

Mature men in higher education.

Mandy Winterton, University of Edinburgh, UK

Introduction

Despite the fact that the widening participation agenda is creating some diversity within the student population of higher education (HE), there is evidence that historical patterns of social class educational differences are being reproduced in the sector. The National Audit Office (NAO) reports a pattern of distinctive class-based trajectories emerging among mature students, with working-class entrants more likely to attend post-1992 universities, and to pursue less prestigious subject areas relative to their middle class counterparts (NAO 2002). Additionally, it claims HE access routes designed to widen participation are being utilised more by middle-class students who have a history of educational acquisitions than the working-classes they were intended for (NAO 2002). It should also be noted that despite increases in numbers of students from the lowest three social class groups, their relative representation has barely changedⁱ. Such findings disrupt the notion that participation is being widened beyond the incumbent social group.

Whilst social class tendencies clearly exist, they obviously interact with and are complicated by other social variables. Contemporary researchⁱⁱ seeks to explore these dynamics, particularly of class, gender and ethnicity, in order to unravel the subtler patterns of participation and rejection. However, there are few studies on working-class men's relationship to HE. Yet as McGivney (1999) and Marks (2003) emphasise, there is an urgent need for adult education among this group, as their traditional social roles continue to dissolve faster than their ability to adjust their cultural expectations.

This paper looks at working class men currently studying in HE. It explores the factors which impact on the men's HE learning and considers the implications for future research.

Methodology and participants

Data is from an 'opportunity sample' of six mature male students at an elite university. It is part of an exploratory investigation into mature male students and HE. Individual semi-structured interviews were held, each audio taped, and transcribed soon after.

Recruitment presented a problem, given the size of the desired population and because the researcher avoided recruiting from those disciplines where men are more likely to be represented (ie. science/engineering). Instead, participants were sought who were non-traditional students in terms of their gender and their social class. A snowballing recruitment technique was necessary. This resulted in 6 volunteers; four who subsequently identified themselves as working-class (wc), and 2 as middle-class (mc). The ability to generalise from this sample is obviously impossible. Instead, the study was undertaken in order to reveal a range of possibilities for further research on this under-researched group of students.

Findings

The research highlights three aspects of the men's histories that appeared to have a significant impact on the men's current learning experience.;

- their motivation to pursue HE at this time in their lives
- their expectations of HE
- their familial situation

Motivations

Their futures: Previous research (Bamber & Tett 2000) suggests that men have a more instrumental attitude to HE. For them, education has a use value, it is primarily a tradable commodity in the employment market. The opposite end of this perspective is to value education for its own sake, for the intrinsic reward and internal satisfaction that learning something new brings.

In this study one participant demonstrated an overtly financial motivation to his HE endeavour. Alan, a 3rd year, full-time social policy degree student, identifies himself as middle-class. He is a self-employed taxi-driver, with a wife, mortgage and young children. Alan maintains that he has no particular interest in the subjects he has studied or any personal commitment to work within the social policy field. Rather, he 'fell into' this degree (as he had no desire for anything else in particular either), has no idea of the jobs it may lead to (hence no consideration of intrinsic job satisfaction), but believes the income will allow him to abandon his current occupation. Despite further probing, Alan consistently talks of HE only in terms of financial gains and rejects notions of self-development as an outcomeⁱⁱⁱ.

This study also reveals a man whose HE journey is motivated essentially by the intrinsic worth of knowledge. Working-class Malcolm enthuses that acquiring knowledge is an essential part of personal fulfilment and an enriched life. After his access course, Malcolm selected a degree (sociology/social policy) because he thought the subjects might be interesting. Like Alan, Malcolm has little understanding of the kinds of job his degree may lead to. Unlike Alan, Malcolm is keen to emphasise the wider benefits of learning.

Malcolm: *I think in broader terms that education broadens the mind, that you see things in a lot more different angles, instead of ...it's less black and white...we have to learn how to see the big picture. To see what's really going on and to be critical.*

The motivations of the remaining men lie somewhere between these two extremes of pure utility value vs pure intrinsic value of education. However, it is fair to say that generally the financial rewards of gaining an education are rarely considered. Indeed, five of the six men explicitly state their commitment not to become 'wage slaves'. Instead their degrees will help them secure a future (hopefully, employed) in which they can pursue a cause or interest, rather than a salary. For example,

Graham does voluntary work with disaffected, we youths and believes that a degree will help him to progress to a managerial position within the organisation he works for. However it is neither the salary nor status of that position which interests him. Instead, Graham feels his own experiences of 'a rough childhood' will enable him to make better decisions than the current managers. He wants his degree in order to be in a position in the organisation where he can have greater influence, and thus provide more appropriate assistance to people from background similar to his own.

Daniel is similarly driven by a desire to be in a position to help others who have suffered some of the things he has. Daniel is a dyslexic, mc man. His family suffered an abusive father, and Daniel now believes that his father's behaviour was probably a consequence of dyslexia that had not been diagnosed. Daniel is committed to research and raise awareness of the behavioural aspects of this condition and is prepared to do it voluntarily. For Daniel money is not a consideration. In his own words he has 'dropped out' of the materialistic society he was born to, and now works part-time, rents a room in a shared house, and with no other commitments, survives on very little income.

Pete wants to work in the film industry, and since his social science access course, has a place on a Media and Communications degree at a 'new' university. Yet, Pete does not believe that the course will provide a gateway to employment in this industry. He knows others who work in this field (invariably, intermittently)

and has some sense that luck, talent and contacts will count more than a degree. Ultimately Pete is taking the course to pursue an interest he has had in a particular film genre since he was 13 years old. His stated motivation is to just know more about it and to learn how to appreciate it further.

Their pasts: As the research progressed it became apparent that the men's progression to HE was fuelled by something even deeper than the desire to have a more fulfilling social role ahead of them. With the exception of Alan, each man's university enrolment seemed to be the start of a process of psychological repair. Separately, they each revealed how gaining a university degree would prove their intellectual capabilities, after school experiences which they believe did not.

Jim (wc) illustrates this most acutely. He recalls with bitterness being labelled a failure at school and for years afterwards, as he switched between periods of unemployment and 'worthless' government training schemes. His return to education is founded on the belief that a degree will restore his worth as a human being. He explains,

Jim: *A degree' [ie.the credential] was never part of it...it was about ...proving to myself I could do it. You only need 40% to get a degree. If the degree was the objective, I'd have done 40% wouldn't I?*

[And later...]

I wanted a first...a 2(i) meant nothing, 2nd best ...I wanted it for me, for myself.

He got his first, then realised that a Bachelor's Degree did not signify the highest intellectual engagement. Jim is now in his final year of a PhD.

The remaining wc men tell similar stories of not being stretched academically, of teachers' assumptions of their abilities^{iv} and, as Malcolm exemplifies, their futures;

Malcolm: *There was this whole underlying feeling you know of, 'well, - you'll just get a job as a farmer, or tradesman or something. And that'll be that...why worry yourself'...But I might have been more than that - how do they know?*

However none are as resentful as Jim, and the other men also implicate themselves as well as the education system for their educational short-comings. Only mc Daniel doesn't allocate blame. Daniel attended a private school where he was diagnosed with dyslexia, sent to remedial classes and eventually left without any exam passes. In a very competitive school environment, he was ridiculed throughout. However, Daniel is philosophical about his treatment, acknowledging that little was known of dyslexia at that time.

Expectations

One might reasonably question why, if these men have been so psychologically injured at school, are they re-entering the educational arena again? Generally in the interviews, there is a belief that both parties have now changed; HE is expected to be a more tolerant/accommodating environment than school, and the men expect their own maturity to guide them as better students this time.

Of themselves: A striking pattern to emerge from the interviews was the men's expectations of a successful completion of their HE undertaking. Failure was barely contemplated. Dyslexic mc Daniel suggests failure holds no fear for him any more, as it is something he is used to experiencing and is now resilient to. Jim is the only other participant who talked of non-completion (of his PhD). For him, failure would be such a personal disaster, that he is adamant he will not allow it to happen.

Jim: *I mean if something happens well, ...it's not like I'm talking suicide or anything...[long pause]...I've got the bairn [a baby] like, but ... I don't know how I'd cope...I couldn't take it..*

But broadly speaking, there was a wholesale conviction among the men that they will inevitably succeed as they are now ready to apply themselves. Typically,

Pete: *This time I was determined to see the end of it...there'd been too many mess-ups....I won't be forcing myself now – I'll be enjoying it this time.*

Alan: *Oh I know I can do it, always known it...I was just waiting for the right time.*

Of HE: Pete and Jim (both wc) held negative pre-conceptions of the university environment. They each anticipated an antagonistic relationship between themselves and a predominantly rich, mc student body. Their time in HE has not altered their opinions. However, their opinions were pretty strong to begin with.

Others were less judgmental of the incumbent student body and believed that whilst there may be differences (mainly due to age/life experience rather than articulating social class differences), mature students would be appreciated. Indeed Malcolm, Daniel and Graham each suggest the learning environment will be enriched by the presence of mature students, and that each social group has something to learn from the other.

One wc man had the expectation that the knowledge gained at university would not necessarily be useful in the 'real' world of work.

Graham: *'I know what to expect – I've been told that on some things I'll have to shut up and accept what they say... I've just got to jump through the hoops to get the certificate, and then I can start doing it the right way when I start doing the job.'*

However, this was not a general sentiment among participants. The only other derogatory remark in this respect came from Alan who had expected higher academic standards than those he has encountered.

Familial situations

For two of the wc men, it was the influence of their long-term girlfriends which provided a significant impetus for their return to HE. Malcolm and Graham each live with partners who have degrees and are from families where university education is the norm. They each relay how this environment has introduced them to the types of knowledge and skills acquired through HE. They also tell how their girlfriends' families have been supportive of their HE studies, whereas their own families have not. Their lack of support disappoints the men (and is similarly experienced by the remaining wc men and mc Daniel also), but they recognise it probably reflects a lack of understanding of what they are trying to achieve.

Working-class Jim also lives with a mc, university-educated girlfriend. He had a degree (from a post-1992 university) prior to meeting her, and now pursues his doctorate at the same elite institution she attended. In fact Pete is the only wc man not to be in a relationship with a mc partner. Pete is also the only student who chose to pursue his degree at a post-1992 university (after doing the access course at the elite university)^v.

However, Pete's behaviour in another dimension mirrors that of all the other wc men; they each made a deliberate decision to move away from their former social groups as part of the transition towards becoming educated. In all interviews, the wc men recall a time of re-assessment of their lives, of looking at their friends and the prospects they will probably share, and then deciding to do something to change that anticipated

future. Malcolm and Jim moved from England to Scotland, for different reasons, and neither of them for their education initially. Whilst Graham and Pete remained in the same city, they each tell of abandoning certain circles in order to move in new directions.

The pattern is repeated by mc Daniel also. He left his competitive secondary education determined not to follow the trajectories expected of his social group. He demonstrates as much disdain for the culture of his previous social class location as some of the wc men do for theirs. Only Alan continues his HE without any upheaval from a previous social group.

Conclusion

Whilst the sample size undermines any potential to generalise from this research, it is nonetheless proposed that that patterns of experiences can be detected therein. This research has fore-grounded two aspects of the men's educational experiences in particular, which appear to have influenced the satisfaction they derive from HE.

Firstly, it has revealed the HE journey to be part of a process of psychological repair. Five participants recall their feelings of failure at school and the impact this had on them for some years after. In less or more extreme versions, each suggest a HE award will be proof that they in fact possessed the intellectual capacities all along. Whilst the men (generally) held positive views of the academe and their place as non-traditional students in it, they were even more positive that they had the abilities to complete their studies. The four wc men also believe they will be more successful in education now, as they have the maturity to recognise its value and the willingness to apply themselves, which they did not possess at school.

Secondly, the research has highlighted the possibility that for these working-class men, HE is intricately entwined with a process of change towards more middle class environments. Three of the four wc men have become more familiar with mc environments prior to enrolling at elite HE institutions. Two of these men in particular cite the discourses and language skills of their (mc) girlfriends' families as providing a positive insight into the benefits of a higher education. Even the one wc man not to be co-habiting with a mc partner still made a deliberate decision to relocate from his previous wc social group prior to commencing his HE studies. Whilst this may be far from indicating an acceptance of mc lifestyles, it is nonetheless an explicit rejection of his expected wc trajectory.

There is obviously greater complexity beneath such patterns outlined above, and there is no suggestion that these constitute 'findings' in any meaningful way. Ultimately this study offers evidence of the complexity of the social and psychological factors, which contribute to the men's HE experiences, and reinforces the claim that further research is required on this particular student population.

ⁱ Additional 8000 students from lowest 3 social groups enrolled between 1994-1998. This represents a decrease in their relative presence from 24.4% to 23.6% of all students (UCAS 1999),

ⁱⁱ for example, Archer et al (2003), Mac an Ghail (1996), Reay (2001)

ⁱⁱⁱ However, Alan has spent 10 years ensuring his family are financially secure enough to permit his HE return. One might suggest therefore that this means something more to him than he is prepared to reveal.

^{iv} It should be noted that 2 wc men also highlighted encountering supportive teachers too.

^v However, one should note that media courses are not available at elite institutions.

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