing to enter a profession as well as those seeking continuing professional development. They can also provide pathways for lifelong learning and the opportunity to progress to other qualifications. The qualification may be offered through flexible modes of learning enabling learners to 'earn and learn' and accommodate the learning needs of different types of students.

[QAA, 2010 para.15]

All Foundation Degrees at the College were designed to support progression to Honours Degree programmes and thus the Honours Degree provision also embraces the concepts outlined in the *Defining Characteristics of Foundation Degrees*.

The political emphasis on the need for the strategic use of technology to enhance accessibility and the flexibility of learning opportunities was articulated in *Harnessing Technology* (BECTA, 2008), being further underlined by the strategic priorities articulated in *Enhancing Learning and Teaching through the Use of Technology* (HEFCE, 2009). Thus established, support for the development of projects and research to support the use of technology to 'transform the ways we teach and learn' (DFES, 2003) was promoted though the funding streams available through bids to the JISC. The College responded strategically to this challenge, embedding the development of technology enhanced learning within both its Higher Education Strategy and the Learning and Teaching Strategy, with associated staffing infrastructure and professional development for teaching staff.

Conole et al. (2006) astutely assert that non-traditional students may require support if they are to benefit from the technology supported learning articulated through widening participation policy:

> Widening participation illustrates the relationship between e-learning and other policy directives particularly clearly, but leads to paradoxes ... First, e-learning is often seen as a way of supporting increasing diversity, but it may be that non-

traditional learners do not have suitable preparation to work in on-line
environments, exacerbating inequality.

<div align="right">[Conole et al., 2006 p.40]</div>

I would contend that this position, while substantiated, requires extended
consideration. Matters of identification, as associated with the categorisation of
students as 'non-traditional', are not limited to any one stage of the learning journey,
however mediated. Preparing such learners for work in on-line environments may,
indeed, be worthwhile, but their learning experience may still be impacted by social
forces both visible and invisible to companions, in whatever role, encountered on that
journey.

1.4.1 Issues of Participation in Higher Education

Research concerning the barriers to widening participation has been somewhat
anomalous (Gorard et al., 2007) with the bulk of research activity being undertaken
through analysis of participation and retention rates, or engagement with those
actually participating in higher education. The foregrounding of this reality is
important as consideration of research in this area unfolds.

Within this context, Gorard et al. (2006) categorise the concept of barriers
underpinning the socioeconomic variance in participation as being 'situational',
'dispositional', or 'institutional', embracing within these categories issues for the
potential participant of location (and thus regional influence), ethnicity, disability,
gender, time, previous education experience and aspiration, occupational background

(individual or parental) and motivation; institutional issues such as inflexibility, access to provision and formality of applications process are seen to exacerbate other 'social determinants' (p.5).

Watson (2006) considers issues of widening participation as a route to social cohesion, of the potential for actualisation through expanded provision, and of retention and completion. He also questions the transformative nature of higher education as he introduces his discussion paper to the funding council. His concern for the ever widening social gulf between participants and those who are non-participants is laid out for consideration but not picked up again as the paper unfolds.. In contrast, Fuller and Paton (2007) indicate awareness of the need to access, within research activity, potential non-participants as posited by Gorard et al. (2007) and the consideration of social processes.

> Less attention has been directed at understanding patterns of individual
> participation and decision-making across the life course [than in participation
> at 18] and, we would argue that, even less has been spent on researching
> decision making as a relational social process .... The language of barriers is
> much less explicit in these interviewees' accounts of their educational, career
> and personal histories and the influences on their decisions.

[Fuller and Paton, 2007 pp.2-3]

Fuller and Paton (2007) importantly conclude that the categorisation of individuals as participants or non participants is not supportive of an understanding of learning expectancies and that the more complex concepts of social biographies and processes enable consideration of the 'long-term, dynamic, socially and culturally embedded, and co-constructed nature of participation' (p.28).

This concept of co-construction of participation forms an important foundation layer when moving to consider the social processes inherent to engagement in learning, whether at macro or micro level. For Fuller and Paton (2007) the emergence of intimate and influential social networks interlinking through the developing social biographies of those interviewed could be understood to result in a variety of dynamic and potentially coalescent social forces. Such social forces are not unique to their study; they may be overt or undisclosed but are not without impact in the learning environment. The combination of biographies and social processes can be therefore appropriately examined through the lens of social forces thus enabling consideration of influence and impact.

1.4.2 The transformational nature of learning

Learning is transformational in nature; it is described as 'a qualitative change in a person's way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualising …' (Marton and Ramsden, 1988 p.271); it 'implies becoming a different person' and 'involves the construction of identities' (Lave and Wenger, 1991 p.53). Solomon's assertion (2005, p.97) that the construction of the learner-worker identity is linked inextricably to 'multiple processes that come about through different and often intersecting discursive

practices' sits comfortably with Wenger's (1998) metaphorical association of multifaceted trajectories of learning and reification through and across social contexts and communities. Thus the 'learner-worker' concept should be considered but one example of the way in which a multiplicity of role identities (Stryker, 2002) impacts on the self in the learning context.

Boud and Walker (1998) also invoke consideration of context or settings beyond the learning milieu. Their assertion, 'Context is perhaps the single most important influence on reflection and learning. It can permit or inhibit working with learners' experience.' (p.196) is extended to embrace issues that impact on selfhood and thus upon the capacity for the transformation of identity:

> The context in which we operate has many features which are taken for granted and are normally invisible on a day-to-day basis. These features have a profound influence over who we are, what and how we think and what we regard as legitimate knowledge. These features include inter alia the language we use to name the world .... the assumptions we hold about ourselves and others (what we believe we can and cannot learn); what is acceptable and not acceptable for us to do and what outcomes it is reasonable for us to seek in any given situation…. These wider features of the context of learning reach deeply into the ways in which we view ourselves and others. They impinge on our identity and influence the ways in which we relate to others.

> [Boud and Walker, 1998 p.197]

Boud and Walker thus foreground concepts that have synergy with those of Fuller and Paton (2007). There are not clear lines of demarcation between 'features' that support participation in learning and those that are troublesome; such features are not always visible, indeed are not always evident to participants in learning or enquiry.

1.4.3 Threshold Concepts and Liminality

Participation in learning then, is not one-dimensional nor therefore without its difficulties. In considering learning as a transformative construct, Meyer and Land (2005) invoke their earlier notion of threshold concepts, seeing transformation through conquering the difficulties of learning as impacting on identity:

> In attempting to characterise such conceptual gateways it was suggested in the earlier work that they may be transformative (occasioning a significant shift in the perception of a subject), irreversible (unlikely to be forgotten, or unlearned only through considerable effort), and integrative (exposing the previously hidden interrelatedness of something).

> [Meyer and Land, 2005 p.373]

These conceptual gateways are important boundaries, the crossing of which will require students to consider, recognise, accept and move through an environment in which there may be a lack of symmetry (Dillenbourg, 1999) in one or more dimensions (e.g. knowledge, experience, power). The initial period of participation in a programme of higher education, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds or where the notion of the learner-worker (Solomon, 2005) is already

troublesome, is likely to confront students with a number of such thresholds and to invoke a state of liminality (Meyer and Land, 2005; Turner, 1979).

Turner (1979) describes liminality as 'literally "being-on-a-threshold," [it] means a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes … registering structural status. …' (p465). He sees liminality as being 'full of potency and potentiality' (p.466), a perception that may not be shared by the student whilst experiencing such a rite of passage. Liminality requires an implicit agreement to move away from the existing social state (self and associated social processes and behaviours), to experience a period of not really belonging and then be 'returned to secular or mundane life - either at a higher status level or in an altered state of consciousness or social being'(p.467). Turner (2008) relates of her late husband, 'Furthermore, among people in a situation of liminality Turner also found what he termed 'communitas', the comradeship and fellowship of people in the midst of liminal ritual' (p.36); experiencing the initial departure from aspects of self must require both trust and substantial motivational drive.

Bringing together these assertions, it is likely that the social biographies of non-traditional undergraduates are not fully disclosed, whether consciously or otherwise. The degree to which disclosure takes place, particularly under the stressful conditions of liminal space, has the potential to impact upon both trust and participative behaviours within a learning community.

1.5 The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis provides a series of the chapters that follow the journey undertaken from the choice of methodological framework to the final discussion of the research outcomes:

- Chapter 2 provides a critical discussion of grounded theory methodology and a comparative critique of a range of methods that have developed since the publication of the classic methodology in 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

- Chapter 3 provides an account of the research activity as it was undertaken, and its conceptual links to the methodology, providing evidence of each of the stages of research.

- Chapter 4 provides an insight into the narratives provided by participants and, with the awareness that the interview transcripts are too wordy to include within this report, contains pen-portraits of all participants in the research.

- Chapter 5 brings to the fore the conceptual categories that emerged from the analysis of narratives

- Chapter 6 introduces a conceptual framework based upon Lewin's hodological representation of 'life space' (Lewin, 1997;1936) and provides the opportunity to combine the analysis of structured data from the empirical research activity with literature in the related areas and from the wider sector in order to provide theoretical situation for research outcomes.

- Chapter 7 provides an overview of and reflection on the research activity undertaken. It puts forward a consideration of the contribution made by the research activity and the potential for further associated research activity.

It is notable that the thesis does not include a discrete chapter that provides a review of literature, either prior to or following the research activity. The principles of classic grounded theory methodology suggest that, whilst initial contextual awareness is of value, there should be critical analysis of literature pertinent to the themes emerging from the data at the point at which that emergence is taking place, rather than at the start of the research activity. It is this route that I have taken and thus aspects of literature started to influence analysis following coding. Interwoven aspects of data and literature can thus been seen developing through Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

1.6 The Originality of the Research

This research is situated in the mixed economy or HE in FE sector. Within the higher education sector provision located within Further Education Colleges is either franchised (and thus potentially considered as part of the university's own provision) or validated by higher education institutions. Thus, whilst this sector is a focus of policy, research even at the institutional level is complex and fraut with both perceptual and data related difficulty. (Parry et al., 2012).

The research is focused at the level of the individual. Tight (2012) reports a small proportion of his sampled research on higher education, from academic journals and

books, as being undertaken at the level of the individual, 'only four out of 567 journal articles, and none of the books, were categorised in this way' (p.214).

The research seeks to establish Lewin's 'life space' (1997; 1996) and his diagrammtic representation of the psychic influence of social forces as a framework within which emergent data can be considered. Postmodern consideration of this framework is rarely found, with greater reference made to Lewin's later work on change and group dynamics.

Thus, the original features of this study are considered to be: the research into individual narratives of student identity within the HE in FE sector and the adoption of Lewin's hodological representation of 'life space' (Lewin, 1997; 1936) as a conceptual framework for the emergent categories from rich data.

1.7 Limitations of the study

1.7.1 The length of study

The timescale associated with this research permitted a single in depth interview with each participant. Each interview captured the perspectives of the participant in the form of a micro-slice of their life space (Lewin 1997), providing perspectives on their biography, context and goals, as the participant perceived them at that particular point in time. Such a study would have benefited from being able to revisit participants in the study as they continued on their journey through higher education. This would have enabled evaluation of the impact of the social forces perceived within the first

interview, allow for the establishment of any changes in the student identity standard

and offer the potential for further action research to establish the effectiveness or

otherwise of institutional initiatives to enhance the student experience.

1.7.2 Size of sample

The size of the sample was sufficient for the study as undertaken. However, the

restriction of the research to one college impacted the study in two ways. The College

provision of higher education is not representative of the sector, having larger

numbers of full-time students than the average college offering higher education

programmes, and offering a larger range of provision at honours degree level. The

College recruits students to its specialist creative and performing arts programmes

from across the country and also locally to other vocational programmes, this

providing a wider mix of traditional and non-traditional students than others within

the sector. It would have been therefore interesting, though organisationally

challenging, to seek to extend the study to a range of other colleges in the sector. As a

full-time employee and part-time doctoral student, it was not feasible for me to spend

the necessary time absent from my professional role. Such an extension undertaken in

the future would vary from the original research in seeking to verify the outcomes of

the initial activity, though individual research projects contributing to the overall

outcome should follow similar methodology.

1.7.3 Mode of Study

This study was undertaken with participants learning through technologically supported face-to-face attendance. Participants were not studying on programmes specifically designed for delivery through or within virtual learning communities. Undertaking this study has led me to consider the extent to which variations on the student identity standard impact similarly on networked learners. This is an area that provides particular interest for future research.

1.7.4 Focusing on the individual

From the outset, a decision was made to focus on the individual, their perceptions, their narrated experience and expectations. To this end, I made a conscious decision that concepts of social structure and related concerns within educational research, such as the impact of 'social capital', 'habitus' and 'power' (Navarro, 2006; Taylor and Boser, 2006; Goddard, 2003) would remain outside the scope of this study.

Chapter 2 : Grounded Theory

This chapter introduces grounded theory as an appropriate methodology for interpretivist research (Blaxter et al., 2006) being undertaken within the research context of non-traditional students studying higher education in a further education college, and in support of the research question:

> How do the social psychological processes associated with the concepts of self and identity influence the experience of non-traditional undergraduate students engaging in college based technology-supported learning?

The chapter considers the key features of the grounded theory methodology and explores the ways in which both the founders of the method and their students have adapted the methods. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the way in which grounded theory was used within this research.

The key features of this research were, from the outset, the exploratory tone of the research question, the key concepts of self and identity, and the twin issues of invisibility and social forces. The intangible nature of these features underpinned the decision to develop a methodology based upon an inductive framework, rather than attempting the verification of a research hypothesis through deductive enquiry. Grounded Theory, whether classical or otherwise, is based upon the induction and subsequent coding of rich data, with continuous comparative analysis of the emergent codes to provide conceptual categories which are meaningful and which explain the social processes being studied (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Star (2007) confirms the effectiveness of grounded theory methodology in revealing uncanny and unconsidered

aspects of social processes in a range of contexts and activities, concluding, 'grounded theory is an excellent tool for understanding invisible things' (p.79).

Hallberg (2006) extracts and clarifies the differing expectations of the outcome of grounded theory research activity:

> Glaser means that a grounded theory can be presented "either as a well-codified set of propositions or in a running text of theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories and their properties" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p31). The form in which the theory is presented does not make it a theory; rather the fact that it explains or predicts something makes it a theory. Strauss' definition (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998) is similar; namely, that theory concerns carefully developed concepts that are put together by statements about mutual relations forming an integrated conceptual framework that explains or predicts a phenomenon or an event, and thereby provides guides to action. Due to Glaser's definition, a grounded theory study can result in an empirically grounded hypothesis that can be further tested and verified with new data using quantitative or qualitative methodology. Glaser means that theory is a process but can be presented as a momentary product that is still developing. Strauss, however, argues that an empirically grounded theory is both generated and verified in the data.

[Hallberg, 2006 pp.142-143]

The nature and scope of my own research established an expectation more akin to that of Glaser, that the outcome would be in the form of a critical discussion, a process

and/or set of themes for further exploration. A second principle applied to the outcome was that it should meet the criteria of fit and suitability as recalled by Cooney (2011, p.18), ' Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasised two main criteria for judging the adequacy of an emerging grounded theory: that it fits the situation and that it works, helping the people involved in the situation to make sense of their experiences and manage the situation better'.

2.1 Key features of Grounded Theory

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) reflect that many researchers restrict their initial investigations into grounded theory to a 'very limited' reading of Glaser and Strauss' initial text. They emphasise the need for an 'understanding of the epistemological bases' (p.32) of the original method and of its historical context as an underpinning framework for the developing, varied forms and applications of the method.

Clarke (2005, p.xxi) clarifies her own understanding that grounded theory has 'roots in Chicago sociology, symbolic interactionism, and pragmatist philosophy'. Corbin (2008) verifies this understanding, through contemplation of her own positionality and that of the late Anselm Strauss, as she introduces the third and updated edition of *The Basics of Qualitative Research,* the text they originally wrote together. Holton (2011) recognizes the influence of symbolic interactionism whilst refuting that grounded theory is symbolic interactionist, quoting Glaser:

> Through Anselm [Strauss], I started learning the social construction of realities
> by symbolic interaction making meanings through self indications to self and

others. I learned that man was a meaning making animal. Thus, there was, it seemed to me no need to force meaning on a participant, but rather a need to listen to his genuine meanings, to grasp his perspectives, to study his concerns and to study his motivational drivers.

[Glaser, 1998 p.32]

This is an important statement by Glaser and one to which critics of his alleged objectivist stance should return since Glaser makes clear the interpretivist nature of rich data collected during a grounded theory study. However, Holton's commentary also highlights the counterbalance provided by Glaser's contribution to grounded theory, describing grounded theory methods as, 'foundational procedures of constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling that enable the emergence of multivariate latent social structures from whatever the data and from whatever perspective the researcher may bring to the data' (Holton 2011, pp.217-218). The influence of his doctoral study at the Columbia School, in particular that of mentors Lazarsfield and Merton as post-positivist methodological innovators, is apparent in Glaser's enthusiasm for inductive generation of theory (Holton, 2011; Samik-Ibrahim, 2000), as too is his conceptualization of grounded theory as being appropriate for research 'open to any epistemological perspective' (Holton, 2011 p.201). Whilst maintaining this open stance, Glaser was influenced by psychoanalysis, having an interest in the emergence of gestalt therapy (Holton, 2011) and having experienced psychoanalysis to further develop his self-awareness (Gynnild, 2011). Holton advises, 'On a meta-cognitive level, one could draw some interesting parallels between the contemporaneous emergence of grounded theory and gestalt therapy' (p.202), a theme

picked up by Glaser when interviewed by Gynnild (2011 p.241). He tells Gynnild that he learned much from psychoanalysis, 'Well, it was used in grounded theory, but no one knows it. The true devotion to data, the true source came from psychoanalysis'.

The combined influences brought to the initial development of grounded theory both joined and separated the authors yet Glaser's focus remains, if only implicitly, on the interactionist conceptualization of social processes. He tells Gynnild (2011, p.251), 'We study what is going on. All people go through basic social processes, they relate to people. It's not all a psychological system. It's a psychological-social system'.

2.2 Schools of Grounded Theory

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) purport that further awareness of developments since the origination of the methodology is also important in order to absorb and understand the epistemological shifts that have taken place during this time. Allen (2010) considers three major developments as researchers progressed the evolution of the method to their own ends.

In the first chapter of *Discovery,* Glaser and Strauss (1967) invite researchers to use grounded theory strategies to suit their own pursuits. Many accepted the invitation. Strauss answered it himself when he published with Juliet Corbin *The Basics of Qualitative Research* (1998). Charmaz (2006) accepted the invitation by presenting grounded theory within a social constructivist approach in *Constructing Grounded Theory.* Clarke (2005) took up the

challenge by giving grounded theory a postmodern twist in *Situational*

Analysis.

[Allen, 2010 p.1606]

The developments in and variations on grounded theory as a methodology, method or framework are considerable and those denoted by Allen are by no means the only documented perspectives worthy of note. However, they do provide a range of positions sufficient to provide an introduction of some key features and concerns, that required consideration before embarking on associated research activity. I will first consider the principles embodied in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and will then present comparative reviews of three variations on grounded theory methods, methodologies and frameworks which have since been developed.

2.2.1 Glaser and Strauss: Classic Grounded Theory

The methodology known as classic grounded theory is expounded in the text *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Although the original method is attributed equally to Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, it was Glaser who wrote the majority of the original document. (Gynnild, 2011; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Bryant and Charmaz (2007) perceive grounded theory methodology to have positivist origins, considering this to be a weakness of the original documentation (p. 33). Hallberg (2006) emphasizes both this critique and Glaser's rebuttal of the claims:

Among several critics, the sociology professor Kathy Charmaz (2000) from

California State University at Sonoma argues that Glaser's grounded theory is

based on positivistic ideals about objectivity, neutrality, reproducibility, and an

underlying assumption that a true reality exists that can be reproduced without

being influenced by the researcher. Distinctly rejected by Glaser (2002b) [sic],

she in fact argues that both Glaser and Strauss assume an external ''real''

reality that researchers can discover and record.

[Hallberg 2006, p.144]

This critique by Charmaz seems to take little account of the wider historical context

and that the original work by Glaser and Strauss, in developing an inductive approach,

was moving away from the constraints of the established methods that promoted

verification through deduction (Holton, 2011; Allen, 2010). Charmaz (2006) writes

critically of levels of positivism she considers inherent to classic grounded theory,

through her consideration of Glaser's background in working with those proposing

'middle –range theories' (p.7) at the University of Columbia. However, she

acknowledges the influence of the Chicago School as brought into the methodology

by Strauss and the shared interest of Glaser and Strauss 'in social and social

psychological processes within a social setting or a particular experience' (Charmaz,

2006 p.7). Also requiring acknowledgement is the way in which the combination of

Strauss's symbolic interactionist epistemology and Glaser's theories of inductive

innovation worked to support the development of the grounded theory methodology

(Holton, 2011; Simmons, 2011). Simmons (2011) writes of Glaser's quest to

minimize researcher preconceptions 'including preconceived questions and

categories' (p.16) and his intention on maintaining the focus on the emergent data. Glaser (2002a) seeks to avoid the construction of 'mutually built up interpretations of data' (para. 8); while indicating awareness of the interpretive nature of participant narrative, he seeks to minimize co-construction of data, seeing this as intrusive.

> GT is a perspective based methodology and people's perspectives vary. And as we showed in "Awareness of Dying" (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) participants have multiple perspectives that are varyingly fateful to their action. Multiple perspectives amongst participants is often the case and the GT researcher comes along and raises these perspectives to the abstract level of conceptualization hoping to see the underlying or latent pattern, another perspective.

> [Glaser, 2002a para. 6]

Simmons highlights the latter part of this quote and its interpretivist nature. In understanding Glaser's quest to minimise the constructivist impact of researcher influence until coding has taken place, Simmons (2011) takes his readers on the journey through the stages of grounded theory, emphasising that grounded theory is about 'discovering, conceptualizing, and explaining patterned subjective realities, with full recognition that meanings are continuous, emergent social constructions' (p.25).

2.2.1.1 The Discovery of Grounded Theory

The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is strategic in its approach (Allen, 2010), presenting and clarifying the principles of a grounded theory

framework rather than providing a step-by-step guide to the research method. The lack of direction from Glaser and Strauss extended to the lecture theatre and frustrated students of the authors; indeed Covan (2007) tells us that she wanted a script. Covan writes of her need, at that time, to be told what she should do. She writes of how she knew from the principles of the method that she had to be inductive, rather than deductive, collecting and analysing her own data but, from her perspective, without clarity as to what and how comparison should take place. Learning to embrace grounded theory was, for Covan (2007), a learning-by-doing process, although she was in the advantageous position of receiving mentoring as a student of Glaser and Strauss. This approach to engaging with the grounded theory methodology reflects Glaser's own autonomous and independent approach to life and his expectation of intelligent engagement with the principles and features of the method (Gynnild, 2011).

Allen (2010) sees this lack of detail as unhelpful to all but the experienced researcher, though she balances this with an emphatically positive view of the emerging impact of the principles as outlined within the text:

> the reader does come away from the book with a certain eagerness to take a crack at theory generation … the reader has a solid belief that the theory that is generated using Glaser and Strauss's methods will be one with dynamic explanatory power since it is grounded in data.
>
> [Allen, 2010 p.1609]

2.2.1.2 Doing Classic Grounded Theory

The strategies underpinning the grounded theory methodology are acknowledged as supporting research within an interpretivist paradigm (Rowlands, 2005; Hughes and Jones, 2003; Goulding, 2002). The principal research activities established within classic grounded theory methods vary in their positioning within this paradigm, varying from the interpretivist to the social constructivist as the research moves from the relative passivity of data collection into the interactional stages of analysis.

The stages inherent to the grounded theory methodology are not distinct and separate but are, instead reliant on ongoing iterative data collection coding and comparison. The philosophy underpinning grounded theory methodology is that, 'the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his [sic] data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967 p.45). Data collection is therefore gradual and, through engagement with theoretical sampling, participants in the research activity are sequentially recruited. The development of conceptual categories through constant comparison of coded data and the development of inter-relationships between data through referencing theoretical codes (Glaser, 1978) led to the emergence of theory, in one of its various forms.

Glaser and Strauss advocate a passive role for the researcher in data collection, seeing the subsequent abstraction of participant data through coding and categorisation being of greater value than its contextualization (Hallberg, 2006). Simmons (2011) emphasises Glaser's concerns in relation to the nature of interviews for data

collection, and his exhortations that interviews should be non-structured and open

ended, avoiding or minimising construction from the outset on the part of the

researcher. Glaser's call (2002a) for the adoption of an interview approach which is

underpinned by the desire for passive listening is balanced by his concession towards

the use of more focused questions in successive data collection during and as a result

of theoretical sampling, a stage at which the prior knowledge of the researcher is

brought to play on the research activity, albeit ameliorated by the preceding constant

comparative analysis. However, for Glaser, the degree to which there is a structure for

the initial data collection activity is of key importance:

> If the data is garnered through an interview guide that forces and feeds
>
> interviewee responses then it is constructed to a degree by interviewer imposed
>
> interactive bias. But, as I said above, with the passive, non structured
>
> interviewing or listening of the GT interview-observation method,
>
> constructivism is held to a minimum.
>
> [Glaser 2002a, para.10]

In aiming to reduce the natural propensity for co-construction of data, Glaser (2002a)

also puts emphasis on the need to ignore concerns about the validity of data during

interviews or observations, seeing such data as just that and validating the research

activity (rather than the data) through the process of constant comparative analysis. He

critiques the position of Charmaz:

> She is trying to solve the worrisome accuracy problem of QDA [qualitative
>
> data analysis] by trying to ascertain the data emerging in the deep, long (hour

or so) interview situation … Her quest is not to take the data as it comes, but to be sure it is accurate, so she gets to mutual interpretation as the answer.

[Glaser, 2002a para. 8]

In maintaining the quest to minimise constructivism during data collection and coding, there is a need to delay, rather than front load, any specific literature review relating to the particular problem. Glaser (1967) takes the position that the literature in the research field should not be considered prior to undertaking the research, thus avoiding preconceived hypotheses. He asserts, 'GT methodology treats the literature as another source of data to be integrated into the constant comparative analysis process once the core category, its properties and related categories have emerged and the basic conceptual development is well underway' (Glaser, 2004 para. 46). This is not to infer that the researcher should exist in a vacuum, nor be unaware of the context in which the research is being undertaken, but that the researcher should 'remain open to what is actually happening and not to start filtering data through pre-conceived hypotheses and biases' (Glaser, 2004 para. 44).

Tight (2004), without taking specific aim at grounded theorists, or those who engage with its methodology, emphasises the need for an individual's awareness of influence as a researcher establishes their project, reflecting that this form of self-orientation may, in itself, require some previous research activity, literature review or otherwise, within the area. Urquhart (2007), in outlining guidelines for working with grounded theory suggests the use of a literature review for orientation, though with advice to the would-be researcher to avoid taking a position on the specific area of the research being undertaken, considering that broad categories of literature around, rather than

focused on, the problem can provide appropriate orientation. Urquhart and Fernandez (2006, p.461) suggest that a preliminary literature review is conducted 'on the understanding that it is the generated theory that will determine the relevance of the literature … the literature review is revisited and extended, once the theory has been generated from the data'. The distinction between the development of contextual awareness that supports the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher and a formal literature review upon which hypotheses are constructed is of importance. Glaser and Strauss (1967) clearly value the former, advocating the reading of the literature as part of the analytical process.

As a student of Glaser and Strauss, Covan (2007) explores the whole issue of the timing of any literature review, lamenting that while Glaser instructed that they should not review the literature prior to analysis of the data, he never did tell them when they should do the reading. Nonetheless, Glaser and Strauss articulate clearly:

> An effective strategy is, at first, literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study, in order to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas. Similarities and convergences with this literature can be established after the analytical core of categories has emerged.

> [Glaser and Strauss, 1967 p.37]

Glaser and Holton (2004) repeat this assertion that the literature should be another data source that can be brought into the analytical process following the emergence of conceptual categories. Simmons (2011) underlines Glaser's intent that effectively

undertaken constant comparative analysis and the resultant engagement with theoretical sampling should underpin the research process and provide a filter for preconceptions and bias.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) introduce memos as providing 'an immediate illustration for [sic] an idea' (p.108), making a distinction between field notes as a record of data collection and the more conceptual nature of the memo. Glaser expresses the value he puts upon the generation of memos, within the research context, to support coding and the subsequent inductive emergence of conceptual categories through iterative analysis and ongoing comparative activity (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Hallberg, 2006; Glaser, 2004).. He conceptualised memos as providing the opportunity to write freely and without constraint, with the goal of generating 'ideas', writing:

> The ideational development in memos accomplishes at least five important aspects of developing theory. (1) It raises the data to a conceptualisation level. (2) It develops the properties of each category which begins to define it operationally. (3) It presents hypotheses about connections between categories and their properties. (4) It begins to integrate these connections with clusters of other categories to generate the theory. (5) Lastly, it begins to locate the emerging theory with other theories with potentially more or less relevance.
>
> [Glaser 1978, p.84]

Covan (2007) tells of the way in which Glaser, during analysis, was continually bringing with him quite clearly his own influences, understandings and anecdotal comparisons. She says 'we eventually learned to write theoretical and methodological

memos and to employ the comparative process of theoretical sampling to enrich the

process of generating emerging theory' (p.68). Bryant and Charmaz (2007, p.20)

discuss the difficulty, particularly for the novice researcher, in balancing necessity to

avoid an initial research framework based upon a literature review, 'something that

Glaser and Strauss particularly took issue with' (p.20), and having a sufficiency of

theoretical understanding of the context to enable theoretical sampling.

2.2.2. Strauss and Corbin: The Basics of Qualitative Research

In authoring *The Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for
Developing Grounded Theory*, Strauss and Corbin (1998) aim not to present the

philosophy behind grounded theory as an inductive methodology but rather to present

an approach to the *application* of grounded theory as a method (Allen, 2010). In so

doing, Strauss and Corbin (1998) took a procedural approach to grounded theory, with

sections of the book providing quite specific procedures and examples for coding and

analysis. To this end, Allen comments, 'Strauss and Corbin (1998) have given

numerous useful examples from their own work that allow for grounded theory to be

applied to context. They also include numbered sections that help the researcher

follow the steps of the research process.' (Allen 2010, p.1611)

 In writing the introduction to the 3rd edition of *The Basics of Qualitative Research:
Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Corbin and Strauss,

2008), Corbin writes, 'it [the book] presents a set of analytical techniques that can be

used to make sense out of masses of qualitative data. Researchers are encouraged to

use the procedures in their own way' (pp.ix - x). This aim seems quite remote from the principles expressed in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and from Glaser's reluctance to be technically prescriptive. Corbin's exhortation to use procedures differently according to circumstances moves the writer further from grounded theory as a methodology and into the wider realms of qualitative data analysis, one such move, amongst several, that Glaser (2004; 2002b) publicly rebukes:

> Most writers on methodology DO NOT have a theoretical clue of what it means to be abstract of time, place, and people. The result is that GT is down-abstracted to just another QDA [sic] with some concepts. Strauss and Corbin (1998) do this in the following:
>
>> Grounded Theory procedures force us to ask, for example: What power is in this situation and under specified conditions? How is it manifested, by whom, when, where, how, with what consequences (and for whom or what)? Not to remain open to such a range of questions is to obstruct the discovery of important features of power in situ and to preclude developing further conceptualization. Knowledge is after all linked loosely with time and place. We carefully and specifically build conditions into our theories.
>
> Thus, Strauss and Corbin force descriptions, irrespective of emergence, on the theory to locate its conditions, to contextualize it and to make it "appear" accurately pinned down, thereby losing its true abstraction and, hence, generalizability.

> [Glaser 2002b, pp.6-7]

However, Corbin's intention is to stay 'true' to Strauss, 'for Anselm, the techniques and procedures were more than just a way of doing research. They were his way of learning about life,' (2008, p.x). Glaser, in contrast, had considerable strengths in his development of ideas and concepts (Holton, 2011). The approaches of Glaser and Strauss to grounded theory, then and as it developed, reflected their recorded epistemological preferences.

Corbin (2008) acknowledges the work of Clarke (2005) and Charmaz (2006) in navigating a course that supports the application of postmodern approaches to classic and indeed, though separately, early Straussian grounded theory, seeing in this an intent to move, 'interpretive methods more deeply into the regions of postmodern sensibility' (p.9). Corbin brings to the fore the ontological and epistemological groundings, of both Strauss and herself, in symbolic interactionism and her intent to embrace an interpretivist approach within a qualitative research paradigm (Corbin, 2008; Holton, 2007).

Thomas and James (2006, p.769), in critiquing grounded theory, cite concerns raised by Robrech (1995) when they comment that 'the elaboration of sampling procedures by Strauss and Corbin (which includes instructions for techniques for open sampling, relational and variational sampling and discriminate sampling) divert attention from the data toward techniques and procedures'. Certainly, unlike the strategies underpinning classic grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the procedures demonstrated by Corbin (2008) have less emphasis on bringing through social processes in the coding and have veered more towards descriptive summation of

phrases from the transcript. Corbin advises, 'Concepts are derived from data. They represent an analyst's impressionistic understandings of what is being described in the experiences, spoken words, actions, interactions, problems, and issues expressed by participants.' (p.51). Corbin's assurance that levels of conceptualisation can vary from the macro to the micro does not deflect from the underlying inference that every word could be considered as being laden with meaning and that at some stage transcription of interviews will be necessary. Examples of codes provided by Corbin (2008, p.121) include 'pain experience' and 'pain trajectory', neither of which are activity or action based. Such early disassociation from social processes through abstraction appears to conflict with, though is perhaps mediated by, her use of memos to engage with social processes.

Allen (2010) comments on the way in which Strauss and Corbin invite the researcher to use their experience and or literature to generate concepts, an area treated with considerable caution in the original method. Covan (2007) points out that Strauss, in discussion, really underlined the importance of history and personal biography, and the way in which meaning becomes negotiated within the social context. 'Strauss helped me to recognise that I bring my history with me, even as I use my sociological eye anew' (p.60). Whilst giving recognition to Corbin's assertion (1998) that such experience should be used to encourage reflection rather than explicitly generate data, Allen (2010) reflects on concerns raised by Glaser (1992) that the procedures presented by Strauss and Corbin (1998) 'force' data. In this criticism, Glaser is not seeking to deny the researcher's engagement with biography or anecdotal

considerations that inform the generation of memos or analytic progression, but is making reference to procedural structures outlined within the text.

> He asserts that in *Basics* the authors ask "many preconceived, substantive questions, which takes the analyst elsewhere from what is really going on" (Glaser, p.4). Glaser uses Strauss and Corbin's (1998) Conditional Consequence matrix found in Chapter 12 as an example. He points out that although dimensions and conditions are always present, they are not always significant to the issue being investigated. A dangerous play does seem to be occurring between the forcing and emergence of categories.
>
> [Allen, 2010 p.1611]

Holton (2011) reports that Glaser made a number of attempts to dissuade Strauss from continued association with the text he had co-authored with Corbin in 1990 and that Strauss, rather than withdraw his own work, encouraged Glaser to publish his concerns. To this end Glaser published *The Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence vs Forcing* (Glaser, 1992), instigating 'a watershed moment in the famous collaboration' (Holton 2011, p.218)

2.2.3 Charmaz: Constructing Grounded Theory

Charmaz (2006), whilst introducing her conceptualisation of 'constructing grounded theory' writes of her experience as a doctoral student at the University of Chicago and of her respect for the originators of the grounded theory methodology:

I had the privilege of learning grounded theory from Barney Glaser in multiple

graduate seminars ... the seminars sparkled with excitement and enthusiasm.

Barney's brilliance shone as he led us away from describing our material and

into conceptualising it in analytic frameworks ... Anselm Strauss, my

dissertation chair kept tabs on my work from the day of our first meeting until

his death in 1996. He and Barney shared a commitment to raising new

generations of scholars to become productive grounded theorists.

[Charmaz, 2006 p.xii]

It is notable that Glaser (2002) also retains considerable respect for his former student,

and the critical dialogue between them should be viewed in this context.

Thomas and James (2006) celebrate the work of Charmaz as a catalyst in the

development of variations in the approach to grounded theory methods and the way in

which she has continued to embrace its key principles. The authors reflect (p.769),

'Those five principles were: the structuring of inquiry; the simultaneity of data

collection and analysis; the generation of new theory rather than the verification of

existing theory; the refinement and exhaustion of conceptual categories through

theoretical sampling, and the direction to "more abstract analytic levels" (1988, p.

125)'. Indeed, Charmaz (2006) provides her consideration of constructed grounded

theory as a 'practical guide through qualitative analysis', thus more closely aligning

her intentions with those of her mentor, Anselm Strauss.

The potential association between grounded theory as a methodology and qualitative

data analysis is problematic for Glaser and Holton (2004), who denounce qualitative

data analysis as conceptually different from grounded theory in its aims and methods. The original focus of classic grounded theory was on its presentation as a methodology, encompassing key principles of induction, constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling, whereas Glaser and Holton (2004) suggest that qualitative data analysis imposes on data 'received concepts, problems and frameworks' (para. 9).

Whilst Charmaz (2006) acknowledges the methodology of grounded theory as being 'a set of principles and practices' (p.9) and establishes her intention to provide guidelines rather than prescription, she immediately differentiates between the classic methodology, the guidelines for a Grounded Theory Method (GTM) that she intends to provide and the changes she associates with travel around the postmodern turn. Charmaz (2006) articulates, 'I assume that neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and research practices.' (p.10). Allen (2010) takes a critical stance:

> Unlike traditional grounded theorists, Charmaz (2006) assumes that neither
> data nor theories are discovered, but are constructed by the researcher and
> research participant. For example, she indicates that when respondents answer
> interview questions, their responses are "a construction-reconstruction-of
> reality" (p.27). Similarly, in chapter six she notes that the act of theorizing
> means constructing abstract understandings about the world. Charmaz's

concern is not with the emergence of theory, but rather with whether or not the
researcher has been explicit in stating that the data and theory are a construct
of both the researcher and the respondent. According to Charmaz, theory
neither emerges nor is discovered, instead it is constructed.

[Allen, 2010 pp.1613-14]

The situation of a constructivist epistemology is consistent with, though not a
requirement of, an interpretivist research paradigm. However, the issue in relation to
the grounded theory methodology, as developed by Charmaz (2006), is the degree to
which the researcher sets out to co-construct data and indeed the theory, thus moving
into a more constructionist positionality. The researcher should be aware of the impact
of their own positionality, conscious or otherwise, throughout the research activity and
develop their ability to appropriately critique their involvement or otherwise in the
processes.

Whilst Charmaz, indeed, devotes considerable effort to clarify her position, she
nonetheless focuses on the procedures she adopts in research activity. Charmaz takes
the reader on a 'journey through a qualitative research project' (p.1) and in doing so
provides the reader with a clear set of guidelines and examples, though this is not to
assert a lack of critical consideration of her own position and the choices she makes in
terms of her research activity. In aiming to stay close to key strategies of classic
grounded theory, Charmaz (2006) very evidently focuses on social processes in her
coding, in this way differing from Corbin (2008). Charmaz does not adopt the formal
stage of Axial Coding promulgated by Strauss and Corbin (1998; 1990), developing

instead subcategories of conceptual categories as necessary and considering the links between them before weaving them back together though the use of theoretical coding. In considering the timing of the literature review, Charmaz again engages with the original principles of classic grounded theory, remaining alert to the need for theoretical sensitivity whilst relegating a literature review such that it does not unduly impact on analysis.

Although they differ in their consideration of the nature of grounded theory (as a methodology or a method) and are mutually critical of the other's stance, Charmaz and Glaser both reject any view that they are seeking an objective reality. The key issue when comparing the perspectives of Glaser and Charmaz is the degree to which the contribution to the construction of a subjective reality is foregrounded (Charmaz, 2006) and the extent to which it is mediated through the process of constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling (Glaser, 2002).

2.2.4 Clarke: Situational Analysis

Clarke (2005) presents situational analysis as *Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*. Her primary consideration is the extension of Strauss's 'social worlds', a 'meso-social vision' (Clarke and Friese, 2007 p.364) and she presents a methodology that she purports will fit this need. Clarke and Friese (2007) focus on matters of 'social worlds/ arenas/negotiations' (p.364) and the statement, 'the situation *itself* is a key unit of analysis' (p.364) contrasts strongly with Glaser's discussion on the fundamentality of 'basic social processes' and 'basic social psychological processes' (1978, pp.93-115). Indeed, Clarke's exploration (2005) of the postmodernity or otherwise of aspects of

grounded theory and her subsequent dissection and reselection of method leads to her choosing to ignore the central tenet of the exploration of basic social processes. Thus Clarke leaves a key principle of grounded theory methodology in her wake.

> She [Clarke] seeks to supplement basic grounded theory methods with a situation-centered approach influenced by postmodernism; this approach emphasizes partialities, positionalities, and contradictions that portray the complex nature of the social world …. She then focuses on the importance of using situations as the locus of inquiry rather than actions or processes.
>
> [Allen, 2010 p.1615]

Clarke takes issue with Glaser on the matter of context. She cites Glaser and Holton as seeing context as emergent where appropriate before emphasising her considered view that context is all. 'I have predicated situational analysis on the analytical necessity of addressing "context" ' (2005, p.18). Glaser (1978) takes seriously the difference between what he considers as a 'unit based' approach to research and his own focus on 'social process analysis' (p.109) and calls upon the reader to recognise the relative merits of each. He introduces an eighteen point comparative table that encapsulates his perspectives of the properties of each type of research, for example: Action; Freedom from Perspective; Research sampling. Glaser (1978) encourages the reader to make their own decisions based on the needs of their research, advising, 'We, of course, are biased towards process as we see many comparative advantages in the transcending nature of BSPs [sic]. The reader must make his own calculations for each project' (p.109).

Clarke's constructionist meso-level emphasis on the situation as the social structural

unit of research feels epistemologically remote from explorations of matters of the

social psychological processes that relate to matters of self and identity as defined in

the context of this research. As such, it is appropriate to acknowledge the

epistemological influences on her method, whilst declaring that an in depth

understanding and associated critique of these influences to be outside the scope of

this thesis.

Clarke (2005) sets out her positionality as an interactionist constructionist and

welcomes the materialist influences she perceives to be inherent to this epistemology,

clarifying, 'We routinely make meaning about, with, through and as embodied parts of

the material world – human, nonhuman and hybrid. The social is relentlessly material

not "merely" epiphenomenal' (p.7). Clarke (2005) seeks to establish her theoretical

position in considering a constructed conceptual duality based upon Foucault's

'discourse/discipline' (p.52) and Strauss's social worlds. Clarke (2005) asserts, 'The

concepts of *both* Strauss and Foucault are social, institution*al* and organisation*al* –

though not necessarily and not only about institutions and organisations. Regimes of

practices and negotiated orderings are kindred spirits' (p.53). Clarke and Friese (2007,

p369) explain, 'Situational analysis draws deeply on Foucault's approach to the study

of discourses and offers explicit strategies for such analyses. In situational analysis,

analysis of discourses can be placed in productive conversation with Straussian

contributions to the analysis of action'.

Allen (2010), Mathar (2008) and Smit (2006) query the extent to which situational

analysis engages with the principles of grounded theory. For example, Smit (2006)

critiques what he perceives to be an attempt by Clarke to use grounded theory as a

vehicle through which she can introduce situational analysis as a method:

> As soon as the reader moves into Chapter 3 it becomes somewhat transparent
>
> that traditional grounded theory may just as well not be used at all. She asserts,
>
> for instance, that situational analysis could be used with uncoded but well-read
>
> and "somewhat digested" data. At the very extreme it may be possible that she
>
> leaves the door ajar (albeit it very slightly) for doing situational analysis
>
> without any grounded theory in sight.

<div align="right">[Smit, 2006 p.561]</div>

Mathar (2008) sees the production of situational maps as a 'brainstorming

exercise' (para.13) undertaken in order to define 'ontologically different types of

elements, both human (individuals and collectives) and non-human (objects,

discourses, etc.), that are in the situation and quickly write them down as they occur.'

Similarly, whilst Allen (2010) writes of the value of situational maps in visualising the

juxtapositions of such agents within a situation, she is less clear that the approach

supports emergence, bringing forward the notions of preconceived conflicting human

and non-human actors, and of structural issues of power.

> It does not appear that data totally emerges using this technique. This is related
>
> to the fact that the author is quite clear in some of her assumptions regarding

social justice and her assertions that researchers must pursue certain topics in relation to that. For example, Clarke (2005) indicates that collective actors are in all kinds of "negotiations and conflicts" (p.37). Here we see that she has already made the supposition that actors are in some kind of conflict even before investigating a situation.

[Allen, 2010 p.1616]

Despite the critiques of the presentation of situational analysis as a postmodern engagement with grounded theory, Allen (2010) and Mathar (2008) clearly value the work of Clarke in providing practical tools for postmodern research. It would seem, however, that Clarke is seeking to provide more than a postmodern method; she is presenting a methodology with its own principles and strategies, the majority of which are distinct from those espoused in classic grounded theory.

2.3 Using Grounded Theory to inform my research activity

My decision to explore and then work within a framework informed by the grounded theory methodology was underpinned by the the strategic centrality of social processes and the inductive nature of the research methods proposed.

My own discovery of grounded theory came through an encounter with the work of Kathy Charmaz. Her research into chronic illness and, in particular, its invisibility was of relevance to both my personal experience of living with rheumatoid arthritis and my academic interest in identity. *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2006) provided an initial understanding of some of the grounded theory methods applicable

to inductive research and her considerations of a constructivist approach had synergy with my own social constructivist epistemological position. However, the decision to revisit classic grounded theory and to engage with the methodology proved to be a turning point.

Reading *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) raised my understanding of grounded theory to the strategic level and provided me with the freedom to consider whether the interpretive strategies supported by the classic methodology was more appropriate to my research than the constructivist principles advocated by Charmaz (2006). My consideration of identity made it important that I provided a opportunity to receive, as passively as possible, the narratives provided by my participants, whilst retaining an awareness of the degree to which my understanding of the broarder HE in FE context was firmly embedded in my professional role. Whilst my epistemological positionality, together with Glaser's expressed intentionality (2002a) that the interpretations of the participant should be heard, framed my understanding that an objectivist position was both impossible and undesirable, strategic engagement with the principles of constant comparative analysis provided the opportunity to engage in active listening that would be moderated through the comparative process.

In seeking to find ressurance that I would be using an appropriate research method, I considered the procedures for grounded theory methods as indicated by Corbin and Strauss (2008) and by Charmaz (2006), having dismissed engagement with Clarke's Situational Analysis (2005) on the basis of epistemological incompatability. I found

the degree of procedural engagement indicated by Corbin (2008) to be too remote

from the classic methodology, and that provided by Charmaz reassuring in its

adherence to the prioritisation of social processes but nonetheless kept coming back to

Glaser's principles and strategies.

The methodology that has most strongly influenced my research activity is that of

classic grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). My research method

has developed within a framework informed by this methodology and its strategic

principles. I have sought practical support in terms of the straightforward examples of

open and focused coding as provided by Charmaz (2006, p.52 & p.58), whilst

maintaining an intent to minimise constructivism during the interviewing and coding

stages.

I established loosely structured, open-ended interviews supported by field notes and

memos. I undertook the transcription, open coding and then focused coding of each

interview-generated narrative before proceeding to the next. After two interviews had

taken place and the narratives coded, I started the iterative process of comparative

analysis. This supported the identification of, at first, conceptual properties and then

emerging conceptual categories and was repeated in a continuous cycle following

each successive interview. Reflective, comparative analysis involved checking the

degrees of consistency or difference that emerged from the consideration of emergent

categories and the application of theoretical sensitivity. I then proceeded to engage

with the concepts inherent to theoretical codes (Glaser, 1978), in order to establish

interactions between categories. I also engaged in theoretical sampling, allowing the

nature of participant narratives and the emerging categories to influence my quest for

further participants.

My research activity and the way in which this framework worked to underpin my

research is discussed in the next chapter and encompasses many of the considerations

that emerged as field notes and memos as I proceeded with my research activity.

Chapter 3: My Research Activity

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical overview of my research activity, with particular reference to my reflections as I undertook the journey and those since. My research question indicates the breadth and exploratory nature of the research to be undertaken, and the focus on basic social psychological processes (Glaser, 1978):

> How do the social psychological processes associated with the concepts of self and identity influence the experience of non-traditional undergraduate students engaging in college based technology-supported learning?

All research activity was situated in my own professional context, a college of further and higher education that enrols approximately 1500 students studying at degree-level annually (full and part-time), the majority of whom HEFCE defines as 'non-traditional' :

> Non-traditional students were defined as those who had at least one the following characteristics:
>
> - from an ethnic minority group;
>
> - had a long-term disability;
>
> - possessed non-standard qualifications on entry to higher education;
>
> - were aged over 25 years on entry to university;
>
> - were from lower socio-economic groups of origin.
>
> [HEFCE, 1997]

The College has embedded the development of technology supported learning within both its Higher Education and Learning and Teaching Strategies and whilst the majority of programmes are not presented as 'blended-learning', nonetheless there is an expectation that students will use technology to support their learning activity. The participants in my study were students undertaking undergraduate degree level study within the College. All participants were volunteers.

The principles and strategies inherent to the classic grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) informed the design and implementation of the research activity. Interviews were designed to minimise constructivist contributions from the interviewer whilst embracing the interpretivist paradigm. Open and focused coding activities were adapted from the examples provided by Charmaz (2006, p.52 & p.58). The analysis, and subsequent theoretical development of themes for further exploration, was predicated on the construction of conceptual categories, supported by the grouping of focused codes and analysis of memos. Engagement with theoretical codes (Glaser, 1978) supported consideration of interconnections between conceptual categories and thus the emergence of theoretical considerations.

The exploratory nature of the research and the potential sensitivity of the data being sought suggested that the sample should be relatively small. It was intended that the research activity should generate substantive rather than formal theory thus providing a basis for further related exploration of the area (Glaser and Strauss, p.79). It was initially considered that between six and fourteen participants would benefit the study,

though the research, as informed by the grounded theory methodology, would naturally terminate through theoretical saturation as core conceptual categories emerged in support of the exploration of the social processes. The research activity moved to saturation through rich interviews with ten participants.

3.2 The Research

3.2.1 Addressing ethical issues

Prior to my research activity it was necessary to obtain consent from both the College's Research Ethics Committee and through the Ethics process at Lancaster University. Particular attention had to be paid to the nature of my role in the College, the personal nature of the interviews to be undertaken, the need for disclosure if applicable under the College Safeguarding procedures, and the potential for interviewing students with physical and/or learning disabilities. An information sheet confirming details of the research, confidentiality, privacy, my obligations under safeguarding procedures and the right to withdraw from the research activity was designed, checked for readability and presented to both ethics panels. Participants were to be provided with the contact details of my supervisor should they wish to raise queries or concerns and would be asked to sign a consent form. Research only commenced on receipt of approval from both Ethics Committees.

3.2.2 My Role

I hold a senior management role within the College, a position well known to staff and students alike. I have strategic responsibility for the College partnership with its

awarding university and all Higher Education (HE) provision. I also have strategic responsibility for the development of learning and teaching, and for five (of nine) curriculum areas within the College. My role and its requirements had two implications for the implementation of my research activity. The first was my self-constructed understanding of the way students might experience higher level study at the college and my prior knowledge of policy requirements and drivers, thus I needed to be aware of any influence or bias these understandings might have on my analysis of data. My second concern was the issue of perceived and actual power. Students undertaking degree level programmes would know my role from my picture in the College Reception, my introduction (and photograph) in the HE handbook, my presence at open events and graduations, and my attendance at and participation in student forums. They would not, however, have contact with me in the course of their day-to-day learning sessions, nor could they be identified by me in the course of Examination Boards (as these were conducted using student identification numbers only). Participants would, however, need to be able to trust in my assurances that their participation or otherwise in my research would have no bearing on their progress within their studies, even should they wish this to be the case. The latter scenario was more likely to be the case as students having access to a senior manager often use this as an opportunity to complain or campaign.

3.2.3 Preparing for the Research

The Higher Education community at the College has developed as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and a number of tutors are undertaking postgraduate study, six of these being at doctoral level. Open discussions about scholarly activity and staff

forums for the research students amongst us have resulted in widespread awareness that I am undertaking doctoral study, though not the details of my research activity.

At the start of my research activity, I contacted HE Curriculum Managers via my research student e-mail, asked that they understood that all such e-mails should be considered as separate from those they might receive from me via the College e-mail system and then requested their support in raising student awareness of the study. The eight HE Curriculum Managers are responsible for all the Higher Education in their curriculum areas and do not tend to be programme leaders or programme tutors. This had the potential of removing pressure from the students they might approach in support of my study as there would be a perceptibly lower risk of day to day impact on learning or within sessions, regardless of a decision to participate or otherwise.

I decided to follow the principles of theoretical sampling, as far as it would be possible within the limited scope of this study, and thus sought three volunteers in the first instance, deciding to allow the outcome of those interviews to 'suggest' where I should turn to seek further volunteers.

My initial request was targeted at those curriculum areas that recruit to Higher National Certificate/Diploma (HNC/D) programmes and Foundation Degrees, as they were more likely to have participants from 'non-traditional' cohorts in their groups. I provided Curriculum Managers with a brief and simplified description of my research activity and asked that they pass this on to their cohorts. I included my student e-mail address and asked that any student willing to participate should send me their contact

details. This would ensure that the student was independently willing and that the curriculum staff would not have awareness of the names or personal details of those volunteering for the research activity.

Three students from two different programmes of study put themselves forward in the first instance. On receiving their contact details, I arranged to have a brief chat with them either by telephone or Skype in order that they could have personal contact with me as a researcher, gain a little more familiarity with the nature of my project, and so that I could talk them through the Information and Consent Form before they took part in the interview. This also gave us the opportunity to arrange a mutually convenient time and place for the interview. This worked well and established a rapport between the student and myself before we met for the interview. I used this process for almost all subsequent volunteers; one student decided to take advantage of my open door policy and drop into my office for a briefing!

Successive participants were invited to join the research with the assistance of HE Curriculum Managers, as was the case for the first cohort. Curriculum areas were gradually targeted such that a mix of students across study modes (full-time/part-time/ work-based) and types of programme (Foundation Degree/Honours Degree) were invited to participate. The quest for participants was a staged process, recruiting two or three at a time in order to meet the need to explore categories as they emerged from the data and subsequent analysis.

3.2.4 Preparing for the interviews

One of the key considerations of interviewing practice was the location of interviews and this initially gave me some concerns. I worried that students would not wish to come to my office, which is situated away from the teaching areas but close to those of other senior managers. The office is rather a formal environment and had the potential to remind students of the possible power relationship that existed between us. The alternatives were less than satisfactory as members of staff are discouraged from being alone with students off campus (or even on campus should they not be visible) due to safeguarding procedures (particularly pertinent to Further Education and Schools but nonetheless applicable throughout the College). It was, however, important that the participant was able to contribute to the choice of location and therefore, in each case, I asked students whether they would wish to use my office, to find a quiet time in the coffee bar, or another location of their choice. Had they chosen the latter, I would have needed to put measures in place in order to comply with safeguarding procedures. In each case, the student preferred to come to my office. Each indicated that they felt it would be more private. Certainly they were not likely to be observed coming to the interview by other students or, indeed, teaching staff. The interviews took place at a table in my office but with chairs placed at an angle to reduce formality. The participants were offered refreshments and water was available throughout the interview. A sign was placed on the door to prevent interruption.

An associated problem, mentioned earlier, was that of my role, implications of power, and its reinforcement through the use of my office. As the interview was seeking to encourage narrative concerning 'invisible' aspects of the participants' lives, it was

important that they felt comfortable and in a position to put their trust in me as a researcher. I looked for a visible transition between roles and decided to use symbolic means to indicate my transition from Director to researcher. All members of staff are required to wear a badge, for identification, that embeds their photograph and indicates their role within the College. I decided that as the student arrived in my office I would remove the badge and set it to one side, telling the participant of its significance as I did so. Students appeared to recognise the relevance of this symbolism and, in a couple of cases, reminded me to put my badge back on as they left the room.

Before starting the interview process, I needed to consider how I would handle my own potential for bias and my preconceptions about 'non-traditional' students and their experience of learning at the College. The interviews were designed to be open-ended and very loosely structured, with the three domains of past experience, expectations and current barriers or enablers to study setting the scene for open narrative on the part of the participant. The influence of my using these three areas for discussion was to become evident in at least one of the conceptual categories that developed and yet the properties inherent to each category emerged from the open narratives of the participants. It was important that I maintained a passive role as far as this was practicable. Whilst the impact of bias might be more likely to come through during the coding process, it was important that I did not display any visible signs of surprise, shock, pleasure or other emotions at details the participant might wish to report. I was aware that any subsidiary questions needed to be open, for example, requesting more detail or asking for clarification and that they should not

pursue an area not presented by the participant. The planned use of recording devices ensured that the narrative was captured in its entirety and as reported by the participant.

3.2.5 The Interview

I decided that I would record narratives using the Soundnote application on my iPad. This application allows for notes to be taken during an interview, supporting recording and writing simultaneously, and will play back the recording relating to any section of the field notes as an alternative to playing back the entire conversation, should this be required. I could then add memos to the field notes after the interview as appropriate. I also used a digital recorder for backup and quickly found that my own ineptitude with the digital recorder (which didn't seem to improve over the ten interviews) became an icebreaker before the start of the interview.

The participants were advised that I would be asking them to tell me about three aspects of their lives. The three areas were firstly, 'a potted history of their life so far - how they came to be studying on their programme, right from a young age', secondly, 'what you expected studying at degree level to be like' and lastly, 'things that support or have a negative impact on your experience as a student here'. My initial aim was not to ask further questions but to acknowledge and encourage. In practice, there were occasions where unplanned secondary questions became a useful tool for seeking clarification or greater depth on a matter raised by the participant.

The participants provided a wealth of rich data, having talked openly in interviews lasting between forty minutes and two hours. As transcripts were of considerable length, and the outcome from coding and categorisation abstracts the participant narrative, I have constructed, using narratives, field notes and memos, a brief pen-portrait of each participant and these have been provided in the next chapter.

3.2.6 Contemplating coding

Following each interview and subsequent transcription, I undertook open coding, using as a template the method provided by Charmaz (2006 p.52). I thus added a column to my transcript page (on the left) and proceeded to allocate codes to indicate social processes as they occurred [Fig. 3.1]

Experiencing early motherhood Being motivated to be educated Finding lack of childcare as barrier Working to survive financially Enjoying job; Being ambitious Having a nervous breakdown Losing everything Making a fresh start	I was a mum very young, I kept trying to go back to school and get an education. Childcare issues and no extended family meant that no matter how many times I tired to start it meant I never got anywhere. My daughter left at 16 and I was still working, you get in a cycle of working and working and you can't afford to stop working to go back to school. I was always in sales and training and very happy in it, but wanted more. I had a nervous breakdown a couple of years ago, I lost my house and my house and just lost everything. But that meant that I was in a really good position to start over.

Figure 3.1 Coding of Interview with Bella

The use of verbs and the resultant highlighting of actions and perceptions was of particular importance to me and was used to maintain the integrity of the research with the principles of the grounded theory methodology. Glaser places an emphasis on the importance of consideration of social processes rather than 'units' (Glaser, 1978), with a process being seen as linking to one or more patterns of behaviour.

Having established open codes, I then undertook the process of focused coding (Charmaz, 2006 p.58), for each participant, in order to establish a secondary set of more abstracted or conceptual codes. This process has the impact of retaining or developing codes that are repeated during open coding, those that have the greatest significance (or fit) to the situation, or those that can be seen as encapsulating a number of other codes. The first round of focused coding proved to be the most difficult but, once established, the use of focused coding enabled the development of the interview-by-interview comparative analyses that would lead to the development of conceptual categories. Some of the codes emerging through focused coding would become properties of these categories as the analysis developed. An example of this from the coding of Bella's transcript [Fig 3.1] would be the development of the focused code 'experiencing a life changing event' from the open coding of 'having a nervous breakdown', 'losing everything' and 'making a fresh start'. It is during this conceptual analysis that the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher comes to bear, the process being supported by the use of memos.

Working at the levels inherent to open and then focused coding lead to a bottom up development of the conceptual properties. Thus whilst, for instance, the eventual

development of a conceptual category named Biography was undoubtedly influenced by the structure I had established for the interviews, individual participant considerations of aspects such as childhood experience, emotional reactions to school and the influence of family contributed recursively to the development of conceptual properties, and each property came to the fore through the narratives alone.

3.2.7 Using memos

Memos have a particular importance within the grounded theory methodology, providing the opportunity for free writing that promotes reflection, the development of ideas (or concerns), the introduction of inter-relationships between categories (or properties) and the starting point for linking with literature (Glaser, 1978). The researcher constructs memos as they interpret the data before them and it is at this point that the researcher's experience, reflexivity, voice and association with literature starts to come through.

In order to keep track of memos, I started to maintain an informal electronic journal to record my developing thoughts on focused codes and potentially emerging categories. The journal was maintained with version control and thus supported the way in which I was to be able to develop the comparative process following each round of focused coding. Through the use of memos I was able to gain confidence in the conceptual properties and the resultant categories that were coming through. Memos took the form of comments to myself, brief notes arranged under headings, transcripts of Skype conversations with a colleague and dated comments inserted in the Word document. For example, from the first three interviews I established what I perceived

at that point to be emerging categories, certainly areas of commonality that had been built up from focused codes.

The initial development of the 'properties' and 'categories' illustrated below took place over a number of weeks and three interviews, with focused codes being grouped in ways that had a degree of fit with the situation. The screen shot [Fig. 3.2] shows the development of focused codes and indicate some preliminary deliberations in relation to some of the developing 'categories' after three interviews. My memos, in this example, took the form of comments within the document and it is this conceptual format, rather than the content, that is of relevance in illustrating the process undertaken.
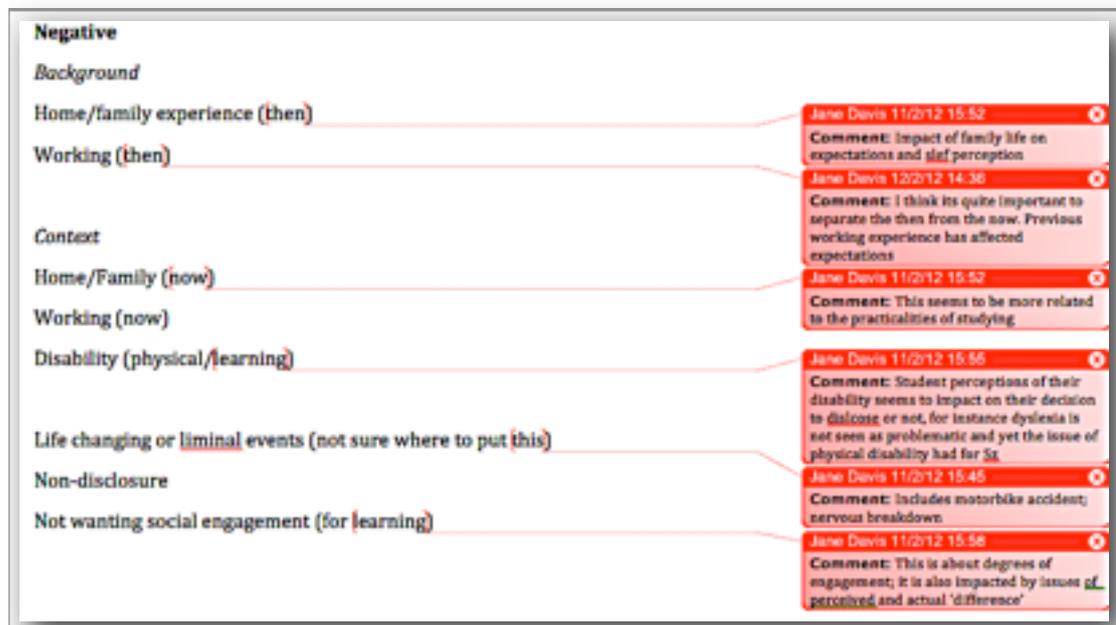
Figure 3.2 Development of focused codes and memos after three interviews

At this stage it was important for me to acknowledge that my initial conceptualisation of social forces, as being barriers or enablers, was leading my consideration of the grouping of codes, with each being grouped into positive, negative and 'other' areas which at this stage I found hard to place. I needed to maintain awareness of this preconception throughout my analysis since, not being emergent from the data nor from substantive theory within the sector, the issue would require further deliberation. Indeed, placing reflections in a memo provided a starting point for ideas and considerations; the activity of recording such thoughts was to prove useful as my research progressed. An example of this is captured in the screen shot below which was written after an interview with the only 'traditional' student. The memo comments not only on the more recent interview but also indicates my reflections as I undertook comparative analysis and started to engage with theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978) to develop interconnections between conceptual categories as they developed. In this instance the latest interview also generated areas that required fresh consideration in relation to the coding of previous narratives. The memo [Fig. 3.3] indicates preliminary thoughts on goal-orientation, starts to bring forward an association between social engagement and the use of technology and mentions briefly literature relating to programmes designed to support the widening participation agenda in higher education. A later memo below [Fig. 3.4], after a further three interviews, indicates my further thoughts that an association seemed to be emerging between the degree to which a participant tended towards being traditional and their likelihood of using technology and social media.

From 10/03/12

The interview with K was quite different to those that went before (and even these were quite variable)

K was the first fairly traditional student interviewed (straight from A levels) and the first with a comfortable middle class background with expectations of progression to university

Also engages with social media more than others

This difference threw me initially

Other stuff coming through:

Needing to study rather than wanting to seems to bring through a completely different social dynamic

D, P and K are all younger and looking for social engagement

And … its interesting where participants start their bio .....

Emerging thought: Seems as though non traditional are more focused on outcome, less likely to be sociable and less inclined to use social media

Seems to be a correlation between use of technology (beyond the very mechanistic) and sociability .....

The curious point here is that use of technology is seen to be key in the WP agenda, particularly Fds ....its certainly in our HE strategy and in the Fd Benchmarks

Figure 3.3 Memo showing reflections following the interview with Kathy

20/03/12

It looks as though less sociable correlates with less use of social media

Also the more non traditional, the less likely to use social media

The more non traditional the more goal oriented (how true is this? They were all pretty focused) and less sociable

R, K, P, all actively use tech in class … all young

D, S and B use it outside class, prep for class but in fairly traditional way ie software on laptop

-> dyslexia

N, G all use it for assignments etc

Figure 3.4 Memo considering use of social media

The memo [Fig. 3.4] also illustrates the way in which it was necessary to question associations and assumptions and to continue with comparative activity. Such memos were also useful in starting to consider how the emerging theory would link with data from literature.

Whist the majority of memos written formed part of the analytical process, memos written immediately following interviews served two purposes. They started to form the basis for exploration of new, extended or interlinking categories (as above) or provided an opportunity for critical reflection on the interview process. My interview with my sixth participant led to the generation of a memo [Fig. 3.5] that captured my reflections on the issue of interpretivist versus constructivist research. I found myself needing to code and report his data very carefully. Following his interview I wrote the following memo:
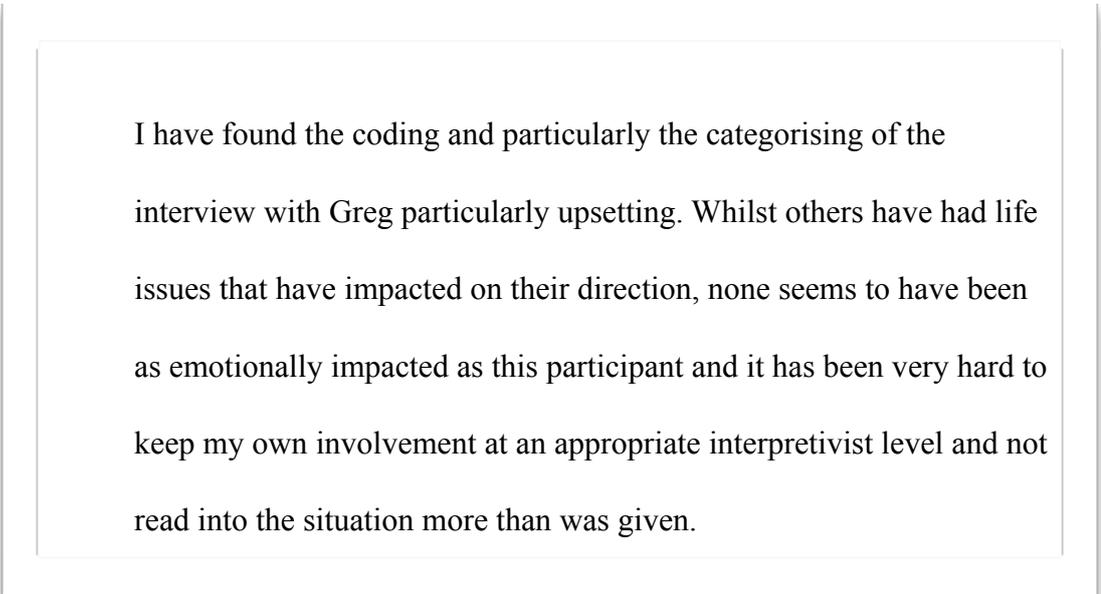
> I have found the coding and particularly the categorising of the interview with Greg particularly upsetting. Whilst others have had life issues that have impacted on their direction, none seems to have been as emotionally impacted as this participant and it has been very hard to keep my own involvement at an appropriate interpretivist level and not read into the situation more than was given.

Figure 3.5 Memo following the interview with Greg

My initial consideration of this participant's data meandered between the reporting of his narrative (through the transcript) to a co-construction of his situation (in and through early memos) and, having considered and rejected this approach in my review of Charmaz's development of a grounded theory method, I needed to pull myself back into a more interpretive position through coding and remind myself that any constructivist engagement should be held back for the post-coding stages. The journey through open and focused coding and subsequent fracturing of the data was, indeed, of value in highlighting the issues raised in the narrative, rather than through my own input, and the iterative analysis of the constant comparative method maintained the interpretive position.

3.2.8 Developing Conceptual Categories

Having completing categorisation and being very aware that the categories had morphed and changed through abstraction and comparative analysis, I decided to revisit each category in order to more closely examine the properties of each and any interconnections between properties. For example, having established Biography as a category, I summarised the properties of each sub-category (home, work, education) through the focused coding of each interview [Fig. 3.6; Fig. 3.7].

Biography: home

Negative

Parental status [Parent or parents not having degree]

Location ['cold-spot' location, area of social deprivation; low socio-economic background]

Financial status [poverty; concern at cost of higher study]

Family expectation/influence [away from study eg being expected to work, lack of encouragement, perception of academic status]

Family culture/behaviours [religion]

Family stability [divorce; relationship with parents/family; emotional climate]

Personal motivations/distractions [sport, early motherhood, career path/ work]

Figure 3.6 Negative properties of Biography: Home following focused coding

Positive

Parental status [Parent/parents having studied at degree level]

Location ['hot-spot' location, area of high socio-economic well-being]

Family expectation/Family members having studied at degree level

Family culture/behaviours [religion, cultural/ethnic heritage]

Having role models [writing stories, being intelligent, careers, friends studying at degree level]

Being encouraged to learn or develop a skill [play, experience, books, using library, sport, music, supporting learning]

Figure 3.7 Positive properties of Biography: Home following focused coding

In undertaking the summary, properties emerged which existed across both negative and positive aspects of this sub-category. With multiple positions being adopted between the extremes or positive and negative experiences reported, it was necessary to develop the properties within each sub-category (e.g. home) to become continua in their own right, thus covering the spectrum of possibilities that emerged from the narratives. The continuum from Biography: Home included:

Parental status

Financial status

Family stability

Location

Family expectation

Family culture/behaviours

Engagement with cultural/vocational skills

Thus, each conceptual category was supported by a number of sub-categories, each of which was shaped by conceptual properties, in the form of continua. Having reviewed all the emerging categories in this way, there remained just five categories for further analytical consideration.

3.2.9 Theoretical Coding

Having established five conceptual categories, it was important to develop their associations and links to the literature. Theoretical codes provided a mechanism to support this process.

Glaser (1978) provides fifteen coding families for consideration which vary from 'Process: stages, staging, phases, phasing …' (p.74) to the 'mainline family: social control … recruitment … socialization …' (p.77). These families of theoretical codes are suggested to increase awareness of ' the myriad of implicit integrative possibilities' (p.73) and are neither exhaustive nor required elements of the coding process. I found that consideration of the range of families was helpful in two ways. I used the theoretical codes in support of further analytical discussion of the categories that had emerged from data and analysis, and also found them to be of use in re-confirming the scope of the research. For example, engaging with Glaser's description of 'the mainline family' and its situation within 'mainline traditional sociology … concerned with large numbers of people in process' (p.77) served to remind me that the focus of this research needed to remain on the individual and that, whilst social structures, orders and hierarchies (for example) are pertinent to the study of student issues within the higher education sector, they are nonetheless outside the scope of this study.

Glaser's first code in the family of theoretical codes is known as the 'six Cs' and embraces potential interconnections between categories. He lists 'Causes, Contexts, Contingencies, Consequences, Covariances and Conditions' (p.74) and contemplation

of these contributed to my consideration of potential interrelationships between conceptual categories, both as they referred back to participants and in terms of wider emergent themes. An example of the way in which I used these codes was that of supporting my contemplation of the categories of Social Engagement and Use of Technology. By also engaging with the theoretical codes within 'Process' (p.74) and the 'Degree Family' (p.75) I was invited to reflect upon the degree to which any association might exist between these two categories, the way in which such an association might play out and whether this association was partial (i.e. in relation to only some of the participants) or complete. This analytical conversation formed a theoretical link with the concept of social forces and suggested Lewin's 'life space' (1997) as a conceptual framework. This development is explored in some depth in Chapter 6.

3.3 The Results

I have chosen to present the outcomes of my research in three particular forms, presented in the chapters that follow. The next chapter seeks to extend the accessibility of the data to the audience and thus provides brief pen-portraits of each of the ten participants. This is succeeded by a chapter that presents the results in terms of the conceptual categories that emerged from the coding and subsequent analysis of the rich data provided through the narratives. The third of these following chapters presents the framework of life space (Lewin, 1997) within which my analysis of participants' narratives has been situated and an analytical discussion of the resultant inter-relationships between categories and their psychic impact.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Data - Ten Pen Portraits

The interviews undertaken during my research activity lasted between forty minutes and two hours and were of considerable length. The transcripts were too long to include within the limitations of this report. This chapter therefore provides the important opportunity for the development of a degree of familiarisation with the participants. To this end I have provided a pen-portrait of each the ten participants in the study.

4.1 Bella

Bella is a mature student who returned to learning following a nervous breakdown. She started her return to study by undertaking vocational computing courses, later progressing to complete the Access to Higher Education programme within the College. Bella lives by herself, within the vicinity of the College, and works in a part-time hourly paid job to support her studies. Bella is in her first year of study on a Foundation Degree.

Bella's formative [home/school] experiences and her life as a young adult presented barriers to her academic progression, her perception being that higher study was inappropriate for those from her background. Bella hid her own abilities to avoid bullying at school, telling of always feeling out of place at home and school.

A focus on maintaining family income and working in a position she enjoyed was disrupted when Bella experienced a nervous breakdown. This was a life-changing

event that she used as an opportunity to refocus. The return to study was staged and cautious, as Bella says 'just to see if I could study and to see if I was capable of being back with people again', this being illustrative of the degree of cautious control and self-protection she affords herself.

Bella fiercely maintains her privacy and projects an image of determination and self-assuredness; she is keen to maintain her identification as being strong and capable. Bella takes medication for both her breakdown and the chronic illnesses that impact upon her study. She is both reluctant to disclose the extent of her physical disability and yet pragmatic about the benefits of disclosure of her dyslexia to the Learning Support team (and subsequently to tutors).

Bella's journey through her studies is very goal oriented. She does not seek any of the social aspects often associated with the traditional university experience and, being situated in a predominantly young cohort, tends to contrast her own 'mature' approach with that of younger peers.

Bella embraces the use of technology to support her study, particularly specialist software for dyslexia and resources provided through the virtual learning environment (VLE). She does use social media but prefers not to link her digital presence to her learning activity. She wishes to maintain separate, different identities for different roles.

4.2 Suki

 Suki is a mature student who lives locally with her daughter. Her son lives with her ex-husband and visits at weekends. Suki is a full-time student who initially studied on the Foundation Degree and, having achieved the award, has progressed to the final year of an Honours Degree programme.

Suki, like Bella, found herself bullied at school and having children at a young age. She experienced no parental aspirations that would encourage the route to higher study. Suki shares with Bella the experience of a life-changing event, in this case a motor-cycle accident, that moved her focus from family and finance to obtaining a less physical management role. Even at this stage, Suki did not realise that study at degree level was possible and she came to the college looking for vocational qualifications (NVQs) that would support a move to a desk based job, not realising that her work based experience would support entry to a Foundation Degree.

Suki has coexisted with Chronic Pain Syndrome (CPS) since her accident and experiences ongoing dull pain interspersed with acute flares. Whilst this impacts on sleep and concentration she has been reluctant to disclose her pain to tutors. The very continuity and invisibility of the problem has led her to dismiss its significance. A reluctance to be seen as 'different' has further dissuaded her from disclosure. Suki chose to disclose her dyslexia as she considered it would directly impact on her studies.

Suki has commitments to her children as a single parent. She has a long-term but not cohabiting boyfriend who expects attention when they are together. She has had to cope with two different legal problems and the recent bereavement of her estranged father.

When talking to Suki it is hard to imagine her responding abruptly. She is calm and thoughtful in manner yet she is only too aware of the impact on her behaviour of being pulled in multiple directions, describing stress levels that dramatically change her moods and behaviours in her home context.

Suki has found a range of technologies helpful to her studies and in particular in helping her cope with dyslexia. She has been provided with a laptop and specialist software through the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), uses a dictaphone and appreciates the resources available through Moodle (VLE), Suki uses Facebook as a communication tool, both for social activity with friends outside college and to communicate with the one peer with whom she has become friendly. She was introduced to a range of social media as part of her marketing studies last year but has left both her LinkedIn and Twitter accounts unused since the end of the module.

Suki is clear as to her rationale for higher-level study and has not come to college with the expectation of a social experience. Whilst she is content to work with a peer to support her study, her friendships are those developed outside college and are long term in nature.

4.3 Dee

Dee is in her early twenties and lives in the town with her partner. She spends her time as a student divided between the university campus experience of her partner and the HE in FE experience of her course. Dee is in her second year of study on an Honours Degree.

Dee's family home lies in a famous university town and she progressed into the sixth form of her school where she took A levels almost as a matter of course. Having applied for university during the sixth form, she changed her mind about progression to higher-level study. Dee then made little effort with her exam preparation and moved into employment for a year. She eventually reapplied through UCAS and came to the area to study in support of her partner, finding a programme that embraced her successes in the workplace.

Dee had high expectations of the social aspect of university study, thinking it would be 'a big party in the first year', and was able to access a range of social activity through residence in university halls. She now lives in a student house with others studying at the university campus and participates in campus-based activities. Dee also differs from her peers in that she is a full time student and has not taken a part-time job to support her studies. Whilst she engages with her learning peers, her social life lies outside her learning environment.

Dee found study difficult in her first year at the College as she was trying to cope with her partner's depression, the problem being exacerbated by the lack of space available for quiet study within their allocated campus accommodation.

The opportunity for focused study is important for Dee who struggles with assignments due to dyslexia and relies heavily on Moodle resources to support her study. Although the Learning Support team are aware, Dee has not overtly disclosed her problems with dyslexia to staff or peers. Unlike Bella and Suki, Dee is not eligible for DSA or the specialist software available through this route.

Dee is not comfortable with technology and only uses social media (Facebook) as a communication tool with her friends outside college. Any communications with her study group are through Blackberry Messenger or text.

4.4 Peta

Peta is in her early twenties and currently lives some distance from the College with her partner of several years, having previously lived in accommodation in the town. She is a full-time student but has a part-time job to fund her studies. Peta is in the final year of her Foundation Degree and plans to progress to the final year of the Honours programme next year

Peta comes from a socio-economic 'cold-spot' and grew up in a family with no immediate experience of higher-level study. She loved reading as a child, enjoyed study throughout her school life and progressed to sixth form.

In the sixth form she was distracted from her studies by her passion for her sport and did not achieve the grades necessary to progress to the university of her choice. Peta obtained a place at [a nearby university] with initial expectations of university being influenced by friends who had preceded her. She looked forward to social aspects of campus life.but did not enjoy the very science based course and dropped out after her first year of study.

Having started higher level study again at the College, Peta has developed a strong career focus but has been dealing with issues outside College that have impacted on her learning activity. Peta found herself having to work very long hours alongside her study to solve financial problems she did not wish to disclose to her family, whilst also trying to work through a difficult period in the relationship with her partner.

Peta is both very independent and extremely sociable. Whilst her year of study on the University campus means she has friends outside College, she engages actively with her peers and has found her study group very supportive. She recognises also the benefits to her studies of personal tutorials and appreciates the resources available through the VLE.

Peta's use of technology is enthusiastic and explorative and extends beyond the use of her laptop for notes or assignments and access to the VLE. She embraces social media and adopted mobile technologies, such as media phones and an iPad (borrowed) to support her learning.

4.5 Kathy

Kathy is in her early twenties and lives in a student house in the town. Kathy is an enthusiastic and energised member of the student community. She has a real sense of direction and a dedication to her music career. Kathy is working to complete her final year of an Honours Degree and has been offered a place on a post graduate teacher training course next year.

Kathy's home is in a university town. Her parents and sister are well educated and share her passion for music. From an early age, Kathy demonstrated her ability as a musician and was supported by family and school in her quest to become a music teacher. Despite her clear focus, Kathy also looked forward to developing as an individual and enjoying the social experience of higher level study and so chose to study away from her home town. She enjoys wide ranging social experiences, from within her curriculum area and outside:

Whilst Kathy has neither family dependants nor health issues to hold her back, she has found her own high expectations of her work and her quest for high grades to be problematic, leading her to feelings of panic when juggling assessment deadlines.

A first semester of independent living brought with it financial challenges. Unlike Peta, Kathy was supported in resolving her overspend. She is now reflective about lessons learned and the way she has developed as an individual. Having recently (and

unexpectedly) take on a part-time job, Kathy is realising both the issues and benefits that combining work and study bring.

Kathy has found her use of technology beneficial to her study and to the development of her future career and has embraced social media with enthusiasm. She is inseparable from her iPad and her Blackberry, finding the mobility they allow an improvement on that afforded by her laptop. She explained regular use of a range of social media, in articular Twitter and Facebook, both of which support her roles as student and musician. Katy uses Moodle and YouTube on her course and has been using an e-portfolio to support work based learning activity.

4.6 Greg

Greg is a full time, mature student who lives locally. He is a carer to his elderly father and has a volatile relationship with his girlfriend. Greg is in the first year of an Honours Degree programme that has professional accreditation.

Greg is the oldest of the participants in this research. His parents' relationship and subsequent divorce both start his narrative and become a recurring and underpinning theme in his interview. Greg came to study at the college as the most recent in a string of unhappy career/work-related changes. His degree level study at the college is not the first but the fourth period of higher-level study, each occurring as a result of perceived life changing circumstances. Greg wishes to be perceived as 'the problem solver', as someone who copes with well adversity; much of his narrative presented otherwise.

Coming from a family with low educational aspirations, Greg experienced recurring bad health as a child and struggled to achieve within the lower sets at the local secondary modern school.

Attaining better results than his peers and being determind not to go straight into work, Greg ignored the family pressures and progressed to study at the local college, moving onto higher-level study at a polytechnic (rather than university) on the advice of his tutor.

Greg's post polytechnic career progression was disrupted by recession. Greg moved into a cycle of retraining, job dissatisfaction and then self-employment and contract work until a fairly recent bereavement provided him with the funding to return to college to study for a degree in a new vocational area that would enable him to develop and build upon his 'core skills'.

For Greg, the social and vocational make up of his cohort had the potential to provide a significant challenge. Many of his peers were considerably younger and in current employment within the construction industry. A minority of the group had progressed from A levels. His own experience was unique to the group. Greg is very goal oriented and has little expectation or need for social engagement with his peers. He has, however, developed a study relationship with a peer closer to his own age.

Commitments to family and friends, together with ongoing financial and legal issues provide an unhelpful backdrop to Greg's study. He attempts to compartmentalise his personal and work identities and yet his feedback emphasises the inherent difficulty of so doing. Greg also makes conflicting statements about disclosure. He says he is reluctant to disclose his personal dilemmas and difficulties to tutors or peers, though he sees himself as being very open. He has also ignored a diagnosis of dyslexia, perceiving that, as with other problems, he has developed coping strategies.

Greg finds technology a useful tool for learning, particularly for research, organisation of course materials and communication. He also uses industry specific software. Greg accesses resources on the VLE but does not engage in online interaction. He has no wish to use social media.

4.7 Nelson

Nelson is one of eight children in a large extended family of Jamaican origin, from what he describes as 'a deprived estate in the middle of South London' and was the first in his family to apply to university level study. He lives in the town and is part of a religious community. Following a year's work experience, Nelson successfully completed his Foundation Degree and is in the final year of the Honours Degree programme.

Like Kathy, Nelson has been hugely motivated by music, being encouraged to develop his talents both at home and at school. His motivation to study at degree level was driven by his desire to teach music and his need to 'give myself a good start in life'.

When at school, Nelson found himself voluntarily isolated, only really getting into friendship groups during sixth form and then actively seeking a social experience when studying at higher level. In his primary school years and into secondary school, Nelson reveals that he had 'anger management problems' which he has managed to resolve as a result of his religious faith. Nelson has variable relationships with his degree level cohort, finding a lack of compatibility with the outlook of some of the class whilst feeling he that he can gain mutual support from a small group of peers. Much of his support comes from his friendships and his Christian community outside College.

Nelson has not found progress easy. He has had problems with reading and organisation but no formal diagnosis of dyslexia; he has not disclosed his difficulties to tutors. Nelson has found the level and quantity of academic study challenging, as it has become progressively more demanding and he now feels that this has impacted on his health. Unlike other participants with reading difficulties, Nelson makes little use of on-line resources or mobile technologies, mentioning only briefly the resources available either through the VLE or via e-mail. Whilst he appears to be content to use social media, Nelson's views on social media are temporarily influenced by his religious activity, 'I'm observing Lent and decided to give up one technology item so I've given up my social media sites as my technical thing'.

4.8 Rick

Rick came from a socio-economic 'cold-spot' and is the only participant in the study who progressed to higher level study following completion of a vocational programme at the College. He is in his early twenties and, having commuted throughout most of his first year, now lives in a shared house close to the College. Rick is a full-time student and part-time professional musician and also has a part-time job to fund his studies. Rick is in his final year of study on an Honours Degree programme and plans to progress to the Army in September.

Rick's home life was heavily influenced by his mother's career as a music teacher. As the youngest child of a single mother, he would accompany her to the music lessons she taught and very quickly showed his own skills as a musician. His musical talents were matched, if not exceeded by his ability in athletics; an injury impacted on his ambitions to train for international sporting activity and influenced his decision to pursue a musical career.

Despite his (now) undoubted academic ability, Rick always felt unable to compete with his brother. Rick sees himself, even now, as 'vocational' and progressed to study a music programme at a further education college rather than following his brother through sixth form. His desire to move into a musical career led Rick to consider moving into employment at eighteen and only a last minute change of heart brought him back to higher education.

Rick spent the majority of his first year of degree study commuting (ninety minutes each way, 'on a good day') and found this impacted on his studies and his emotional engagement with the course. Moving into local accommodation proved beneficial and allowed him to participate more fully and obtain local employment to support his studies but staying with another student who had no need to work impacted on his self-esteem, his competitive nature and his need for separation from College life.

Rick has been aware of his need to ensure that his job, while necessary, does not impact upon his study and has ensured that the two aspects of his life are controlled and separated. Indeed, the theme of separation is very important to Rick who advises that he keeps the five aspects of his life separate: student, partner, son, worker, musician.

His concern about his identity and others' perceptions have influenced Rick's decision not to use social media that require status updates, though he has used YouTube for study activity and welcomes the resources provided by tutors on Moodle. Despite his aversion to social media, Rick is particularly enthusiastic about using technology to support his learning activity. He uses a range of music technology, a PC, a Macbook, and mobile technologies that support communication, lecture capture and revision.

Rick does not see himself as being sociable and has a minimal social life, predominantly outside College. He does, however, work very closely with a small group of peers established in his first year of study to mutual benefit.

4.9 Cerys

Cerys is a mature work-based learning student studying for a Foundation Degree on a part-time basis. She lives locally and is married to a serviceman who is often posted abroad and presents herself in an almost resolutely calm and collected manner. Cerys has two very socially active children.

Cerys dropped out of school before completing 'A' level study but, wanting to work, took up equivalent vocational qualifications whilst living with relatives and earning her keep. Cerys then progressed to work in the early years sector and continued to do so as she married, had children and relocated. Cerys had started furthering her career through training before the army relocated her husband and found herself looking to continue the progression in her new home town.

When Cerys enrolled for the Foundation Degree she did so in the belief that it would not only benefit her career path but that it would give her a focus when her army husband was away on a tour of duty. The emotional upheaval of army tours of duty, the relatively recent death of her father and the time constraints of lone parenting have proved challenging for Cerys and she particularly values the camaraderie of her peers when at College. They share the experience of the working context and are all mature students and yet she sees few of them as friends, keeping her study and her personal life separate.

Cerys uses technology to support her learning activity, relying heavily on her laptop and assistance from her teenage son when using applications for the first time. She

values in particular the use of technology to access resources on the VLE, the ability to find research material through the internet and the way she can organise her resources. Cerys uses texts and e-mails to discuss assignments with peers but is uncomfortable with the use of social media.

4.10 Beth

Beth is also a mature work based Foundation Degree student who studies part-time. Beth lives some distance from the College, with her husband and three children. She is self-employed and works from home but shares a common sector based background with her peers.

Beth enjoyed a positive childhood and was encouraged rather than pushed to learn, finding herself both well-supported and popular at school. Her move to college to study at 'A' level, however, did not work well. She missed her school-based friendships and did not have the motivation to persevere in a more academically challenging environment. Wanting to earn a living, she dropped out of college and undertook Youth Training Scheme training in the travel industry.

Beth enjoyed her work within the travel industry and the opportunities for exploration this afforded her. She continued to work in the industry following the birth of her first child but found the juggling of childcare and working hours too difficult after the birth of her second and third children. At this point Beth left the industry she loved and started to work as a childminder. The change of working activity seemed a necessity at the time but it was to provide Beth with a funded route into degree level study.

Beth has found juggling her roles as mother, daughter, worker, wife and student difficult and tiring. She has a quietly optimistic nature and sought to bring forward not only the challenges but also the potential benefits to her family of her need to prioritise her study on occasions. However, her second semester of study proved to be very challenging as she tried to support her father during her mother's progressive and debilitating illness.

Whilst Beth did not come to study at degree level with the expectation that social engagement would play a large part of the experience, she has nonetheless valued the support of a close knit group of peers.

When Beth studies at home she relies on her laptop for both study and access to resources on the VLE. She also uses YouTube to access TeachersTV, though her use of other social media is very limited and purely social in nature:

4.11 Thoughts from consideration of the Pen-portraits

In providing these narratives, I have stepped away from the principles of grounded theory as adopted in my own research method, and from the research process, and have constructed participant profiles. This work has been undertaken in order to provide the audience with contextual awareness to support the presentation of findings from the research as encapsulated in the following chapter, rather than being an integral part of the research process. The pen-portraits demonstrate the breadth of

situation, context and outlook of the participants, highlight similarities and differences

within the group, and life changing events or decisions that led to progression to

higher level study. The narratives bring to the fore social forces, processes or events

that have impacted upon their life space (Lewin, 1997).

Chapter 5: Outcomes from the Research Activity

This chapter presents the categories that emerged from open and focused coding of the participant narratives. Each conceptual category emerged with a number of subcategories, each of which was formed from the co-location of conceptual properties that emerged from the coding of data. The properties were not static in nature, but took the form of continua.

The categories presented are:

· Biography (home, education, work)

· Context (financial/legal stability; study, space and place; emotional/social stability)

· Social Engagement (desire; studying with peers; nature)

· Use of Technology (for study; for communication; as required by the College; using mobile technologies; Social Media)

· Identity/Self (identification; difference; goal identity; liminality)

Biography, Context and Identity/Self emerged as 'core' categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) following consideration of theoretical codes, in particular Glaser's Six Cs (Glaser, 1978 p.74), 'causes', 'contexts', 'conditions' and 'consequence', and theoretical coding families such as 'degrees' and 'process' (Glaser, 1978 pp.74-75).

5.1 Biography

At the start of their interview, participants were asked to provide a 'potted history', a brief autobiography that would tell of the journey travelled from early childhood to their current situation. This proved to be valuable in terms of establishing a comfortable flow to the narrative and supported participant engagement with the invisible aspects of the research. Participants all explored three broad biographical areas or sub-categories: childhood home/family life, education and work/extra curricular activity. From each domain emerged distinct properties in the form of continua that impacted to varying degrees on progression to higher education.

5.1.1 Biography: Childhood Home/Family Life

All participants spoke of the area in which they grew up, seven naming their childhood home town [Cerys, Beth, Peta, Kathy, Dee, Rick, Nelson] and the others making reference to the nature of the area [Suki, Bella, Greg]. Whilst the majority of participants did not make explicit reference to the implications of the location of their childhood home, the associated expectations of growing up in an area with a record of low (or high) progression to higher education were expressed by four of the group. Two participants [Kathy, Dee] grew up in university towns with associated expectations of progression to higher education. Two participants [Nelson, Rick] reported having felt particularly disadvantaged by the location of their childhood homes in areas of social deprivation. Both Nelson and Rick made reference to the associated cultural expectations for post school progression and told of a

determination to continue with their study with the explicit intention of avoiding perceived stereotypical outcomes. For example Nelson commented, 'where I've come from, not to be stereotypical, but a young black boy growing up in a deprived estate in the middle of South London …', presenting both his conception of his own background as being subject to stereotyping and an aversion to what he perceives could have been a future outcome of 'selling drugs, being in a gang or in jail or whatever'.

Five participants [Suki, Bella, Greg, Rick, Peta] reflected on the issue of the financial status of the family and its potential to impact negatively on their route to higher level study, either in relation to their perceptions of the high costs of university or the need for family income. For example, Suki and Bella told of exclusion from the family home, each having fallen pregnant as a teenager, and the resultant need to be self-supporting. Two participants [Greg, Rick] told of family pressure to discontinue study and find work in order to make a financial contribution to the family home. Peta and Rick reported concern about the costs of studying at higher level and a reluctance to let family members shoulder any burden of debt.

All participants indicated awareness of the educational status of their parents and commented variably upon the associated impact. The view held by family members of the relative worth of higher study and the levels of encouragement or expectation that the participant would progress in educational terms was reported as having greater influence on some participants than on others. There was not always a clear association between the academic success of the participants' parents and their

influence on the academic aspirations of the participant. For example, neither of Peta's parents had studied to degree level but they clearly expected her to aspire to university study. She articulated the view:

> They never pushed me to do anything but I wanted to do [it] and they just wanted me to reach my full potential … you go to university to reach your maximum potential and just done it automatically [sic], although they're really supportive about me pushing on and doing what I needed to do.

A positive family culture emerged as being influential on the raising of aspirations of participants, with specific reference being made to learning through books/reading [Suki, Peta, Bella] and outdoor activity [Beth] or developing a skill such as sport [Dee, Peta] or music [Kathy, Rick]. Four participants also told of the positive influence of family engagement with cultural heritage through music [Nelson], travel [Cerys], visits to National Trust locations [Beth], or religion [Nelson]. Some participants told of the positive influence of role models. Role models did not necessarily follow university study paths but provided inspiration in terms of their own career paths or activities. For example Rick was influenced by his uncle's work as a naval musician, Cerys and Beth were influenced by their parents' roles as teachers, and Greg was inspired by his father's enthusiasm for engineering.

A lack of family stability, underpinned a lack of initial engagement with study on the part of the three oldest participants[Bella, Suki, Greg], all of whom reported experiencing destabilisation through unsettled emotional climates, poor relationships

with family members, early parenthood, or the impact of divorce. In each case, the participants told of how moving to higher study has allowed them to set themselves beyond or apart from their childhood situation, though the timescales varied considerably.

In summary the key properties across both negative and positive aspects of this sub-category can be expressed as continua with the following descriptors: parental status; location; family expectations; family behaviours (i.e. perceptions and actions) and stability; engagement with cultural/vocational skills; financial status.

5.1.2 Biography: Education

For six participants [Cerys, Beth, Greg, Rick, Suki, Bella], feedback on the school experience varied considerably but was not generally understood to be a key driver towards studying at higher level. However, for the four participants progressing from 'A' levels [Dee, Peta, Kathy, Nelson] working towards university study was an expectation.

Schools reportedly attended by participants varied in type and location, from urban secondary modern schools [Bella, Greg, Suki], comprehensive schools [Peta, Dee, Cerys, Beth, Kathy], further education[Rick] and sixth form college [Nelson]. There were only three features emerging from comments relating to organised school provision: the benefits of setting/streaming in allowing students to feel they could achieve [Greg]; the lack recognition of and support for learning disabilities such as dyslexia [Dee, Suki, Bella, Greg, Peta]; the inspirational and/or supportive approach

of teaching teams in some schools/colleges [Rick, Nelson, Kathy]. Indeed, the majority of narratives in this area, across all interviews reflected participants' emotional and social engagement with the experience.

Participants' narratives told how their self-perceptions of educational ability were influenced by their reflections on achievement. A spectrum of reflections emerged from the ten participants telling of experiences that varied from a history of low academic attainment against a backdrop of the perceived unassailability of higher awards [Suki] to successful progression through the formal examination structure enhanced by additional awards and celebrations of success [Kathy]. For those who did not attain formal qualifications, narratives included reference to a growing lack of confidence and an inability to engage with the presented forms of assessment. Perceptibly unassailable forms of assessment were reported as presenting a hurdle that threatened to impact on participants' experience of higher-level study and informed their choice of institution for later study [Greg, Suki].

Participants told of memories that covered a range of social experiences, during their earlier stages of education, and the impact that this had upon their motivation and application at that time. Such experiences ranged from a time of friendship and popularity that supported learning [Beth] to memories of being isolated and without friends [Nelson, Rick], being bullied [Bella, Suki] and even being with the 'wrong' friends [Dee, Kathy].

Participants who had a negative experience during formal education to level three, spoke of a lack of direction or focus [Dee], of being distracted [Peta], losing interest and enjoyment [Cerys, Rick], hiding their intelligence [Bella] or dropping out before completing their intended study path [Beth, Cerys, Suki, Bella]. Beth and Cerys told how they had enjoyed one level of study but found progression to the next level at a different institution challenging, with a subsequent change in their perceptions of the study experience at that time. For Bella and Suki, in particular, the reported impact of bullying had very negative outcomes and it took a life-changing event, a breakdown and an accident respectively, to restart the desire for learning. Participants who had a positive experience of school/college recounted being made aware of their talent or ability [Kathy, Nelson, Rick, Peta] gaining confidence [Greg], having and making choices [Dee, Peta, Nelson, Kathy, Greg], having focus [Kathy, Rick, Greg] and planning for progression [Nelson, Kathy, Dee, Greg].

In summary, the key properties in relation to the sub-category of Biography: Education include: Social engagement; Emotional engagement; Achievement

5.1.3 Biography: Work

This sub-category makes reference to work undertaken by participants before making the decision to progress to higher-level study.

Participants described their involvement with work related activity, the various changes in their working situations and the impact of those changes. The nature and degree of work-related activity varied considerably from voluntary work such as

involvement with St. John's Ambulance [Kathy] or in Church youth clubs [Nelson], working whilst at school or college in part-time Saturday or holiday jobs [Beth, Cerys, Rick, Greg, Peta], working in a 'gap year' [Nelson, Peta, Dee], to being in full time employment [Suki, Bella, Greg].

Participants expressed differing motivations for their work related activity. For Bella and Suki, full time employment became a financial necessity as soon as their children were of school age and precluded any consideration of pursuing further education. Greg moved into employment after having completed study at polytechnic. Whilst finding their working roles more than acceptable, in each case a life-changing incident (respectively: mental illness, motorcycle accident, re-organisation) impacted their ability to continue in their chosen work and required that they reconsider their future working activity. This stage of reconsideration became the gateway to higher study. Suki commented, 'until I had this accident I was happy in my job and earning enough to keep us afloat, so had that not happened I probably wouldn't be here doing this' and Bella described how her she used the experience of having a nervous breakdown, with associated loss of home and job, as a chance to start afresh. Greg regaled:

> There was a big reorganisation and so on and I really didn't like it anymore so said, 'I've had enough of this, I cannot be bothered with this rubbish anymore, I'm leaving'. So I'd made a decision that I'm leaving and spent one whole year saving like hell. It didn't help that I'd also bought a car as well but I thought 'ok, cost going to College, back to uni is X, I need X amount of money' so I

just saved up and saved up and when I had enough I walked into the office and said to my manager, 'I'd like to see you now' and walked out.

Having worked part-time to support level three study, Rick found the choice between full-time employment and higher education difficult. He reported making the last minute decision to continue with degree level study when he was unable to find employment appropriate to his career aspirations. For Cerys and Beth, however, part-time Saturday jobs and the associated social side of working encouraged a move away from education before completing sixth form or college education. Both Cerys and Beth enjoyed their subsequent work for a number of years, only adapting the nature of their work when childcare became a consideration. Certainly, Beth told of the change in career needed following the birth of her third child, an event which led her to take up child-minding at home and led her to seek early years practitioner status. Support from practitioner bodies encouraged both participants to further develop their practice and opened up the opportunity for further study.

Dee, Peta and Nelson took a year out of education before progressing to degree level study. For Dee and Peta this was due to uncertainty about how or where to progress. Peta commented on her lack of focus at this time, 'I was going to go and get a job … then I realised that there's no job opportunities … I had a real think about it. … and I finally looked at [the College] at a management course and thought 'now that's something that I want to do'. Dee described how her work experience during this period was affirming and encouraged her progression into a related degree programme. Nelson sought affirmation of his plans to train as a teacher. He told of his

decision to defer enrolment onto his chosen degree and undertake a placement in his chosen area of employment as part of a planned gap year.

The properties of the sub-category Biography: Work were closely intertwined, with positive working experiences sometimes, but not necessarily, associated with progression to higher-level study. Thus a negative work-related occurrence was not necessarily a barrier to a move to further study. Properties of this sub-category were Need, Aspiration and Interruption.

5.1.4 Biography: an overview

Whilst the category of Biography serves to set out the backdrop for further analysis, engagement with theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978) suggests an exploration of the extent to which the emergent sub-categories and their properties are perceived as cause of the subsequent perceptions and/or actions of the participants, the degree to which this engages with relevant literature and the impact of life-changing events and/or periods of liminality (Turner, 2008). This relevance of Biography is further developed in the following chapter.

5.2 Context

Participants told of their commitments and relationships outside the study environment in terms of home life and working activity. The participants talked of practical and emotional aspects of home life that had the potential to have positive (supporting or motivational) or negative (distracting or de-motivational) impact. Sub-

categories took the form of continua and include: financial/legal stability; study, space and place; emotional/social stability.

5.2.1 Financial/legal stability

The continuum represented as 'financial stability' brings to the fore a range of situations with participants reporting a range of experiences from extreme financial difficulty to, more faintly expressed, financial stability.

Four participants [Bella, Peta, Rick, Nelson] who reported studying as full time students found that they needed to undertake work, even as full time students, in order to maintain their financial stability. Whilst Rick and Bella described carefully prioritising work and study patterns in order to sustain a balanced income, Peta reported finding the situation more difficult to manage. She told of her need to pay off two debts in a relatively short period of time and of the need to work long hours. She told of the way in which the strain of working to pay debts led to a loss of focus on her studies.

Greg explained his reliance on inherited funds to provide funds for study and personal support and Suki related her need to await the outcome of a financial claim following an accident that had resulted in loss of employment. Both told of the strain they felt in trying to juggle finances whilst coping with slow moving legal issues, expressing determination that the situation should impact as little as possible on their study.

Four participants did not report financial difficulty. Cerys and Beth were the only participants studying on an employer funded part-time programme that was strongly work-related. They both told of being the second earner in the family, with their respective husbands providing primary income. Due to the nature of their programme of study, both participants spoke of the value (both financially and to their study) of being able to maintain working activity. Dee and Kathy indicated that they had not expected to work during their 'university experience' and were reliant on their student loans in the first instance. Kathy told of her over-expenditure in her first term and the way in which she subsequently budgeted to ensure that the situation did not recur.

5.2.2 Study, Place and Space

All participants spoke of the benefits of living near to their place of study though they reflected on variable experiences of location.

Peta, Dee and Nelson, having moved into the area when they started their study programme, were initially allocated accommodation provided by the College's partner university, giving them proximity to both College and University facilities and a feeling of social engagement with the campus experience. They reported that the benefits of the physical location were outweighed by the high costs of the facility and lack of study space in the accommodation. Kathy also told of moving into the area and joined others in a shared house, reaping the benefits of proximity and study space. Rick explained how, in his first year of study, he commuted from his hometown finding both the monetary and social costs of the commute difficult. He also moved to rented accommodation near the College with personal space to study.

Suki, Cerys and Beth told of living locally in their family homes and the resultant compromises in terms of study space and family living areas. Suki spoke of her reliance on the use of the dining room table while Beth mentioned working on her bed. All three participants reported having children and partners, and articulated their need for quiet space that was suitable for study, needing to delineate an area where they could or should not be disturbed.

Bella and Greg said little about their accommodation, though both participants indicated that they were not cohabiting in any form and benefited from being local to the College. Greg did, however, lament about the difficulties he found having to travel long distances on non-lecture days to support his elderly father.

5.2.3 Emotional/Social Stability

This property relates to the involvement of participants with friends, family and partners and the potential impact of emotional upheaval or support on study. The majority of participants talked about their relationships, referring to those aspects that supported them in their role as a student and the associated events or actions that caused them difficulty.

Only Bella and Nelson did not report having a partner. Bella told of her determination to remain self-sufficient and commented that she did not look for support nor to provide support to others. Nelson chose not to disclose much of his home or social activity. He did, however, tell of his need to support a friend (following an assault)

and the negative impact of his distress at this situation on his studies. Nelson described his Christian network as being of invaluable support as he struggled with some elements of his study.

All the other participants spoke of having partners, all of whom provided variable support depending on location, and their own emotional, social and work related needs. Rick and Kathy described their partners as being supportive of their study path though neither lived locally and the two participants did not articulate the need for study specific support.

Greg's narrative told of a complex and difficult relationship with his girlfriend and his exasperation at the situation. He expressed repeatedly his need to provide support for his girlfriend and also his elderly father and yet did not describe any degree of support or encouragement (or a need for such support) from them.

Beth and Cerys related different experiences of the support they received from their husbands and children. They both described their respective husbands as being pleased that they were studying but described how the levels of empathy exhibited during times of assignment completion appeared to have diminished over the duration of the course. Beth's narrative indicated that her husband had changed jobs leading to an increase in responsibility and more time away from home. Beth described increased isolation, her determination to seek her husband's help with childcare when he was at home and the additional issues she faced as her mother developed Alzheimer's disease. Cerys told of her husband's army role and his postings to

Afghanistan during her course of study. She described how the postings caused her considerable distress, and thus distraction from studies, whilst her husband was away and when the Battalion suffered losses or injury. She also commented on her husband's expectations of being put first when he returned from a posting and the emotional dilemmas she faced when juggling study and her role as an army wife.

Beth and Cerys related the different attitudes they experienced from their children in relation to their student roles. Beth spoke of her endeavours to represent her study experience positively to her children and reported feeling like a role model for her daughter, in particular. Cerys described how she fitted her study patterns around the needs of her family. She reported that her children led very busy lives, and required lifts to football, dancing and other activities, leaving her only the later evenings as quiet study time. Cerys told of her decision to reduce the number of days she worked in order that she could dedicate more time to her academic study.

Suki also told of juggling her study around her children, particularly as her son only visited at the weekend. She spoke of the benefits of having made the decision not to work during her degree level study allowing her to study when the children were at school and her boyfriend was not visiting. Suki's narrative referred to the recent difficulties caused when her ex-husband's domestic arrangements became problematic and her son's living arrangements had to be reconsidered, a situation that disrupted her study for some weeks.

Dee and Peta described living with their partners for several years; for both this was initially in University accommodation and latterly in a shared house. Dee told of her partner's period of depression whilst living on campus and her difficulties dealing with the pressure she felt to support her partner and the feeling of claustrophobia engendered through trying to deal with that situation within very limited physical space. Peta also described a feeling of being in too close proximity and the resultant short term split with her partner. Both participants confirmed that physical relocation was a relief and supported their relationships.

5.2.4 Context: an overview

The category of Context would appear, in the first instance to impact more strongly on participants in their current role, and it is of importance to reflect on the relative immediacy of the experiences related within this category, the degree to which this category is influenced or caused by properties of the category Biography and the association of this category with other categories, such as Identity/Self, that were seen as being in the same timeframe.

5.3 Social Engagement

In telling of their journey, their expectations and experience, participants reflected on their social engagement. In some cases participants reported on their own capacities for social engagement. Such disclosures were embedded in their narrative around their social positioning with biography, context and expectations of student identity.

5.3.1 Desire for social engagement

Participants' desire for a social experience as a direct part of their learning activity or in association with their higher education varied considerably. Four participants [Nelson, Kathy, Peta, Dee] described themselves as very outgoing or sociable, being keen to become involved with campus-based activities and making friends from other programmes of study. Kathy, in particular, expressed the need to maintain wide friendship groups across a range of contexts. Nelson and Dee both spoke of seeking long-term friendships and of their reliance on friendships formed on the University campus and unrelated to the learning experience. All four of the most self-reportedly sociable participants had progressed to higher-level study from the 'A' level route and had expressed expectations that being a student would be a social experience. In abrupt contrast, the three participants with the highest awareness of contextual difference [Bella, Greg and Suki] expressed the view that they were prepared to be friendly with their peers but were not seeking friendships. All three expressed the view that College was not a social experience and emphasised their strong goal-orientation. Suki and Greg indicated a preference for maintaining existing long-term friendships outside the learning experience. Bella spoke of her clear decision not to make friends:

> In my last life [before having a breakdown] … I was friendly but not your friend, and I think that my transition from breakdown to normal I worked so many hours and never had friends, I thought, 'I need to make friends, but don't know how to' and kind of messed it up a bit. Now I realise I'm actually happy with the way it is being friendly and just having one or two close friends.

5.3.2 Studying with peers

Regardless of declared intentions to be sociable or otherwise, all but one participant [Bella] told of the benefits of engaging with a peer or a small group of peers for study activity. Suki and Greg each described how they chose a particular peer with similar attitudes and focus with whom to share learning perspectives and provide mutual support. Seven participants [Peta, Rick, Kathy, Beth, Cerys, Nelson, Dee] reported being part of a long-term group of peers in class, working collaboratively to support learning. These friendship groups were described as valuable but having relevance for study related matters only, whether inside or beyond the physical College environment.

Six participants discussed the group work/activity required of them as part of their study activity. Bella, Kathy, Suki and Greg all expressed difficulty with the concept of group work, expressing concern about a lack of balance in the activity and issues of group dynamics. All four participants had previously emphasised their strong focus on successful outcomes to their study. Peta and Beth, however, spoke positively about group activity, each finding value in the strengths and perspectives of others in their group and valuing interaction.

5.3.3 Nature of social engagement

From the narratives of participants, the varied degrees of social engagement reported by participants (in/out of study) provides a continuum ranging from those who are

exceptionally outgoing and sociable to those finding social activity very challenging. What is noticeable is that friendships existing outside the learning context were rarely reported as being mixed with study-based friendships. Several participants [Greg, Suki, Rick] explicitly expressed the desire to maintain the separation of their social engagements.

Four participants made disclosures, in relation to their own capacity for social engagement, that were apparently contradictory in nature, counter-balancing popularity and shyness [Beth], of being good in social situations and yet being unsociable [Rick], feeling guarded in social situations but working well within a team [Suki], being isolated as a child and being outgoing as a student [Nelson]. The participants, however, expressed each self-reflection separately within their narrative, speaking of each personal trait as distinctly contributing to their understanding of self.

5.3.4 Overview: social engagement

This category, having emerged within its own right, engages to a considerable degree with the categories of Biography, Context and Identity, emerging with associated rather than direct impact and as such has not been identified as a core category. The nature of the research outcomes do, however, provides themes for consideration in relation to the core categories.

5.4 Using Technology

Participants considered the ways in which technology was effective in supporting learning, the nature of the technologies used, and the ways in which they engaged with technology.

5.4.1 Using technology for study

With the exception of Nelson, all participants spoke of the personal technology they used to support their learning activity, either on or off site. Nelson did, however, make reference to his use of technology and it is therefore assumed that he has access to a device, though this may be shared or in a public location. Rick and Greg both made use of a personal computer, though Rick also made use of a laptop and assorted music peripherals. All remaining participants told of their use of a laptop computer with office software (word processor, spreadsheet, presentation software), document storage and Internet access.

In reporting their use of technology for learning, Bella, Beth and Greg, all mature students, described the extent to which they felt its use could now be taken for granted. Conversely, Dee and Cerys expressed a lack of confidence in their use of technology, indicating that each would use it only as far as it was necessary to support learning.

5.4.2 Using technology for communication

All participants reported using technology for communication. While all participants made use of College e-mail in establishing interview arrangements, only six participants talked explicitly of its use during the interview [Peta, Nelson, Rick, Kathy, Beth, Cerys]. Five participants spoke of using text messaging or SMS [Rick, Dee, Beth, Cerys, Greg]. Four participants said they used Skype [Dee, Peta, Bella, Beth], though of these participants only Peta reported using Skype for learning related activity.

5.4.3 Using personal mobile technology

Five participants [Bella, Suki, Rick, Peta, Kathy] related their experience of using mobile technologies for learning. The ways in which these participants described their use of mobile technologies is shown in Table 5.1.

Four users of mobile technology in class described how they needed or wanted to be able to revisit taught sessions either to help them deal with dyslexia or as a revision tool [Bella, Suki, Rick, Peta]. Peta and Kathy, whilst looking to use mobile technologies as a tool, also told of having the confidence to explore and adapt to new technologies when the opportunity arose. Both Kathy and Peta spoke of their awareness of the College's developing work with the student use of iPads for learning and of their decisions to embrace the initiative and work with pilot activity.

Tools/usage	Taking notes	Taking Photographs or videos	Making audio files	Internet access	Document Storage
Mobile Phone	Rick				
Flip camera		Rick			
Digital Recorder			Bella Suki Rick		
iPad	Kathy Peta	Kathy Peta		Kathy Peta	Kathy
Portable Scanner			Suki		

Table 5.1 Participants use of Mobile Technologies

5.4.4 Using Technology as promoted by the College

All participants told of having access to Moodle and described its use for accessing learning resources. This was reported variably as motivational [Rick, Peta], a money saving device [Beth], as support for those with learning disabilities [Suki, Bella, Dee], as a space for peer interaction and feedback [Peta, Kathy, Rick] and as a means by which to continue with study activity during College closure due to periods of poor weather [Peta]. Feedback in the narrative of participants [Beth, Rick, Kathy] indicated that where a single tutor on a programme used Moodle effectively, there were expectations of similar use by others.

Thus Participants' narratives indicated a willingness to try new experiences, such as Moodle, Pebblepad, Youtube and the e-library facility, to support learning when

encouraged and supported by tutors but few of the students interviewed indicated that they were unlikely to venture into newer territory, such as discussion forums in Moodle, without the explicit validation of value coming from either tutors or peers. For example, Suki was aware of the existence of discussion forums but had not been required to use them as part of formal learning activity. She commented, 'There are forums but I've never really looked at them too closely.'

Some participants reported the need for training. For example, Beth commented that training in use of Moodle would have been beneficial at an early stage in her programme of study, 'we've only just been introduced to it [Moodle] and haven't had any training we're probably as a group not aware of its potential and I know not all of the other lecturers are using it'. Cerys reported her initial horror at having to use Powerpoint for presentations:

> When I started the course I didn't even really know how to do a PowerPoint presentation either and it was funny actually because we were a joint class to begin with, BA and Foundation Degree, and when they said about PowerPoint presentations obviously us older lot were like, 'oh no!' and it was major panic … that was interesting and challenging but my son helped me on that one luckily.

Five students explained their access to and use of specialist software. Bella and Suki described how they were provided with laptops and ReadWrite software to provide support for their learning with dyslexia. Kathy, Rick and Greg told of the specialist

software they used for their vocational areas, having access to a range of specialist professional facilities within the institution and, and, for Rick and Kathy, access to composition software on their laptops.

Participants reported using online resources when researching for assignments. They cited Google Books [Cerys, Beth], accessing the College e-library [Dee, Beth, Kathy, Bella, Cerys] and using Athens [Greg].

Participants studying music and early years [Kathy, Rick, Nelson, Beth] discussed the departmental use of YouTube for accessing resources and, in the case of musicians, uploading videos of performances for peer critique and assessment. Kathy and Rick expressed a preference for the use of Moodle for peer review; they were able to talk about the privacy settings of the YouTube domain used by the Department but told of their preference for the cohort only activity in Moodle.

Suki discussed the way in which students on her degree programme were tasked with using LinkedIn as a developmental tool. She reported the way in which the use of the network was integrated into assessed work, thus providing students with a rationale for it initial use. She is no longer required to use this and so no longer uses the platform.

5.4.5 Using social media

Whilst seven out of ten participants told of using Facebook socially, only Peta, Nelson and Kathy described using the social networking site for learning activity; Peta, Kathy

and Suki told of using it for communicating with friends, and Nelson and Kathy explained their development of professional profiles.

Greg, Cerys and Rick each stated emphatically that they did not use social networking sites as a matter of principle, all expressing their concerns with privacy, security and the prospects of cyber bullying. Greg made the sign of the cross when Facebook was mentioned and expressed the view that social networking was far too impersonal, stating that he preferred face-to-face or telephone contact. Peta also expressed the view that Facebook could be seen as anti-social but was content, nonetheless to use it for communicating with her peer group. Beth commented on the use of Facebook groups for learning by younger students on earlier years of her programme and expressed the view that she might have benefited from this had tutors shown the group the way forward.

As musicians, Kathy and Nelson both described the need to develop a professional network, having used MySpace as a professional space, before adapting to similar use of Facebook pages. They also spoke of Soundcloud and Reverbnation as recent sites they were both, but separately, watching with interest. Bella also spoke of her interest in using web-based platforms for personal and profession development and told of her gradual development of a website to support and showcase her writing.

Kathy and Peta were the only students who told of using Twitter. Five participants [Nelson, Suki, Beth, Cerys and Greg] expressed their doubts about the time it would take up, its relevance to their activity and the general purpose of its use. Peta

explained that she used Twitter as part of her part-time job. Kathy told of using Twitter professionally as a musician, as a personal learning network and for personal development.

5.4.6 Overview: Use of Technology

The use of the theoretical codes of 'process' and 'degree' in considering the status of this category suggests the need for (1) analysis of the extent to which technology is used and (2) engagement with the processes associated with and leading to participant use of technology in differing ways and for different purposes. This category is seen as being the consequence of other processes rather than the cause of processes and does not emerge as a core category. Nonetheless there is considerable engagement with the established core categories of Biography, Context and Identity/Self .

5.5 Identity/Self

Interviews undertaken were designed to encourage the participant to talk about their biography, their contextual experience and those aspects that helped them or hindered their experience as a student. Participants spoke of themselves in terms of 'I', 'me' and 'myself' and also made explicit reference to identity, leading to development of Identity/Self as a conceptual category, much of which remains invisible to peers and tutors alike - an institutional blind spot. The nature of the reflections suggested the following properties for this conceptual category: identification; difference; goal identity. The descriptor of each property was suggested by the emergent data and thus definitions are situated with the relevant findings, below:

5.5.1 Identification

The property 'identification' refers to the desire of participants for identification with roles or individuals within a shared context. It considers how participants identified themselves against their own expectations of particular roles and their own understandings of the perceptions of others.

All the participants described their adoption of one or more symbolic or structural identity (Burke and Stets, 2009). Six of the ten participants identified themselves with their professional practice [Greg, Kathy, Nelson, Rick, Beth, Cerys], four saw themselves as full time students [Bella, Dee, Peta, Kathy], and two emphasised their family role [Suki, Beth]. However all participants reported having more than one role with a majority engaging with concept of multiple, interlinked identities with differing perceptions of self [Bella, Suki, Peta, Rick, Nelson, Cerys, Beth].

Five participants [Cerys, Suki, Peta, Beth, Rick] told of their awareness of the potential for conflict between role identities. For example Suki told of the difficulties of being simultaneously a mother to her children, a partner for her boyfriend and a student and Peta reported the challenges of juggling her worker role with her student identity. Burke and Stets (2009) propose the concept of 'identity standard' explaining, 'Tied to each identity is a set of meanings that persons attribute to themselves when they are playing out or claim an identity.' (p.49). Participants reported, at times and in complex situations, concern about their ability to meet their own expectations of the roles they were adopting, and thus their identity standard (Burke and Stets, 2009), for that role. Priority had to be given to different roles regardless of context when there

was a time-constrained goal to be achieved. Examples include: adherence to assignment deadlines leading to prioritisation of study at home [Suki, Beth], having to temporarily duck out of student role when dealing with family issues [Beth, Cerys] and the need to allocate priorities to work and study [Rick]. In such situations the participant engaged with the role identity associated with the greatest degree of need at that moment.

Five participants [Suki, Peta, Rick, Greg] looked to compartmentalise the various role identities (Stryker, 2002) played out across their lives (for example home/work/ student) and worked to keep these separate. Both Rick and Greg expressed wariness of the way in which the perceptions of others might change should they be seen in contexts that required them to be adopting a different role identity, and expressing comfort in the invisibility of their alternate roles. In each of these instances the participant told of not wanting to experience the perceived impact of overlap between role identities and the prospective dilution of their performance against their own identity standard (Burke and Stets, 2009) pertinent to the situation. The intended invisibility of alternative identities was seen to protect the validity of the salient identity within the given context (Stryker, 2008) from being polluted by the mixed perceptions of any audience members privy to both scenarios. For example Peta did not want her financial problems to be seen to impact on her identity as either daughter or student; Cerys did not want her role as an army wife to have visible impact on her role as a student. Rick's comment was particularly emphatic:

People perceive me as a particular person all the time; people perceive me as that particular person while I'm training, people at University perceive me as someone potentially different, or even similar but in a different way of thinking… To be seen in a different way changes things. It's not that I don't like change, it's that's who I am but I don't know how they would then see me after that and what would happen.

Kathy, Greg and Dee commented on their own engagement with different groups and within different contexts but, unlike Rick and Suki, did not make reference to their own engagement with multiple role identities, expressing a lack of a conscious desire to perform or need to frame differently with different social groups (Goffman, 1959). Nonetheless narratives such as that of Kathy's tale of needing to adapt on her return to the family home and Dee's supportive role for a partner with depression suggest the subconscious adoption of differing role identities.

Participants indicated their expectation of traits inherent to their identity standard for the student role. Six participants, from across the biographical range, told of determination, ambition and focus [Kathy, Bella, Peta, Rick, Suki, Greg] as underpinning their approach to study. The majority of participants placed emphasis on actions such as being organised [Kathy], setting priorities [Rick], preparing for sessions [Suki, Dee, Peta], 'learning from past experience' [Bella] and 'being a problem solver' [Greg].

Six participants [Rick, Kathy, Bella, Greg, Peta, Cerys] were able to express awareness of their own talents and abilities with particular respect to their student identity. For example, Rick and Kathy spoke of being well organised; Bella, Peta, Kathy and Cerys commented on their determination and focus; and Greg told of his ability as a decision-maker. Three participants reported that they were self-critical [Kathy, Rick, Bella]. Indeed, Kathy, a student progressing from A levels, spoke of how she found that her desire for perfection impeded her ability to approach assessment calmly. Three participants [Rick, Kathy, Greg] expressed the view that they could see multiple perspectives or maintain an open-mind across and beyond their studies. Seven participants [Bella, Suki, Dee, Greg, Nelson, Kathy, Peta] considered the skills and attitudes they had adopted, within their student role, that were now supporting their progress in undertaking study. Bella and Suki, told of developing strategies to overcome the issues and restrictions associated with their respective forms of imperceptible physical disability. Five participants [Bella, Suki, Dee, Greg, Nelson] related the ways in which they were coping with dyslexia. Kathy and Peta reported working on the development of study skills and communication strategies.

5.5.2 Difference

Buckingham (2007), in his initial considerations of 'identity', conceptualises identification as extending to recognition of difference. The majority of participants described their awareness of biographical, contextual or physical difference, and related this difference to either the expectation or experience of studying at degree level. The way in which perceptions of difference emerged from the narrative and the emotions associated with such difference varied considerably.

The two most self–descriptive and emotionally presenting participants, [Bella and Greg] saw themselves as being very different from their families and painted autobiographies that perceptually isolated them within their childhood context. In both narratives the participants depicted themselves as being strong and capable, a role they reportedly played ably in the classroom situation, yet continuing to describe undisclosed [to staff and peers] events that had caused them distress in strong firm voices that belied their choice of words. For example, Greg commented, 'It's like, well you know, if you make the assumption that the world is pretty rough then you don't get too upset. Things that happen that are nice are a nice bonus, so I tend to take that philosophy anyway'.

Six participants made reference to social stereotyping in terms of ethnicity [Nelson], financial and social deprivation [Nelson, Rick, Suki]; educational difference [Nelson]; disability [Suki, Dee, Bella, Greg]; social stigma [Bella, Suki]. Their narratives reported how they felt this impacted on their expectations of their paths ahead. For example, Bella and Suki both told of having experienced teenaged motherhood and having a focus on their family responsibilities rather than on their own education.

The categories of difference associate strongly with the published characteristics of the 'non traditional' student. Indeed, half the participants [Bella, Suki, Cerys, Beth, Rick] would not normally have taken the step into higher study at that point in time and only chose to change their progression path having experienced an event that led to a contextual change in their life space (Lewin, 1997). Examples include nervous

breakdown [Bella], accident [Suki], and family relocation [Cerys], none of which had been revealed to teaching staff or fellow students.

Rick and Nelson provided feedback that determination to avoid the consequences of perceived stereotyping (low-income single parent family and ethnicity respectively) became a driver to progress to further study. Neither policy nor institutional enablers was seen to have changed the learning direction of the participants, though Suki, Cerys, Beth and Bella reported the proximity and nature of the College provision as making degree level study a journey that was possible to tread.

Five mature participants [Bella, Suki, Greg, Cerys, Beth] talked of experiencing difference within the study context particularly in terms of the maturity, life experience, attitude and application they attributed to themselves and found lacking in some of their peers. Suki, Beth and Cerys progressed into cohorts where mature students were in the majority and each described the situation where the cohort was socially similar as preferable. They told of the way in which the identity standard they had set for their student role was maintained regardless of the feedback from other students within the environment. These participants' narratives told of surprise and at times dismay when others in their cohort did not visibly adhere to or share this standard, but indicated in all cases that participants were not prepared to deviate from their own standard.

Only three participants did not make comments focused on difference [Dee, Peta and Kathy]. These were all school based A level students for whom the natural contextual,

if not biographical, path was progression to HE. All three described their expectations of becoming a degree level students embraced features beyond the purely academic, with opportunities to develop themselves and to enjoy the social aspects traditionally associated with the university experience.

5.5.3 Goal identity

The term 'goal identity' is used to reflect the identity to which participants aspire and which provided motivation for progression to higher education and for focus within the learning process.

All participants indicated the goal underpinning their study path, expressing this in terms of a specified role i.e. manager [Dee, Peta, Suki, Bella, Greg], teacher [Kathy, Beth, Cerys] , performer [Nelson, Rick]) and the emotional/physical benefits of attaining that goal. The participants reported that perceived benefits of attaining their goal identity included social and financial independence and the potential to change the perceptions of others. The majority of participants [Suki, Bella, Rick, Nelson, Greg, Beth] expressed a wish to move away from a perceived negative self-identification, such as stereotypes or stigma or their own perception of a negative identification by others, or to prove their worth in the context of disability or biography. The degree of focus expressed by all participants was indicative of very strong degrees of extrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Participants reported otherwise invisible aspects of their biographic self that they perceived provided intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000) for their study paths.

Five participants expressed the view that they always had a love of learning [Suki, Peta, Kathy, Greg, Beth] seeing this as lifelong and fundamental to their way of being. Six participants told of being led into learning through their passion for a vocational area that underpinned their goal identity; examples included music [Rick, Kathy, Nelson], sport [Dee] or childcare [Beth, Cerys]. Such motivation was also perceived by three participants [Suki, Kathy, Beth] as providing a counterbalance for some of the difficult feelings experienced at particular points in their study, for example feeling frustrated and stretched [Suki], pressured [Kathy], guilty [Beth].

5.5.4 Liminal experiences

Participants variously and implicitly reported experiences of liminality (Turner, 2008) as they reflected on the development of their self-perceptions and actions within the student role. Each participant told of the ways in which they adapted as they moved to adopt the student role, changing self-perceptions and adapting behaviours.

For example: Suki reported development of comfort within the role, moving from finding the experience 'quite daunting' during her first week on the Foundation Degree and, having 'registered structural status' (Turner, 1979), more easily adopting the role indicated by her student identity standard. She reported 'I find it easier this year' as she worked to complete her Honours year.

Rick, Nelson and Bella commented on the way that they had developed their ability to set priorities while Kathy reported the way in which she had developed life skills and self-discipline within her student role. While Rick did not explicitly acknowledge

change in his self-perception, his initial declaration that he was not academic, a

perception that he said had suppressed his desire for degree level study, sat at odds

with his declaration that he had received top scores in all the army tests he had taken

and his subsequent posting to the Intelligence Corps. Such altered states of both

consciousness and being (Turner, 1979) became part of the emergent self and whilst

this did not reportedly impact on the meanings inherent to the student identity

standard of each Participant, nonetheless it impacted on perceptions and actions.

Indications of the impact of the liminal nature of study also emerged through the

reporting of 'communitas' Turner (2008) by Beth and Cerys, as they bonded with

those sharing their identity as early years practitioners within the newly experienced

context of the foundation degree. Rick also experienced the need to develop, 'the

comradeship and fellowship of people in the midst of liminal ritual' (Turner, 2008 p.

36) as he, and others in his cohort, established a group of fellow musicians in whom

they could develop trust and reliance through changing and performative situations. It

is important to note the link between the participants; role based experience of

liminality and the nature of their social engagement.

5.5.5 Overview: Identity/Self

Although participants had not been asked to provide narrative on the subject of

identity and self, much of their commentary on their history and context was

nonetheless self-reflective. Themes of roles and the expectations of those roles took

prominence, leading to consideration of role identity (Stryker, 2002) and identity standards (Burke and Stets, 2009).

As some participants voiced the difficulties of balancing multiple roles in a variety of situations, the issue of identity salience (Styker, 2008) also came to the fore. Stryker (2002) explains that the multiplicity of identities potentially available to an individual at any one time exist hierarchically within any given situation and that the identity adopted by the individual at that moment has the highest salience. He writes, 'If different identities are called up, they may or may not carry conflicting or contradictory expectations. If they do, their relative location in the identity salience hierarchy becomes a potentially important predictor of subsequent behaviour' (Stryker, 2002 p.61).

Stryker(2002) continues, in his writing, to associate commitment with identity salience. Indeed, the struggles reportedly encountered by participants occurred not when they had a singular commitment in a simple situation, for example a student in College, but in the face of multiple commitments, or social processes, such as parenthood and assignment deadlines.

5.6 Bringing in the literature

This chapter has presented the conceptual categories as they emerged from the rich data of the narratives and following open, focused and some initial theoretical coding. However there is a need to situate these findings within a framework that supports further analysis and then engage with the broader literature on the experience of non-

traditional students, in order to establish themes worthy of further research and

contributions to both knowledge and practice within the sector. Chapter 6 considers

the findings as informed by engagement with hodological space (Lewin, 1997) and

Chapter 7 presents a discussion of the research outcomes as situated in the literature.

Chapter 6: Conceptual analysis of findings

This chapter focuses on the further conceptual consideration of the analysis of rich data from a small group of participants and thus, whilst such analysis suggests outcomes pertinent to the substantive context, there is not an intention to generate formal theory. While the primary focus of the chapter is the emergent conceptual categories, the chapter develops the way that the core categories are framed within a conceptual framework supported by the concept of hodological space.

6.1 The Conceptual Categories

The conceptual categories Biography, Context, Social Engagement and Use of Technology embraced conceptual properties in the form of continua, each having impact upon or being impacted by emergent properties from the category of Identity/ Self.

The categories, and related properties, discussed in the previous chapter are:

- Biography (home, education, work)

- Context (financial/legal stability; study, space and place; emotional/social stability)

- Social Engagement (desire; studying with peers; nature)

- Use of Technology (for study; for communication; as required by the College; using mobile technologies; Social Media)

· Identity/Self (identification; difference; goal identity; liminality)

During the discussion of my findings (Chapter 5), Biography, Context and Identity/ Self were identified as core categories.

6.2 A Conceptual Framework

In order to better understand the nature and impact of the conceptual categories and properties that emerged from the data, it was important to find a model that would support the appropriate capture of both their essence and impact. As a social psychologist influenced by phenomenological philosophers, Kurt Lewin formulated a meta-theoretical construct, a concept he named as 'life space', that could be used to represent all the influences acting on an individual at any one point in time (Sheehy, 2004; Henle, 1978; Lewin 1936). The following section therefore considers the use of 'life space' in relation to my research findings and the subsequent sections discuss the contextual situation of these findings against the backdrop of sector related policy and research.

Lewin's conceptualisation and representation of 'life space' (1997; 1936) provides the basis for a frame within which categories emerging from my inductive research could be coherently represented, as they existed at any one moment for any one participant. As the research captured the each of the participants' narratives in an individual interview lasting between forty minutes and two hours, attempting to represent a 'life course' (Giddens, 1991, p.75) was seen as inappropriate. Lewin's own designation of

'life space' was the capturing of a very thin slice of socio-psychological or 'psychic' life against a small slice of time such that, by preference, the time-slice became microscopic or infinitesimally slim. Where recording of a direction of travel or section of a 'life span' was required, Lewin (1997, p.206) advocated observation of a 'macroscopic time-interval', through consideration of a series of microscopic representations, in order to ascertain the state of the life space at more than one point in time. This would be a positive technique for representation of the rich data induced for a participant during a future longitudinal study.

Lewin's conceptualisation was of a topologically designed 'hodological space' (Lewin, 1938) containing and demonstrating 'a totality of co-existing facts … these coexisting facts have the character of a "dynamic field" in so far as the state of any part of this field depends on every other part of the field' (Lewin, 1997 p.187). Lewin's 'totality of facts' includes anything and anyone affecting the individual or Participant at that point in time but this inclusion is only in so far as they have 'psychic' impact on the individual. The concept of hodological space, as considered within the scope of this research, applies to matters, issues or processes which have had psychic impact on the lives of Participant(s), as reported within Participant narratives. The psychic nature of such representation embraces the invisibility of the captured social processes (or forces) and associated perceptual reactions; only the behaviours or actions resulting from the resolution of psychic forces, at any one point in time, gain visibility. Thus a change in behaviour or a course of action may be perceived by tutors and peers within the educational setting with little or no awareness of that which lies within the life space.

Lewin (1997) also recognised that a change in or over time might bring with it a change of goal, an adaptation of habit (regular action/perspective) or psychical context that changes the influence of valences and thus the depiction of the life space. Lewin (1936) considered that matter beyond psychic boundary, or 'foreign hull', of the life space takes the form of material, structural processes, or activity that does not have psychic impact at the given point in time [Fig. 6.1]. He wrote:

It is obvious that psychology must take into account the physical and social facts which obey non-psychological laws and which control events in the "foreign hull" of the life space. For these facts determine the boundary points of the life space and are of great importance for all events in it.

[Lewin, 1936 p.75]

It is important, however, to recognise that it is the activity within the life space and which is thus impacting on the perceptions and actions of the individual at a given point in time that is pertinent to this research activity.

5—The life space as a "dynamically not closed" world. P, person; E, environment.
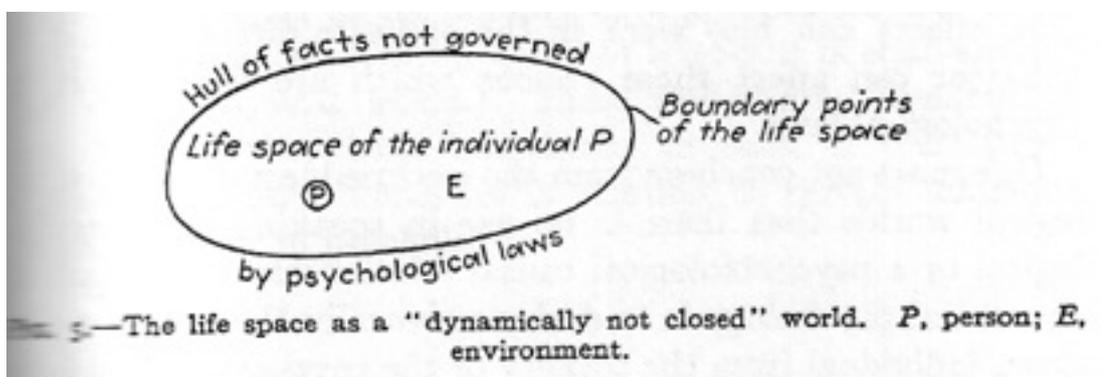
Figure 6.1 The Life Space (Lewin, 1936 p.73 fig. 5)

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Whilst Lewin's work was situated in an era that developed a structural Taylorist modernism (Alajoni et al., 2010), his legacy continues to be evident through and beyond the post-modern turn, whether this be through, for example, his much challenged but better known work on change management, his development of theories of group dynamics, the introduction of action research or, more rarely his specific work on life space. Rainio (2011) writes with a post-modern perspective, in critical contemplation of the potential for further development of Lewin's 'life space'. Seeking to simplify the concept of 'life space', Rainio explains succinctly:

> The hodological space is a *discrete* presentation of the space … it is constituted of *regions* with boundaries between them, some regions being "neighboring" [sic] each other (ie having common boundaries) some not. The whole of all regions is called "life space". The structure of the "life space" is defined by the 'neighbourhood relation" between the regions.

> [Rainio, 2011 p.4]

A) Topological (hodological) representation
1)   2)

E = neighboring region
of A, B, C, and D
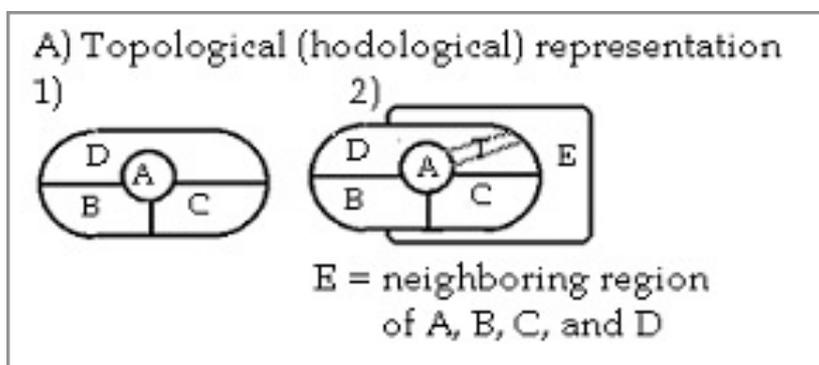
A, B, C, D are regions in the life space. T provides a link between A and E.

Figure 6.2 Hodological Representation of the Life Space (Rainio, 2011 p.3)

In considering the construction of the illustrated space, Lewin (1997) indeed indicates the importance of the positioning of regions within the life space and forces within that space. His consideration of forces takes the form of directional 'tendency to locomotion' or 'strength of drive ' (p197) that may cause a change of perspective(s) or action(s). Rainio (2011, p.5), again seeking to simplify, presents Lewin as denoting three types of forces: 'driving forces', 'restraining forces' (or barriers) and 'boundary forces'.

Rainio (2011) sees 'boundary forces' as problematic. Rainio's positivistic visualisation is of boundaries as concrete edges to or partitions between regions. He expresses concerns about the conceptual validity of a boundary, to a force-bearing region or valence, having the potential to exert force (or resistance) in its own right. Again, this concern aligns more with Rainio's positivistic drive for greater generalisation and development of a more concrete and widely applicable mathematical representation of life space than with Lewin's considered aim of representing the psychic time slice for an individual. Indeed, Lewin's own position (1936) likens the boundary to a threshold, through or across which the ease of moving may differ. Since boundaries are perceptual and relative, it is this more interpretivist consideration of boundaries as thresholds that I have adopted in considering the life spaces of Participants and the associated discussion.

Lewin's writings emphasise the importance of the present tense of life space, and thus its validity in terms of its influence on and reflections of perceptions, values and

actions at a given point in time. He writes (1997, p.189), 'This present field has a certain time-depth. It includes the "psychological past", "psychological present", and "psychological future" which constitute one of the dimensions of the life space existing at a given time'. Lewin's assertion clarifies his position that the lived past of an individual is not contained as a region within the life space; the psychic impact comes rather from that individual's perceptions and feelings about their past. In considering Participants' data, experience of the present is impacted by Biography and Context (i.e. memories, perceptions and meanings preceding the current point in time) and their goals or 'expectations, wishes, fears, daydreams' (Lewin, 1997 p.207) relating to the future. The Participants provided considerable narrative about their past and current contexts and yet their future was closely bound to their sense of Goal Identity. Lewin's framework supports the proposition that each of these regions has influence upon the perspectives and actions of the present.

Regions which induce forces or force fields are labeled as 'valences' by Lewin:

> The valence might be due to a state of hunger, to emotional attachment or to social constellation … the statement that a certain region of the life space has a positive or negative valence merely indicates that, for whatever reason, at the present time and for this specific individual a tendency exists to act in the direction towards this region or away from it.
>
> [Lewin, 1938 p.88]

He cites a goal as an example of a positive valence, 'a force field where all forces point toward the same region' (Lewin, 1997 p.197). Each of the properties of the conceptual categories emerging from the rich research data can be seen as having the capacity to take on a positive or negative valence (or influencing force) within the life space of the Participant, with the degree and nature of the force depending upon the perceived position of the Participant's situation along the continua at the given moment, the existence or otherwise of conflict (overlapping valences) and the pertinence of the region to the potential action.

6.2.1 The concept of Hodological Space and Participant Life Spaces

Whilst Lewin (1997; 1936) did not set out to order regions chronologically within the majority of his illustrations of life space, I made the decision to seek to illustrate the psychological past, the psychological present and the psychological future (respectively) of participants discretely. Thus within the diagrams that follow reference is made to 'past', present' and 'future'; in each case the illustration considers the psychic perceptions of the participant and the impact or force that results.

I decided to include only the core categories within the life space, as identified in my research outcomes, with the intention of illustrating the forces inherent to both those categories and their sub-categories. Sub-categories that emerged within the conceptual category of Context were subsumed by the role identities reported as being variously adopted by participants, as the experience of particular sub-categories was inherent to the experience of that role. For example, Beth's reported desire for a space to study,

rather than her bedroom, was experienced with her enactment of her student identity standard.

Within the diagrams solid lines were used to indicate a solid, potentially force bearing boundary to a valence or region. Variable degrees of fluidity between regions were illustrated through the use of dashed or dotted lines (the smaller the dashes, the greater the porosity). This principle was extended to the boundary between Biography (psychological past) and Context (psychological present), to life changing events or thresholds, and to the degree to which the adoption of roles has been reported as discrete or open. Arrows were used to indicate the reported direction of forces. Codes were developed to indicate regions within the life spaces, as follows:

GI : Goal Identity   IS : Identity Standard

LC : Life Change   AW: Army Wife

CH: Church   D : Daughter

E : Education   H : Home

M : Mother   Mu: Music

P : Partner   So: Son

Sp : Sport   S : Student

U: University (not College) Ca: (University) Campus

V : Volunteering   W : Work

A: Army
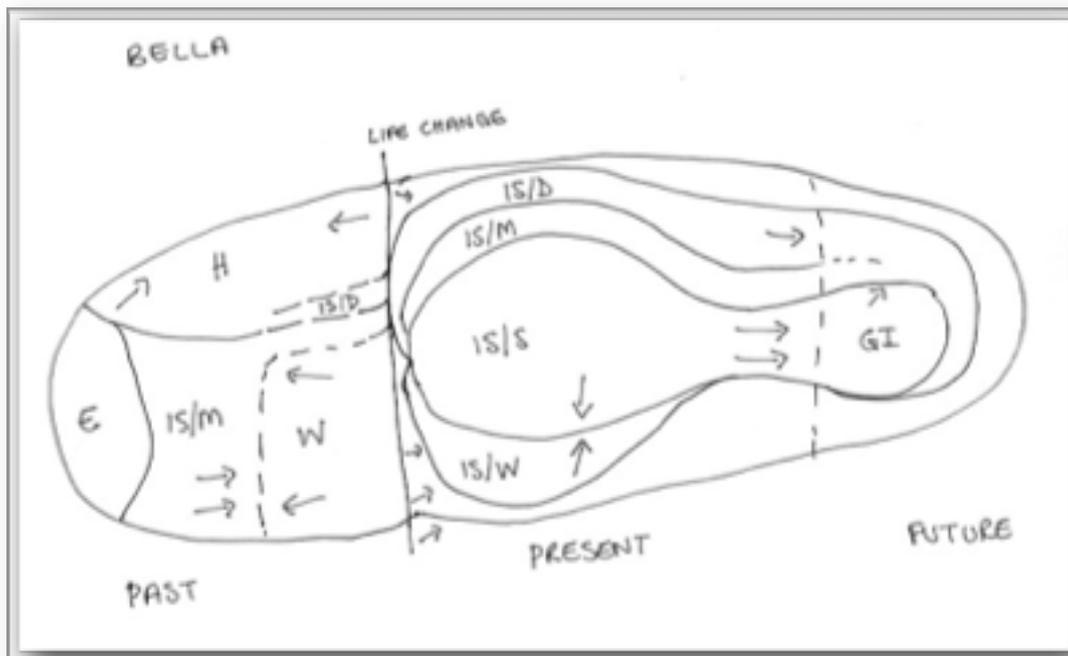
Key: E=Education; H=Home; W=Work; IS=Identity Standard; S=Student; M=Mother; D=Daughter;
GI=Goal Identity

Conflicting forces within Bella's psychic past were dispelled by the life changing event

(a nervous breakdown) that impacted on all areas of her life and which is shown as a

strong past/present boundary. This disruptive event led to Bella's reported

abandonment of her earlier life and thus provided a changed Context, supported the

development of a future goal identity which was to provide the driving psychic force

or motivation for the adoption of a primary role as a student.

Figure 6.3 Bella's Life Space
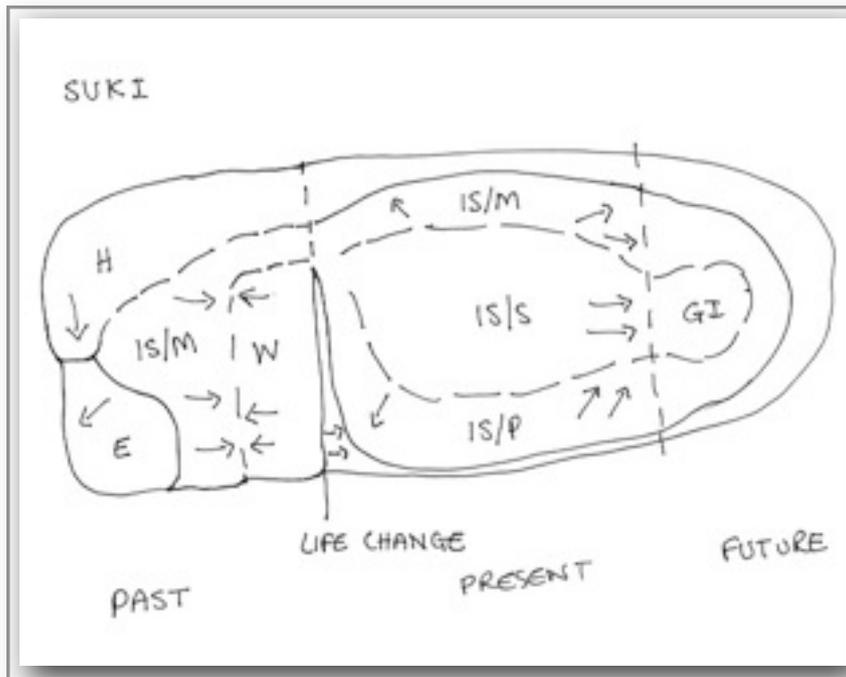
Key: E=Education; H=Home; W=Work; IS=Identity Standard; S=Student; M=Mother; D=Daughter; P=Partner; GI=Goal Identity

A motorcycle accident was reported by Suki as being the life changing event that led her to consider a new goal. Unlike Bella, Suki retained aspects of her role identities as a mother and a daughter, as shaped by her psychic past. Thus the boundary between her past (in her family roles) and her psychic present in the same role is separated by a broken line, a softer more porous boundary. Her previous identity as a worker, however, is completely separated from her new role as a student and this is shown by the strong solid boundary.

Figure 6.4 Suki's Life Space
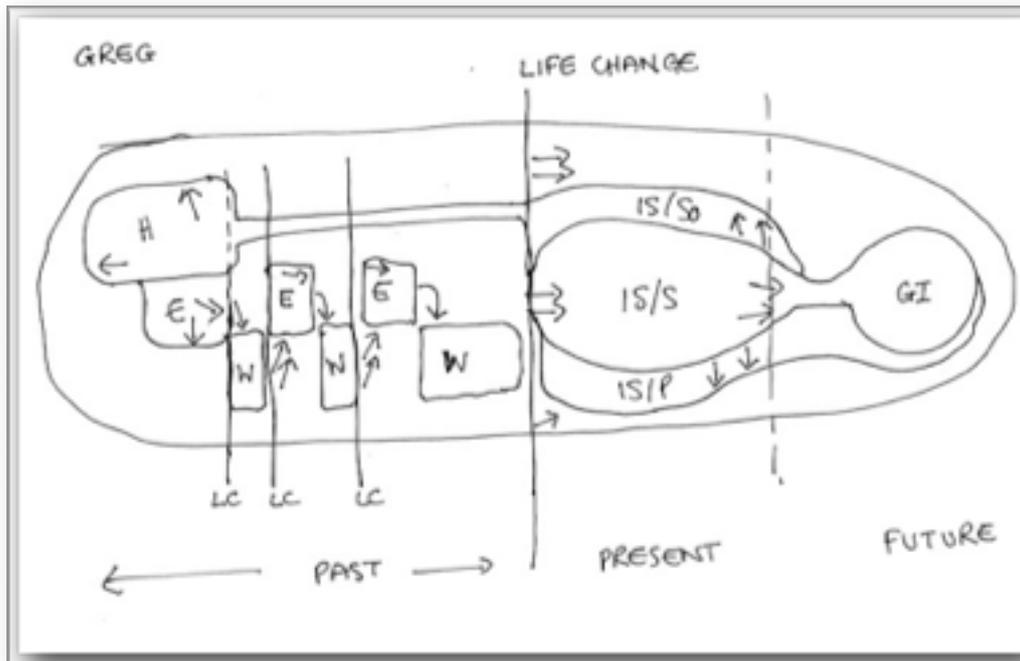
Key: E=Education; H=Home; W=Work; IS=Identity Standard; S=Student; M=Mother; So=Son; P=Partner; GI=Goal Identity

Greg's psychic past encompasses four life changing events, as indicated by the solid boundary lines across the depiction of his psychic past. He has changed his role and his self perception after each event, moving to a new educational situation (and a new goal identity) in each case. The life space shows the influence of his home or family life on his current self perception in his role as a son; the valence Home is shown feeding through the boundaries to influence this part of his psychic present. Strong boundaries between role identities emphasise compartmentalisation.

Figure 6.5 Greg's Life Space
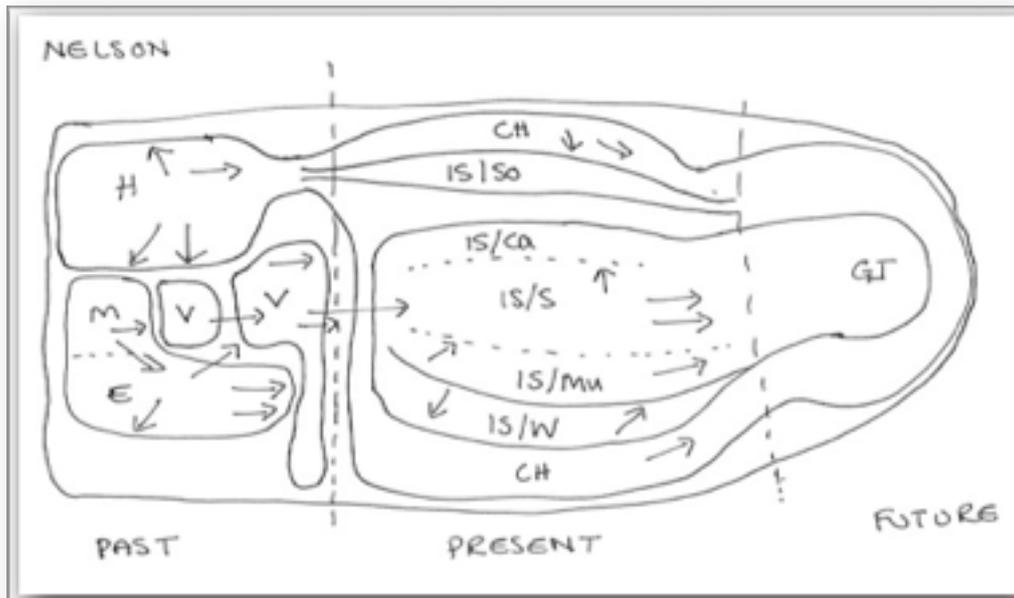
Key: E=Education; H=Home; W=Work; IS=Identity Standard; S=Student; So=Son; GI=Goal Identity; V=Volunteering; Mu=Music; CH=Church; Ca=Campus

Nelson's life space depicts strong motivational forces (as shown by forward facing arrows) from his Biography, or psychic past, thus supporting his goal identity and the journey to the adoption of a student role. The influence of the his religious beliefs and his role as a son are reported as being very much present within his Context and yet are separated (as illustrated by strong boundaries) from the student role. Nelson's involvement on the University campus and his role as a musician are closely linked to his student identity standard and the boundaries separating these roles are shown as being porous.

Figure 6.6 Nelson's Life Space
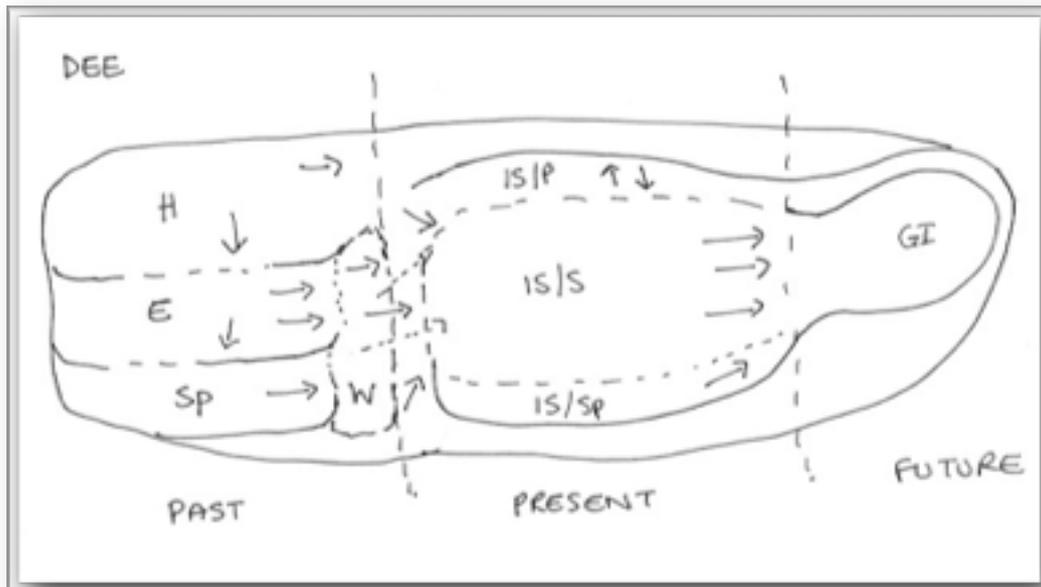
Key: E=Education; H=Home; W=Work; IS=Identity Standard; S=Student; SP=Sport; P=Partner; GI=Goal Identity

For Dee, undertaking higher level study was an expectation, and this is evident from the illustrated positive forces (arrows) from all areas of her psychic past. Her traditional understanding of the university experience has led to a high degree of salience of the student identity role, as shown by the size of the space allocated to that valence in her life space diagram. She also reported a high degree of inter role porosity, embracing her student role in her sporting and home lives and thus these roles are separated by broken boundary lines.

Figure 6.7 Dee's Life Space
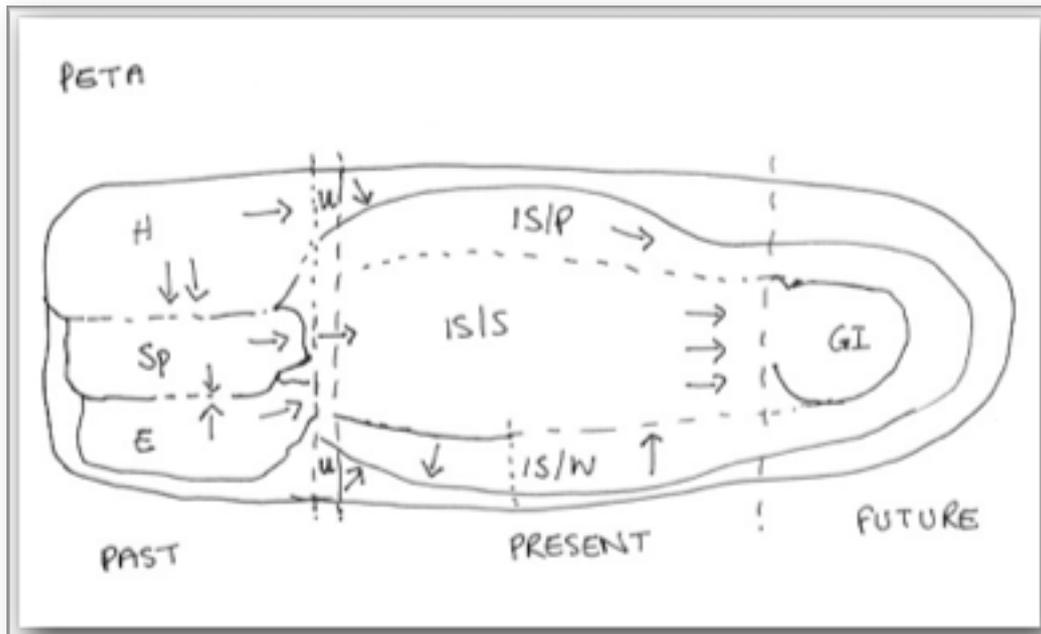
Key: E=Education; H=Home; W=Work; IS=Identity Standard; S=Student; SP=Sport; P=Partner; GI=Goal Identity

For Peta, progression to higher level study was encouraged rather than expected, a conflict being reported between her sporting prowess and the post-school route to university study. The boundaries between Peta's reported past and present are illustrated by a win set of porous boundaries as she moved between her home life, though an initial stage at a campus based university, before progressing to her current role. Peta's most salient role is that of a student. This role dominates her psychic present and is reflected, though the use of broken boundary lines, in the other roles she undertakes.

Figure 6.8 Peta's Life Space
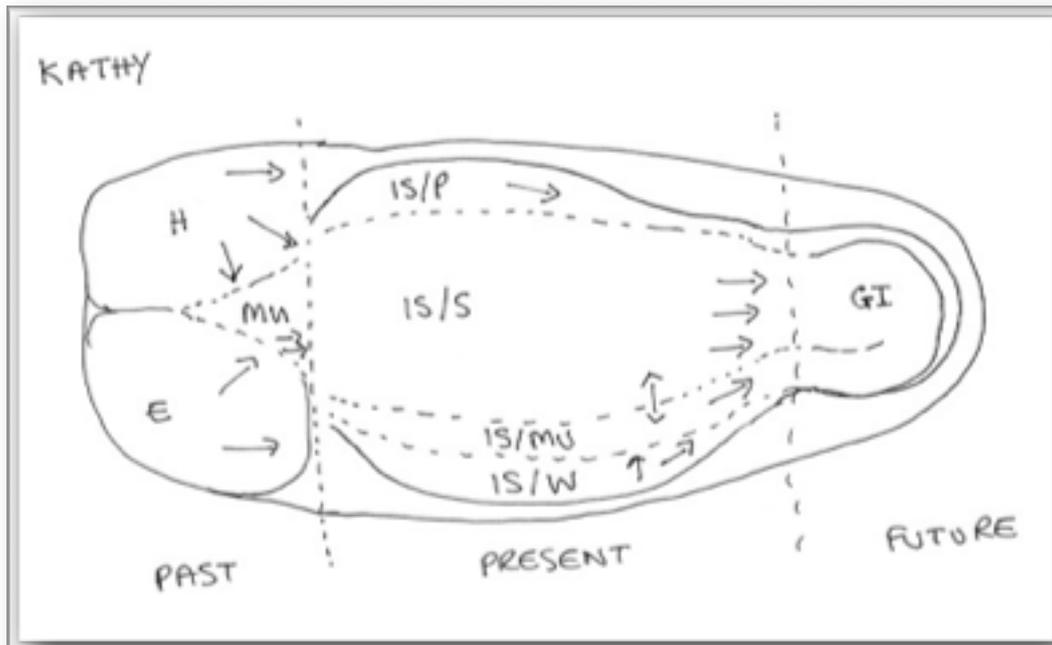
Key: E=Education; H=Home; W=Work; IS=Identity Standard; S=Student; Mu=Music; P=Partner;

GI=Goal Identity

Katy reported only positive psychic influences in her Biography. Her early

commitment to music is reflected in both the valences of Home and Education and

her Goal Identity as a music teacher was established in this context. This positive

influence permeates the porous boundary between Katy's past and present. Katy's

strong expectation of a traditional university experience is reflected in the dimensions

of her student identity standard and the porous nature of the boundaries between her

other roles.

Figure 6.9 Kathy's Life Space
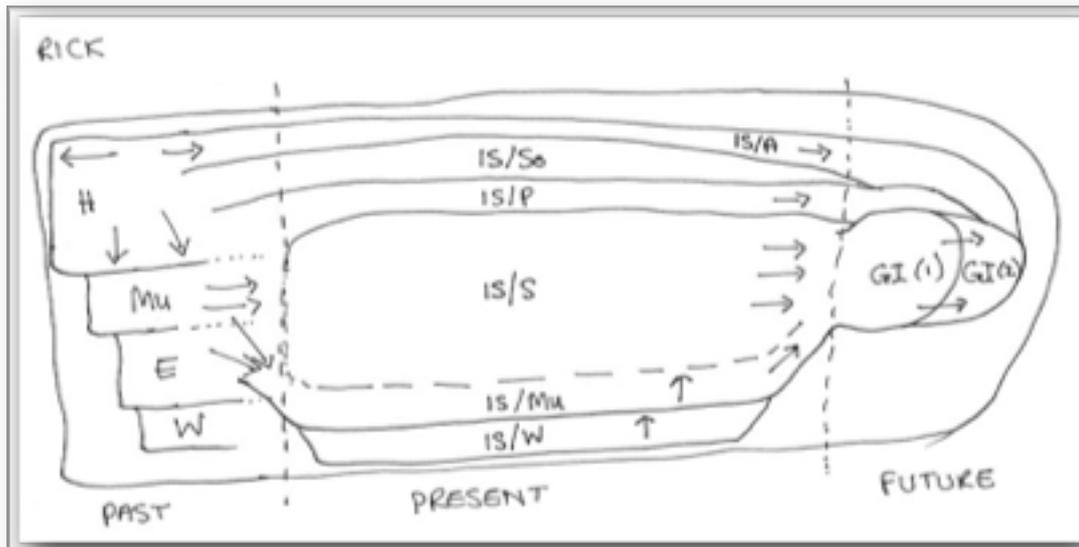
Key: E=Education; H=Home; W=Work; IS=Identity Standard; S=Student; So=Son; Mu=Music;

P=Partner; A=Army; GI=Goal Identity

Rick's life space illustrates continuity between his Biography, or psychic past, his

Context and his Goal Identities. He reportedly retains a strong sense of temporal

continuity in his roles whilst maintaining compartmentalisation between each, as

indicated by the strong boundary lines between role identities. Rick's goals changed

as his studies progressed and this is illustrated by the developed Goal identities shown

within his life space.

Figure 6.10 Rick's Life Space
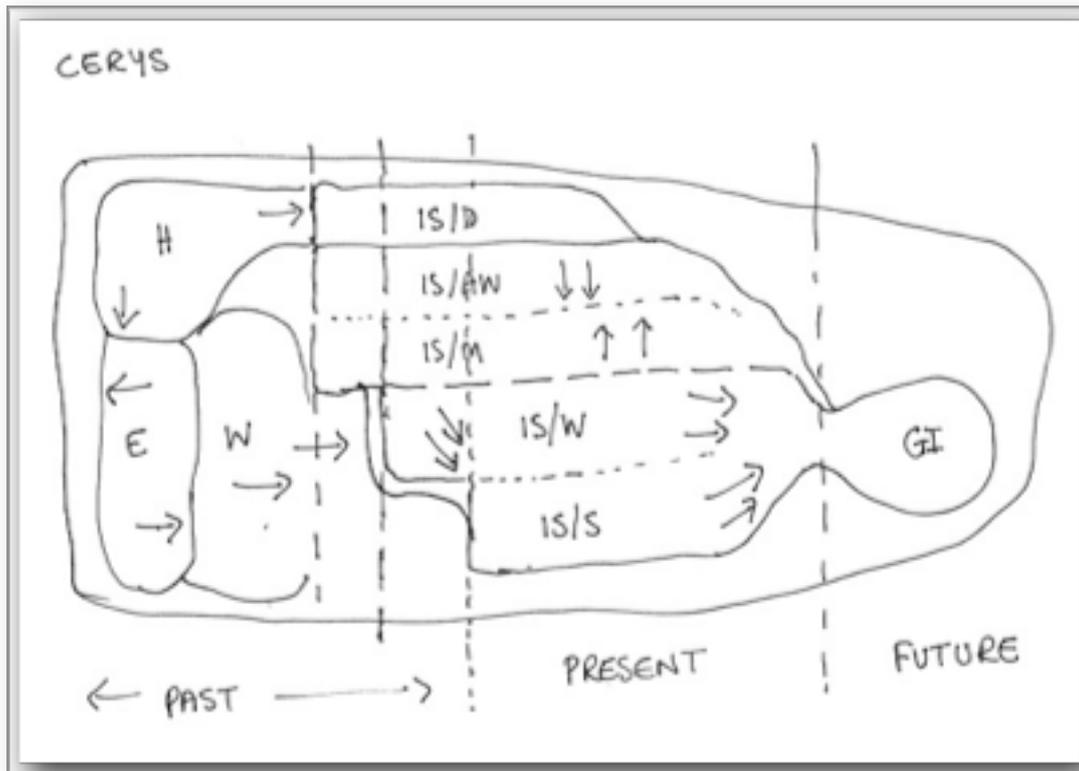
Key: E=Education; H=Home; W=Work; IS=Identity Standard; S=Student; AW=Army Wife;

M=Mother; D=Daughter; GI=Goal Identity

Cerys' life space drawing depicts her perception of her Biography as evolutionary,

albeit in stages, rather than having clarity associated with a goal identity. Each of her

biographical stages are gently separated by a porous boundary. Having left education

in preference for a working life, the nature of her work eventually led her nack to

learning. The conflict of connected roles within Cerys' psychic present is illustrated

in the diagram by the forces associated with motherhood and her role as an army

wife. None of Cerys' roles are completely separated and none has apparent salience at

the time of the interview.

Figure 6.11 Cerys' Life Space
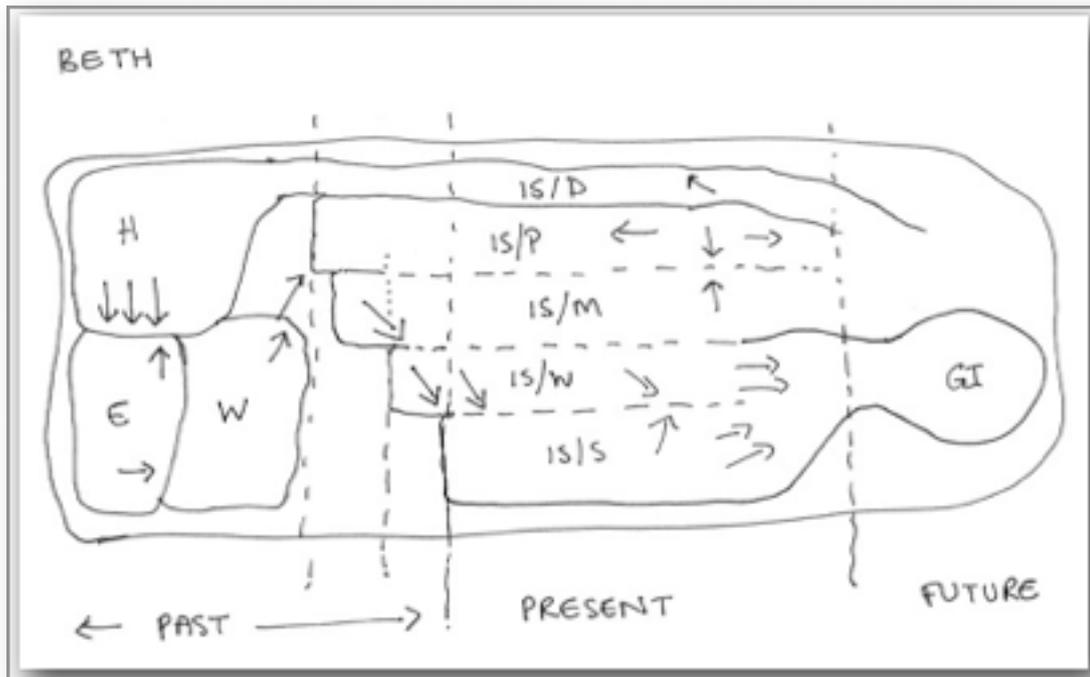
Key: E=Education; H=Home; W=Work; IS=Identity Standard; S=Student; P=Partner; M=Mother; D=Daughter; GI=Goal Identity

Beth's psychic past also reflects the perception of a continuum, with events such as motherhood providing porous boundaries between stages within her psychic past and her present. The depiction of motherhood leading to her current work (as a childminder) which supported her study (in Early Years) which supports her Goal Identity (as a teacher) flows through the diagram from the reflections on her recent past to her expectations for the future.

Figure 6.12 Beth's Life Space

6.3 Key themes emerging from conceptual framework

 While it is possible to discuss each area of the framework in its own right, the situation of each region (or conceptual category) and its valence creates unique dimensions for each participant and at each point in time. Thus the sections below

provide the opportunity for discussion and consideration both pertinent to each core category, in relation to participant life space and the wider field.

6.3.1 Biography and Context

Since Lewin (1997) captures the life space at a given point in time and emphasises the importance of the location of regions the relative co-location of the valences representing conceptual categories of Biography and Context has considerable importance. The categories of Biography and Context, representing the psychological past and psychological present respectively of the participant, evidence the application of social forces, and thus strong influences, on both perceptions and actions of the participant, and this remains the case unless and until a disruption (e.g a life changing event) or goal valence (e.g. a new goal identity) causes held perspectives to be questioned and challenges constructed meanings.

Participants' Biography and Context, as illustrated in the life space drawings, are separable by varying degrees. For participants Bella [Fig 6.3] and Suki [Fig 6.4], the valence Biography has a boundary connecting with the Context region that has been sharpened by a life-changing event (breakdown/accident), thus exerting its own drive away from past perceptions and toward the generation of their new goal to participate in degree-level study.

For participants such as Greg [Fig. 6.5] and Nelson [Fig. 6.6], the two regions of Biography and Context are connected through family ties and issues [Greg and

Nelson] and a commitment to religious beliefs [Nelson]. In each case, a property that emerged from the participant's narrative exists within their Biography and again within Context. It thus impacts on their perceptions of role and actions in their psychological present. For example, Greg's narrative tells of still strong perceptions of a childhood trauma evident, which have impacted on his role as a son (IS/So) and emerge as negative forces in his present, whilst Nelson told of how his early development of and still growing relationship with his religion (CH) enhances his present experience.

For Dee [Fig 6.7] Peta [Fig 6.8], Kathy [Fig 6.9], Rick [Fig 6.10], Cerys [Fig 6.11], and Beth [Fig 6.12] the boundaries between Biography (psychological past) and Context (psychological present) are permeable and thus indistinct. Each narrative shows a degree of continuity between the Biography and Context as presented by the participant, with a lack of clear demarcation in the timelines provided.

The narratives all provided evidence of current contextual activity that extends for the duration of their student experience, though the life space drawing remains a the depiction that is illustrative of a temporal microslice. Invariably, within this microslice, some aspects of Context are also evident in the recent psychic past. This is particularly evident in the life space diagrams of Cerys [Fig. 6.11] and Beth [Fig. 6.12]. I therefore conceptualise the boundaries between representation of Biography and Context as representing a continuum of porosity, variably supporting continuity but clearly generating a flow of influence between regions rather than the generation of conflict.

In each case the properties within the valence Biography, situated in the psychic past of the participant, are imposing or applying invisible force, for example the impact of family expectations, to the Context region, itself a composite of forces. It appears to be this latter region, and the associated tensions created through the presence of long and short term goals, that has greater influence on the participants' conceptualisation of identity and self at a given point in time, and therefore upon their psychic present. Thus, I would assert that whilst Biography would appear to influence or have impact on Context, it is the valence of Context, being more closely related to the psychic present, that has the greater influence on progression to higher study and on the student experience.

6.3.2 Identity/Self

6.3.2.1 An Overview

The participants in my research activity had crossed the threshold of entry to higher-level study and, at the time of contemplation of their life space, were continuing with their programmes of study. The time slice applicable to this research and the narratives relating to their 'life space' were therefore situated against this frame. Thus the conceptually evolved valences of Biography and Context, whilst embracing their route to study, more interestingly influence the complex region of Identity/Self and the locomotion of each participant towards attainment of their respective goals. This influence is evidenced through their self-identification, the articulation of their goals,

the role identities adopted (when and how), their identity standards and the way in which they have approached and continue to engage with student life. Thus the region contains in itself a number of valences, representing and generated through the properties of Identity/Self as a Conceptual Category.

Lewin (1997) conceptualises goals (or needs) as exerting strong driving forces towards the psychological future, creating the tensions necessary for positive locomotion in the direction of the goal. The participants all expressed their goals in terms of the roles or positions they wished to hold (e.g. manager, teacher, performer), and in so doing established a Goal Identity. Since the psychological future is formed from expectations and hopes, the inter-relationship between self-expectation and the goal identity of the Participant becomes necessarily close, thus impacting on the development of a relevant role identity (Stryker, 2000) and the nature of the identity standard (Burke and Stets, 2009) adopted for that role in support of the locomotion of the Participant towards the goal. Thus, Goal Identity, whilst itself receiving influence from Biography and Context takes the form of a strong positive valence that is exerting directional influence over the meanings inherent to each reported understanding of Participant student identity standard and the degree of Participant commitment to, and therefore salience of, the student role identity.

In defining role identity, Stryker (2002, p.57) writes 'attaching a positional label to a person leads to expected behaviours from that person and to behaviour toward that person premised on expectations. The term "role" is used for these expectations that are attached to positions'. Stryker and Burke (2000) differentiate between role and

identity in terms of the degree of externality of meaning – as such they assign 'role', with its structural emphasis, to refer to the social expectations of positions held in social networks . The expression 'identity' is associated with the internalisation of meanings and associated expectations or 'standard' in relation to that role; inherent constructions of social being lead to the adoption of a particular identity (Burke and Stets, 2009; Stryker and Burke, 2000).

In considering the participants on their study paths, taking on a student role identity becomes a stage in what Giddens (1991, p.75) describes as a 'trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future'. For non traditional students studying in college based higher education, the contextual conceptualisation of undergraduate identity has potentially greater challenge than would be the case for the more traditional student. This challenge is underpinned by the lack of clarity of the positioning of college based higher education, whether through franchise arrangements or within a validating partnership, which furthers the suggestion of marginality (Esmond, 2012; Parry et al., 2012).

Brennan et al. (2010a) bring to the fore Becher and Trowler's (2001) consideration of the 'role of individual agency in identity and cultural construction' (p.22) with the implication that a dissonance between individual and faculty objectives may impact on learning and, by implication, the visibility of learning opportunities. Brennan and Jary (2010, p.13) highlight the 'orientations and aspirations that individual students bring ' (p.13); this theme is developed further in the work of McCune et al. (2010, p. 692), research strongly influenced by the writing of Wenger (1998) on learning

trajectories, 'Wenger argues that an individual's sense of where they are going in relation to particular communities helps them to decide what is important for them and what they may incorporate into their developing identities'. Thus the definition and associated expectations of student-hood or, indeed, the nature and porosity of the role identity adopted by student - and the institutional acknowledgement of its variance - is of importance to the co-construction of the learning experience.

Northedge (2003, p.27) suggests that those new to academic study 'have a more demanding role than most. They cannot simply listen, absorb and imitate. They need to develop identities as members of the chosen knowledge community, so that they "think" and "speak" its discourse'. This positioned is developed by Brennan and Jary (2010) who suggest that *what is learned at university* includes the development of self (or selves), 'about shedding existing identities and acquiring new ones ... acquiring an ability to juggle multiple identities as being simultaneously a 'student', a parent', a worker' (p.8), and Stevenson and Clegg(2013) who assert, ' there are compelling theoretical and empirical reasons for thinking more explicitly about temporality and future orientation rather than seeing it as obvious and always already there. Araujo (2005) too has suggested that the 'present' is experienced in relation to the past and future' (p.18).

Brennan et al. (2010b) suggest engagement with the postmodern conceptualisation of passing from 'ascribed status' to 'achieved status' (p.136) and the concept of self-authorship, the latter relating strongly to the aspiration to a goal identity (Lewin, 1997), whether this is in terms of an absolute role or in terms of membership of

subject/practitioner communities. Certainly mature students Bella , Greg and Suki reported movement from an ascribed self towards a goal identity; Peta, Dee, Nelson and Cerys saw themselves becoming practitioners within professional communities whilst Beth, Kathy and Rick had clear goals in the form of named role identities.

Esmond (2012) writes of identity as being relational and dynamic, a position that concurs with views expounded within the symbolic interactionist communities (Cooley, 1983; Stryker, 2000). In undertaking his empirical research Esmond writes, 'During the interviews, narratives of identity formation emerged that were constructed around the processes by which students came to participate in higher education'(p. 358). Brennan et al. (2010b) also see identity as relational. They consider two conceptions of identity which they name as 'personal identity/self-identity/self-concept' (agency, disposition or attitude) and 'group identity/social identity' (membership type identity) (p.136), perspectives which engage with the notions of self and identification (Buckingham, 2007). The issue of membership - or memberships - requires acknowledgment of multiple identities, this being particularly evident for part-time and/or mature students, for whom the picture is more complex (McCune et al., 2010; Richardson and Edmunds, 2010; Gallacher et al., 2002).

All participants expressed, through their narratives, their expectations of higher level study, and thus of the features of student identity, and told of the ways in which they maintained personality traits, perspectives and actions that shared meaning and thus self-verified their adopted identity standard within their situation (Stryker and Burke, 2000; Burke and Reitzes, 1981). Within the participants' life spaces, the valences of

Biography and Context influence the socially and individually constructed meanings associated with the particular understandings and expectations of the role held by each participant, thus underpinning the set of standards against which they would measure their own performativity within a related setting or frame (Goffman, 1959).

Burke and Stets (2009) consider the moderation of an individual's ongoing reflexivity as they engage with their own perceptions and those of others within a given frame, measuring the 'self-in-situation' (p.54) against their identity standard and thus highlight the production of moderating actions to maintain the standard, rather than the modification of the identity standard according to feedback and this is illustrated through the narratives of participants. For example Greg, Bella and Suki reportedly found themselves to differ from their classmates in the formation of the student identity standard but reported that nothing that younger peers did deflected them from that standard. These participants are more mature than others in the group, and therefore may have a more deeply rooted sense of identity. Thus, the strength of their own social reinforcement through biography and context was potentially greater than any influence of fellow students, in their respective cohorts, away from the continued moderation of actions towards the adopted identity standard. Where peers within a situation shared the student identity standard of participants the narrative told of effective underpinning of that standard. Examples of this reflexive reinforcement can be seen from the narratives of Cerys and Beth where the students closely shared identity standards as practitioners and mature students. Another example is that of Rick who explained how he chose to work with other students who shared his

perspectives on learning and thus, to an extent, his student identity standard which reinforced, self-verifying and increased his confidence in his chosen standard.

Research activity in the broader field affirms this finding. Littlejohn et al. (2010) reported a similar adherence to identity standards following a three-year study of 2215 young university students, 'their expectation of how they might learn at university remained relatively static over the same timeframe' (p.13). While this covers only a proportion of the potential dimensions of the student identity standard, it corroborates a low probability of a change of position from the point of enrolment, even for 'traditional' students.

> Educational psychology literature reveals that prior expectations exert powerful influences upon student behaviour, whether they are internal, self-expectations of students or arise from external agents, such as teachers (Kirsch, 1999; Merton, 1968; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992).
>
> [Littlejohn et al., p.14]

Empirical research undertaken by Burke and Reitzes(1981) on the student identity standard found 'four dimensions of meaning that were seen by all students as being relevant to defining oneself as a student' (Burke and Stets, 2009 p.83). These dimensions emerged as academic responsibility, intelligence, personal assertiveness and sociability with students' responses differing according to where they saw themselves on each continuum. The study continued by looking for degrees of consistency between student perceptions and actions in their student roles and the

dimensions of meaning as expressed. The research concluded, ' identities influence

behavior [sic] only to the extent that the meanings of the behavior and the meanings in

the identity standard are the same.' (Burke and Stets, 2009 p.82). Stryker and Burke

(2000, p.289) extend this position and link the maintenance of the identity standard to

the degree of goal orientation, 'Students with a more strongly committed student

identity work more effectively to verify and maintain that identity – that is, to keep

perceptions of self-relevant meanings in the situation in line with self-meanings in

their identity standard'. Thus, in relation to life space, consistency and strength of

meaning as influenced through Biography and Context and in combination with the

positive valence of a clear Goal Identity influences the maintenance of the student

identity standard.

Participants' narratives indicated three broad differences in the expectations and

behaviours associated with the construction of their student identity standards. I

therefore initially considered there to be three differing Participant positions in

relation to their own dimensions (Burke and Reitzes, 1981) of the student identity

standard. Bella, Suki, Greg, Cerys and Beth had not made long term plans to follow

their route into higher levels study but, having done so had a very focused and

structured expectation of structured academic study that did not extend to activities

beyond class activity [Standard A]; Rick's expectation and understanding of the

student identity was similar in that, while he had not made long term plans to study at

higher level, he had focused on the student role very seriously whilst following a

vocational progression route. However his narrative reported his understanding that

learning would be less tutor directed. Nonetheless his actions strongly focused on

study related activity and eschewed the social engagement often associated with the traditional 'university experience' [Standard B]. The four students progressing through the A level route [Kathy, Peta, Nelson, Dee] had high levels of 'academic responsibility' (Burke and Reitzes, 1991 p.242) in that they had been given a clear understanding of the academic expectations of higher level study and had continued to plan for undergraduate study. These students were self -perceived as 'intelligent' and exhibited higher degrees of sociability; their student identity standards had been influenced by the expectations of their schools of the 'university experience'. Kathy and Peta, in particular, articulated their vision of developing self through the higher-level experience and sought to establish wider social networks.

6.3.2.2 Identity Standard

This initial analysis led to me to consider to what extent the student identity standard exerted influences that resulted in the adoption of habits and tools understood to be in accordance with that identity standard, thus positioning the student identity standard as a valence in its own right. The participants' narrated adoption of a particular form of student identity standard appeared to have a level of synergy with their perceptions of learning and actions. The student identity standard appeared to run in parallel with the degree to which participants reported separation of identities or, indeed, their lack of separation. Where having a student role identity was reported as being a part of the participant's goal (i.e. the goal includes spending time as a student) the identity standard of the student varied to include 'the student experience'.

The initial categorisation of Student Identity Standards as presented by participants took the following forms:

Student Identity Standard A [Bella, Greg, Cerys, Beth, Suki]

All participants in this group shared the same set of broad expectations, perceptions and actions.

Expectations	Perceptions	Actions
Expecting Higher Education to be hard/academic	Structured delivery Teacher as authority	Uses learning resources as directed Uses technology as a tool to support learning
Not expecting a social experience	Focusing on study	Engaging with peers in support of learning Not engaging with peers socially
Not seeking a 'traditional university experience'	Undertaking study as part of life activities	Adopting other role identities when not involved in study related activity

Table 6.1 Student Identity Standard A

Student Identity Standard B [Rick]

Rick was the only participant progressing from vocational level 3 study.

Expectations	Perceptions	Actions
Expecting higher study to be progression from further education	Expecting a range of vocational and academic study modes Seeing tutors as experts Seeing tutors as supportive	Making wide use of subject specific college resources Using learning resources as directed Using technology as a tool to support learning
Expecting independent study	Seeking less direction	Using personal technology to support learning

Not expecting a social experience	Focusing on study	Engaging with peers in support of learning Not engaging with peers socially
Not seeking a 'traditional university experience'	Undertaking study as part of life activities	Adopting other role identities when not involved in study related activity

Table 6.2 Student Identity Standard B

Student Identity Standard C [Dee, Peta, Kathy, Nelson]

Dee, Peta, Kathy and Nelson all progressed to higher education following 'A' levels. They adopted the same broad expectations and perceptions of the student role and yet the degree to which they shared actions varied. Thus individual responses are bracketed.

Expectations	Perceptions	Actions
Expecting higher education to be hard/academic	Seeing tutors as experts	Using learning resources as directed [Dee] Using technology as a tool to support learning
Expecting higher study to be professional/vocational	Expecting a range of vocational and academic study modes Seeing tutors as experts	Making wide use of subject specific college resources [Kathy/Nelson]

Expecting independent study	Seeking less direction	Using personal technology to support learning [Kathy/ Peta/Nelson]
		Engaging in regular exploratory activity with use of technology [Kathy/Peta]
		Using social networking to support vocational development [Kathy/Peta/ Nelson]
		Using social networking to support learning [Kathy/ Peta]
Expecting the 'University Experience'	Seeing student life as the central experience	Separates role identities when moving between study and social environments [Dee, Nelson]
		Maintains student identity as primary role [Kathy, Peta]
		Not expecting to work whilst in student role [Dee/ Kathy]
Expecting social activity	Seeking high levels of social engagement	Engaging with peers for study
		Engaging with peers and other students on and beyond campuses
		Taking part in Student Union activities
		Engaging with social networking sites [Nelson/ Kathy/Peta]

Table 6.3 Student Identity Standard C

This exploration served to underline the inherent dangers of such categorisation, as it was not possible to categorise participant expectations, perceptions and actions completely within any one of the designated types of Standard and a number of key features were found to exist in more than one category. *Standard C*, in particular, proved more problematic than even the summary above would indicate since there were considerable variations in emphasis inherent to the relevant sections of the narratives of these Participants and thus, as indicated, actions did not necessarily correspond with broadly shared expectations. This established, for me, the necessity of viewing the valence of Student Identity Standard as a multi-stranded continuum that could then cope with the rich variety of perspectives presented, not only through my Participants but in future research. Characteristics illustrated to some degree and thus taking the form of strands running throughout this continuum include the perceptions of the learning and teaching experience, degrees of social engagement, the use and adoption of technology and the maintenance of the student identity, each having started as an emergent conceptual category in its own right.

Issues of diversity, are presented by Brennan and Osborne (2008) as they too looked to develop a typology, or set of 'dimensions', of the behaviours, expectations, perceptions and actions, inherent to the student role. The authors represent the outcomes of their analysis of the nature of the student experience and the extent of diversity of the student role within their student population. The scope of their classification was structurally different from my own considerations, engaging with their perception of the institutional mediation of student roles and experience in addition to that reported by participants. My own typology looked to ascertain the

influence on behaviours of the adoption of a particular identity standard. For Brennan and Osborne the exploration engages more directly with structures beyond the boundary of the life space that they consider provide a contextual influence on the identity standard and thus upon student behaviours.

Brennan and Osborne explain, 'The first of these [dimensions] was shaped predominantly by the organisational characteristics of the HEIs – how curricula, students, staff and space were organised – and the second by the social characteristics of the students – how much they had in common and how much they differed from one another' (p.184). The tripartite typology of experience was identified as comprising 'shared experience and high student diversity' (A), 'shared experience and low student diversity' (B) and 'individualised student experience' (C). In so doing, Brennan and Osborne (2008) felt it important to ascertain, not only the degree of shared experience within the formal learning environment but also the extent to which the collective experience extended to related extra-curricula and social opportunities.

The Type A students considered by Brennan and Osborne were reported as having presented a high degree of diversity, but nonetheless sharing a largely common experience, tending to be influenced by the cohesive activity associated with or required by their subject choice rather than a need to fit with the expectation of the institutions. This subject allegiance was seen as being a continuing thread for these students following graduation, a profile being shared by the three students studying music within my participant group [Kathy, Rick and Nelson]. Kathy, Rick and Nelson

came from three very different backgrounds, with clear biographical difference and differing expectations of higher level study, sharing only the very clearly reported love of music and a related goal identity.

The Type B students, reported by Brennan and Osborne as having 'shared experience and low student diversity', were quite distinct in their more traditional engagement with the university setting. The authors reflected:

> Students who had been in a type B setting were massively more likely to want to retain an association with their university and were also more likely to feel they were able to get on with a range of people. And they were much more likely to emphasise the "life changing" nature of the university experience

[Brennan and Osborne, 2008 p.187]

This comment underlines the exclusive nature of the SOMUL research activity in its exploration of higher education experience. Had the researchers extended their activity across the full range of higher education provision they might have seen a division in the nature of this particular 'type'. Within situated professional or vocational programmes, the very situatedness develops the shared experience, though this may not be that of a typical or typified *university* student. Thus, the authors' commentary was at odds with a similar typology encountered within the group of participants in my own research. The participants studying on the Early Years programme [Beth and Cerys] were 'non-traditional', studying within a cohesive group of students with similar backgrounds and outlook, and thus had low levels of diversity. The professional nature of the programme ensured a collaborative approach and, although there was little social activity provided or accessed for the cohort, students

shared membership of the professional community. Whilst the students reported the impact of study on their life-course or personal goals, there was no indication that there would be an ongoing allegiance with the institution, nor necessarily the wider spectrum of sociability as indicated by the Type B group in the research of Brennan and Osborne.

The Type C group as described by Brennan and Osborne (2008) has the greatest synergy with the student experience as reported in the HE in FE sector, 'local students, often mature in age (over 21 at entry) with domestic and work commitments. Engagement with the university was typically limited to attending lectures and undertaking obligatory coursework' (p.186). Life outside the university experience was reported as having high priority, a profile familiar to the majority of participants in my own study.

> For students in type C settings, life outside university remained of high importance.For this latter group of students, the experience of university study was something which was lived in parallel with other lives, lives quite full of other responsibilities. Thus, in response to questions about their sense of self-identity, some students would point to the existence of several ways in which this was manifest.

> [Brennan and Osborne, 2008 p.188]

Broader consideration of student typologies has underpinned consideration of both experience and associated outcomes (Hu and McCormick, 2012; Brennan et al., 2010a; Long, 1977) and yet such typologies are situated in traditional university setting. The comment by Brennan and Osborne (2008) that a student's membership of

any one of their their typologies are not exclusive provides a catch all, being similar in nature to my own reflections on the typification of student identity standards earlier in this chapter. They do not, however, offer the notion of a continuum and thus fail to address the experience of those who do not fit the stereotypes - a common feature of the non-traditional student.

6.3.2.3 Identity Salience

One of the thematic characteristics of the continuum that represents the student identity standard has been highlighted as its degree of continuity within and beyond the learning situation. For the majority of participants, the student identity standard did not take precedence outside the learning situation and their narratives told of the other identities they adopted as and when there was need to work towards differing goals or needs. For participants adopting a broader and more sociably focused student identity standard, there seemed to be a greater blurring of the need for differing frames and discrete performances (Goffman, 1959) and less of a desire to present themselves within a different role identity. Stryker (2002, p.57) writes 'discrete identities may be thought of as ordered into a salience hierarchy, such that the higher the identity in that hierarchy, the more likely that the identity will be invoked in a given situation or situations; this probability of invocation is what defines identity salience.'

The role identity adopted at a point in time is accorded salience in relation to social or personal commitments, being evaluated in the form of the costs or benefits of fulfilling a particular role, or otherwise. (Serpe, 1987).   The forces driving towards

the primary goal within the life space, at that instant, influence the locomotion of the individual within their psychic present (Lewin, 1997) and therefore influence identity salience. Where participants expressed a number of goals or needs coexisting within their life spaces, there is a need for some resolution, if only partially, of the existing forces towards reducing the tensions created in the system (Lewin, 1997).

A simplistic positivistic proposal would be to assert that the role identity adopted within a situation reflects the impact of the goal or needs exerting the strongest force. This was not Lewin's contention when considering such a situation through his use of 'topological psychology' (1997; 1936) and indeed, adopting his reluctance to adopt a pseudo-mathematical resolution of forces and thus avoid generalised outcomes (Rainio, 2011), there is highlighted the importance of also considering the impact of the forces exerted by any other goals or needs, and the influencing forces emanating from Biography and Context, whether through earlier adoption of externalised preconceptions of the role being played or though the internally constructed meaning underpinning the identity standard adopted. Whist this model might well function appropriately for examination of a micro-slice of time as represented by the snapshot that is 'life space', the negotiation of identity salience for participants over, for example, a family weekend would require ongoing maintenance or adaptation of the identity salience hierarchy as the immediate goals flex and change. In this example, the degree of social commitments, the intensiveness of personal ties (Stryker, 2002; Serpe, 1987) would provide strong contextual sway. An example of the need to juggle the role identities adopted emerge when considering the reported impact on Suki of juggling the needs of her visiting boyfriend, children on school holidays and the dog

that needs walking, against the imminent hand-in date for her latest assignment. Suki reported clearly the frustration, and associated short tempered behaviour, that had resulted from an inability to focus on the maintenance of the student role for the attainment of the assignment goal with the combined emotional impact of her perceived devaluation of her parenting role.

The degree to which participants reported identity salience as being problematic would appear to be associated with the strength of separation between the roles. For example, with differing rationales, Rick and Bella told of their decision to work towards complete separation of home, work and student role identities and their explicit choice to compartmentalise their lives such that they were not put in a position of social or role conflict. For the Participants with family commitments, the opportunity for separation of roles was deemed more complex, even when this appeared possible at the start of their studies, as was the case for Cerys. With her husband 'on tour' with the army, Cerys felt that she could organise her student role around the needs of her children and thus study in evenings. She had not realised the emotional impact of her role identity as an army wife and the high degree of salience this role took when any casualties were reported in the Battalion and, more naturally, when her husband came home on leave. At the other end of the spectrum, Kathy told of 'being the same everywhere' and adopted a very holistic student identity standard which left the salience of this role almost unchallenged as she moved through differing facets of study, work and social activity.

There is little, if any, reported recognition of the potential impact of the invisibility of both the student identity standard and the degree to which identity salience impacts upon study activity for 'non-traditional' students. Higher Education Institutions, through Student Charters, guidance, regulations, induction activity and learning design frameworks impose an institutional perspective of the expected student identity. During induction, students experience skills audits, study skills support and are introduced to the virtual learning environment and other technologies for learning as they move into their higher level study experience, each designed to support their transition into the role of the 'HE student'. Yet the establishment, at national, institutional or subject level, of any form of cohesive understanding of the impact of individually adopted student role identity remains a challenge ripe for further research and development.

6.4 Summary

This chapter reported the consideration of the core conceptual categories through engagement with the conceptual framework of 'life space' (Lewin, 1997) and its hodological representation. The process of developing of hodological representations affirmed the articulation of Biography, Context and Identity/Self as core categories, emphasised the impact on participants of the psychic, and thus often imperceptible, influences of Biography and/or Context, highlighted the impact of life changing events, and clarified the nature of boundaries between illustrated valences. Of particular interest were the extent to which solid boundaries existed between

Biography and Context, the resultant fluidity of influence between regions and the degree of porosity between reported role identities .

The centrality of the concepts of role identity, identity standard and identity salience (Burke and Stets, 2009; Stryker, 2008; Stryker, 2002; Stryker and Burke, 2000), to the student experience of higher education, has emerged through the recursive analysis of the emergent categories and their hodological representation, albeit with a small group of participants. The absence of explicit recognition of related social forces and their subsequent invisibility within generalist policy documents and strategic plans suggests, at least, a need for reconsideration of the structuralist approach to subsequent implementation within the learning context.

The following chapter provides the opportunity for re-examination of the research findings against the research question *How do the social psychological processes associated with the concepts of self and identity influence the experience of non-traditional undergraduate students engaging in college based technology-supported learning?* and situates the outcomes against policy documents and peer reviewed literature that engages with the experience of the non-traditional student.

Chapter 7 : Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter revisits the research question *How do the social psychological processes associated with the concepts of self and identity influence the experience of non-traditional undergraduate students engaging in college based technology-supported learning?* and, in so doing, situates the outcomes of my research activity within the wider context of policy and research relating to the experience of the non-traditional undergraduate.

Of the five categories that resulted from my research activity, three are core and thus evident within the life space; they are subject to, or emerge as a result of, a range of social psychological forces. The psychic past (perceptual biography), psychic present (context and role identities) and further (goal identity, expectation and motivation) influence not only the progression to and expectations of study at higher level, but the choice of institution, and the nature of the study undertaken; they influence the identity standard adopted by the participant and the degree to which there is impact on the nature and expectation of the actual study experience, including the adoption of technology to support learning and the degree to which the student chooses to engage in the social experience.

The extent of the social psychological influences inherent to student biography and context is not always embraced in research reports and policy reviews that relate to the widening participation agenda for higher education. A strong focus at policy level

remains on the statistical analysis of the numbers of students categorised as being biographically 'non-traditional' in consideration of widening access to higher education. Examples of this focus are provided by Tight (2012, pp.84-85) in his recent review *Researching Higher Education* and he cites Ball et al. (2002), Gayle et al. (2002) and James (2001; 2000) as they describe variably the impact of class, ethnicity, gender, location and parental education, all of which are prescribed and measurable 'non-traditional' indicators within the formal policy documentation (HEFCE 1997). Tight (2012, pp.84-85) importantly notes the view of Gayle et al. (2002) that the impact of these biographical factors was '… less than they had expected and their main conclusion relates to the need for further research to better understand the complexity of what is going on'.

Fuller et al. (2011) also note the apparent incompleteness of policy related research that relies solely on the relatively limited information provided through the statistically reported and recorded biographies of non-traditional participants in higher education and bring to the fore factors less frequently perceived or made visible in the policy research context:

> Policy makers are … left puzzling over the barriers to participation that they assume must exist to explain *non*-participation. Yet this is to ignore the complexities of many people's lives and the extent to which decisions concerning potential participation are heavily influenced by a range of factors, including past experiences of formal education, expectations and aspirations

linked to an individual's upbringing, and the current educational experiences

and aspirations of friends and family members.

[Fuller et al., 2011 p.2]

The sections of this chapter that follow consider the interplay between the social

psychological processes and associated social forces, as highlighted by my research

activity, as they impact on student progression, expectations and experience of

students and considers the findings against a backdrop of the literature.

7.2 Social Forces and Progression to Higher Education

The emergent properties of the category Biography led to consideration of the

influence of the participants' perceptions of past experiences situated in their

recollections of home, work and previous education. This psychic past mediated the

route taken by each participant to higher level study, and through influencing their

psychic present, continued to influence their perceptions and actions. Participants'

self-perception or self-worth developed through the social influence of family, school/

college peers and work colleagues and through their own perception of status and

capability as it was reflected through engagement with the broader social and

institutional context.

The findings of my research suggest that the decision to progress to higher level study,

where this followed on from a previous educational experience, strongly relate to the

perception of the institutional expectation, 'the inculcation of self-

confidence' (Crozier et al., 2010 p.67), a psychic, and thus invisible, state that, in

combination with academic or vocational success, generated positive forces within the

valence of education within the psychic past and thus supported the perception of

accessibility and choice in progressing to higher level study. Where progression to

higher level study followed a less traditional route, the psychic drivers emerged either

during a latterly, or recent, stage of the psychic past or as a psychosocial response to a

life changing event. In such cases the absence of the recent   experience of positive

institutional expectation, or indeed where the psychic past held echoes of emotional

dissonance with the educational experience, the student sought the best fit with their

situated context.

Whilst retaining the emphasis on the importance of psychic engagement with

perceptions of past and present experience, it is important to acknowledge that

progression to higher study is thus further influenced by the recursive social

construction of meaning that results from factors that exist without the 'life space'.

Such factors, beyond the influence of the individual aspirant to higher study, impact

nonetheless on the psychic forces within the life space, examples of which include

perceptions of possible goals for which the individual can aim. The benefits, or

otherwise, of social expectation in earlier education has been already been brought to

the fore. However, another such external factor is the stratification of higher education

institutions and the associated but less visible conceptualisations of expectation and

choice.

The vertically differentiated and highly stratified system of higher education within the United Kingdom (Esmond, 2012; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; Locke, 2008) has emerged as the result of policy discourse and implementation associated with widening access to and participation in higher education (Brennan and Osborne, 2008). Archer (2007) asserts that this policy framework has led to a hierarchical, tripartite system, 'of research-based, teaching-focused and locally-orientated HEIs ... [the latter] responsible for "training" and serving regional economies, adopting a distinctly "local" outlook and remit (predominantly catering for "non-traditional" students)' (p.638). This hierarchy is intended to provide choice and support a more diverse student population (Roberts, 2011; Locke, 2008; Archer, 2007; Tunbridge and Shobrook, 2005) and yet as Brennan et al. (2010a, p.35) reflect, 'in reality the ability to exercise choice depends on the possession of economic, social and cultural capital ... Choice is thus dependent on what is available and what is allowed, and has a significant organisational component'. Indeed Parry (2010) questions the degree to which higher education within further education colleges serves to provide a more democratic route to the fulfillment of the widening participation agenda suggesting that such provision rather supports diversionary tactics that protect the role and identity of elite institutions.

Much is made of the role of college based higher education in the Widening Participation agenda (Parry et al., 2012; HEFCE, 2006). However, the notion of widening participation in higher education through the institutional promotion of and support for internal progression within mixed economy environments is challenged by Bathmaker (2010). She sets out to consider the way in which mixed economy

institutions can facilitate 'seamless' (p.89) progression between further and higher education by means of their very duality. Bathmaker posits that this conceptually seamless progression route was presupposed to support continuity of and thus familiarity with space and place, and the crossing of 'boundaries related to knowledge' (p.89), particularly aspects of transition concerning the level and/or nature of learning. Her message, however, proposes that progression within a single institution does not necessarily imply a removal of boundaries to seamless progression at eighteen. This position is supported and extended by the outcomes of my research. Indeed, any such supposition suggests a lack of engagement with the psychic forces that work against the conceptualisation of further (and/or higher) education for that individual at that point in time, regardless of the nature of that continuation, whether said forces emanate from the psychic past or relate to the situated context and roles played at that point in time.

The associated argument by Archer (2007, p.639) ' that "WP students" are being offered access only to a "lesser" or "diluted" version of higher education', is complemented by the assertion of Esmond (2012) that the celebration of a higher educational hierarchy has the impact of situating college based higher education, 'either on the boundary of or "outside" higher education' (p.356), thus adding complexity to prospective applicants' perspectives of differentiation between further and higher education, a situation that he describes as, problematising 'essentialised notions of authentic "student" identity'.

The presentation of college based higher education has often been associated with the development of vocational goals or roles (HEFCE, 2006). My research outcomes support the suggestion that the process of conceptualisation of the student identity, without the social forces inherent to an associated goal, is likely to be challenging unless there is a clarity of expectation, both within and without the life space. Where progression to this form of higher level study is not linked to vocational specificity, the need for situated convenience may come into play. Parry et al. (2012) explored in some depth the choices made by a students studying degree level courses at a range of colleges. Certainly the issue of location and convenience was given prominence, but the authors also wrote of the uninformed choices made by a not inconsiderable number of students interviewed.

> Students who selected their college because it was near their home or place of work, or because they had progressed from another course at their college or previously studied at the college were far less likely to apply elsewhere to study. While some were making a positive informed choice to study at their particular college, others were restricting their options and choices, consciously or unconsciously.

[Parry et al., 2012]

In reports such as this, commissioned by Government departments to provide a landscape perspective that will support policy decisions, much attention is made to the more traditional routes and returns to study, albeit considering the widening participation context of college based higher education. I propose, on the basis of my research, that for some mature students returning to study there is potentially a

psychically harder, less natural transition, actioned as a result of 'relationships, events and 'critical incidents' (Gallacher et al., 2002 p.503) which, as turning points or life changing events, may lead to a reappraisal of the current circumstances by the individual. Dyke (2011) also focuses on the notion that for some individuals, progression to higher-level study takes the form of a perceived disruption to their current context, rather than being directly and exclusively relating to the impact of biography. Contextual considerations such as the impact on family life of undertaking higher level study would be an example of such a disruption. McCune et al. (2010, p. 700) expound the benefits to the individual of disruption,' It may be that big life changes disrupt students' existing identities opening up new possibilities for taking on the role of learner in higher education'.

7.3 Social forces and students' expectations of higher education

On the basis of my research, I argue that individuals progressing to higher education bring with them a student identity standard that is informed by their psychic past, the nature of their situated roles and their goal identity. For those students progressing from school/sixth forms and for whom there has been a high expectation of university education, the identity standard is likely to be explicit and more closely associated with the traditional university experience; for those returning to study, the identity standard is not necessarily explicitly expressed. for both categories of student, the identity standard adopted, consciously or otherwise impacts on perceptions and behaviours within the learning context; there are also implications for the student's

expectation of institutional behaviours and associated provision. Of concern is the degree to which student expectations and those generically assumed by the institution may not concur.

In the light of such consideration of implicit psychic expectations, the position taken by Ertl et al.(2010) seems constrained as they consider the student expectations of the higher education institution during the transition to university of academic and vocationally educated students. The authors reported a worrisome lack of preparation on the part of those moving to higher level study from the vocational sector, a lack of preparatory 'grooming' (Crozier et al., 2010). The authors write, 'Over 20 per cent [sic] of vocational students in our sample explicitly stated that they had no particular expectations of their HEI at all. Together with the high expectation of support and guidance, this seems to indicate pronounced uncertainty of vocational students about the context in which HE takes place' (pp.86-87). I would argue that whilst such students might not have explicit expectations of the institution, they will have engaged with their own implicit understanding of their student identity standards, a situation from which their expectations of their learning institutions will emerge.

McCune et al. (2010) also make the assertion that students' expectations of university are impacted by that which 'is relevant and meaningful for them' (p699), though expressing this as being pertinent to their lived experienced and engagement in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). The authors embrace the reflections by Crozier et al. (2008, p.167) on the contextual and often invisible impact of the 'sociocultural locations' of students. The empirical findings of Crozier et al. (2008)

support comparison of motivations and choice for students across the participatory continuum:

> The social experience seems to be central to many middle class students' motivation for going to university, making them as concerned about their social life and friends as about their studies... For most working class students [in the study] ... their degrees are a means to an end. They are pragmatic in their course and university choices; frequently they don't have a choice at all. Financial issues are factors and there is a need for most of these students to take a part-time job ... living at home means they socialise with home-based friends and have limited university interactions. Many are time poor; and their degree is not central to their lives, fitted in around their busy demanding schedule of employment, domestic care and family commitments.
>
> [Crozier et al., 2008 p.175]

This acknowledgement of the experiential constraints of non-traditional students is welcome and my research activity reported similar issues being experienced within the psychic present. My research extends the position taken by Crozier et al.(2008) through engaging with the role identities within which students situate themselves and the inevitable and associated conflicts of multiple roles. This is an important issue and remains central to my research activity. It is important that the psychic impact of such situations is acknowledged (in addition to the practical tensions of multitasking), the strength of the goal identity, and thus the transformational learning journey, requiring maintenance if the student is to maintain psychic focus on their study. Gallacher et al. (2002, p.503) recognise the importance of such a transition. They report, 'A key idea

in the Chicago School's analysis of careers is the idea of "status passages" through which people make the transition from one social role to another. This may often involve a change in a person's identity and perception of self'.

7.4 The student identity standard and institutional mediation of student experience

From the outcomes of my research, I argue that students engage with higher level study through the adoption of an identity standard that is the product of their psychic biography and the social symbolic construction of its meaning in terms of their short to medium term goals. I recognise that students are, however, confronted by a set of institutional expectations that may dominate the architecture of their higher education experience, clashing with or complementing their identity standard as a student. The extent to which the identity standard of individuals may be validated or mediated by institutional expectations and frameworks thus requires consideration.

Brennan and Osborne (2008, p.185), having undertaken their research in the university sector, report ' While recognising that within all HE settings there are considerable differences between the lives of individual students, it is also clear that the social and organisational factors can combine to shape the collective experiences of students to an important degree'. Crozier et al. (2010, p.65) also assign importance to the 'organisational culture and ethos', seeing this as having association with wider socio-economic positionality. Brennan et al. (2010a) further the conversation,

considering the role of institutions in 'shaping personal identities and group cultures', and making reference to the nature of the experience as structured by staff, academic disciplines, physical environment and the accepted and expected student culture of the institution.

The provision by Parry et al. (2012) of a statistical comparison of the nature of entrants to higher education, foregrounding the far greater extent to which mature and part-time students populate the HE in FE context, these two factors alone requiring a difference in learning cultures and expectations within these institutions. HE in FE is expected to establish a learning climate that is responsive to the needs of such students, in addition to those who are in need of learning support - either through study skills/learning support or a more careful induction into the levels required for undergraduate study (Parry et al. 2012; HEFCE, 2006). It is unsurprising therefore that the institution within which the research was undertaken embraces the need for flexibility within its Higher Education Strategy and its Teaching and Learning Strategy. Whilst the College provides the opportunity for residential accommodation for those living outside the area, the majority of students are local residents and as such this underpins the expectation of student experience. Of importance to the College, in this context, is its provision of flexible learning and support opportunities through the adoption of technologies, a view reflected variably in the perceptions and behaviours of research participants.

Consideration of my research suggests that institutional adaptation to the needs of cohorts with wide ranging experiences and expectations has its own inherent risks and

uncertainties. Clarity of expectation may be perceived as reducing flexibility, and yet it can be purported, through engagement with the psychic response of participants to variations in behaviors within cohorts, that such flexibilities may underpin a clash between student identity standards and the learning climate of the institution. Crozier et al. (2010) consider a similar theme as they balance their call for a more inclusive climate, supported by flexible learning, study skills support and acceptance of the potential dualities of student lives, against their perception that academic progress can also being tempered by the structural expectations of the institution. The authors perceive strong institutional expectations such as full attendance at lectures and zero tolerance of late submission of assessment as providing a consistent framework within which students can progress, writing 'there are tensions between the academic rigour and the desire to accommodate a diversity of personal experiences and commitments .. unintentionally this often has a counterproductive effect' (Crozier et al., 2010 p.70).

The tensions explored by Crozier et al. are developed within the work of Zepke et al. (2011). The authors suggest that the need to adapt to an institutional expectation of student identity can have the potential to disrupt the engagement of the student and thus their journey to a successful outcome, or can even remove the institution from the frame of possible choices for some students. The authors refer to Tinto's (1993) proposal that students engaging with higher education have to leave behind their previous cultural situation in order to belong in the new academic culture of the institution. This leads the authors to make the assertion:

> Congruence between familial and institutional culture means students with
>
> higher socio-economic status are more likely to be successful than students

with low socio-economic status... Some students, often labelled 'non-traditional', lack the cultural capital needed to integrate and succeed. They may have different interpersonal skills, habits, manners, linguistics, educational credentials and lifestyle preferences (Berger 2000) than those required for success in mainstream educational settings.

[Zepke et al., 2011 p.228]

The emphasis placed upon the socio-economic mis-match serves to ignore the difference in expectation, associated with identity standard, that may relate more to the recent psychic past or to the psychic present of the student and thus the framing (Goffman, 1959) of their performance as a student. The claim made by Zepke et al. (2011) is more likely to be realised where the institution has a resident tradition (Brennan and Jary, 2010) and thus the expectation of a more traditional 'immersive experience' for students progressing directly from school or sixth form, thus precluding mature and part-time returners to study. As explained previously, the College in which my research is situated provides the *opportunity* for a residential experience and the social engagement this supports (for the minority of students enrolling from outside the catchment) without this experience forming the institutional expectation of studenthood, a situation extended nationally by the largely non-residential traditions of HE in FE. Indeed, Parry et al. (2012, p.92) report, 'It is asserted that the full student experience in an HEI may not be appropriate for, or desired by, vocational learners on part-time courses'.

Morgan-Klein (2003) has observed that there is little appreciation of the ways in which students may need to be flexible in accommodating work, family,

social and educational activities, though a few studies have tackled this issue

(Metcalf 2003; Moreau and Leathwood 2006). For many students

circumstances dictate that their experience is not the classical residential one

[Brennan & Osborne, 2008 p.182]

Whilst Brennan and Osborne put the emphasis on the physical and social

commitments of students, my research illustrates the psychic variance in salience

inherent to the student role identity in relation to such multiplicity of roles. Brennan

and Jary (2010) also give recognition to the variation in student situation, and start to

engage with the importance of student identity, as they reflect on those who continue

to live at home. They articulate the associated impact of conflicting ' influences' and

'responsibilities' adding, 'They have less time available to spend as students' (p.12).

Crozier et al. (2010) take this further as they relate the 'personal histories and

experiences' (p.69) of their participants to exhibited/ reported learner behaviours in

the context of the institutional cultures and expectations. They write of the lack of

centrality accorded to learner identities for those students for whom life required a

balancing act between academic activity and responsibilities/commitments outside the

student experience. Such consideration provides a baseline against which my research

serves to highlight the potential for differing and often invisible levels of identity

salience (Stryker, 2000) in relation to the student role identity, that might be

anticipated for those experiencing immersion in student life and those living at home.

Certainly the degrees of inter-role porosity reported by participants in my study and its

variability according to situational circumstance had (and continue to have) the

potential to remain invisible to the College, thus affecting the learning experience.

7.5 Pedagogy and the student identity standard

My research outcomes indicate that students have expectations of teacher/tutor behaviors and attitudes that lie on a continuum, ranging from the authoritative expert to the supportive mentor, from academic to vocational, and with differing degrees of direction and independence being expected within the learning context. Such expectations are situated within the psychic dimensions that make up the student identity standard, and impact on the nature of engagement with learning. Consideration of such expectations requires engagement with published positions on pedagogy.

Tutor adoption of pedagogies is situated against the backdrop of strategically supported and discipline-oriented scholarship and learning strategies, and the variable picture of institutional facilitation of learning through resources and time allocation (Feather, 2012). Zepke et al. (2011) highlight the relevance of 'institutional learning climates' when considering student engagement, applauding the impact of 'supportive teachers, learning support and collaborative learning ... the role of teachers is vital'(p 229). Hockings et al. (2010) assert that there has been little formal research on the impact of the widening participation agenda for classroom practice. They assert that transmission methods of teaching remain the primary 'mode of knowledge transmission' (p.95) with an emphasis on the lecturer as an authoritarian role. Within this context, Hockings et al. (2010) describe and rebut the policy-based perception of

the generic or 'stereotypical' (p.98) view of the non-traditional student, a profile that

establishes them at high risk of 'lacking the skills and competences to succeed' (p.98)

in the university context. Hockings et al. set out to challenge the policy view whilst

acknowledging differences of a less visible or discernible nature:

> Our study suggests that diversity extends beyond the structural divisions of
>
> class, gender and ethnicity. It encompasses different work, life and educational
>
> experiences, different entry routes to university and differences in living
>
> arrangements and family commitments (see Bowl et al, 2008a). Diversity also
>
> encompasses psychological and epistemological differences, including
>
> differences in students' approaches to learning, ways of knowing, and subject
>
> knowledge.

<div align="right">[Hockings et al., 2010 p.98]</div>

My research findings sit comfortably in the company of this acknowledgement of

psychological and epistemological diversity in the widening participation context but

further develop the position to embrace the way such diversity is inherent to the

student identity standard and the impact of social forces.

Haggis (2006) raises the issues of variation between past and present expectations of

student identity. She cites epistemological differences in student expectations and

behaviours that emerge as a result of inconsistencies in the expected level of academic

practice and the nature of engagement with learning experienced by the student before

progressing (or returning) to higher education. Haggis (2006, p.521) asserts, 'the

reality of difference (whether in relation to age, past educational history, culture, class,

disability etc.) is often assumed, pedagogically, to indicate a need to find out about individual learning approaches or styles, in order to diagnose deficits, and then to offer support where deemed necessary'. This institutional emphasis on remedial activity and support measures in improving the experience of the non traditional student is highlighted by Roberts (2011) and Northedge (2003).

> Higher education has seen a radical diversification of students and courses, over recent decades, in the context of continuing pressure towards greater 'relevance' and widening of participation. This has presented sharp teaching challenges to a sector long protected by high walls of selective entry and intellectual aloofness. Yet institutional responses have often gone little further than offering 'remedial' support to 'weak' students ... Proper' students continue to define the norms, whilst the rest tag along behind as best they can.

> [Northedge, 2003 p.18]

Whilst my research outcomes indicate that learning support and the availability of flexible learning resources is appreciated by students, the teacher-led utilisation of such resources that is prevalent sits remote from the engagement suggested by the variation in student identity standard, thus suggesting that institutional mediation is not the panacea policy might suggest. The assertion that non-traditional students have to adapt to the institutionally expected form of learning is echoed in the university-situated empirical research activity of Laing et al. (2005) and Roberts (2011). Laing et al. (2005, p.178) assert, 'Differing student and institutional expectations of the teaching and learning environment often lead to an unnecessary conflict of interests.

The early resolution of this conflict and an opportunity to compromise may prevent unnecessary withdrawal'.

Roberts (2011) seeks consideration of pedagogical appropriateness, 'to suit the needs of an increasingly diverse student body' (p.185) and thus addresses, at least in part, matters of attrition, 'drop-out among non-traditional students remains stubbornly disproportionate in comparison to that among their more 'traditional' peers' (p.195). Participants in Roberts' research activity articulated the view that the actuality of their learning experience did not match well with their prior expectations in terms of course hours, flexibility of learning supported and the learning styles expected. Roberts somewhat contrarily reflects, 'Using the revelations of non-traditional students still in HE, this article has illustrated the lack of preparation for the academic side of university life, raising questions about where the responsibility rests in ensuring that expectations match realities' (p.195). This comment is empathetic to the contemplation of Brennan et al. (2010a), who consider the degree to which learning opportunities are apparent to students, 'Learning opportunities and expectations also vary in their explicitness to students - 'visible' and 'invisible' pedagogies in Bernstein's terms. And what might be 'visible' to one student might be 'invisible' to another student from a different social or educational background' (p.23).

Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that the educational environment created by teachers' behaviours, beliefs and attitudes has a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement' (p.173). Brennan et al. (2010a) extend this position, 'Student learning is in part determined by students' contacts with their teachers and peers

outside formal educational settings and by their extra curricular activities (including work experience and part-time employment)'(p.21). Such a position requires qualification of the term 'contact', its semantic positioning suggesting engagement in a literal rather than psychosocial sense. The setting of my research activity within the context of vocational college based higher education provides a different backdrop to that of Brennan et al. and a greater variation in the nature of such contact. The degree of porosity between role identities impacts upon the degree of tutor-student or peer engagement with cognitive, vocational and practice based learning beyond the taught session, variably precluding or encouraging the type of environmental engagement proposed within the more traditional university context. Based on the outcomes of my research, I propose that within the more fluid arena of HE in FE, such 'contact' exists in a more ephemeral and less visible form, experienced as the development of professional commonalities and engagement with collaborative meaning making in the vocational field.

Hockings et al. (2010) consider the interplay between student and teacher identities and its influence on academic engagement. The authors reflect on the pedagogical traditions of the disciplines 'and the particular pedagogical practices of their teachers' (p.99) bringing into play consideration of the influence of the teachers own expectations of ways of knowing and the reported desire of students to make sense of new knowledge through association with their own experience. They seek to answer the question ,' how do teachers academically engage all students within a culturally, socially and educationally diverse classroom?' (p.97).

When asked what they know about the lives, back grounds and interests of their students, the eight teachers admitted they knew very little. Most of what they "knew" was based on their experience of past students and their assumptions of what students should know and be able to do.

[Hockings et al., 2010 p.101]

The authors seek to justify the position of teachers in their lack of engagement with the invisible aspects of their students. They report the growth in classroom numbers and diversity of the student body, with a resultant increase in class size and associated changes in workload as reducing the opportunity for teachers to engage with students on a more individual basis than was perhaps the case some years ago. The degree to which this is the case in the context of HE in FE is questionable as neither growth nor increase in diversity has been evident across this sector (Parry, 2012). However, the increases in annual teaching loads inherent to the FE sector, an ongoing concern for tutors of HE in FE (Feather, 2012), undoubtedly restricts the time for an exploration of otherwise imperceptible student interests and experiences, as discussed by Hockings et al. (2010), thus compounding their invisibility. The authors rely on the tutor's gathering of student information and do not address the issue of the voluntary nature of disclosure and the extent to which students are prepared to make visible those issues that sit outside their self-construction of the student identity standard. This is an area explored within my research through the reported association of disclosure and its psychic impact on the attainment of the goal identity

7.6 Social Dimensions of the Higher Education Experience

The outcomes of my research indicate that students have differing expectations of the nature and extent of social engagement associated with their higher education experience, and these are closely related to the construction of their student identity standard, the salience of that student role identity and the degree of porosity between the roles adopted. This research challenges the relevance of sectoral, and institutional, expectation of the university experience in developing the social engagement of non-traditional students, particularly within the context of HE in FE.

7.6.1 The Institutional influence on social engagement

The social aspects of a traditional university lifestyle are underpinned by the structural behaviours of the institution, to the extent that the impact of student union activity has more recently been included as a category for feedback in the National Student Survey. Whilst student engagement is seen as extending to involvement with matters of learning quality (QAA, 2012), this community aspect of higher level study is seen as of increasing importance at both local and national levels (Little et al., 2009). Certainly the expectation of universities and colleges alike is that students will be socially engaged in relation to their studies and that, for some students, there is an expectation of social interaction that considerably exceeds the policy perspective and consolidates their position in the community life of the university. Thomas (2002) exhorts the benefits of 'academic and social match' as she considers the persistence of students' social engagement with their studies and proposes proactive institutional involvement with its facilitation. She explains, 'Our research identified three ways in

which the institution can play a role in promoting social networks: firstly through student living arrangements, secondly by the provision of appropriate social facilities and thirdly via collaborative teaching and learning practices' (p.436). My research, whilst recognising that such policy-led expectations and responsibilities are being taken seriously across the spectrum of different institutions, also underlines the differing needs and expectations of students who do not study their degrees in the residential tradition. The outcomes also highlight the way in which a significant minority of non-traditional students may compartmentalise roles played within their psychic present, moving out of the student role where there is no perceived benefit to their goal identity.

Crozier et al. (2010) set out to explore what they term as 'the sociocultural experience of university life' (p.68), a concept that embraces both overt and implicit pedagogical expectations embedded within the layers and modalities of social engagement. Wilcox et al. (2005) underline the importance of social engagement, and associated support mechanisms, engendered through student living arrangements whilst Brennan and Jary (2010) present the implicit expectation of the more traditional immersive residential experience of extended learning through involvement in the activities of clubs and societies. Crozier et al. (2010) do not report this wider conceptualisation of social engagement within and without the learning environment as being necessarily the panacea presented by Brennan and Jary (2010), particularly where there is not an expectation, nor necessarily the provision for a residential experience. Crozier et al. (2010) contrast responses to such an expectation with reported behaviours at the widening participation institutions.

Although the working class students in our study do not dwell explicitly on

their social anxieties, many ... demonstrate a psychic response by strategically

opting out and therefore avoiding the university social milieu ... for middle

class students the opposite response to the social aspects of university seem to

be the case. For most there were a key reason for going to university in the

first place

[Crozier et al., 2010 p.69]

Crozier's generalised association between expectation and class was not reflected

uniformly in my research, the association between school or sixth form expectations

of progression to university having a greater impact than socio-economic background.

Indeed, my research leads me to propose that rather than opting out of 'the university

social media', it is the minority of students who expect a social dimension to their

experience, whilst attending college based higher education, make a conscious

decision to opt-in. They seek out the campus based activity available through the

partner university to fulfill the needs of their student role identity, while for those

progressing internally within the College, the social process of progression assures

social continuity at least to a degree. I therefore argue that for mature or part-time

students, within the College context, the desire for university/college oriented social

engagement outside the learning environment is peripheral, the invisibility of this

psychic response and the absence of sociability within the student identity standard of

these participants being almost taken for granted by the institution; theses students

form part of a *widening participation* majority within the college.

7.6.2 Social engagement and the student identity standard

Through my research I have reported the different emphases inherent to the student identity standards adopted by participants, thus adding the complexity of the HE in FE environment and the widening participation context to the conceptualisation of dimensions of identity promoted by Cantwell (2008). The author engages with Reitzes' (1980) consideration of traits of student identity, purporting that the dimension of the identity standard which reflects academic responsibility suggests 'an academic orientation that characterises students as studious, responsible, independent, and individualistic'(p.4). Cantwell balances the dimension of sociability, which she reports as leading to a less academic approach to attainment of study outcomes against those of 'personal assertiveness' and 'intellectual curiosity' (p.4)

> Intellectual curiosity characterises a student that is competitive, open-minded, creative, studious, and idealistic. This type of student seems to be interested in pursuing knowledge but may not be as strictly academic in their orientation as those characterised as academically responsible.

> [Cantwell, 2008 p.4]

My research conceptualises student identity standards as collections of multi-stranded continua (Chapter 6). The situation of Cantwell's dimensions of identity, as psychically influenced and influencing entities within the past and present of the life space, reflects their intertwined relevance in the individual's self-construction of the student identity standard rather than, as she implies, their presence as predictive

phenomena. For example, the coincidence of high degrees of intellectual curiousity and higher than average levels of sociability, as reported by those strongly influenced by schools or sixth form in seeking the university experience, sits as a counterbalance to the reported perceptions and actions of those for whom goal identity and high degrees of academic responsibility co-exist. Thus, the difference in desire to seek goal oriented social interaction to progress learning and the more intrinsic desire for an active social life, aligns with role identity as a student, manifesting itself within their student identity standard and being influenced by Biography, Context and goal identity.

Lewin (1997) promulgates the perspective that a positive valence is associated with the tension, immediate or otherwise, required for movement towards the attainment of a goal. The representation of my research outcomes through life space drawings, illustrates the importance of the goal identities on the perceptions and actions of participants, particularly those whose student role identity was not dominant in the psychic present. To this end, and for these students, where social engagement supported the attainment of the goal identity or the smaller goals encountered en route, such as assessed work, appropriate forms of social engagement for learning gained relevance and thus synergy with the dimension of academic responsibility (Cantwell, 2008).

The reference by Thomas (2002) to the benefits of generic institutional facilitation of social networks cannot be accepted as prescriptive nor applicable across the range of providers within the sector. Whilst my research findings report utilisation of such

networks to the degree required to undertake coursework or assignments, they also bring to the fore the student instigation of the type of social interaction that they perceived to be beneficial to their own learning needs and the associated rejection of perceptually irrelevant mediated activity. I therefore argue that such networks vary considerably in size and strength according to the extent to which this fits with perceptions of the student identity standard (Burke and Stets, 2009) and associated student activity. To this end, where professional and student roles shared porous boundaries, engagement with one or more professional or vocational communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and the resultant collaborative learning activity (Dillenbourg, 1999) served to provide social networks that supported learning outside the direct learning context but with high degrees of relevance to the student identity adopted.

My research thus highlights the impact of the invisible social forces that result from construction of the student identity standard, and the nature of its co-location with other roles in the life space, in influencing the perceptions and behaviours that support social engagement.

7.7 Use of technology to support learning

7.7.1 Overview

My research outcomes provide a platform from which I challenge the policy position that promotes the generic adoption of technology to support learning and consider the way in which the nature of the student identity standard and the degree of role

porosity in the life space impacts upon the way in which the student engages with technology in the learning context. Using technology could be therefore be conceptualised as a role related 'habit', a combination of perception and action (Lewin, 1997 p.208), which is attributed to the current state of the life space, an action that has meaning associated by an individual influenced by the role(s) they are undertaking. The impact of this argument is most clearly seen through discussion of the institutional engagement with technology, student engagement with learning technology and consideration of the conceptualisation of the affordances of technology for learning.

7.7.2 Institutional engagement with technology for learning

Successive research undertaken by the Oxford Internet Institute since 2003 indicates that generic access to technology, particularly mobile technology, has increased within the population of Britain and with it the capacity and inclination to communicate and research using such devices as laptop computers and mobile phones. (Dutton et al., 2011 p.6). With increasing access to and adoption of technology becoming both a driver and enabler of educational change, national policy and good practice frameworks that support increased flexibility of learning opportunities for students (QAA, 2010; HEFCE, 2009; BECTA, 2008) have underpinned the assumption that a student would need to access technology in some form when participating in educational activity, and in particular higher education. Conole et al. (2007) also consider the role that 'e-learning' has been framed to play in the context of institutional responses to such national widening participation policy frameworks,

emphasising its potential value where physical access to campus-based learning resources might be an issue. Such institutionally endorsed adoption of technology, where appropriately supported by teaching staff, and accessible to students beyond the physical domain of the institution, is promoted as supporting a diverse range of students.

Institutions seeking to address increasing demonstrations of success through national student survey data, look to use technology as a means to increase perceptions of student satisfaction (Walker et al., 2012). Jones and Healing (2010) comment on the structural agency of generationally focused policy, asserting:

> Policy-makers make use of generational metaphors to describe future intakes of students and to frame plans for the development of educational infrastructures. Teachers begin to design their courses for a presumed audience of Net Generation students ... The research we have conducted illustrates the way in which the structural conditions that students face at university are, to some degree, outcomes of collective agency, and we suggest expanding the notion of the agent to include persons acting not on their own behalf but enacting roles in collective organisations such as courses, departments, schools and universities.

> [Jones & Healing, 2010 p.354]

Institutional behaviour, whilst framed formally by national formed policy documents and strategic plans, is further impacted by the development of funded research

reports. Indeed the *2012 Survey of Technology Enhanced Learning for Higher Education in the UK* (Walker et al., 2012) indicates that research reports, such as those published through JISC, have a greater impact on the implementation of technology enhanced learning than that of 'external strategy documents' (p.17). The assumption of wider spread technological adoption receives institutional endorsement through the embedding of technology supported learning (or e-learning) within learning and teaching strategies and the associated tutor adoption of the Virtual Learning Environment, e-books, electronic journals and web-based learning materials. Creanor et al. (2006) noted in *The Lex Report*, 'In many cases, tutor influence and human intervention were highlighted as key factors'. My research outcomes suggest that such factors are underpinned by the expectations of higher education associated with the multi-stranded continuum of the student identity standard. Thus, engagement with technology to support the learning experience can be strongly mediated by the institution and thus becomes part of its learning architecture. Anagnostopoulou et al. (2009, p.10) emphasise:

> The evidence of a deficit approach [e-learning is seen as a solution to a problem] to e-learning appears to manifest itself in both tutor actions and student views of how technology can be used in learning. Specifically, the way in which the use of technology within particular learning situations is introduced and integrated into face-to-face practice influences the way it is perceived and used by the students.

An example of such institutional hegemony is highlighted by Passey and Higgins (2011) who report the recognition, in post compulsory education, of the role of learning platforms as a means of mediating and supporting learning and interaction for students in higher education. The virtual learning environment is just one means through which institutions look to provide more flexible access to learning resources. In an attempt to provide contrast with the strongly institutionalised approach of the VLE, Blundell and Chalk (2009) invite consideration of the role of e-portfolios in establishing a sense of 'positive sense of self-identity, achievement and confidence that is often submerged within traditional university degree courses'. They promote the institutionally hosted e-portfolio pages as being a space where the institutional can 'recognise' rather than 'accommodate' diversity. Blundell and Chalk reflect, 'students can express their membership of the University and so they facilitate the emergence and legitimacy of their identity as students in rather interesting ways'. They thus assert that students are provided with the space but develop its use with some autonomy. *My research reports the recognition of institutional influence, or support, through the VLE and e-portfolios. Student perceptions indicated* that both were tutor led and that their own adoption of the space was outcome driven, calling into question the sense of ownership indicated by Blundell and Chalk.

7.7.3 The affordances of technology for learning

My research supports my argument that, for each student, the purpose and possibilities of technology to support learning are a product of their student identity standard and

the extent to which they consciously or subconsciously compartmentalise their psychic present. This position takes issue with policy based assumptions centred on politicised perceptions of generic affordances associated with technology. The research also supports and extends the conceptualisation of affordances as describing 'the way in which there is a complex and dynamic co-evolving relationship between technologies and users' (Conole, 2012 p.98).

The 'perceptual theory of affordances' (Jenkins, 2008 p.34) was conceived by James Gibson, his work being situated against a backdrop of developments in ecological psychology that followed from the work of Lewin and Koffka. Jenkins explains Gibson's expression as describing an ephemeral interaction between an organism (human/animal), its situatedness and an object. Jenkins, in bringing to the fore the perceptual complexity of the concept of affordances asserts:

> Gibson's descriptive account of affordances exteriorizes psychological features that an empirically- minded psychologist takes for granted as "interior." If taken from the prescribed frame of reference- reciprocal relations between the organism and environment- one can more clearly see this view for what it is: a blend or synthesis of both perspectives (subjective-objective) rendered in a phenomenological frame. Affordances are apprehended by the individual organism, yet are conceived as features associated with the environment whether or not an individual organism apprehends them.

> [Jenkins, 2008 p.36]

Whilst reflections on the use of the term 'affordances' continues to be problematised in relation to learning technology (Oliver, 2005), the expression has been and continues to be commonly used refer to features or characteristics, beneficial or otherwise, made available to the would-be designer or user. Oliver's discussion questions the validity of the expression 'affordances' through historical and contemporary critique of its use, both as a generalisation to support research, as 'normative interpretations' (Oliver, 2005 p.403) or 'impossible ghostly entities' (Chemero, 2003 pp.182-183). Parchoma (2012) confirms the continuing currency of the debate, reinforcing the phenomenological underpinnings of the term:

> The notion that affordances neither belong to the environment nor the individual, but rather to the relationship between individuals and their perceptions of environments, and importantly, that this relationship provides a direct link between perception and action is at the centre of ontological debates on the nature of affordances.
>
> [Parchoma, 2012 p.3]

Whilst such argument is beyond the scope of this research, the conceptualisation of the Digital Visitor/Resident continuum (White and Le Cornu, 2011) and the way in which individuals engage with technology, or vary in their perceptions of its potential, nonetheless has the potential to extend future reflection as to the way in which affordances might speak differently to individuals in the learning context. White and Le Cornu (2011) adopt 'metaphors of tool, place and space' to articulate the potential experiences, perceptions and actions of computer users. The Digital Visitor/Resident

continuum thus provides a range of user positionalities, extending from users of technology as a tool through to virtual occupancy of one of more digital identities within 'social media spaces', or a combination thereof.

7.7.4 Student engagement with learning technology: challenging the policy position

My research led to consideration of the degree to which the strategic emphasis on the use of technology, within my research context, was at times not comparable with the ways in which different students reported its adoption to support learning. This finding supports and extends, through contextual variation, the position of Sharpe and Currant (2009) who argue that the intended universality of staff and student adoption of technology for learning is at variance with that reported through studies of student experience. The authors challenge the policy assumptions of technology enhanced learning. They postulate, 'Anecdotally, we know that while some students are using technology in ways that help them study and learn, other students find technology to be an obstacle to their learning' (p.1).

Whilst my research situates the exploration of student engagement with technology in the contrasting context of college based higher education, the nature of the uses of technology reported concurs with the Lex Report (Creanor et al., 2006) and the associated LXP research (Conole et al., 2008). Both reports present interviewees' primary, though not exclusive, use of technology as a tool to support e-mail and other communication and to access course materials. Empirical research undertaken by

Anagnostopoulou et al. (2009) pays attention to this relatively restricted use of technologies, suggesting a reluctance of their student participants to engage autonomously in learning through technology:

> Contrary to Conole (2008) in the recent LXP study, the researchers found that technology did not appear to be integral to the student learning experience for anything other than ease of access to resources. Although almost all the participants ... were technically aware and used technology as part of their day-to-day life without much thought, few actually used the technology in their learning to engage in collaborative learning tasks. Although technology appeared to be an integral part of the students' lives, it did not seem to be an integral part of their *learning* lives.
>
> [Anagnostopoulou et al., 2009 p.14]

Benson and Mekolichick (2007) hypothesise, 'The more the use of digital technologies is compatible with a role identity, the higher the use of such technologies' (p.501). In discussing the outcome of their research the authors comment:

> As suggested by identity theory, one's cognitive commitment to the academic identity mediates the relationship between one's level of integration of digital technologies into the academic role identity and one's level of use, comfort in using, and desire to use digital technologies, but not one's computer self-efficacy.
>
> [Benson and Mekolichick, 2007 p.505]

The authors thus suggest that identity influences the use of technology within the academic context, extending their consideration of self and the academic role to embrace both students and staff alike. They assert 'given the highly interactive nature of education, the patterns extant in one group will have substantial consequences for the other'(p.499).

This position is echoed in the findings of King and Widdowson (2011) as they bring to the fore the low levels of adoption of 'on-line learning' by tutors delivering higher education in further education colleges despite strategic institutional impetus for adoption. They also reference the findings relating to student choice as reported in the HEFCE Online Learning Task Force Report.

> While the move towards online learning was seen as something which was to the institutions' strategic advantage, the suggestion did not meet with wholesale support from the students involved in the research. The report notes that students prefer to be given a choice about how they learn, and that some subjects are more readily delivered through e-learning techniques than others.
>
> [King and Widdowson, 2011 p.7]

King and Widdowson (2011) also highlight the low levels of ICT/ILT related support reportedly provided for students at the institutions within the scope of their study. They comment, '… given the low use of on-line learning methods, this may not be altogether surprising. It may also reflect a less imaginative use of ILT which confines

itself to commonly used applications such as word processing packages which are now widely used and understood.' (p.9)

Future research activity could usefully involve the exploration of the tutor role identity and the degree to which the identity standards adopted by tutors, particularly in the context of HE in FE, only embrace the use of technology as a tool, potentially limiting their conceptual development of digital residency (White and Le Cornu, 2011) and their capacity to further develop learning design activity. This exploration would seem increasingly pertinent as the perception of the availability and ever extending pedagogical potential of technological adoption is not uniformly accessible to tutors and students alike.

> The ever increasing technology rich learning environment in which today's learners and teachers are immersed is raising issues in terms of social exclusion; the technological divide might be narrower but it is deeper – those not connected or not using these new technologies are being left behind at an alarming rate.
>
> [Conole, 2012 p.131]

Bayne and Ross (2007) report findings by Krause (2007) that aspects of student biography, for example socio-economic background, impact with some significance on the understandings, experiences and expectation of those students in relation to their use of technology to support learning. Cerniewicz et al (2009, p.86) propose 'The students are influenced by, but not determined by, the barriers they face. They

are not influenced in the same way by social structures simply by being part of a broader group, nor do they respond in the same way'. They consider the actions and perceptions of the individual to mitigate against structural influence, writing of the ways in which their own participants are seen to be influenced by context and identity, 'making strategic choices in favour of their long-term futures' (p.87). My research outcomes extend this position, suggesting that the 'strategic choices' reported by the participants in my research align with the nature of the student identity standard adopted and the degree to which role identities are compartmentalised, whether or not this is consciously actioned.

Through my research, I highlight an underlying tool-based adoption of technology inherent to student identity standards of participants and suggests that this meets the perceived baseline standard for the 'dimension of academic responsibility' (Cantwell, 2008). This proposition recognises an alignment with the proposition of cultural agency as presented by Jones and Healing (2010). Indeed, institutional foregrounding of the use of technology both prior to enrolment and during study as experienced through tutor-led activity, has become part of a contextual enculturation that is reported as mediating the student role identity and subsequent expectations. This position varies as students, according to their 'intellectual curiousity' and 'sociability' (Cantwell, 2008), engage with social affordances of technologies 'in terms of peer support and communication' (Conole, 2008 p.11).

> The picture emerges very much of a networked, extended communities [sic] of
>
> learners using a range of communicative tools to bounce ideas off each other,

to query issues, to provide support, to check progress… this peer network is particularly valuable to students who favour a social approach to learning but its almost universally important to some extent.

[Conole et al., 2008 .p11]

I would argue that the degree to which students engage with social media also aligns with the more sociable dimensions of their student identity standard, their digital presence varying between a goal influenced (vocational/professional) identity to the more permanent development and vibrant engagement with concepts of social presence. My research would suggest that for students within the HE in FE context for whom study is more predominantly goal oriented, the development of social presence is less than prevalent, thus aligning with and contextually extending the reflection by Conole (2012, p.131) that 'despite the rhetoric about new social and participatory media generally … the reality is that their uptake and reuse in formal educational contexts has been disappointing'.

My research, in considering engagement with technologies for learning, suggests that the expressed perceptions and preferences positioned each student on the Digital Visitor/Digital Resident continuum (White and Le Cornu, 2011), with predominantly tool based use of technology aligning with the characteristics of a Visitor and development of an on-line identity or presence suggesting Residency. I therefore argue that shared meaning, and thus understanding, of the perceived affordances of technology, in terms of the tool/space/place metaphor (White and Le Cornu, 2011), is situated recursively within the valences of Context and Identity. This being so, then

disruption from another valence, or from without the 'foreign hull' (Lewin, 1936 p.75) would surely be required to effect change in the identity standards of students and tutors alike and thus impact positionality on the Digital Visitor/Resident continuum (White and Le Cornu, 2011).

7.8 Responding to the research question

How do the social psychological processes associated with the concepts of self and identity influence the experience of non-traditional undergraduate students engaging in college based technology-supported learning?

The research process, its outcomes, analysis and situation within the literature, has illustrated ways in which the concepts of self inherent to the multi-dimensional student identity standard, its salience and its co-location with other role identities impact on the expectations, perceptions and actions of students. The research outcomes have suggested that the socially situated, and yet subconscious, self-construction of the student identity standard emerges as a result of a variably porous relationship between the psychic past and psychic present of the student and that this is in turn influenced by the tensions introduced as a result of long and short term goals. Such perceptions and actions are evident not only in the realm of progression to higher education but can be seen impacting on student expectations (of the institution, the tutors, the learning architecture and themselves), their desire for social engagement and the way in which they conceptualise the use of technology to support their learning.

The conceptual distance between the nationally and institutionally generic conceptualisation of the term 'student' and the individually constructed student identity standard requires consideration, particularly in the widening participation context. I would assert that a greater degree of shared meaning can but lead to an improvement in the learning experience and thus an improvement in the attrition and achievement rates of widening participation students.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 The Research Journey

This thesis provides a critical account of the journey undertaken in response to the research question, 'How do the social psychological processes associated with the concepts of self and identity influence the experience of non-traditional undergraduate students engaging in college based technology supported learning', situating the research in a college of further and higher education.

Exploratory research informed by classic grounded theory supported the emergence of five conceptual categories: Biography (perceptions of the past), Context (perceptions of the present), Social Engagement, Use of Technology and Identity/Self. The conceptual framework of life space and its representation through hodological space (Lewin, 1997) served to maintain critical focus on the impact of social psychological forces on the individual.   From this analysis, Biography, Context and Identity/Self were established as core conceptual categories, thus identified as generating psychic impact on the life space of the individual, the various role identities within the psychic present of each participant being foregrounded through the life space drawings.

The emphasis on psychic social processes captured through the production of life space drawings evoked consideration of the student role identity, associated conceptualisations of the student identity standard and issues of porosity between roles and between an individual's psychic past and present. Engagement with

Cantwell's dimensions of student identity (2008) provided a link between the self-construction of the student identity standard, expectations and behaviours in terms of academic responsibility, social engagement and intellectual curiousity.

Situating the research in the context of literature relating to the undergraduate student experience, both peer-reviewed and policy related, established the importance of the student identity standard, and the way in which consideration of notions of role identities, the extent of their porosity, and the socially situated self-construction of the student identity standard can extend or build on research into the student experience.

8.2 Reflections on the research

8.2.1 My Role

As a senior manager in a college environment, with responsibility for higher education provision, I felt that it was of particular importance that I should engage with academic student-related research. Undertaking active research into the student experience, in particular their learning opportunities, provides academic credibility and supports quality enhancement in a sector that is seen primarily to have a particular widening participation role in higher education (HEFCE, 2006).

My role, in requiring that I take a lead in scholarly activity for staff and students, engage with managers in partner universities, and take the strategic lead for quality assurance and enhancement, has already seen benefits from my continued status as a lifelong learner and from my research activity. Undertaking this research has provided

me with a considerable personal and professional learning opportunity and with evidence to support institutional change within my own working context.

My role as full time professional, part-time student, wife and mother has restricted the time available to publish and present papers for external peer review during my period of study. I have, however, benefitted from the opportunities to present my Research afforded by the College's Research and Scholarly Activity events and from the learning community based peer review activities undertaken by fellow doctoral candidates with whom I started my research journey. I have lead a workshop on student identity and the Digital Visitor/Resident Continuum at the Plymouth E-Learning Conference (April 2013) and have had a paper accepted for the British Educational Research Association Conference in September 2013. I am also working with colleagues in Australia and Ireland to develop a symposium, around issues of identity, for the Networked Learning Conference in April 2014. I will be seeking further opportunities to both present aspects of my research and pursue associated developmental opportunities on completion of this thesis.

8.2.2 Grounded Theory

Undertaking a study informed by Glaser's principles for grounded theory has been both challenging and exciting. The inductive essence of the grounded theory methodology ensured the focus on the individual student as intended from the outset. The reliance on the gradual accumulation of sufficiently rich participant narratives, as necessary to challenge or saturate emerging categories, initially seemed precarious. This uncertainty was ameliorated, as participants volunteered from across the study

context and showed sufficient trust in the process to provide in depth narrative interviews.

Engagement with the methodology required very careful consideration of both my positionality and those allegedly inherent to the methods adopted, and this remained a focus as the research activity progressed. The iterative nature of grounded theory analysis required ongoing researcher reflexivity, with particular need to develop an awareness of when it was and was not appropriate to undertake a shift of emphasis within the interpretivist paradigm and adopt, what was for me, a more natural social constructivist approach to engagement between emerging categories and my professionally developed understandings, the literature associated with the properties of the conceptual categories and the emerging theoretical concepts.

8.2.3 The Focus of the Research

The research question, whilst deliberately broad and open, provided the constant reminder that the focus of the research was on 'basic social processes' and 'basic social psychological processes' (Glaser, 1978) and their influence or impact on the individual's perceptions and actions. The consideration of Lewin's theories of 'life space' as an analytical framework worked effectively to support my conceptualisation of social processes as social forces and the development of a more holistic understanding of the relative positioning of the conceptual categories. The consideration of the psychic nature of the life space highlighted the degree to which much that influences student perceptions and actions remains invisible or outside the awareness of staff within the institutional context - and, indeed, in the wider policy

context. In particular, the development of life space drawings drew my attention to the reported primacy of participant role identities within their psychological present and to the varying degrees of porosity between adopted roles.

The small number of participants and the timescale over which the research could be undertaken limited the potential for the generation of 'grounded formal theory' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 p.79); indeed, this was not the intention of the thesis, the research being grounded in a very specific substantive area. The research did, however, fulfil the need to bring to the fore previously 'invisible' issues relating to the experience of non-traditional students within the sector, and to establish associations with existing research that could underpin changes to practice, certainly within the College itself. The research generated themes for future research, at local and national level, and provided a platform from which established policy could be questioned.

8.3 Implications of the research

8.3.1 Contribution to knowledge

This research makes an original contribution to knowledge through the association between the student identity standard (Burke and Stets, 2009; Stryker, 2008), the importance of identity salience (Stryker, 2008), the degree of porosity between role identities and the potential impact of these invisible or psychic social forces on the perceptions and actions of undergraduates studying within college based higher education.

The research also presents an original conceptual framework for the consideration of the social forces inherent to role identities, identity standards and their salience through development of Lewin's hodological space (Lewin 1997; 1936).

8.3.2 Critique of policy and practice

This research supports a critique of the generic and 'generational' (Jones and Healing, 2010) underpinnings of existing national and institutional policies and practices and the assertion that the subsequent development of institutional practice, with the key association of attainment of academic success, thus provides the substantive influence on the student experience.

Policy emphasis on the flexibility of learning opportunities, and the need to support widening participation, through engagement with technology enhanced learning, is established through a necessarily structural framework. Whilst policy based research is reported as having greater impact on institutional behaviour than the original policy documents, institutions' replication of the structural approach seek also to ascertain, and benefit from, generalised feedback from students through National Student Surveys, Audits and Reviews (Walker et al., 2012). Cerniewicz et al. (2009) suggest consideration of 'the relation between agency and structure from the perspective of the agent, or the person' (p.83); such a recommendation with its implications for research at the micro level may prove problematic at the sectoral level but would add an important dimension to the local practice of engaging in technology supported learning.

This research will be used to develop greater understanding, at the practitioner level, of the impact of the student identity standard and of degrees of identity salience and therefore encourage discourse around the nature of affordances of technology supported learning for students at the College.

8.5 Future Developments

This research has provided a number of opportunities for future action. The first avenue for action is that of immediate responsive action within my own professional context and consists of dissemination of the findings of my research to practitioners and the development of new pre-enrolment activity to establish a clearer understanding of the student identity standards of incoming applicants and existing students alike. The aim of this activity would be to better inform induction activity, awareness of the personal and individual affordances of technology supported learning and the need for differentiation of learning opportunities, particularly in relation to the College's implementation of its strategy for technology supported learning.

The second avenue is that of further research activity. I am particularly interested in the contribution this study can make to the work of White and Le Cornu (2011) in further exploring their conceptualisation of the Digital Visitor/ Digital Resident continuum. The potential for research in this area that engages with exploration of the student identity standard and the impact of identity salience provides exciting possibilities for further exploration both in the context of technology-supported learning and within networked learning communities.

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