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# **Young people constructing identities in the transition to Higher Education**

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Doctor of Education

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April 2010

# Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

**Signature:**.....

Hilary Lawson

April 2010

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## Summary

The research is a study of 12 young people constructing identities in the transition between sixth form college and university. Identity is conceptualised as fluid and self-reflective. Giddens' (1991) work on the reflexive project focuses on both narrative and reflexivity in the construction of identity, and this research uses the tool of narrative to capture the subjective experiences of the young people. Narrative methodology is shown to produce rich and detailed data and it both constructs as well as captures stories. The research process itself becomes part of the young people's identity work.

The young people are embedded in a social and historical context of late modernity and I endeavour to interrogate how structural forces shape and constrain identities. Some analysis of agency and choice in relation to identity is forwarded. The research findings foreground the student identities of the young people and explore what being a student means for the young people. Being in transition and issues of liminality are associated with this student status.

The nature of transition is interrogated drawing on literature from anthropology and psychoanalytic theory among others. Transition is experienced by the young people as a space of betwixt and between-ness which has four particular effects on identity. Firstly, transition encapsulates a quality of temporality which concerns both the present and the future. It pushes the young people to conceive of making the transition to university as an opportunity to make a 'fresh start', and the new identity is future-oriented; transition shapes future as well as present selves. Secondly, transition disrupts the normal flow of life and often involves choice-making. Making choices, particularly those which will have future implications, brings identity into sharp relief through reflexive processes. Thirdly, transition to university involves moving into a broader landscape bringing encounters with a wider range of people. This forces issues of similarity, difference and otherness into the frame. Identities are reflexively constructed through understanding of similarity and difference, and transition provides the space where the young people are faced with both possibilities and limitations. On the one hand the broad social mix of university students provides an awareness of heterogeneity that the young people had not experienced before, with all the potential for new identities this opens up. But on the other hand, butting up against otherness and difference in this way solidifies and limits identities. Fourthly, transition precipitates mechanisms for connectedness.

Connectedness- that is, the all-pervading and on-going relating with others; peers, friends and family- dominates the narratives of the young people and is significant in both social capital and support, and also identity. Cross-gender friendships are prevalent and are shown to have significant effects on identity. The role of emotion in social interaction is also analysed drawing on concepts of emotional capital and emotional literacy. Links are made between emotion and narrative and the place of emotions in the research process is also discussed.

Giddens' work on identity emphasises the role of reflexivity and yet the concept is not well analysed. Professional discourse is drawn on to open up the concept. The different ways the young people engage in reflexivity are demonstrated and reflexivity is found to be both context-dependent and also related to self-learning. The need for reflexivity is also applied to the research process. Narratives are co-productions and research authenticity calls for transparency and reflexivity of the researcher.



# Introduction: Where it all began

## The focus of this research

This doctoral thesis concerns 12 young people making sense of themselves and their identity through the narratives they tell themselves and others, at a transitional stage of their lives. The research endeavoured to both provoke and capture story-telling as a significant process in the construction of identities. The context within which identity is examined is the context of transition brought on by the imperatives of educational policy which shape a distinction between further and higher education and a transfer from one to the other.

My interest in this area of research was stimulated by taking up a student welfare and counselling role within a Higher Education Institute in 2002. The stories I heard from troubled students were often of emergent, and consequently still fragile, identities. Leaving behind networks of family and friends the students' new-found freedom to carve out an independent identity could be both exhilarating and overwhelming. Not only did the new situation raise the question "Who am I?" but also, in an atmosphere where the pressure is on to perform in both the common room *and* the seminar room, "Am I good enough?" and "How did I get here?"

The work ignited my curiosity about young people's developing selves in late adolescence as they moved between different learning institutions, new geographical and social spaces and emerging stages of autonomy and independence. The current focus on 'transition' calls for the Higher Education Institute to take account of the impact on young people's lives of up-rooting from home-based sixth form college to study at the Higher Education level of university. Emerging from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century flurry of 'transition to HE' research was the finding that students needed to feel integrated, and the emphasis was placed on helping the student make friends. 'Freshers' Weeks' in most Universities have become a whirl wind of socialising at University-organised events. Partying until the first light of the morning and waking up with a crashing headache and a mobile phone full of numbers of people met and only dimly remembered are common Freshers' experiences. My work as a student advisor revealed that students felt under pressure to make life-long friends by the end of the week. If they missed the chance, everyone else would be befriended and they would be alone. But choosing and making friends is a significant experience of identity and so, in the very first week, students were faced with fundamental self-questioning.

## **Developing research-mindedness: the professional doctorate**

My professional background is in social work but I moved from the field to the academy two decades ago. In 2003 when I embarked on the professional doctorate the leap from being a social work lecturer to a researcher was in some ways long but in other ways a mere side-step. The craft of the social worker and that of the qualitative researcher are similar: in both the stories are the raw material, the use of self is a primary tool, and the focus adopted must be on both micro- and macro-processes to elucidate the interaction between the personal and the social. There are of course also differences, and the explicitly therapeutic nature of the social work encounter is one such, although some respondents may report finding research interviews cathartic.

Steeped in the stuff of students' stories through my advisor role, I was able to relate the assignments up to and including the Critical Analytical Study (CAS) in the first two years of the doctorate specifically to the experiences of young people in transition to university. The assignments explore different methodologies, relevant literature and, crucially, my own identity as a professional and researcher. Designing an evaluation of the personal tutoring system at an HEI afforded me an opportunity to analyse and apply theories of evaluation (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Guba and Lincoln 1981, 1989), experiment with different kinds of interview techniques with both tutors and students- particularly valuable as a first experience of interviewing as a researcher rather than in a therapeutic role- and also acquainted me with the different tensions inherent in students' academic lives. It also introduced me to the dilemma of dissemination of findings and the disjuncture between policy and research. Another short paper (Lawson 2004b) allowed me to explore the fusion of professional and researcher identities. In this paper I began to realise just how deeply ingrained my professional social work training is in both my personal and professional identity. As a social worker I was trained to understand and value the uniqueness of subjective experience and when I turn to research I am drawn to those methodologies that enable the meaning-making of peoples' lives to be open to scrutiny. Through the CAS (referred to more fully in Chapter 1) I became familiar with Giddens' (1991) work conceptualising identity as a 'reflexive project' (p. 9), and this has been a significant theoretical influence throughout the research process. The choice of narrative methodology was informed by this work. The telling of stories as a meaning-making device fits both my personal and professional understandings of 'being'. Giddens' work on the connection between identity and narrative further theorises this position.

Much of the burgeoning research on the transition to university focuses on the university student once they have arrived at university. There is an assumption that transition begins at the start of university rather than it being a process which has begun some time before the first day of the university term. There is a lack of 'joined-up-ness' in Post-16 education provision which appears to be reflected in the research literature (Mantz Yorke personal communication April 2008). I was keen to buck the trend and devise a research strategy which captured the identity- shaping antecedents of university life, particularly as they were played out in pre-university educational contexts, as well as the experiences of the first year at university.

As will be seen as the thesis unfolds, although this is not a doctorate about social work, theoretical understandings drawn from social work- for example the psychoanalytic concept of transition, reflexivity and identity- have proved highly valuable in the struggle to interrogate my findings. Social work discourse draws on an eclectic mix of theory and in the CAS I analysed literature from different discourses including psychology, anthropology and sociology as well as professional disciplines such as education and social work. This study is also informed by sociological perspectives of late modernity and the conceptualisation of identity as fluid and reflexive.

### **Purpose of the research: research questions**

The substantive question is:

How do experiences of transition between the different educational contexts of sixth form college and university impact on identities of young people?

More specifically I wanted to find out what were the most significant experiences which shaped identity, and how far the young people were, or felt they were, free to forge their own biographies (Beck 1992) or constrained by structural forces. So:

What is the role of agency in the young people's identity-work?

My role as a student advisor meant that the finding of connectedness as highly significant in identity was not entirely unforeseen. My understanding of young people's group-life both from my experiences as a parent and also from my professional work led me to hypothesise the group - friendship group, peer group-would be prominent in the narratives of the young people. The original question about this was:

What role does the group play in shaping identity?

My research was an iterative process. Although the concepts of identity and narrative provided unifying coherence, interviews with the young people over a twelve-month period resulted in revisions and additions to the original questions. This question on group-life came to be seen more widely as connectedness as it became apparent I needed a concept to conceive of the young person as constantly 'in relation' (Josselson 1994) with a wide range of friends, family, peers and others. The concept of connectedness also refers to the way in which young people are connected in wider social relations such as age, gender, class and race. These social relations invite consideration of how power is invested differentially throughout society and operates at both the macro and micro level. Connectedness has a more on-going, all-pervading quality about it than the term 'group-life', and the question on group-life was revised to:

How does connectedness impact on identity?

As the research unfolded further, the processes that facilitate that connectedness came to the fore. The way the young people managed relationships, often with a surprising degree of insight and skill, were noted:

What are the processes that facilitate connectedness, and how can these be incorporated into a developing sense of self?

The young people in the study were 'in transition'. The literature review had provided few answers about how the context of transition itself affects identity. Did the students feel themselves to be in transition and is there something about being in transition that accelerates or facilitates identity-work? The question was posed as:

How do the young people experience transition and what is the connection between transition and identity?

Finally, I wanted to grasp how the young people understood their developing sense of selves. I was interested to see whether those processes would be apparent in the narratives themselves. Further, would a narrative methodology enable the processes of reflexivity and subjectivity to be exposed sufficiently to develop an understanding of the role of narrative in identity? On another level I wondered if the research itself would provoke reflexivity and identity-work. Would a

research project which made explicit to the subjects themselves the role of narrative both as a methodological tool and also a way of making sense of selves be a factor itself in the construction of identity? These questions are conveyed in the more general question:

What does the study of the young people in my research project indicate about the role of reflexivity and narrative in the reflexive project of the self?

## **Structure of Thesis**

The thesis is structured into this introduction, a literature review, three data chapters, a summarising and concluding data chapter, and then a brief Ending highlighting key findings which will hopefully contribute to the existing literature.

**Chapter One** brings together some of the very wide literature and research that has informed this thesis. The original starting point in the interrogation of the concept of identity was the psychological material that had informed my social work training. Although this ever-expanding literature has been well used to inform research concerning transition to university, the concept of identity at the heart of my research is one emanating from sociology. The research is based on a concept of identity characterised by fluidity and self-reflexivity. The chapter introduces contested themes associated with late modernity such as risk choice and difference. It also establishes a place for both anthropology and psychoanalysis in the understanding of transition, and psychoanalysis is also drawn on to illuminate identity. This research concerns the way in which young people come to an understanding of their sense of self, and reflexivity and learning are important processes in this endeavour. These concepts are introduced in this chapter, as is the concept which forms the basis of the chosen methodology, the narrative self.

**Chapter Two** continues the theme of the narrative self. It posits that a narrative methodology is able to capture the private and public narratives that drive and shape lives, so that it is a methodology which is well placed to reveal both the personal and social aspects of identity. The research findings are drawn from narratives of 12 young people who were interviewed both before they started university and also once they had become a university student. The chapter explains the research design and also emphasises the importance of the subjective reflexivity of the researcher, arguing that the researcher is the primary research instrument.

**Chapter Three** is the first of three data chapters which have been divided up to focus on three broad areas or themes. In Chapter 3 the focus is on being a student. The research was presented to the young people as being framed by transition between educational contexts, so their student identity was fore-grounded. This chapter is both about transition to sixth form college *and* transition to university, and interestingly the former is presented as more complex for many than had been anticipated. The role of learning is highlighted in this chapter. So, too, is the effect of transition itself on identity. How to introduce the 12 young people in a way that allows the reader to get a 'sense of them' and to follow their stories has been problematic. After much experimentation I decided to weave their stories throughout the 4 data chapters; each chapter tends to focus relatively more on two or three of the students. In this way by the end of Chapter 6 it is my hope all 12 young people will have made an impact on the reader. Brief biographical details are found in Appendix A.

**Chapter Four** tackles the question which has exercised many theorists (for example Lawy 2002) writing about identity in late modernity, namely what is the nature of the inter-play between structure and agency. This chapter sees several of the young people make active choices to disrupt conventional ways of 'doing gender'. It draws on Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* to shed light on how class positioning affects identity, and it highlights the way in which transition to university may hold the potential for shifting class for some, while for many contact with 'the Other' highlights and reinforces class position.

**Chapter Five** is about connectedness, that is, the all-pervading relating with others; peers, friends and family. The significance and the quality of the relationships the young people forge emerged from the findings as crucial sites for support, learning and identity. This chapter focuses on how the young people went about making friends and connections, and draws on recent theorisation of the flexibility of friendship patterns (Weeks et al 2001; Allan 2008). It notes the on-going significance of their birth families both as a source of support but also as a model for the formation of relationships between friends. The role of emotion is highlighted as crucial in the development of life and relational skills. It is also shown that friendships formed across gender are prevalent among university students and it is argued this may have important implications for identity-work.

**Chapter Six** is a concluding data chapter which draws much of the preceding discussion on findings together and offers theorisation about the different ways identities are constructed including the role of reflexivity. The place of emotion in identity is fore-grounded and theory derived from work undertaken by writers such as Reay (2000) and Gillies (2006) on emotional capital is used to suggest that the significance of emotion in both identity and support needs further emphasis and theorisation. The chapter then offers some critical reflection on the concept of reflexivity in learning and identity. Finally, the chapter ends with an acknowledgement of the place of psychoanalytic understandings of first familial experiences as fundamental in the construction of identities.

**Chapter Seven** is a short chapter which refers to the importance of endings in narratives. In that spirit, it summarises some of the findings and analysis raised throughout this research which have particularly contributed to the literature on identity and transition. It argues that transition itself has not been sufficiently interrogated for its impact on identity. It refers to Giddens' conceptualization of the reflexive project and suggests some of the findings in my research open up the complexity of this much-used but under-examined process of identity-making. It also makes a case for there being further work on the role of emotion in identity, and also for a greater emphasis on the role of emotion in the research process. The chapter ends with a discussion about the use of narrative methodology in research on identity.

# Chapter 1 The literature review

In this chapter I present a review of the literature that guided my thinking through the research. It summarises and builds on the longer Critical Analytical Study (Lawson 2005c) which formed an earlier part of the EdD. Research from across different disciplines was scrutinised to illuminate the experiences of young people at a point in their lives when they were undertaking significant transitions brought on by educational imperatives. The review revealed that both identity and transition were highly current concepts attracting attention across a range of disciplines. In the analysis of this work it became apparent that some literature (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Hall 2000) offered theorisation about identity and self which made more sense to me as a way of explaining the experiences of young people than others. The review enabled me to clarify that my own research should be based on a concept of identity characterised by fluidity and self-reflexivity, and that the research methodology should be one which is most likely to 'get to the heart' of the subjective experiences of the young people as they engage with their transitional contexts. Giddens's (1991) work in which identity is theorised drawing on insights from both psychoanalysis and recent sociological literature to posit the self as self-constructed through narratives of the self was highly influential in both my conceptualisation of identity and also my decision to use narrative to capture and make sense of experience. In this chapter I give a brief overview of the journey I took through literature and research drawn from psychology, sociology and also the professional discourses of education and social work in an endeavour to explore both identity and transition before discussing my understanding of the narrative self within late modernity which underpins my research. I was persuaded by my undertaking of the CAS that the effects of transition on identity have not been well-theorised in the literature.

## **Perspectives of transition: contributions from psychology**

The research on transition to Higher Education has predominantly been driven by political and policy developments. The need to explain the phenomenon of 'drop-out' exercised politicians and educationalists in the USA in the 1970s and Tinto's (1975) seminal work in this area offered an explanatory model of why young people left college or university without completing their studies. Although Tinto did not explicitly address the concept of identity, his work is important in shifting research onto individual experience, and also the relationship between the individual and the



social context. However, both his research and much of the subsequent research on transition to Higher Education take a perspective framed by the research questions arising from those first political drivers, namely, why do students withdraw prematurely from their studies, and, more recently, what can the universities do to facilitate transition? Transition is the focus of enquiry not for how it affects students' developing sense of self, but how it can be overcome. That is, transition is problematised.

Much literature on transition views it as a hurdle to be overcome and studies are mostly outcome rather than process focused. Research, particularly that within psychology, measures 'coping' and 'adjustment' (Banyard and Hayes 1994), psychological disturbance (Fisher and Hood 1987, 1988) and academic achievement (Farsides and Woodfield 2003).

The literature on 'coping' with transition tends to be informed by three main bodies of knowledge; a psychological life span perspective of identity, theories of loss and bereavement and Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy. The literature on identity and transition written from within the life-span perspective is immense. Several researchers have applied Marcia's (1966) model of the four identity statuses to negotiating the transition to university (Berzonsky and Kuk 2000; Jordyn and Byrd 2003). How well the students adjust to the transition is measured using a quantitative methodology based on pre-defined inventories for self-scoring. This body of research makes claims of association between different levels of identity development and various aspects of coping. Although the findings begin to convey a sense of the student's experience in relation to their environment I found this literature frustrating because the methodology seems ill-equipped to convey the shifting multi-faceted experience of adjustment to a transitional life-space; a view shared by others, for example Elliott (2005:117).

The CAS highlighted the crucial nature of the methodology chosen to interrogate the subject matter. Often I was drawn to a research paper because its title seemed to promise enlightenment only to be disappointed by results conveyed in numerical data and statistical relationships with no sense of the subjective student experiences. Where authors *were* able to use students' own words to convey subjective experience, and used theories of transition to speculate on their findings, what it really meant to be 'in transition' came under the microscope (for example Fisher and Hood 1987, 1988). This was what I wanted from my own research.

## **Perspectives of transition: contributions from psychoanalysis**

Other literature which focused on the concept of transition itself was located within both psychoanalysis and anthropology.

The concept of ‘the space between’ is a familiar one in psychoanalytic discourse, and stems from Winnicott’s (1953) work on the ‘transitional space’ between mothers and their babies as the child comes to gradually differentiate herself from her mother. What Winnicott termed ‘transitional phenomena’ made possible early fundamental transitions from subjectivity to objectivity, and from being merged to being separate. Phillips (1988:114) writes that these transitional phenomena ‘provided a bridge between the inner and outer worlds’. Winnicott described the concept of the ‘holding environment’ as the psychic space between the mother and baby within which these transitions were enabled to occur.

In psychoanalysis, ‘spaces between’ are both playful spaces (Hunt and West 2006) and also sites of much work. They are associated with process, interaction, creativity and meaning. But they also generate anxiety. In his work on the self and ontological security, Giddens (1991), too, returns to Winnicott’s conceptualisation of transition to describe the individual’s life-long struggle between ‘being and non-being’. It is in the spaces of life that fundamental anxiety stemming from this ontological dilemma rise to the surface. Holdsworth and Morgan (2005), drawing on Luescher and Pillemer (1998), also suggest that ambivalence is a characteristic of transitional times. They define this as being “torn between practices and moral evaluations” (p.22). In my research I argue that the transitional space accelerates the work of identity-construction through processes such as self reflexivity and connectedness. It does this by opening up a site where creativity, anxiety and ambivalence compete for attention and some kind of resolution. The friendships that emerge from this space are friendships where intimacy establishes rapidly. Transitional spaces are fertile ground for the blossoming self.

Some writers have applied a psychoanalytical conception of transition to studies of transition within education. Lucey and Reay (2000), for example, conducted qualitative research on children’s experiences of the transition from junior to secondary school in an attempt to theorise the place of anxiety in children’s construction of self in transitional times. They position themselves at odds with accounts of educational transitions which “prioritise the negative aspects of children’s anxieties” (p.191) and re-frame anxiety as a driving-force which can be “central to the

development of effective coping strategies” (p.192). Their work reveals the way in which anxiety manifests itself in the informal spaces of the transition to secondary school. Children often referred to getting lost in corridors and stairs of the new school environment: an expression of both a physical and more ontological sense of being lost. The authors note the significance of the ‘in-between’ spaces of the corridors, playgrounds, school gates and so on in the children’s narratives of early school-life. Resonant with Winnicott’s work on transitional spaces they claim that not only do such spaces generate anxiety, but are where children play, are creative and form intimate relationships. They write (Lucey and Reay 2000:197);

these (informal) spaces are raised not only as spaces of contestation but also as sites which hold multiple possibilities: of ‘freedom’, increased maturity and for some, of adolescent sexual frisson.

In another research study, Bourne (2001:104) discusses discourses and identities in a multi-lingual primary classroom. She, too, focuses on the boundaries between ‘official pedagogic time’ that is, those:

boundaries between classroom and playground as (the children) line up to enter the room; in the cloakrooms and washrooms; ‘settling down’ at the beginning of the lessons, before the teacher takes her place.

Bourne used radio microphones to study the different discourses children employed at different times of the school day. Her work demonstrates the power of transitional places; within them official power relations are disrupted and children can use the space to exercise their own agenda;

Children are not passive pawns in the socialisation processes of the school, but active participants, taking up different positions within the alternatives open to them through both pedagogic and peer discursive practices (2001:103).

These two studies highlight the way in which a focus on transition can open up the territory between structural conditions and lived realities. Bourne’s work emphasises power and creativity exercised in the interstices of school life. Lucey and Reay’s conceptualisation of anxiety as a positive force in the ‘project of self-hood’ was experienced in the transitional spaces of school-life. Both research studies illuminate the relationship between transition and identity. They were formative in the conceptualisation of my own research: they suggested that narratives of identity

would be found in the informal spaces of university life, and this, was where I determined to look for them.

### **Liminality: anthropological contributions to theorising transition**

Anthropological work on the use of public rituals to mark transitions from one state or stage to another throughout the life-course has concerned itself with liminality. Van Gennep's (1960) work on *rites de passage* notes that public rituals are often connected to religious or spiritual meanings of death and re-birth, and he argues that the dichotomy of sacred and the profane is a central concept in understanding transitional stages. He distinguishes three major phases of ritual; separation, transition (associated with chaos) and reintegration. The anthropologist Victor Turner (1969, 1982) has developed Van Gennep's work to theorise the 'in-between', or 'liminal', state distinguishing phases of separation and reincorporation. Liminality represents a period of ambiguity; a marginal and transitional state. Simpson (1996:2) explains the liminal space as "the betwixt and between, a state in which the initiand has moved out of one status but has not yet moved into the next". Interestingly, several of the students in my research used the same vocabulary, describing themselves as being in the state of 'betwixt and between'.

Liminality represents a marginal and transitional state where there is marked contrast to the structures of 'ordinary life'. It is conceived as a time of experimentation with new cultural forms and the development of other communities. Turner conceptualises these communities of 'intense comradeship and egalitarianism (1969:95)' as 'communitas' in which the participants create their own counter-culture where values are fluid, and informality and creativity are emphasised. Communitas stands outside formal structures of society with its inherent constraints on freedom and creativity. Turner himself does not discuss communitas in relation to students, but the parallels between 'liminal personae' participating in communitas and student life have not escaped different writers (e.g. Simpson 1996). Turner (1969) discusses the lack of hierarchies and "the powers of the weak". He notes the stories, myths-and one might add, the prejudices-that are generated about the group by those within the more formal structures of society. He writes that "communitas has also an aspect of potentiality" (1969:127) and that people in a liminal state are:

A kind of institutional capsule or pocket which contains the germ of future social developments of social change (Turner 1982:45).

The work of van Gennep and Turner provides tools to analyse further the student experience. Although it is important to recognise, as Turner himself does, the limitations of applying such concepts to modern western societies, van Gennep's focus on status in transition is illuminative. Like the liminal status, the student status is both a definite status and a non-status. This can be seen in others' perception of students. Students are both denigrated for their 'lack of contribution' to society but also envied. Students inhabit the margins of 'real life' and their value lies solely in their potentiality. As Turner (1969:129) writes, somewhat optimistically, liminal people are:

Released from structure into *communitas*, only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of *communitas*.

### **Transition as loss and a search for meaning**

The literature on loss and bereavement is where psychoanalysis and anthropology meet. Loss is conceptualised by psychoanalysts such as Parkes (1993) as a process involving an event which disrupts the patterns of ordinary life, provoking a search for meaning and eventual reintegration. This mirrors processes within the anthropological work of ritual, and in fact ritual and *rites de passage* play an important role in death and grieving. Thinking about transition in terms of loss explains the connection with the expression of emotion. I will argue that the young people in my research were able to make deep and effective connections with others during transition to university, and the expression of emotion was a vehicle through which this happened. Transition, the disruption from 'ordinary life,' laid the students opened up to others in much the same way as anthropologists characterise those undergoing ritual.

Marris (1986) claims that every situation of change can be understood as an experience of loss and as analogous to bereavement. Psychoanalytically derived theories of loss and bereavement are grounded in attachment theory and the individual's drive towards 'making sense' of their situation. Loss, argues Parkes (1993 drawing on Bowlby 1980), can be conceptualised as a process with specific stages of emotion and behaviours and always involves a search for meaning and reintegration. Bowlby argues that the restless searching following the death of a loved one is connected to the loss of an attachment figure and that such behaviour has survival value. His theory of "internal working models" explains the way in which children make assumptions about

themselves and their world, based on previous experiences of relationships and attachments. Such assumptions form a 'mental map' which will shape future experiences.

In the CAS I drew on the work of Bowlby to explain the role of anxiety and separation in transition: the type and degree of anxiety of later separations depends on the quality of early attachment relationships and consequent early childhood experiences of separation. As my research has progressed however, and the significance of connectedness emerged from the narratives, more recent work has been useful (e.g. Zimmerman 2004; Parade et al 2010) to establish the links between early attachment experiences and the ability to form quality relationships which act as sites for both support and identity. Nevertheless Bowlby's seminal work remains fundamental in consideration of both identity and transition.

Hopson (1986:133) writes that transition is a "discontinuity in a person's life space" and that the degree of stress associated with transition varies according to its predictability and voluntariness. It will also depend on the individual's perception of that discontinuity. It can be seen, then, that how prepared the student is for university-life will affect the experience and the ability to make sense of it. Transition involves re-integration and finding meaning after the loss of an "interpretable world" (Marris 1986). Family experiences and values play an important role in both preparedness and finding meaning highlighting the link between personal and social narratives.

Extensive data-based searches undertaken for and since the CAS have revealed few papers which make explicit the relationship between transition and identity. The literature discussed above can be used to theorise that relationship. The narratives of the young people in my research indicate a propensity towards self-reflexivity which can be explained by the disruption or loss of the known and familiar. Meaning-seeking is fundamental to identity-work, and transition accelerates meaning-seeking and self-evaluation. Parkes, (1993), writing of bereavement, suggests that the threat to inner assumptions about the world is an emotional experience. It will be seen within my research that emotions and emotionality is fore-grounded in the narratives of the young people, and conceptualising transition with reference to processes at play in loss and bereavement suggests why this might be so.

### **Adolescent Identity: psycho-social approaches to the self and others**

Erikson's (1968) seminal work on adolescent identity, developed by Marcia over the next thirty years, was a starting point for my review on identity because life-span perspectives formed the foundation of my social work education and were familiar territory. Although criticised for its "teleological and unidirectional interpretation of identity development" (Meuss et al 1999:419), Erikson's work is still highly influential. His psychosocial approach portraying the individual's struggle with a developing identity, the experimentation with different roles, behaviours, and friendships, and the crucial role the social context plays in this process continues to inform recent psychological research. It offers an understanding of the inner world of the adolescent and their relationship with society. In my research I came to think of this interplay between the self and the social world as connectedness, and the young people's narratives demonstrated the salience of family, friends and the wider social context on identity.

Erikson (1968:128) describes identity as a "sense of continuity and sameness" and argues that identity develops as the individual evaluates themselves and their past history in relation to the present social context. Arnett (1998, 2000), drawing on Erikson's psycho-social theory, has coined the phrase "emergent adulthood" to describe what he sees as a distinct and liminal stage of the life-course which, he argues, extends from the late teens to the mid-to-late twenties and which is historically contexted in contemporary industrialised cultures. Following Erikson, he argues that it is in this stage that young people undergo the crucial separation-individuation processes, in particular from their families and other primary groupings, in order to establish a sense of who they are – "an independent, self-sufficient individual" (Arnett 1998:313). However, the emphasis on individualisation as 'standing alone' has been contested. Josselson (1994:83) argues that although adolescents do necessarily undergo some separation-individuation in the process of establishing an integrated adult identity, this has been over-stated. It is not, she writes, that adolescents are becoming:

"lone selves" needing no one....rather, they are editing and modifying, enriching and extending their connections to others, becoming more fully themselves in relation (Josselson 1994:83).

Josselson's theories of relatedness are informed by psychoanalysis and concepts such as holding, trust, and attachment in the developing self. Drawing on Winnicott she writes:

Growth only takes place within the context of an adequate holding environment, which may be provided by an internalized representation of trustworthy others (Josselson 1994:90).

This emphasis on the ability to trust resides in much of the literature on identity, and I return to the importance of trust for identity below.

As my research progressed, the salience of relatedness became increasingly significant and I turned to the sociology of intimacy to look for theorisation of my findings. Josselson had excited my interest in interrogating the qualities of relationship and her work provided the leaping off point for this further investigation. Her work does not, however, satisfactorily address how relatedness is mediated by gender and my own research endeavours to interrogate connectedness and gender through the narratives of the young people.

### **Giddens and the reflexive project of the self**

Another theorist whose work I found particularly stimulating was Anthony Giddens. Giddens' writing represents a fusion of psychoanalysis and sociology which interrogates the permeable boundary between the personal and the social. He proposes a theory which is particularly well placed to bring understanding to the subjective experiences of young people in their engagement with twenty-first century institutions of higher education even though his 1991 work is peculiarly without reference to age or life-stage. Giddens wrestled with the concept of identity and identification in very differing ways from Erikson, Marcia and other psychologists in that his sociological gaze fore-grounds the social and historical context of identity. For Giddens, identity in late modernity is a project of reflexivity in a context of institutional reflexivity. His use of the phrase "project of the self" reflects the ever-changing nature of society where predictability of actions and developments cannot be assured. Du-Bois Reymond (1998) emphasises that projects have a 'draft' quality which have to be constantly changed or abandoned as circumstances dictate. Identity is conceived as self-reflexive and self-constructing in an on-going iterative process.

Day to day practices which are 'chosen', either more or less out of awareness, to represent particular life-styles are constituents of identity. Giddens' concept of lifestyle is something more than patterns of consumption. Lifestyles are "routinised practices" which include dress, food, choice of entertainment, friendship groups, and language; an



integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity (Giddens 1991:81).

Lifestyle choices, then, concern the very core of self-identity and are in a constant state of flux. Foucault's work (1980) emphasising the role of power and knowledge in shaping life style decisions is particularly apt in the consideration of the adolescent life-stage. Foucault analyses the way in which individuals come to regulate themselves and others by "coding", or giving particular significance, to different practices which then has the effect of managing and regulating behaviour and consequently identity. These "technologies of power" act as:

an inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by internalising to the point that he is his own supervisor, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself (Miller 1993:223).

Young people struggle with developing competing identities built out of, and sustained by, different sets of disciplinary practices as they interact with the multiple facets of university life. The self consciousness of youth renders them acutely aware of the meanings which lie behind subtle differences in consumer and lifestyle choices. Within the university there are conflicting demands and pressures to make use of the academic, social, and ideological/political life on offer. How the student chooses between different practices and lifestyles constitutes the identity-work my research set out to capture.

Giddens' (1991:75) conceptualisation of identity as a "trajectory of the self.... from the past to the anticipated future", is consistent with the way in which young people coming to the end of their secondary school lives and moving into further and higher education are wrestling with past and future identities. This view of the self is predicated on there being a narrative of the self, developed and enacted through iterative practices. For Giddens the stories individuals tell themselves about themselves constitute the essence of the self. He writes:

A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor-important though this is-in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going* (Giddens 1991:54, italics in the original).

Reflexivity, argues Giddens, is a key process in the maintenance of this self-narrative. However, reflexivity is presented as a given rather than problematised in his 1991 work. This work is neither age nor gender specific and there appears to be an assumption that reflexivity is a standard and universal ability. In this thesis I debate this, using findings from my research, and drawing on discourses of reflexivity mostly located within social work and education. I argue that reflexivity is context-dependent and also that transition has a particularly accelerating effect on reflexivity.

Finally, Giddens' understanding of ontological security and trust, and their fundamental role in identity, form the crux of my conception of identity. Both 'trust' and 'ontological security' are concepts used in social capital and other discourse to convey the power of economic and material conditions and it is important to distinguish this usage from Giddens' psychoanalytically derived meaning drawing on thinkers such as Winnicott. Giddens (1991:242) refers to basic trust as the

trust in the continuity of others and in the object-world, derived from early infantile experience.

Trust and ontological security are essential at a time of transition because:

trust is a mode of coping with the time-space absences implied in the opening out of potential space (1991:42)

Within late modernity with its increased sense of risk and unpredictability individuals must increasingly invest in their self-identities to maintain ontological security (Giddens 1991; Lawy 2002). Giddens links the importance of disciplinary routines to the need to ward against threatening anxieties. He refers to Winnicott's assertion that the infant is all the time on the brink of unthinkable anxiety and claims the importance of routines to separate off 'being' from 'non-being'. The connection is made between fundamental issues of ontological security and existential anxiety at the heart of identity, and the everyday routines and social practices that people engage in to create and sustain those identities.

## **Young Peoples' Identities in Late Modernity: difference, risk and choice, narrative and emotion**

The experiences of the young people in my study are differentially shaped by the conditions and structures of late modernity. Subsequent to the CAS I analysed much of the burgeoning sociological literature offering explanations of how young people make sense of their lives on the threshold of adulthood in twenty-first century western societies.

A sociological perspective of identity, in contrast to the more individualistic psychological understandings, emphasises that identity is “socially produced, socially embedded and worked out in people’s everyday social lives” (Lawler 2008:8).

Conceptualisations of identity are bound by the historical context within which they are produced and in late modernity identity is perceived as fluid and multi-dimensional. Stuart Hall (2000:17) specifically rejects Erikson’s (1968) understanding of identity as a “stable core of the self....identical to itself across time”. Instead:

Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions.

In this passage Hall articulates his position that class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality cannot be understood as discrete identities but that identity is produced at the point of intersection between the personal and these determining structures. Sociologists contest how far the individual is able to exercise agency and choice within the structural constraints. The tensions between individual agency and social structure are fore-grounded in many of the recent studies on adolescent transitions and some of this literature will be discussed below. Here, I focus on Hall and others’ conception of identity being constructed through difference.

### **Identity and difference**

Identity formation involves setting boundaries which mark out sameness and difference. Hall (2000), drawing on writers such as Derrida (1981) uses the psychoanalytic concept of identification – ‘a construction, a process never completed (2000:17)’- to explain the way identity can only be

constructed in relation to 'the Other'. In the field of identity politics, which is where these arguments are largely located, the important point is that these identities are constructed "within the play of power and exclusion" (2000:18). Epstein (1993:18) emphasises this point:

We are women because we are not men, black because we are not white and so on. Furthermore, the categories are not only those of difference. They are established in hierarchical ways, so that one category is dominant. From our earliest experiences in a racist and sexist society, we are invited to identify ourselves in these ways in relation to the opposite gender and/or race.

She argues that psychoanalysis has contributed to an understanding of the development of subjective identities by its exploration of the unconscious processes at work in these constructions of 'the Other'. Identities are established by the drawing of boundaries and placing others outside them. She emphasises (1993:18) that individuals have "major emotional, often unconscious commitments to these identities".

This understanding of identity and difference explains power relations in society and the way that identities are differentially valued. That "identities are always tied to shifting power relations" is explained by Foucault's (1977) conceptualisation of power as "discursive and exercised rather than possessed" (Burke and Jackson 2007:116). In my research the young people are shown to operate frameworks of similarity and difference both in positioning themselves in society and also in their micro-worlds. Such binary-thinking sharpens meaning-making and informs questions about who they do, and do not want to be – and who, due to structural constraints, they never can be. It reinforces and disrupts identities. This analysis of power and how it connects to identity deepens the understanding of subjective experience and the way in which attitudes of the 'other' are shaped and reinforced. Power explains the legitimisation of certain identities and also everyday practices.

Bourdieu's (1997) writing on *habitus*, field and the different kinds of capital that are available to individuals to bring to bear on their engagement with the world by dint of their family and cultural inheritance furthers an understanding of power relations in society. It is drawn on in this thesis to

theorise the effects of the young people's social positioning on their identity. Bourdieu understands *habitus* to be a system of dispositions, - ways of perceiving, thinking and acting. *Habitus* is inextricably linked to identity in that it is embodied. Reay (1995:355), paraphrasing Bourdieu, explains that *habitus* is used to:

Demonstrate the ways in which, not only is the body in the social world, but also the ways in which the social world is in the body.

*Habitus* is produced in the interplay between past and present. Reay explains it as the product of early childhood experiences modified by subsequent encounters outside the home. She writes:

While *habitus* reflects the social position in which it was constructed, it also carries within it the genesis of new creative responses which are capable of transcending the social conditions in which it was produced (Reay 1995: 434-5).

An understanding of *habitus* illuminates the infinite number of constraints on choice, but Bourdieu uses the concept to emphasise agency, too, in a challenge to over-deterministic conceptions of structuralism. This tension between structure and agency has exercised many recent theorists endeavouring to understand youth and youth transitions in late modernity.

### **Choice and risk**

Lawy (1998:1) has stated that "the rhetoric of choice is problematic". Although many late modern theorists subscribe to a conception of the reflexive project of the self, both the degree of choice and also the *experience* of choice in that project is fiercely contested. These deliberations are embedded in a wider debate about how far tradition and security in late modern western society has declined to be replaced by a culture of individualism where unpredictability and risk prevails. Beck's influential work on the "risk society" (1992) posits a society where certainty of knowledge about important social concerns has given way to debate and contestation. It is the individual who becomes the reproduction unit of the social in the "lifeworld" and this is particularly problematic because this "individualized private existence" is dependent on "situations and conditions that completely escape its reach" (Beck 1992:131). The standard biography is replaced by the "choice biography". Continuous processes of choice and decision-making are experienced as burdensome, and, as argued by Brannen and Nilsen (2002:516) "the individual is not so much an actor in the choice biography as compelled by (de)institutionalizing structures to make choices".

Giddens acknowledges the unpredictability of life but his conception of 'choice' is more optimistic and liberating than that posited by Beck. However, his work has been criticized by those who have argued he has generalized the experiences of a minority to the majority (Skeggs 2004) and downplayed both inequality and tradition, particularly the on-going salience of family structures, in modern society (Jamieson 1998, Ball et al 2000). Ball et al, for example, challenge Giddens' de-emphasis of the impact of different social- class on young people's biographies. They write (2000:22):

Reflexivity will get you only so far if you leave school without qualifications.

They argue that choice, real or apparent, depends on context and that the longer the young person participates in education and training, the more obscured are "the structural and material continuities which patterned their 'choices' and life decisions" (p.4).

Furlong and Cartmel's (2007:5) work further theorises the obscuring of the social structures which continue to shape life choices. That these life chances "remain highly structured at the same time as (people) increasingly seek solutions on an individual, rather than a collective basis" is what Furlong and Cartmel refer to as the "epistemological fallacy of late modernity". Young people tend to see themselves operating in a meritocratic society and therefore the architects of their own success or, insidiously, their own failure.

Several authors highlight the effects of risk on youth identities. Lawy, (2002:419) for example illustrates through case studies how young people "seam together" within a coherent narrative the negotiation and management of risk and choice faced everyday in experiences and "chance happenings". The decisions and choices made by those he studied "were not abstracted from their lives, but were a constitutive and integral part of their respective identities". Lawy (2002:421) conceptualizes young people as actively investing in identities and argues that risk, identity and learning are "mutually constitutive". Youth identities are tied up with present-oriented consumerism, lifestyle and leisure as well as future-planning based on education and employment. Narratives are spun through processes of continuous and reflexive interpretation and re-interpretation in the interplay between everyday choices and the limitations of wider context of structural and material restraints.

### **The narrative self**

Narrative has become the thread which stitches together the fragments and flux of modern lives. Narrative offers coherence and is a vehicle for meaning-making. The narrative self is one which actively engages in producing narratives drawing on memories, understandings and experiences as raw material (Lawler 2008; Plummer 2001). Holstein and Gubrium (2000:3) write that “we are creatures of everyday life” and offer an account of the self engaged in everyday practices, a “social construction that we both assemble and live out as we take up or resist the varied demands of everyday life” (p.10). The self is produced in everyday exchanges and conversations through linguistic and interpretative skills (Woodward 2002). It has agency and can be the author of its own private narrative, but is also shaped by public narratives. This inter-relationship between the personal and social, the private and public runs through the narratives of the self.

The stories individuals tell and recount both to themselves and others are not merely descriptive acts, but function as interpretive devices which offer meaning to lives. Lawler draws on Paul Ricoeur’s work (1991) to explain the three components necessary in narrative: characters (human or non-human), action (evolving through time) and plot. It is the construction of the plot or ‘emplotment’ which acts as the cohering strand, linking events together in ways that are culturally understood by both the narrator and the audience. In this way narratives are both personal and socially contexted. Lawler (2008:13) expresses this in this way:

Narrative gives us a means to understand identity in its sociality, since narrative identity places us within a complex web of relationships and, ultimately confounds the notion of the atomized individual.

A self producing itself through narrative is, then, both unique and personal but also social and connected. As stories are told and re-told past events are re-worked in the present and the anticipated future creating meaning and a semblance of coherence. This conception of the self is, I believe, a workable concept fit for the purpose of research investigating the identity-work of young people in transition. However, the narrative self is also constructed through the dynamic between the narrator and the audience. This will be discussed further in the context of narrative methodology.

### **The emotional self**

Narratives also allow for the expressions of emotion. In fact, the more emotion the narrator can wring out of the narrative, the more the audience is likely both to listen and to connect. The significance of emotion and its expression has emerged from the narratives of the young people in the research. As the thesis unfolds, Reay's (1995, 2000) concept of emotional capital as a derivative from Bourdieu's work on capital will be drawn on to theorize the place of emotions in the inter-generational transfer of resources. This work is also much influenced by Hochschild's (1983) concept of 'emotional labour'.

The sociology of emotions became a legitimate area of study in the early 1980s (Kleinman 2002) although literature on emotions and identity is hard to find. Hochschild's (1983) 'The Managed Heart' is one of few texts which interrogates the relationship between emotion, gender and identity. It provokes discussion about authenticity and performativity, but theorisation of the emotional self is thin. Layder (2004:10/11) claims "we are emotional beings" but argues that:

Emotions and the motivations to which they give rise have frequently been denied any important role in our day-to-day conduct by even the most sophisticated of social theorists.

Uncoupling practices from structures, as for example in Morgan's (1996) concept of 'doing family' has freed up the ability to scrutinise relationships across a variety of settings, including the consideration of gay as well as heterosexual partnerships (Weeks et al 2001). Discussion arising from Giddens' (1992) work on the transformation of intimacy has also focused attention on relationships in late modernity. He conceives the "pure relationship" as a social relation freed from traditional ties and entered into "for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another" (Giddens 1992:58). Although how far there has been democratisation of relationships is questionable (Jamieson 1999), the body of literature on intimacy has, for the first time, legitimised the place of emotion in social life. The theorisation of the emotional self may emerge from this literature.

### **Learning, identity and learning about identity**

Learning lies at the root of identity. Nixon et al (1996:49) have written about the relationship between learning, identity and agency and suggest that "learning is becoming":



It is an unfolding through which we learn not only what makes us unique – what individuates us – but how we can make that distinctive agency work in the world.

In the CAS I reviewed the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) to discuss the effects of situated learning on identity. Wenger (1998:215) wrote that learning was transformative and therefore “an experience of identity”. Participation is key in this process and refers to more than simply having membership of a community. Participation is a way of learning – “of both absorbing and being absorbed in the ‘culture of practice’” (Lave and Wenger 1991:95). Wenger was not, however, discussing communities such as the university community whose main purpose is learning. His argument is that learning takes place everywhere, in every social grouping. He calls these places “communities of practice”. The concept of communities of practice has been much used, perhaps over-used, in different contexts particularly, more recently, in Higher Education. However, I refer to the literature because it has clear resonance with the processes at play in young people taking on the identity of student, particularly at University. It theorises participation in the groups and groupings that intersect their lives as processes of both learning and identity.

Transformative learning, as originally conceived by Mezirow (1978), has generated a large literature and I reviewed this for insights into the effects of learning on identity. Mezirow’s original conception of perspective transformation was one of political and ideological awakening. A fundamental shift in meaning structures precipitated by either a single “disorientating dilemma” or a more gradual exposure to events, caused, he argued, critical self-reflection and changing assumptions or ideology. With its three phases of critical reflection, discourse and action transformative learning is rooted in theories of social action and the interplay between the personal and the political.

Subsequent writers have critiqued and developed his ideas. First, the emotional aspect of transformative learning is neglected. The theory is criticised for its “over-reliance on rationality” (Taylor 1997:48), and Taylor quotes Egan’s (1985:216) findings that “more complex learning occurred when an affective change occurred” (cited in Taylor 1997:48). Second, Mezirow has also been criticized for underemphasizing the way in which learning takes place through relationships, although he does acknowledge the role of discourse in reflection. In Taylor’s paper he refers to “connected ways of knowing” and the importance of “subjective elements of relationships (trust, friendship, support) and their impact on transformative learning” (p.49). Finally, transformative

learning has more recently been used to focus on changes in self and the personal world of the learner (Jarvis 1999) rather than shifts in wider political understandings.

A growing literature in what is loosely termed 'life long learning' brings much of the above together in one body of knowledge. Learning is perceived to be transformative both personally (Hunt and West 2006) and politically, although there are also claims that lifelong learning should do more to expose the exclusionary discourses and practices, particularly in Higher Education which maintain traditional hierarchies (Burke and Jackson 2007). Learning is seen as continuous and builds on lived experience (Williamson 1999). It can also be deeply reflexive and intensely emotional "to do with experiencing and understanding ourselves in new ways, as emotional and cognitive beings" (Hunt and West 2006:164). The recent ESRC-funded project "Learning Lives" has illustrated the connection between learning and identity. For those who, like the young people in my own study, learning is a significant part of who they are, learning is conflated with both 'becoming' and 'being'. Goodson and Adair (2006) have also suggested learning is belonging. They draw on Bauman's (2004) notion that the fluctuating conditions of late modernity causes individuals to be spiritual travellers and that with the feeling of being 'out of place' an uncertainty of self and belonging arises. "In a world of constant flux and uncertainty, we relentlessly find ourselves in the act of becoming; of seeking to belong" (Goodson and Adair 2006:5).

Learning can fulfil some very deeply embedded needs. Finding 'your place' and belonging has also been seen as a primary drive of young people as they make the transition to university. For example Wilcox et al (2005) write:

becoming a student is about constructing a new identity and a sense of belonging.. students need to negotiate between the old life they have left behind (family, home and friends) and the new life they have ahead of them.

### **Transition identity and power**

Power operates at the structural, cultural and individual level. Exposing power relations and the circulation of power at the point of transition to Higher Education focuses attention on the construction of 'truths' and the legitimisation of certain identities and practices. The 'sense of belonging' that Wilcox et al refer to is deeply enmeshed in power relations and can also be construed as 'fitting in' to hegemonic ideals about students and student-life. Although the Higher Education Institution strives to increase 'diversity' and 'widen participation' from 'non-traditional'

groups, the labels themselves connote a lack of power, and underpinning inequalities between these and other groups of students remain unchallenged with a deficit discourse being applied to certain groups. As I argued earlier in the chapter, much of the psychological research and literature on transition to Higher Education focuses on 'coping' and 'succeeding'. Dominant discourses in the University are those of success and failure and the research mirrors this. In this thesis where the experience of transition to University and the effects on identity are scrutinised, it is important not to replicate the discourse of success/failure. Ideology pushes certain dominant understandings into focus and at the same time de-emphasises other aspects of social reality. Focusing on silences and absences in the young people's experiences enables the researcher to be critically reflective of the hegemonic frameworks which circulate through identity and transition to Higher Education.

## Chapter 2 Methodology

The choice of methodology reflects ideological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the conception of the research as a whole, and it also informs the specific design and instruments. The epistemological framework for my research is late modernity, and the concept of self I utilise-fluid, reflexive and self-narrated- is an understanding of self generated within this cultural and historical milieu. The CAS interrogated research from within both positivistic and interpretivist paradigms, and the latter's emphasis on the construction of knowledge through social and subjective processes allowing the researcher to explore unique and experiential meaning-making is the paradigmatic perspective adopted in this thesis. Narrative methodology was chosen to capture and analyse those meaning-making processes, and the concept of narrative informed the overall design as well as the particular research instruments.

I have utilised a small scale study using qualitative methods to explore the young people's stories generated through a range of data-collection techniques but chiefly unstructured face to face interviews over a twelve-month period. The research is interrogating experience and meaning and interpretivism is an anti-positivistic epistemological position which is predicated on a conception of the social world which emphasises understanding rather than explanation and predication of human behaviour (Bruner 1990; Bryman 2001). Meanings are constructed and reconstructed through social interaction and narrative is a vehicle which weaves between, and synthesises, private and public understanding of social life.

Elliott, in her work on using narrative in social research argues that an interpretivist methodology can provide access to the reflexive individual in ways that quantitative research cannot. She writes (Elliott 2005:131) that "there is no scope within quantitative research for understanding the ways in which individuals use narrative to construct and maintain a sense of their own identity". Further, she argues, it is through interpretivist methodology, and not quantitative research, that individuals can be seen to shape as well as be shaped by the culture and communities of which they are a part. Narratives both reflect and provoke what Giddens (1991) has called "institutional reflexivity".

Interpretivism, then, is concerned with the interplay between the personal and social, with meaning and with interpretation. It calls for a researcher who is able to put herself in the position

of the interviewee and record interpreted meanings from that vantage point. The multi-layered interpretation of interpretation is noted by Bryman (2001:15) who writes:

There is a double interpretation going on: the researcher is providing an interpretation of others' interpretations. Indeed there is a third level of interpretation...because the researcher's interpretations have to be further interpreted in terms of the concepts, theories and literature of a discipline

Given this complexity, how can validity in qualitative research, and narrative research in particular, be assured?

### **Authenticity in qualitative research**

Striving for *authenticity* within qualitative research rather than reliability and validity recognises the distinctiveness of interpretivism as a research methodology.

The emphasis has shifted from positivistic debates about ensuring replicability and accurate measurement, to the quality of the descriptions the research produces (Elliott 2005). Quality is seen to rest on authenticity and trustworthiness in the portraying of rich, holistic, detailed accounts (Guba and Lincoln 1989). Authenticity has a range of meanings. It has ethical connotations, as in a "moral commitment to truth seeking" (Bron and West 2000:170). It also suggests a need to ensure fairness, and an exhortation to fairly represent the different experiences and viewpoints of the participants (Bryman 2001). Authenticity implies the researcher has accurately conveyed the fragmented, subjectively interpreted realities and is predicated on an awareness of the part played by the researcher in both interpreting , conveying and indeed co-constructing those realities.

Cohen et al (2000) argue that where there is no fixed reality to portray, only different, personal, interpreted accounts, 'understanding' is a more suitable term than 'validity'.

They write (2000:106):

We, as researchers, are part of the world that we are researching, and we cannot be completely objective about that, hence other people's perspectives are equally as valid as

our own, and the task of research is to uncover these. Validity, then attaches to accounts, not to data or methods..... it is the meaning that subjects give to data and inferences drawn from the data that are important.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) also use the term 'catalytic authenticity' to refer to "the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants" (Stiles 1993:611). Catalytic validity directly addresses the empowerment of the research participants. An awareness of power in all its manifestations is essential if research is to be both authentic and principled.

Stiles (1993) also stresses the need for transparency of the research process to ensure the plausibility of the data can be determined. The research must be adequately contextualised in its historical, social and cultural location. He argues that the scope of the research should be well addressed with clear conceptualisation of the data, that is whether it is to be used to construct models and theories, as in grounded theory, or whether to highlight the specificity of the population under scrutiny. In this thesis, it will be seen that the 12 participants of the research study represent a small and relatively homogenous group of individuals, most of whom come from a specific geographic area. The research is designed to offer insight into unique subjective experiences and any generalisations both within the group and extending from it, have been deliberately resisted.

## **Narrative Methodology**

Research utilising narrative methodology is predicated on an understanding that life is storied and that the generation of stories enables actors living in a storied world to make sense of themselves and that world. Narrative can be seen to be both an ontological position and also an epistemological one. Bruner (1986) and Polkinghorne (1988) are generally attributed as being the first significant writers on the "narrative mode of knowing", although as Speedy (2008:45) notes, the "narrative turn" is "part of an age-old tradition in many cultures", and as Czarniawska (2004) writes, the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979/1986) had engaged in debate about the relationship between this non-modern narrative form of knowledge and modern scientific ways of knowing a decade before. It took another decade for theorists such as Giddens (1991; 1994) and Beck (1992,1994) to focus on the identities at the centre of the narratives and conceptualise the narrative self as a self-reflexive actor making meaning and striving for coherence through the generation of narrative.

Narrative methodology has been increasingly used by researchers over the last twenty or thirty years across the social sciences (Josselson et al 2003; Elliott 2005; Speedy 2008). Speedy (2008:11) notes the influence of the anthropological interest in the role of stories in traditional cultures and argues that since the 1980s there has been a 'crossover' from anthropology into other disciplines. In the 1990s the interest in narrative gained significant momentum particularly in sociology (Marvasti 2004), and fields within it such as the sociology of health, the family and criminology (Elliott 2005). Plummer (2001:ix), however, writes that even though narrative methodology has become more theoretically sophisticated it still remains "at the margins of mainstream academic research". Josselson (2003), in her narrative research entitled "Up, Close and Personal", understands narrative work to require an imaginative and creative approach. If lives are to be recorded as they actually are, that is, to use Plummer's (2001:7) phrase, "as a fluctual praxis, always in flow and ever messy", then the researcher must be prepared to experience that flow and messiness herself. Narrative methodology can be critiqued for this eclectic approach to data collection and calls for rigorous reflexivity as I discuss below. The blurring of researcher and researched narratives demands interrogation of the question 'whose story is this?'

### **Subjectivity and reflexivity: the self in the research process**

Narrative methodology does not allow the researcher to hide behind a mask of distant, and safe, objectivity. Narratives are co-productions and in narrative methodology the researcher is an active audience and the interview is the site of production (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Although qualitative research has always concerned itself with the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the "crisis of representation" of the late 1980s (Denzin and Lincoln 2003) generated a particular concern with researcher reflexivity, subjectivity and visibility. Because narrative methodology has grown up working with the slippery stuff of story, debates about the "crisis of representation" and the illusory nature of reality other than that created through the research itself are embedded in the approach. The 'truths' that people produce in narratives are contexted both by the social location and identity of the narrator (Lawler 2002) and are also bound by the context in which they are uttered. This leads to a need to adopt an explicitly reflexive approach to research (Elliott 2005) which calls the subjectivity of the researcher into the frame. However, it is argued that it is not enough to simply make the biography of the researcher known. Including aspects of the researcher's narrative does not render an autobiographical

account 'true'. (Walkerdine et al 2002), and "unfettered reflexivity" (Elliott 2005) in the shape of 'confessional accounts' of the research experience are also to be discouraged.

Narrative research focuses not just on the understandings and interpretations of the researched but also of the researcher and those produced by the interaction of the two. Holstein and Gubrium (1995:34) emphasise the "multiplicity of positions and perspectives that respondents may take" during an interview. This requires researcher agility to mirror the differing positions if the researcher is to stay within a synchronistic frame of reference. Bringing knowledge derived from psychoanalysis to bear on the interview process enables the use of analytic concepts such as transference and counter-transference to interrogate further what goes on within the research interview. Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2002) have taken the discussion about the place of subjectivity in the research process one step further by emphasising the role of the unconscious. They argue (2002:179) it is not sufficient for researchers to "assert their own subjectivity without also understanding the production of that subjectivity itself". Drawing on what has been termed a 'postmodern orientation to psychoanalysis' debate concerning reflexivity of the self, the Other and the dynamic between the two, has precipitated "the restructuring of methodology and the rethinking of interactional configurations in which the self is understood in relation to the others (Elliot and Spezanno 1999)" cited in Walkerdine et al (2002:180).

Such epistemological concerns as reflexivity and subjectivity have their roots in feminist research, although, as David (2003) argues, this has not always been acknowledged. Oakley's (1979) work developed the reflexive scrutiny of all aspects of research design and practice and exposed traditional interviewing as hierarchical and embracing power imbalances. More recent analysis of power relations within research has been undertaken by writers such as Walkerdine et al (2002) and Skeggs (2002). Walkerdine et al (2002:195) urge researchers not to retreat into feeling so uncomfortable about the "surveillant and authoritative position" of the researcher that the research is claimed to be more about the self than the research subjects, and Skeggs, in a frank account of her "authorial power" and its relationship to social positioning, argues for "accountability and responsibility in research, not for self-formation and self-promotion" (2002:366).

Reflexivity until very recently has tended to be emphasised in the context of data collection and the interviewing process, but less so in analysis and the presentation of results. In narrative



research, however, the researcher is reflexive of her dual position as also a narrator. In the interpretation and presentation of results a narrative unfolds. In this thesis thirteen narratives will be told; twelve young people's stories are weaved together in the thirteenth, my own. My own narrative is shaped by "foreground(ing) the role of the imagined audience" (Elliott 2005:165) and informed by public narratives about the demands of doctorate research.

### **The place of emotion in research**

Just as subjectivity only made an appearance in the research literature as the stranglehold of positivism was loosened, so, too, has the role of emotions in research until recently been a casualty of positivism's rationality (Oakley 1981:40). In this thesis I hope to convey the significance of emotion in identity and in learning, both my own and my research participants'. Narratives are a vehicle for emotion, and any research based on narratives must wrestle with what Walkerdine et al (2002:194) refer to as the "tricky place of emotions, ours and the participants' within the research process". I am drawn to the recent use of psychoanalytic ideas in the research process because it offers a language to articulate the complexity of the human encounter. For example, when I interviewed the young people at university I was aware that I was hearing their stories from three competing positions: the position of researcher but also as someone used to being a professional helper, and a mother who has a daughter at a very similar stage in her educational career. I found it hard to be dispassionate about their experiences. I liked these young people and I became aware of how important it was to me to know that they were 'alright' rather than 'struggling' which might, arguably, have given me more 'meaty material' to analyse for my thesis.

What is emotional truth? At times I sensed a disjuncture between what was said and visible presentation. I was also aware that some young people may have given me positive stories because they sensed my maternal interest and responded with the reassurance that sons and daughters feel obligated to give their concerned parents. Transference and counter-transference were concepts I found myself writing about in my research diary and they were important in reflecting on the data to be as transparent and authentic as I can be.

Throughout the research it also became apparent how important the young people's skilled use of emotions was in their everyday encounters and identities. The paucity of literature on the place of emotions in research activity is beginning to be addressed, but Burke and Jackson (2007:132) succinctly articulate why its appearance in the literature has taken so long:

The ways in which the emotional has been firmly set outside of forms of knowledge that are socially validated is entrenched in patriarchal assumptions. Being objective and rational is associated with masculine ways of being whilst being subjective and emotional has historical links with constructions of femininity.

Listening to feelings can move beyond the personal, individual story to an understanding of wider structural narratives.

### **Living life in narrative**

Narrative methodology is predicated on an agreed definition of narrative and the place of private and public narratives in social life. I explore experience, meaning and temporality below, before discussing the role of plot and narrative causality. The way in which narratives can be seen as “social products” (Lawler 2002), then precedes exploration of narrative identity.

### **Experience, meaning and temporality**

Underlying the concept of narrative is an emphasis on experience and meaning as essential aspects of human existence. Polkinghorne (1988:1) links narrative, experience and meaning in his influential work *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*:

(N)arrative (is) the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful.

The realm of meaning, he emphasises, is an activity not an object and research into meaning-making is particularly complex because “the activity of making meaning is not static, and thus not easily grasped”(1988:7). Narratives are more than ‘reports’ which merely reflect reality, they are fragmented and shaped by the context of the telling. Narrators create meaning in the narrating, and research can capture this active process to give a better understanding of the respondent’s reality. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) note the interpretivist researcher’s role in stimulating the interviewee’s interpretive capacities in their discussion of the ‘active’ research interview as a site for the production of knowledge. Both the narrator and the researcher are together engaged in meaning-making processes and researcher reflexivity is required to interrogate the researcher role in both the production and the interpretation of the knowledge if the research is to be authentic. Insights and interpretations emerging from the ‘active interview’ can be both powerful and

empowering for the research participant. But they are also partial and specifically produced for the interview.

Narratives are more than disconnected meaningful experiences. They convey a sequencing of events. Dewey, writing in the 1930s, argued that an element of experience is continuity, and that “experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000:2). As these events unfold, learning is unleashed and meanings are understood. The full significance of the individual events emerges when seen in relation to each other and to the whole (Elliott 2005). A narrative is a story with a beginning, middle and end. The context of time is the backcloth upon which the sequenced events of the narrative are woven. Narrative “provides a framework for understanding the past events of one’s life and for planning future actions” (Polkinghorne 1988:11).

Writers such as Polkinghorne (1988) and Bruner (1990) have written extensively about meaning, experience and narrative but as the work of both is grounded in cognitive psychology the important place of emotion in narrative is lacking. Meaning making schema are presented as cognitive processes and there is little discussion of the role of affect in human experiences. In my research, emotion plays a significant part in the experiences of the young people, and the relationship between emotion and meaning-making is interrogated. The role of emotion in cognitive processes and learning is now well-documented (Burke and Jackson 2007; Howe 2008), and in the young people’s narratives of new lives where negotiating relationships and communities is a dominating theme, recognising and managing emotions in self and others is a key element of making sense of experience. This highlights a deficiency in earlier writing on narrative.

### **Plot and causality**

The placing of events in the context of time provides one kind of cohering thread which runs through narratives. Another, related, way in which narratives achieve coherence is through the role of plot. Plot is a term which is linked to literature and particularly fiction, but in personal narratives it is used to indicate a relationship between different events, that is, causality. Emplotment is the process by which seemingly disparate events and both intended and unintended consequences are synthesised, causal links established and a meaningful whole produced. Elliott draws on Chatman to explain the way both the author and audience of narratives tend to attribute causality to a sequence of events recounted in narrative form:

Events are 'linked to each other as cause to effect, effects in turn causing other effects, until the final effect. And even if two events seem not obviously interrelated, we infer that they may be, on some larger principle that we will discover later' (Chatman, 1978:46 cited in Elliott 2005:8).

Much has been written about the differences between "paradigmatic explanations of knowing" (Bruner 1986) and narrative causal explanations and it can be seen that the former offer explanations which can be generalized from the particular-"universal truth conditions" (Polkinghorne 1988)- whereas narrative causality is context specific. Baumeister and Newman (1994:678) write:

Narrative thinking sacrifices the generality of the paradigmatic mode in favour of comprehensiveness. Rich accounts can encompass many features, and so narratives are more flexible and can accommodate more inconsistencies than paradigmatic thinking.

### **Social aspect of narratives**

Narratives are both situated within, and also interact with and are informed by, historical, social and cultural contexts (Josselson et al 2003; Lawler 2002; Plummer 2001). Polkinghorne (1988:14), notes that narratives perform a significant function at both the personal and social level:

At the individual level, people have a narrative of their own lives which enables them to construe what they are and where they are headed. At the cultural level, narratives serve to give cohesion to shared beliefs and to transmit values.

Narratives told, or produced, in a social context can be seen as 'social products' functioning as "interpretive devices" (Lawler 2002), which enable the narrator to represent him/herself both to him/herself and to others. The way in which the personal and social are entwined within narratives means that personal narratives are not free from the shaping and constraining effects of social structure. Narratives are told to an audience and audience reaction- both positive and negative-will become part of the continual process of production and re-production that is narrative. Narratives also incorporate the life narratives of others and become joint rather than individual enterprises. There are also what Somers and Gibson (1994) refer to as 'public

narratives'. These are a wide range of narratives which are "attached to cultural and institutional formations rather than the single individual" (Somers and Gibson 1994:62). They may be linked to expert knowledge, or knowledge which has become 'expert' through their frequent repetition. They may be shaped by particular institutions. Elliott notes how a range of formal settings- such as medical consultations and, of relevance here, research interviews, may, through a variety of procedures control the way in which narratives are told. She (2005:128) links controlling institutional settings and Foucault's (1977) concept of the 'regulated self' here:

As Foucault has stressed, the west has become a "singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, family relationships and love relations...Western man has become a confessing animal (1990:59)".

The content of those confessions, is, however, highly prescribed both culturally and historically. In Higher Education Institutions, for example, the Press Office seeking news for publication regularly demands from lecturers stories of 'students achieving success by overcoming adversity'. This emphasis on success, survival and coping (or not) also permeates the Higher Education research literature as I have already noted. The plethora of confessional celebrity 'misery memoirs' reflect the 21<sup>st</sup> century appetite for such narratives. Plummer gives examples of stories that not only change over time, but which are *of* the time. 'Coming out' stories of gay and lesbians in the 1970s, for example, ended the silence on homosexuality which was filled only by the voices of "doctors and moralists" whose stories were "couched in the most negative of terms- since homosexuality was seen as a sickness, a pathology and a crime" (Plummer 2001: 94).

### **Narrative identity**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Kierkegaard famously wrote that "life is lived forward but understood backwards", and Lawler (2002:251) comments that in fact lives are understood both forwards and backwards "in a 'spiral movement' of constant interpretation and reinterpretation". Paul Ricoeur (1991), has called this process in which the past is continually re-worked to achieve a coherent sense of self a 'narrative identity' (Lawler 2002). This means that, as with narratives themselves, the concept of temporality is essential in this reflexivity (Elliott 2005; Polkinghorne 1988). Ricoeur has written extensively about time and narrative, and Elliott (2005:125) explains his use of the term *soi-même* to mean an identity which has *permanence* through time without

*sameness* through time, as distinct from an identity which is always *exactly* the same. She writes (2005:125):

Ricoeur argues that a narrative understanding of identity avoids the choice between continual flux and instability and the stasis of absolute identity.

The linking of the past, present and future through narratives is what enables individuals to maintain a coherent sense of self. Polkinghorne (1998:150) describes this process of the production of identity through stories over time:

We..... make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self then is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into a historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be.

The narrative identity is a synthesis of personal and public narratives, socially structured but able to exercise agency. It is produced in everyday practices making lifestyle choices from a range of options (Giddens 1991), it is also ‘disciplined’ (Holstein and Gubrium 2002) “by the diverse social circumstances and practices that produce (it)”. Narrative identity is essentially reflexive, fluctuates over time and is context dependent.

## **Research Design**

The design of the research needed to encompass research methods which would enable the unfolding of narratives. I wove the two elements of temporality and context into the design by giving consideration to timing and location in both the substance of the interview and the framing of it. For example, temporality guided the fact that interviews took place at the end of sixth form college and during the first year of university to frame the element of transition and temporal movement I aimed to record. Additionally, within the interviews themselves I asked questions designed to elicit looking back and looking forward (see below and Appendix C). Similarly, as narratives are culturally situated it was important to hear those narratives from within the current cultural milieu, so all of the second interviews were designed to occur at the new university. I also wanted to utilise a range of media that might provide insight into the students’ subjectivities.

Wenger has used the concept of reification to “refer to the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into ‘thingness’” (1998:58). Plummer, rather more elegantly, has referred to “documents of life”. He writes (2000:17):

The world is crammed full of human, personal documents. People keep diaries, send letters, make quilts, take photos, dash off memos, compose auto/biographies, construct web sites, scrawl graffiti .....All of these expressions of personal life are hurled out into the world by the millions..... They are all in the broadest sense ‘documents of life’.

As the research progressed I came to use many different documents, all of which conveyed partial narratives that helped support and piece together the narratives the young people told. For example the notice boards in the students’ rooms were usually crammed with photos, tickets of gigs attended and parties to come, and sometimes a crumpled seminar time-table or booklist lurking in a corner. I would comment on these and narratives of new student life would tumble into the tape-recorder. Towards the end of the year there were also email exchanges between me and some of the young people which were more formally produced documents.

### **Research sample**

My research sample consists of 12 young people, 3 boys and 9 girls who were all just leaving one of three sixth form colleges, two of which are in a southern city and one in a northern city, at the time of the first interview. Most of the sample-not all, as will be seen below- are from families where there is a family history of attending Higher Education. Although the sample is differentiated through gender, race and disability, there are also commonalities, in particular, class. Initially I saw the structural homogeneity of the group as having the potential to limit findings. Indeed the sample would have benefited from a greater number of male interviewees to interrogate findings a little more rigorously. However, as the research progressed it became apparent that the limitations of the sample also gave advantages: my being able to work with a certain degree of shared experiences and perceptions allowed me space to explore and analyse individual differences and detail. In a sense the commonalities enabled me to focus on the differences.

I wrote to two local sixth form colleges asking for students who had decided against taking a ‘gap year’ and were starting university in Autumn 2006 and who would be willing research subjects. My

initial plan of having a sample of students with whom I had no connection was scuppered by the fact that the returned lists contained the names of six students, five of whom I already knew through having a daughter a similar age and being part of the same networks. Another 5 students came via word of mouth, people who knew about my research either from me so they volunteered their children or from my daughter, in which case they volunteered themselves. One student came with her boyfriend to his research interview to “keep him company” and became the 12<sup>th</sup> member of my sample. The sample, then, constitutes what Bryman refers to as “convenience sampling”, gathered by a “snowballing approach” (Bryman 2001:98).

The research sample is a relatively homogenous group predominantly from comfortable middle-class homes. All were 18 or 19 at first interview. All are white except two who have dual heritage (both British/Indian). There was no intention of representivity nor will I make generalisations from the sample under study. What I hope to produce, however, is one of the many “grounded, multiple and local studies of lives in all their rich flux and change” (2001:13) that Plummer links to the recent rise of what can broadly be termed life story work in the social sciences.

Although I initially viewed the fact that some of the sample were known to me as problematic, as the research progressed my relationships with the participants became part of the research itself in two main ways. Firstly, there emerged from the research the theme of connectedness. As I show as the thesis unfolds, the students’ pre-university lives were dominated by participation in personal communities, and once at university they worked to re-create social systems that were familiar to them. I came to realise I played a part in those communities and was a link between the old and new. Secondly, the ‘narrative’ is a highly fluid and contested medium. Hearing narratives from the young people as a researcher but also as a mother with children the same age as the interviewees affects both what is told and what is heard.

### **Research instruments**

I start this section with a statement about the main research instrument: the researcher, myself (Oakley, 1981; Josselson et al, 2003).

As narratives are always work in progress, continually being worked and re-worked, the telling of the narrative to the researcher is another opportunity for it to be re-worked. Narratives are a co-



production (Daiute and Fine 2003; Lawler 2002). So what is it that I as the researcher bring to this joint enterprise?

***Research Instrument No 1: Me, the researcher***

The research has been an emotional, intellectual and ideological endeavour for me, and I have made choices of research design and theoretical interpretations that are, I see as I sew together the pieces of the research into a written whole, representative of the many fragmented parts of my own trajectory of self. As already noted, I am a mother of daughters, one of whom was in her 'Gap Year' during the year I was interviewing the research participants in their new universities. My social work background provided the lens which highlighted the significance of relationship and emotion in the young people's stories. It also meant I instinctively brought psychoanalytic thinking to research reflections, this knowledge base being familiar to me in my work as a social worker and counsellor. I was excited to find that psychoanalytic concepts are now being applied to the research process by some forward thinking feminist academics.

Although the positions of mother and social worker are salient in my identity, it was that of a Student Advisor working with students in an HEI which kick-started my interest in the research topic. Memories of my own experiences as a sociology student in the late 70s, when my discovery of sociological and in particular, feminist debates had been truly transformative (Mezirow 1978) were triggered by this role. I was expecting to find similar narratives emanating from first year experiences of the students in my research. As will be shown, their narratives reflect more personal than ideological transformations.

Finally, in my research there has been a political drive to give voice to the students I have interviewed that has been motivated by the adultism which permeates contemporary British society. Haines and Drakeford (1999:1) identify a "pervasive negativity" that envelops perceptions of and responses to children, and they starkly suggest that "our society does not like young people". Students, too, suffer a negative image associated with their liminal status as explored further in the following chapters. However, this researcher did not have to look far to find the thoughtfulness, resources and energy of young people.

### ***Research Instrument No 2: the reflective research journal***

Field notes and journals are an obvious and longstanding form of embracing the self in the products of qualitative research, though they are often overlooked as such (Coffey 2002:317).

Taylor (2006) writing in the *British Journal of Social Work* discusses the way in which reflective journals are crucial tools in the developing professional identities of social work students. As students narrate their experience in the journals, the activity of reflection produces particular identities. My own research journal has been a vital research instrument and within this study I will refer to extracts to demonstrate the reflexivity engendered by the research. At the same time I acknowledge that the journal has been a site of the production of a researcher self (Coffey, 2002; Taylor 2006).

### ***Research Instrument No 3: Interviewing Instruments***

#### Piloting

Piloting was a crucial first stage in the testing of two instruments, the unstructured interview and the self-completed questionnaire. The latter resulted from the piloting of the former. I chose to pilot the narrative interview with a young person who, although the same age as the students in my study, was not part of the study because on completing A levels she decided against going to university. Concerned that the stories the student told should be her own I made the interview very open and without structure. It raised two issues, firstly that I needed some kind of trigger tool to kick off and structure the interview, and secondly, I needed to do more thinking about the kinds of stories that might be told, and how I might manage these. This was because the student wanted to tell the story of her childhood which had been dominated by the mental health difficulties of her single parent mother. From the first, then, I was engaged with issues of boundaries between research and therapy, my concomitant role as a researcher and a concerned individual, and the dilemma of structure. Researcher-imposed structure might be constraining and restricting of the narrator's voice. Alternatively it might be experienced as 'containing' and alleviating the anxiety of a too-open space.

Persuaded by the latter position, for the first interview (not the second, which was more unstructured), I devised a questionnaire to be completed by the student at the beginning of the

interview which then formed the basis of the interview. This questionnaire had first been piloted with a group of four young people who completed it and then discussed with me their experience of doing it. I subsequently removed and added questions, and changed the wording of others following their reactions and responses. The questionnaire is in Appendix B.

### The initial questionnaire

The kinds of questions asked, the whole direction of the research, will to some extent influence the kinds of narrative research subjects produce in the research itself (Lawler 2002:254).

The questionnaire was designed to capture two overarching themes of the research- narrative and identity. The questions encourage 'narrative thinking' (are there particular stories about you that your family tell?), introduce the concept of temporality (how have you changed over the last year; when you think of yourself at college....) and also ask about specific events and, through narration, their meanings (can you remember any particular incidents from your childhood?). Questions which focus on identity are those which encourage the student to think about themselves as a child, in the family and as a student at school and college. The relational aspect of identity informs the question 'Think of a particular friend. How would s/he describe you?' and 'Would you agree with that description?' as well as asking the student to name people who are important to them. Identity as a trajectory is encapsulated in the question 'what kind of person do you hope to be?'

Finally, the first question is in the form of an invitation to 'tell me 5 things about yourself, about who you are, or what you do'. Designed as an 'ice-breaking' question which I hoped would be a familiar way into thinking about identity reminiscent of popular identity-quizzes, this question was either completed in a spontaneous flash or agonised over for several tortuous minutes. I include a statement from each of the students' responses in the 'pen-pictures' attached at Appendix A as I believe each made an important claim about identity.

### Interviewing

The second interview took place at the young person's university, usually in their bedsits. The second interviews were unstructured but focused on the initial experiences of university life. A list of prompts can be found at Appendix B.

I comment on the experience of interviewing as this thesis progresses as some of it was captured in my research diary and provides additional data. Interviewing the second (and sometimes third) time round when a relationship had been established between myself and the young person generally produced longer and more detailed accounts than the first interviews where inevitably there was more discomfort as both of us were endeavouring to make sense of the encounter. Some interviewees were harder to interview than others, one young person in particular was rather reticent. Another one was hard to stop talking. Two of the young people brought friends round to the first interview. On both occasions this caused me initial panic – do I involve the friend or ignore them? Will it restrict what the young person says or free them up? Interviewing, however well planned, will always have a messiness about it, and as the research progressed I felt more able to ‘go with the flow’ with the young person in the driving seat. The seeds of this confidence were sown when one male interviewee came for his first interview with his girlfriend in tow. Although she said she would not join in, she could not restrain herself, and had interesting and insightful narratives of her own. I invited her to be one of my sample and she became Rosalyn. Hey’s (1997:41) statement is pertinent here:

Research in the real world is lived as a series of rapidly unfolding and occasionally unpredictable events about which one has to make practical decisions.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was assisted by the qualitative data software Nvivo. Themes were sought for and other themes emerged as the data was transcribed, in-putted and trawled through. The conceptual framework of identity as fragmented and conceived in tensions between difference and similarity, structure and agency was used to identify themes. Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is used as a starting point to analyse the effects of class on identity, and authors such as Reay are used to theorise gender relations. The conceptual framework underpinning this thesis understands power to be differentially connected to structural relations. An analysis of power and power relations focuses attention on the way ‘truths’ are constructed and assumptions are made and legitimised. The context of the research is Higher Education and identities made in relation to this will be shaped by the prevailing ideology of this predominantly white male institution. The concept of transition, how it was experienced and its effects on identity were noted in the narratives. The

process of reflexivity is at the heart of Giddens' work on the project of the self and I felt this warranted explicit interrogation, so reflexivity, too, was a theme identified early on for analysis. Themes which emerged from the data were primarily concerned with different aspects of connectedness for example the development of social capital, the nature of friendships and gender and friendships.

## **Ethical Considerations**

My ethical stance towards this piece of research has been informed by the principles emanating from the values and ethics base of my professional social work practice, from feminism, and also the extensive literature on research ethics (for example Gray, 2004; Denscombe 2007).

Social work practice is informed by the General Social Care Council Code of ethics for Social Work (2002) which states that social work is committed to five basic values: human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity and competence. These values, it seems to me, are an appropriate starting- off point in a discussion about research ethics because they lay the foundation stones from which principles can be hewn. The GSCC codes are suffused with exhortations to treat each person as an individual, to "respect diversity, different cultures and values". They emphasise the centrality of the person at the heart of the work, and the importance of the worker doing the best she can to protect the interests of that person. Issues of enabling informed consent, ensuring the respondent is clear about the reasons, the process and the outcomes of research, and handling data with sensitivity and confidentiality have to be thought through carefully, and I believe my professional practice afforded me a head-start in this process.

Beckett and Maynard (2005) emphasise the importance of the worker being clear and transparent about their world-view and throughout this chapter I have endeavoured to be self-reflexive about the values I hold. I strove to ensure the young people and their narratives were not exploited in any way and that they got something out of the interviews over and above the small sum of money I gave for each interview. Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) conception of the interview as a site where meanings and learning are produced rung true in my work with the young people and there were many moments of revelation and clarity in the interviews which I felt the young people greatly valued. I made a point of visiting them in their own new lives both because the narrative

takes on a more live quality when it is recounted in context, but also so that I was the visitor being invited into their worlds. This had important power implications: a guest has to be mindful of the house-rules. Interestingly, there is little literature on ethical considerations specifically in narrative research (Elliott 2005), but I would argue that it is a methodology which has the potential to be particularly empowering for the research 'subject' – a term which belies the active role of the narrator driving the interview. The skill of the researcher is to follow, to prompt, to clarify and to share the emotion the narrative generates.

### **Relationship between researcher and researched**

Oakley has exhorted the interviewer to disrupt traditional research relationships where detachment and inherent inequality resides and to be "prepared to invest his or her own personality in the relationship" (Oakley 1981:41); but this creates its own difficulties. It has the potential to free up the space for other configurations of relationships which, unregulated, may impede the quality of the research and which may also be unethical. One such reconfiguration, for example, is when the research interview strays into therapy. Although the therapeutic value of the research interview has been well documented, therapy and research must remain conceptually distinct. This issue becomes particularly salient in narrative research because of the recent interest in the use of narratives for therapeutic value in narrative therapy (White and Epston, 1994). Narrating is a vehicle for making sense and establishing coherence and identity both in the research process and in therapy. The researcher must be clear of role, although an experience in my own research demonstrates this is not always easy: when playing back the recording of an interview I could see I had responded to the young person's unhappiness with interventions designed to mobilise his self-efficacy and personal resources: responses which arguably have more legitimacy in the counselling-rather than the interview-room.

Troubling ethical issues will be different for each researcher as each takes different selves into the research arena. I have already discussed the social worker and mother in the interview room. In this final section I also bring in the young sociology student, myself a generation ago. Although a boundary must be drawn between research and counselling as outlined above, research can usefully draw on techniques from counselling theory in order to listen actively and hear the meanings and interpretations the narrator intends. One such technique which aids the ability to suspend judgement and understand the individual's world-view as closely as possible is that of

empathy: the ability to move between one's own and another's frame of reference to facilitate understanding another's subjectivity without losing sight of one's own (Egan, 1985). The closer the interviewee is in social position and experience to the interviewer, the harder the latter must work to be clear whose narrative is being recorded.

Sometimes this was a struggle for me, and keeping in the young person's frame of reference when thoughts and memories were constantly triggered required much careful focus. An example will illustrate this. One of the young people referred to there being "lots of orange people" at her university. I was immediately transported back in time thirty years remembering the followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh dressed in orange clothes. My brief reverie was shattered when it became apparent that what the young person was in fact referring to were the students who had spent too long in the sun-tanning cabins on the high street.

These experiences brought home just how emotional the research engagement can be, and how important it is to be able to work with those emotions if the research is to be authentic as well as ethical. It has been my intention in this chapter to render the research process as transparent as possible and to address the issues of my own reflexive subjectivity within the research. This has involved the telling of some of my own narrative. In the following chapters, the young people's voices will be heard.

## Chapter 3 Transition, learning and being a student

In this and the following two chapters I use the voices of the young people to explore themes which emerged during the research. The young people are at a transitional stage in their lives, and they characterise both being at sixth form college *and* at university as being in transition. I explore the relationship between transition and identity, and find that being in transition has a particular effect on identity: it provides an opportunity for introspection and re-evaluation. Transition often involves the task of making decisions and choices, and the young people in this study are at the point in their lives when many of their choices concern both who they are and who they want to be. The identity of 'student' is both present and future-oriented. Some of the students had well-thought out life-plans and others' futures were more hazy, but all recognised by the time that I first interviewed them that they had made choices about themselves which meant that learning and 'being a student' was to be part of their identity for some years to come.

### Being a student

All of the 12 young people in my research were, when first interviewed either just before or just after receiving news of their A level results, committed and enthusiastic about studying at Higher Education level. They had chosen their future University with care, and all had identified prestigious redbrick universities in which to undertake their undergraduate study. Research methodologies which gather narratives for analysis recognise that individuals present their narratives tailored to particular audiences. As my research was introduced to them as being about identity and educational transition, the young people constructed narratives of themselves primarily – though not exclusively – in their learning contexts. They spoke about relationships with peers and teachers, their favourite subjects and how well they thought they had done at school. As their narratives unfolded, it became apparent that the identity of 'student' sat more comfortably with some than with others. For some of the young people, doing well at school had always been important; others seemed to 'grow into' being a student during school and college years. This 'growth' was often particularly marked as the young people transferred into sixth form college and goes some way to explain why they experienced sixth form college as a significant transition: it involved a shift in status and consequent re-evaluation of identity as a student.



Tony is an example of a young person whose identity as a student only really became a more comfortable part of himself at University. The son of an academic, he had had a complex relationship to learning and being a student while at school. Tony described himself as being a *“wild child”* when younger. He would win friendship through playing the fool in class and indulging in minor acts of delinquency. His explanation of this behaviour was that he was often bored at school. Certain things and particular teachers did capture his attention, however, and then he found himself able to become engaged and focused. His interest in music, for example, was nurtured by a music teacher for whom he had a tremendous amount of respect. Music continued to be an important part of his identity while at University.

Although his school-days were often difficult, going to university was always in his life-plan. He had a good relationship with his academic mother and would sometimes, when school was closed for example, accompany her to her work and sit in the lectures she gave. He grew up with a familiarity of academic life. When he was younger he thought it would be History he studied as an undergraduate as he had a long-held interest in this, fuelled by reading the book-series *“Horrible Histories”* as a child. Tony showed how the way a subject is taught can kill off a budding interest: by the time he was in the first year of his A level studies he had *“done the Nazis five years in a row”*, had *“done them to death”* and decided to change allegiance to Politics. The way in which Tony eventually seemed to feel comfortable with the identity of student once at university will be returned to below.

Alice, by contrast, is an example of a young person who had always had a sense of herself as a ‘good student’, one who had enjoyed learning throughout her school-life and for whom going to university was an inevitable next stage of her education. Although her father went to university, her mother did not, and Alice felt that because both have had successful careers there had been no pressure to choose a particular educational trajectory.

Alice had had a clear life plan as long as she could remember, and that was to become a teacher. Cousins and friends of the family were teachers and talked of their work had inspired her from an early age. They had helped and given advice when she was choosing her A level subjects. She described herself as someone who took studying seriously and who had consistently worked reasonably hard. She described how she never wanted to break rules at school – *“I suppose I was a goody goody really”*. The way in which Alice felt able to make this statement about herself

contrasts with Tony's diffidence about embracing 'being a student'. Although both are very different people who have had different life experiences, how far gender affects this construction of the self will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

### **Transition to sixth form college**

A significant finding of my research was the intensity of the transition to *sixth form college*. Whereas I had anticipated the move to *university* would result in narratives of discontinuities and disorientation, in fact such narratives typified the change from school to college. Students entering sixth form college experienced disruption to the familiar setting and pattern of educational life. Existing friendship groups were dispersed. Academic subjects were taught in new ways making different demands on the student engaging with the task of learning. The students were given freedoms as near-adults –no more uniform, no need to be in college outside of lessons, and so on– but there were also more responsibilities as the onus for attendance, learning and meeting deadlines shifted away from parental and teacher control, to them. Many found it daunting. Maggie was knocked of her academic perch. Rosalyn felt lonely and unable to manage putting in time to succeed both socially and academically. Rachel found a boyfriend who did not value educational pursuits, was drawn away from her studies and failed her first year.

### **Changing status and growing up**

College involved a change of status which meant taking on the trappings of adulthood. Jessica said that since starting sixth form college:

*I have become more confident and have actually started to think about the future.*

This gradual increase of confidence over the two years' of college was a common theme, but asking the young people to think back to the beginning of college produced some narratives of initial panic, disorientation and unhappiness. Rosalyn had been looking forward to moving in a different circle of friends at sixth form college. However, the start of college filled her with despair: she felt ill at ease both socially and academically. For her, studying her A levels was a shock. She described to me the transition from being at school and able to "*get GCSEs and have a social life and be cool*" to being at college and suddenly realising that studying would have to be prioritised if she were to succeed academically. The task, she explained, was to take on that intellectual identity and "*still be seen as cool*". This was particularly pertinent for Rosalyn because she had been bullied

at school and had not found making friends easy, at least initially. She arrived at college only to find that making friends there would not be easy either- combining a social life with the need to work harder than she had anticipated militated against that. During the first year she found college hard. She felt “*de-motivated*”. It was a lot less fun than school. Becoming an intellectual was, for her, a miserable process. She says:

*Its just that I was having a little bit of a miserable time (at college) and I had thought everything would be better (than school). Or it would at least be a bit better. ....The second year at college was for me just about the work and much less about the social side. But I stopped noticing it as much and I just got used to it probably.*

For Tony, the transition re-activated the feelings surrounding the loss of his father through divorce some four years previously. His story of transition is one of being up-rooted from the familiar to the unfamiliar and illustrates the difficulty of negotiating transition, particularly if having to manage personal and familial issues as well. (Tinto, 1975). Tony described starting at sixth form college in this way:

*It kind of felt like swimming against the current.*

His parents had separated while he was at school and he had been able to cope with this when everything else around him, crucially the school setting, remained stable. He told me:

*I knew what was what at (school), because I'd been there for five years and at that point it was basically a third of the whole of my life.. I knew how everything worked there. ... I knew the teachers so I could get...well I s'pose although I think I got a lot better behaved I still was cheeky, I s'pose, and I knew how to play the system...*

His work at college suffered, although he managed to pick himself up in the middle of the second year and achieved sufficient A levels to enter the university of his choice. He said he thought college had made him grow up quickly.

### New ways of learning

Transition to both sixth form college and to university involved the students in new learning, and new ways of learning, which could have significant and unsettling effects. Many students at sixth form college commented on the different kind of learning that students engage in once GCSE examinations are over. A level study provides an opportunity to study a subject at a depth not experienced before, and there is also a shift from pedagogic instruction to more discursive educational practices. This seems to result in learning having a significant impact on previously held meaning structures and the way the young people related to their world (Mezirow1978). For Alice, studying Media had encouraged her to think critically and she became more interested in politics and world events at this time. Rachel described this new-found way of engaging with both the social and physical world in her first interview just at the end of her two years' at sixth form college. She told me:

*Studying chemistry has made me realise the world is much more complex...y'know I think, well I get up, watch Big Brother, go to parties, get drunk, that sort of thing and then when I do chemistry I think oh there's more to it than this... Chemistry feels important, like finding out about the world....*

Her enthusiasm for chemistry remained through the first year of university and had a significant impact on her identity as discussed below.

Nick described well the different educational practices learning at sixth form college entailed. In this quotation below he explains the emphasis on group discussions which was a feature of sixth form lessons but he also reveals that he has not yet caught on to the fact that discussion *is* learning! He enjoyed the discussions and was envious of those students who he felt had taken subjects which involved more emphasis on group exchange of views than the subjects he had taken. For example, those taking philosophy he felt:

*discuss in the class quite a lot..They make quite a big point of discussing stuff and we did do some discussions in politics but it kind of would be hard. Sometimes we'd start an interesting discussion but it would have to be stopped so that we could learn something instead.*

Alice, too enjoyed this greater emphasis on participative learning:

*Now when I look back to school I can see I used to like voicing my opinions and doing*

*discussions and stuff, but it was only in college I noticed it. I did Critical Thinking and it was weird cos it was different to what I thought it was going to be like. I didn't majorly enjoy it but I was quite good at it cos it was like the theory of argument and not actually arguing with people. But yeah I was good at it and that's why I started to notice that I enjoy debating!*

Several of the students described how learning at sixth form caused them to question the certainty of 'truth' and there being a 'right answer' for the first time. Rosalyn described the way her thinking changed at college:

*Yeah it made me think about science in a very different way, the way all truth can be questioned but sometimes you just have to get on with it and take a pragmatic approach- if it works, do it.*

Maggie expressed it in this way:

*I began to realise that even in maths there's not always one straight down the line way of thinking. That was hard to grasp at first, that really confused me and then someone explained to me that different people see things in different ways, even in a subject like maths, and that was really hard for me to get my head around.*

She shows how such a realisation was not restricted to subject learning:

*Yeah and I always thought it was a silly statement when people are like oh there's never one right answer, but maths taught me that there are different ways of thinking and not so quickly reject people's ways as I did in (first year of college). My maths teacher said that I grew up quite a lot cos I'd sit up and listen to other people's ways and give them a go whereas before I wouldn't have done that.*

### **Choosing subjects for study – a choice about identity**

Hey's study of girls' friendships at school highlights the way in which for young people educational institutions are sites for the investment in "multiple possibilities" of social and academic display (Hey 1997:43). Educational contexts are future-oriented, concerned with equipping students with skills and qualifications for a later time. Young people use both formal and informal spaces to negotiate both present and future identities. They have an eye to the future while investing in

present-oriented identities. Young people manage image and self-definition through both leisure activities and also the positioning of self in relation to education and educational achievement throughout school, college and higher education (Kehily and Pattman 2006; Bloomer 2001).

Relatively little of the literature on learning and identity concerns itself with subject-based learning (Bloomer 2001). However, for the young people each of these 'bodies of knowledge' encompasses different meanings which impact on their self-definition work. I discuss this again more fully below in relation to gender and subject-choice, but here I will make general comments about the way subject –based learning is involved in identity-work.

Knowledges are differentially connoted. The privileging of scientific 'rational' knowledge over process, tacit knowledge is well aired in both feminist and professional literature (e.g. Eraut 1994; Ruch 2000). Among these young people, choice of subject was not simply a matter of interest; it was also a decision about a public display of identity. Nick illustrates this well. He told me in the first interview conducted at the end of his two years' at college that although he decided early on in his school-life he wanted to pursue sciences, he had taken a range of arts and science subjects at A level. It was only in college that he felt sufficiently confident to acknowledge his love of animals, a confession that fits uneasily with stereotypical masculine identity, and chose to study zoology at university. He said:

*I've always liked animals which is a bit of a rubbish thing. I've always liked reading about animals.....I've never had a pet but I've always read about animals, loved zoos and aquariums so it's always been (there).*

That subjects studied make a statement about identity is true at University, too. Alice, a Geography student, wrote at the end of her first university year that she had been surprised at how many friends she had made among the Geography students as:

*I thought that the people doing Geography would all be a bit nerdy.*

Alice went on to describe the 'outsiders' view of Geography:

*Well I definitely have a lot less lectures/seminars than other subjects, which has led people to believe that it is a bit of a doss. I can understand what they mean, and we often get asked*

*questions like ‘can you colour between the lines yet?’ and people make jokes about it just being about drawing maps. But it’s mostly just laughed off, nobody ever means offence, as you can make a joke about all the other subjects.*

In Alice’s statement it can be seen that Geography, like most subjects, projects an image imbued with particular meanings, and those that study it embrace those meanings and work with or against them. Rachel, for example, studying Chemistry at university, enjoys the way in which studying Chemistry makes her knowledgeable about the world, knowledge she can impress friends with:

*(Chemistry) is like, oh yeah, this is how something works in a plant or something and you’ll be like oh that’s something interesting and I kind of feel ooh I know something nobody else knows (except other chemists!) and I kind of like that, I do! I feel a bit superior over everyone else cos like I know... I know there’s lots of things that I can’t do but I sort of like the feeling when I go yeah I’m doing chemistry and everyone’s like “wow!”*

### **Transition and being a university student**

In the second interview, when in his second term at university, Nick expressed very clearly his view that he was in a transitional state in response to my question about how he felt about being a student:

*I dunno..yeah probably just the lifestyle of being poor, lazy and supposed to be learning stuff. Its kind of a thing on its own. Its being responsible for yourself like an adult but totally not being an adult. Its like having a job but totally not having a job cos you’re not doing anything useful for anybody or anything like that. So its just that kind of middle bit that isn’t even a transition between childhood and adult really its...its just a phase or something. ..what is it? Weird, I dunno.*

In this quote Nick is articulating his experience of liminality. Holdsworth and Morgan (2005:23) note that “the identification of the conditions for liminality does not necessarily mean that the individuals thus located will experience or understand it in this way,” but Nick is clearly aware of being in some kind of suspended state on the outside of the mainstream, a state difficult to articulate but is felt and experienced.

Being a student at university is essentially a liminal state. It is both a privileged position and a negative one. Van Gennep's (1960) anthropological work is useful in the conceptualisation of the student world as one of on-going transition. Although much is made of the transition *to* different educational contexts, the higher education context is, itself, I argue, a transitional space. A student status is at the same time a definite status, imbued with privilege, and also a non-status because its value lies in its potentiality rather than its present.

Students are aware of this contradiction which is particularly marked as a university student. The students in my research generally (with the exception of two of the students who had infiltrated the local music scene) expressed feeling outside the geographical community they had moved to join. Once at university their narratives refer to themselves in distinction to the "*locals*". Student night-life, I was told, in university cities from north to south, took place during the week. At the week-ends the "*locals*" came out and the students were priced out of the city.

Rosalyn explained the "dirty looks" she got from "*old women on the bus*" because of her student identity. Rosalyn explains she likes being a student but:

*...not necessarily the connotations that come with it, you know, people assume quite a lot about you if you're a student*

HL: *Like what?*

*Rosalyn: Like layabout is one word that springs to mind from this woman (on the bus), what she obviously thought was that we were lazy students who couldn't be bothered to walk up the stairs so were blocking the passageway and causing her 5 seconds delay getting on the bus. I know for a fact that every one of us would have gone upstairs if we could have got our suitcase upstairs.*

Tony's emerging student identity suddenly flourished as soon as he started university. I interviewed him fairly early on in the first term. He sat in his messy student-room littered with books and half-drunk cups of coffee. The walls were plastered with posters and leaflets. He wore a hoody emblazoned with the name of the university and he spoke of his Halls with pride and a sense of belonging. His use of collective pronoun was significant:

*This Hall, we're a friendly bunch. Its like I've just made 18 friends already. We spend a lot of time in the kitchen hanging out.*



My research diary gives a flavour of the difference I noted in Tony when I interviewed him on that occasion. I wrote:

*I was early for our appointment so had to wait outside his Halls of Residence for him to arrive. His confident, cheery greeting when he saw me, and the numerous times we had to stop on the way to his flat while he exchanged a few words with other students in the Hall spoke a narrative in itself. Tony looked and acted like he belonged.*

This was confirmed by the written account of his first year that he sent me after the year had ended. He had competed for, and won, the opportunity to conduct research under a Research Scholarship Scheme. He felt confident in his new-found academic identity. He had developed study techniques and had done well in end of year exams. He had engaged with his subject and wrote:

*the past year has put a lot in perspective and made me think about global politics very differently.*

### **What makes a student?**

Nick, too, invested heavily in the student identity. He had obviously thought a great deal about what it meant to be a student. For example, in his first interview when thinking about starting university he told me:

*I don't really know how seminars and tutorials work but I'm not worried about it, I don't think. I think I've felt like ..almost a student forever, well for a long time..I think I am quite studenty now. I'm OK at learning at school..even if I miss some time off or something, I just do it. Its not cos I have a teacher telling me to do it and stuff its cos I need to, I want to. And then the rest of my life I think is quite studenty..the stereotypical things like the philosophical talks we have.*

Nick's view of being a student is some-one who enjoys discussing philosophical issues and he had begun to practice these skills in sixth form college. Learning to be a student involves developing such skills and also becoming familiar with practices and meanings. Although all of the young people in my study had a general understanding of the demands and expectations of Higher Education through the family and social contexts they had been brought up in, a more specific

learning was required once at University. Many of the young people commented on how at sea and de-skilled they felt when first attending seminars. Maggie, for example, said:

*Adjusting to the different type of learning that you need at uni has definitely been the most difficult thing. It could go unnoticed if you didn't turn up for lectures for a week, so you could just miss everything ....That's the kind of scary thing and also the lecturers don't set you work you have to find out when work is set on this intranet thing. I mean there's no one there handing out something and saying give this to me in a week's time. That's difficult because loads of people are missing certain tutorials or missing certain deadlines because they're finding it difficult to adjust and people are starting to resent the fact that no one's really telling us information - it is a really difficult transition from college.*

She went on to emphasise, however, that the paucity of guidance from tutors had forced the students to rely on each other for information and support:

*There'll always be one person from my course that knows what's going on. Its quite good cos we all give each other a hand.*

The young people's narratives are peppered with accounts of significant support being derived from the different groups they formed and participated in. These groups were also crucial sites of learning, meaning and identity: this was where the young people's sense of themselves as students was constructed. The young people swapped information, resources and also strategies for survival.

Jessica's frank descriptions of how students managed the anxieties provoked by lectures illustrate some of the subversive student practices that are learnt and exchanged in the narratives of survival that pervade the student groups. These are the "tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb" (Wenger 1998:47) that participants of communities of practice take on as they move from the novice to the proficient.

*The lectures are pointless. No cos they give you all the hand outs and basically go through them with you. Cos a lot of people are doing the statistics module, they actually find they understand it better if they don't go to the lectures because it's going over A level stuff but it's just confusing them having the lecturer re-explain it in a different way. So the people that don't turn up to lectures in that, actually are doing better than the people that are turning*

up.

A little later in the interview Jessica gave me an account of how students avoided exposure which both amused me and aroused my sympathy for the hapless lecturer:

*One of them gives sweets out like every lecture. Its to get people involved. He has questions and if you answer or if you point out a problem on the board or just say what you're thinking at anything he'll give you a sweet. At the start of the lecture he'll try and get people involved and he'll like randomly select a person's name on the board and then they've got to answer a question. But people normally claim that they're not there... because ... he'll put the name up and just no one will admit to being that person.*

Wenger(1998)'s work provides a tool for analysing what goes on in groups that are bound together in a shared endeavour by understandings and routines which have evolved within the group. In the following quotation from Alice it is possible to see how her involvement in a community of practice impacts on learning, and also the self-consciousness of the novice using a practice (understandings about plagiarism) specific to it:

*Most of the learning takes place outside of lectures and seminars...As a group, we often help each other out with essays, presentations and stuff by sharing books we've found useful, talking about how we've written things and helping each other out generally (pause) whilst avoiding plagiarism [she laughs] I'm sure I have to say that!*

Sangita also highlights the importance of the group in her learning and identity. She says:

*Being a modern foreign language student is amazing, there seems to be a real sense of community between us. Many people think that a language is easy and don't understand the extent of it – we do lots more besides just French, like history, literature, arts.....I really enjoy putting my studying into context, like I bought Le Monde and it had an article with the French lady who had had the first face transplant- she'd refused to do an interview with the English press..... I managed to read the whole interview without using a dictionary, and really felt a sense of achievement when I opened the Guardian, and they had done a review of the very article in Le Monde!*

In this passage Sangita shows the development of an identity not just as a student but as a student linguist, and she does this by positioning herself against other students, in her suggestion that other students do not understand what it takes to be a language student.

Sangita also exemplifies the more “tacit conventions” and “untold rules of thumb” of practice:

*I didn't think I would get so stressed about exams, or that I had it in me to stay up all night and write an essay in pure desperation to just get it finished. I didn't think it was possible to like Red Bull....! I'm not sure I would have got through exams without it!*

### **Fresh start**

Many of the students spoke about looking forward to a “fresh start” on starting university. Leaving home meant leaving behind old familiar patterns of behaviour and, importantly, escaping from old familiar demands and expectations. Several described difficult webs of relationships at home in which they felt ensnared, for example Rachel spoke at length about a friend who made emotional demands that she found hard to stand up to. University provided an opportunity to shake loose from such entanglements and choose friendships with care. Another young person, Vicky, told me:

*I want to go to university also to see if I will change again cos also in (HomeCity) I'm a bit..I dunno everything is kind of formed in (HomeCity) now, like friendships groups and everyone's got them and when I go to university it will be a fresh start really.*

Vicky's comment that she is curious to see whether she will “change again” refers to a narrative of finding relationships difficult at school. In the family, she was the youngest with three older brothers, and when invited by me to describe how she was as a child her first statement was:

*Well I was a very shy child I know that. I suppose that I wasn't shy at first and then I got shy...I think it was because I was very sensitive but I was a bully. Its shameful I know but yeh in Year 3 I was a bully...I was renowned for being a bully...I was given money for beating up other people.*

Later the tables turned, and Vicky became bullied herself

*I was bullied in Year 5 by my friends who turned on me, and then I was bullied by my brother's friend cos my brother got bullied at the same time and so they started to bully me*

*as well.*

After a period of loneliness and insecurity which resulted in bulimia and counselling, Vicky's secondary school life ended. Sixth Form College provided an opportunity for her to build up some self confidence and to make a small group of friends. Going to university, then, was an opportunity to take the new learning about relationship-building further and to establish secure and satisfying friendships.

Vicky's narrative shows clearly why, for her, university was seen as an opportunity for a "fresh start". Others also used the same expression. The new situation was anticipated as a chance to choose how they wanted to present themselves. Maggie expressed this, and also her realisation that there is no such thing as a 'blank slate' in this extract:

*I think at first I was really conscious of how I presented myself, I think first impressions really count. And then I realised like there was a huge stigma coming from (HomeCity) here. People thought girls coming from (HomeCity) were like y'know smoke puff, rowdy girl kind of thing..like generally quite bolshy and loud and stuff so I was quite conscious not to slip into that stereotype, but then at the same time I thought I'd be more desirable as a friend if I was more confident and outgoing so I tried that, which is more confident and outgoing than I am..."*

Maggie shows here that although the new situation may provide a space for the trying on of different identities, that space is also cluttered with culturally given stereotypes which have to be managed and resisted.

### **Freshers' Fair: trying on identities for size?**

Winnicott and others have conceptualised the transitional space as a creative one, where fantasy and play have free rein. Van Gennep's (1960) work on liminality has been applied to the university context (Simpson 1996) and activities associated with the first week of university life - "freshers' week"- can be construed as initiation ceremonies where a young person leaves behind the life associated with school, family dependence or other non-student statuses and takes on the identity of university student. In the CAS (Lawson 2005c:33) I suggest that the week is:

*characterised by frenzied socialisation and immersion in student fairs designed to encourage*

*commitment to political, cultural or sporting activities.*

I envisioned the fair offering identities the students could pick up and try on for size. The young peoples' narratives suggest that although most-not all- students did find their way to the Freshers' fair, free sweets and tickets to local night clubs were more of an attraction than the political or cultural badge they could attach to themselves. The fair was also used as a means of finding friends rather than differing ideologies. Maggie, for example, explained how she joined the netball team for this purpose, and in so doing was consciously presenting herself as someone interested in sports. In the same way, Jessica joined the "Neighbours Society" so she could meet others who were similarly interested in watching re-runs of the Australian soap for hours at a time. Presumably this, too, made some statement about how she wanted to present herself – that is, that there was more to her than an intelligent high-achieving Mathematics student!

But if I were expecting statements of political allegiance to be made at these fairs, then I was disappointed. In fact several of the students explicitly expressed an antipathy to self-categorisation. This chimes with the theme of individuality and 'being different' which characterises a number of narratives.

Tony, who took Politics at university had the following to say when asked why he hadn't joined any political society:

*Well I wouldn't like to label myself...I don't know, I suppose I don't trust myself that I wouldn't get into a group and then I'd just start thinking of myself as that, and kind of like go out of my way to support them when I didn't believe in everything, and also because people would expect me to believe in those things so I couldn't say anything (different)....and also another thing you know, it costs money.*

Rosalyn expresses the same diffidence about making a statement about herself to friends and acquaintances, even though she is very clear about her political views. She told me:

*I'm a socialist libertarian. But I consider that to be more or less left wing in most people's books and yeah if people were to ask me, I'd either be the same degree left as them or more. I do think the war in Iraq is wrong, I do think that you should have completely free medical care... I do think that the transport system should be completely brought under the public control, and y'know stuff like that..*

Rosalyn's clear views and her previous acknowledgment, in the first interview, of enjoying long political and philosophical debates with friends caused me to express surprise that she didn't do this at university. Rosalyn's reply hints at risk of exposure:

*You're right I do miss (the debate) actually cos I know I said to you last time that was a big thing with me and my friends...But I think here we're a bit...we're not quite there yet sort of thing.. I can see that there are views waiting to come up from people that I can't wait to start and pick at and I think "go on say something, go on"- I can't wait to start really, really bringing out those topics but its just not time yet...I think people are scared to dive in just yet...*

Friendships are fragile at the beginning of university-life, and making ideological statements feels too risky for Rosalyn at this point.

Nick's room-mate, however, had tackled this one head on. Nick described to me how he had arrived at the Halls of Residence on the first week-end of the term after his room-mate had already settled in. The room-mate was not there when Nick arrived, but he had left a very clear indication of his identity on the wall above his bed- a poster depicting Christian messages. So on the first evening while other roommates were swapping details of home town and A levels achieved, Nick and his new friend discussed their opposing philosophical views of the meaning of life.

So, the clear space that transition evokes, the arena for a fresh start and a place to "*be me*" turns out to be somewhat illusory. The space is cluttered with social and cultural litter that must be side-stepped and managed by the young people experimenting with their identities. Choice is circumscribed and constrained.

### **Transition – betwixt and between**

Many of the young people expressed being in a space between two homes, that of their family and that where they have made their new lives. They describe a sense of "betwixt and between". Holdsworth and Morgan (2005) have argued that this is linked to ambivalence that both the student and their parents feel about the balance between support and independence.

Vicky, a young person whose narrative reveals how important family and home is to her expressed a feeling of being in no-person's land:

*Vicky        Yeah and then I come back and I love being back and yet sometimes it feels a bit awkward*

*HL:         In what way?*

*Vicky:       In the way like my dad wants us all to piss off now (haha) he's had enough of children so, it's a bit like you do, you do seriously feel like you're um kind of invading the home a bit...*

Jessica also noticed a difference when she returned home. Others changed their behaviour towards her, which although may be welcome, also signifies a change of status:

*Dad always seems more willing to help me out now like giving me lifts to places when I want to cos he never used to give me a lift on a Friday night and now I'm back home he will.*

Alice tries to express how she feels caught between two bases:

*I do (miss home). But in fact I feel, not anxious about going home, but I think it might be a bit weird at first. Like when I'm here (at university) I miss people from home. But I can tell that when I go home I'm going to miss people from here and just feel like you don't really win either way.*

Then there are also concerns about what changes there might be back home without the young person being able to have any influence. Would friends or siblings have changed? Would the friends and siblings think *they* had changed? Jessica comments on the shifting nature of sibling relationships:

*I still talk to my sister like a lot when I ring up and stuff. I don't really talk to my brother. ... But I think that might be cos he's grown up rather than me but I'm not sure and I can't tell cos he still seems the same with my sister. Like when I'm with him he doesn't fight or argue with me anymore. I'm not sure if that's cos I'm not constantly winding him up all the time. I'm not sure.*

Nick, the middle child in between two sisters, says:



*Maybe with my family it's a bit different actually cos in this house (at university) I've got a room mate and we're all sort of very friendly ..well I always keep my door open and stuff like that I've always got people in my room and I went back home and I'd sit in my room for 20 minutes and then get bored and then find my sister and talk to her. Which I never used to do. I never used to talk to my sister, now I do.*

Finally, the need for these young people to touch base from time to time was a common theme.

Alice said:

*Yeah cos it was all new and exciting and then it was still exciting for a few weeks and there was this lull where people who were like living nearer by would go home for the weekend and stuff and it was at that point that I thought oh god. That would be nice to go home. It wasn't that I desperately needed to go home ... I just thought I'd like to go home for an afternoon or just an evening that was all I wanted .... And it takes ages to get home.*

Rosalyn said:

*I think it was about week five. I think we were all a bit low. In fact we were sitting in Laurence's room having just watched a film and bits of our ceiling in our kitchen suddenly fell down.. It wasn't that much of a big deal but it shocked us all when we walked in there. It was funny cos all three of us looked at each other and just went "how much is the next train home?" - just to go back for a day, for an hour I mean we'd come back and stuff. And we were all thinking it and we all said 'Fair enough. Just want a break from this'. But none of us did and we all got through it and the next day we felt alright.*

I was struck that both students used the phrase "*just for an evening, just for an hour*", a kind of 'touching base' that attachment theorists describe when young children are beginning to separate from their parents for the first time.

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In this chapter I have endeavoured to show the ways in which fledgling students wrestle with new identities forged in contexts that demand choice and commitment. I have argued that transition to and between sixth form college and university shines the spotlight on identity: identity moves from the wings to the centre stage. The notion of reflexive self-identity that Giddens's (1991)

describes has been useful in showing how these students negotiate between their previous lives and being at university (Wilcox et al. 2005). However the account also emphasises the power relations operating in terms of class, race and gender have shaped the way that identity is performed during their time at college (Ball et al. 2002; Burke and Jackson 2007). These now enable the self-probing, re-evaluation and experimentation that is provoked by transition as old patterns and practices may be exchanged for new. Becoming and being a student may call for a 'buying into' of dominant social constructions of what it means to be a 'good student'. The Higher Education Institution is the official legitimator of how the student should perform both in and out of the classroom. Current emphasis on the 'student experience' regulates both the student's academic and also social identity. This chapter has demonstrated what can be seen as the struggle for legitimacy and how the different young people occupied a range of resistant or compliant positions in that struggle.

## **Chapter 4 Finding their own place: identities and social structure**

This chapter focuses on the way in which identity is shaped by social structures. Identity has been conceptualised as a self-reflexive project in which the self acts with agency and discernment. However, the self is embedded in a social context which is heavily imbued with meanings associated with for example class, gender, ethnicity and (dis)ability. Much sociological writing concerns itself with the inter-play between structure and agency. In this thesis I have been interested to find out how the young people in my study make sense of the “cultural givens” and work with or against them to fashion their own uniqueness. Transition enables these processes to be seen more clearly than at other times because transition often encompasses the exercise of choice. This chapter shows how many of the young people made choices in awareness of, and often in opposition to, traditional cultural meanings and restraints. They are narratives of agency. However, I argue the transition to university also brings with it a realisation that social life imposes constraints and limitations. It is the exposure to the broader social and cultural mix of university life that triggers reflexivity of the young people’s sense of self in relation to difference and ‘otherness’. This chapter illustrates some of the different ways in which the young people forged identities in the interplay between personal and social life.

### **Gender, identity and choice**

I begin the chapter with an exploration of the effects of gender on identity. Nielsen (1996:11) has written:

The gendered subjectivity is the gendered “being in the world” which consists of unacknowledged and to some extent unconscious gender (unconscious images/discourses and feelings attached to gender).

However, some of the narratives demonstrated that in the exercise of choice, unconscious gender becomes profoundly self-conscious. This can be seen particularly in the choices made about which subjects to study at Sixth Form College and University.

As has been noted, of the twelve students in this research, five had decided to study science degrees at university. Of these, two took Chemistry, and the other three students were studying Bio-chemistry, Maths, and Zoology. Only one of the five was male, and the number of female students opting for what might be thought of as ‘traditionally male’ subjects surprised me<sup>1</sup>. Responses to my enquiry about what influenced their choice of University subject showed that choice depended on several different factors including long-held ambition and also snap decisions based on A level achievement. However, narratives also appear to show that some female students consciously made subject-choices in opposition to traditional gendered options to make a statement about their subjectivity.

Young people in modern society are confronted with an array of different representations of gender identity. It has been argued that gender identity comprises ambivalent and inconsistent discourses about what it means to be a girl or boy (Volman and Ten Dam 1998; Lawy 2003; McLeod and Yates 2006). Both girls and boys mediate these conflicting gender discourses through their everyday practices, their personal experiences and aspirations. Below I first discuss how some of the girls in my study ‘did gender’ before considering how the boys made sense of competing discourses about masculinity.

### **Girls will be girls?**

Although cultural messages about girls’ school performance and future career aspirations and success are ambiguous, girls at school have now been given permission to succeed (McLeod and Yates 2006). However, the dominance of the “freedom of choice” discourse renders gender inequality invisible and therefore “not discussable” (Volman and Ten Dam 1998), and as Furlong and Carmel have argued, contributes to the “epistemological fallacy of late modernity” (Furlong and Cartmel (2007). Young people have both to accommodate the structures gender imposes, and also at the same time interpret and make personally meaningful contradicting representations of gender. Volman and Tan Dem (1998:532) write that young people:

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Education Statistics Agency report in 2008/9 the following % of all students were female: Biological Sciences 64%, Physical Sciences 41%, Mathematical Sciences 39%

actively negotiate and live the different gender positions available. They develop a gender identity by participating in the existing discursive practices and by occupying their own place within these.

‘Their own place’ is an apt phrase and one in which I now apply to two female students in my study who decided to choose a science degree at university. Pursuing science for both Maggie and Rosalyn was at the same time perfectly normal because of the dominant discourse that girls have equal access to all subjects, and also deviant because underlying the dominant discourse is the ‘not discussable’ discourse that science subjects are counter-feminine. Both the girls show their awareness of these conflicting culturally-mediated messages and also how their choice of a science subject is related to identity and sense of self. For Maggie the choice is born of competitiveness and an opportunity to be successful. For Rosalyn it is explicitly to be different. Both students emphasise the high value they placed on carving their own individual and unique place in the world, and for both studying science provided a gateway.

### ***Maggie***

Maggie was the youngest of three children. Of the three she was the one who had been most successful at school. Her older brother and sister did not go to university. However, Maggie told me that she had always been very clear that she would.

As all the young people talked to me about their lives; past, present and anticipated future, themes emerged. Sometimes this theme was ‘headlined’ at the top of the story by being the first thing they said. Maggie, for example, talked a great deal about competitiveness in both her interviews. Her first comment in response to my invitation to think of herself as a small child was:

*I remember being really competitive especially with my brother and sister, very eager to please people as well...especially my parents....I remember going into gatherings with my parents when I was really little and saying that I loved to write before I could...I don't know whether it was the competitiveness or wanting to maybe fit in and be involved in the adult conversation or just impress people I guess....*

The interplay between ‘fitting in’ and ‘being different’ created a tension which was a strong motivating force for Maggie and which could be seen in the friendships she chose but also, of relevance here, in her identity as a student. Her choice of degree subject, Bio-Chemistry,

represented for her an opportunity to study something a little different from her peer group. She explained she thought it would provide intellectual stimulation and by choosing it, it confirmed an important part of her identity, her intellectual ability:

*(I decided I wanted to study science) half way through GCSEs. At first I wanted to go into law..the general attraction to that was mostly the money (laughs). But then..I started to really get into science GCSE cos it challenged me the most out of all my subjects and I think that's what drew me to it so much cos I found it so hard and so interesting at the same time.*

As discussed in the last chapter, many of the students reported that when they moved on to sixth form college they felt challenged by their learning at AS and A level. Maggie believed that as her confidence grew over the two years and she came to realise that she *could* manage the learning she found so difficult at first, it gave her a greater sense of her intellectual ability. The choice of science subjects threw her fear of not fitting in into the spotlight as, although she was drawn to sciences, she was concerned about the way students studying science are perceived:

*I thought I wasn't going to fit in cos I thought they'd all be geeks and I didn't see myself as a geek so I thought oh no I'm gonna be in so much trouble but then I got to college and within the first year I found myself socialising with people who take the same subjects as me and they're not geeks and I'm not either.*

So Maggie's fear of not fitting in finally succumbed to the greater desire to succeed in a challenging subject and to be seen as a little different from her peers. In this next statement, made in the first interview at the end of her two years' at sixth form college, Maggie reflected over a passage of time and, in the telling, constructed a sense of self that would prove to be a useful companion in her subsequent journey as a university student:

*I got a real rush from taking a huge step by myself. I look back at that now and I think that was a really brave decision considering I didn't know what was coming but I think that's almost why I did it because I wanted that really big step. I wanted to be on my own and I wanted to do subjects that were considered hard.*

Maggie describes how the challenge, and the fact she persisted although finding the subjects harder than she anticipated led to increased confidence and the realisation that she was more

persistent than she had believed herself to be. Although gender is not explicitly referred to here, I read the sub-text as – “*not bad for a girl!*”

Of course, Maggie is free to develop an ambitious intelligent self in opposition to more traditional images of femininity because she conforms in other ways- she is an attractive, fashion-conscious and sociable girl. Rosalyn, on the other hand, finds ‘being different’ more challenging even though it is a desired state.

### **Rosalyn**

In Rosalyn’s second interview she reflected on what studying science at sixth form college meant for her:

*Rosalyn I felt a little singled out at college in that I was so into (studying science). Quite a lot of the girls were doing chemistry with biology with the aim of becoming a doctor....(but) out of 500 people at college I was the only, or one of the very few, girls doing all 3, chemistry, physics and maths*

*HL: Did that bother you?*

*Rosalyn I like being different. And I’m not scared of it either and I like being bold and brash and you know stuff like that. And I enjoyed it, I enjoyed all three of my A levels. I particularly enjoyed Chemistry and now here I am at uni and I’m enjoying it. So I must be doing something right!*

Rosalyn was one of the few students in my sample who gave me a sense of unease after the interview at university. Her story of the first two months at university was one of a struggle to fit in and establish herself as well as the development of supportive survival networks, of which more in the next chapter. At the time of my interview she said she was over a difficult patch and things were looking up. The interview ends with her saying “*I feel brilliant to be fair!*” The words and the manner in which they were said suggested a dissonance, and the “*to be fair*” had a ‘mustn’t grumble’ quality to it which fit with the struggle Rosalyn conveyed in the interview. Much of this struggle concerned her gendered sense of self. She’d never been a “*girlie girl person*” she explained to me:

*I’ve never been, oh, I need to see the girls, I haven’t had a gossip for the last four hours.*

But she was also tiring of another female construct that is available to her, the “*ballsy ladette*”. This was the identity she assumed back home and now at university she was conscious of wanting to set free other aspects of herself:

*I used to think about it a lot at home...I just was conscious that I was showing certain things and perhaps shielding others whereas here I've not even thought about it...I've got a nickname back home, there are people who call me Eggers and there are people who call me Rosalyn because in Rosalyn there are two different people. Eggers is the ballsy laddish girl who will take none of your crap thank you very much but who will, you know, be sorted and organised and look after sick people and stuff like that and its true to say that I am all those things but I'm not exclusively those things...like sometimes I just want to sit down and have a chat with someone and actually might, you know, show some weakness god forbid and you know be a girlie girl*

Rosalyn went on to explain that Eggers was fore-grounded as a strategy to survive the bullying she experienced in her peer group at school. Her story also alluded to being cast in the role of the ‘*strong one*’ in a family where certain members experienced mental health problems, another familiar role for a female (Howe, 2008). But whatever the genesis of how she presented herself to the world, Rosalyn’s story portrayed a young woman who was navigating a course through opposing constructs of being female and finding costs and benefits in each, and also that difference can be uncomfortable. Her refuge was her academic identity and at the university she had chosen, being a female chemist was positively connoted:

*It's a big flag ship thing for (this) university. It's a big female chemistry institution as opposed to just a big all round chemistry institution...they're big on having girls.*

Rosalyn, then, was comfortable in occupying a position in which she was resisting a dominant gender discourse because of the comfort and solidarity of others taking a similar position (Burke and Jackson 2007). Otherwise, “Identities of refusal can be difficult and lonely” (Burke and Jackson 2007:114)

### **Jessica**

Jessica’s home was a big northern city where she lived with her two younger siblings and her parents, both working high-achieving professionals. Jessica ‘did gender’ through two different



persona. She was intelligent, reflective and hard-working, but most of the time she played the scatter-brained pleasure-seeking 'funster'. Jessica illustrates how although some students had a clear plan about what to study at university relatively early, for others the choice of subject was more haphazard:

*It was at the end of AS...that's as far back as I start (wanting to study Maths at University)...Maths was what I was best at...I decided to do that cos I couldn't think of anything else at all. I was best at maths so I took that...my friend she actually said that was the exact same reason that she picked it as well and that she's thinking same as me that we're still not decided if it's the right choice or not...*

Jessica was a lively, highly intelligent girl who worked hard during her school and college and achieved 3 A Grades at A level. Her 'ditz' presentation belied her ability and interest in academia. This exchange, which took place at the end of the first term of university, though made with humour, can be read through a gendered lens to reveal an age-old story about girls hiding their intelligence to win approval and acceptance from the boys:

*HL: So when you say that you're doing maths, what kind of reaction do you get?*

*J: The boys think I'm lying! They're like, no you don't you do a thickie course like marketing and management, and I'm like no I don't I do maths. And they're like, there's no way you do...We've even been debating how you got into uni in the first place*

She then added, with a look which seemed to convey her awareness of the multi-layered narratives she was presenting "....its only joking though!"

### **Boys doing gender**

Boys, too, must negotiate gender constructions and make choices from a limited array on offer. Recent writing on the meaning of masculinity within the postmodern context has challenged the notion of 'masculinity' as a coherent concept (Robertson 2007) and argues that the diversity of men's identities renders the term 'masculinity' of little use. However, this is not to suggest that boys are free to construct their own identities: hegemonic masculinity remains a significant structuring force even though:

many men live in a state of some tension with, or distance from, the hegemonic masculinity of their culture or community (Connell 2000:11)

Consistent with studies which have explored masculine identities within educational contexts (Burke 2007), all three boys in my research spoke of themselves as lazy or “blaggers”. Tony, for example, in the first interview, expressed anxiety about studying at university:

*That seems quite daunting I suppose because I did blag my way throughout my GCSEs and blag my way throughout A levels.....but a degree is a whole different thing..*

He returned to this theme in an account written at the end of his first year. Obviously pleased with his end of year “high 2:1” he wrote:

*It helps that I enjoy my subject, and was placed in a very unusually studious environment which mean that for the first time in my life I felt inclined to work rather than blag my way through the year.*

Martin, too, in the first interview appeared almost keen to emphasise his laziness and carelessness. This didn’t just apply to school work, he said, but all aspects, which explained why he hadn’t got a job and why going to university was a preferable way of spending the following year rather than taking a Gap year. Asked why he had decided against a Gap year Martin said:

*I wouldn’t know what to do....I wouldn’t want to get a job basically. I’m actually terrible at jobs. I’m terrible at them..I’m just really lazy and rubbish at them. I did two actually but the first one I was really lazy and the second one I lacked initiative...it was at an office and I’d just be sitting around not doing anything so I was like ‘what do you want me to do?’ and then they fired me cos I didn’t do it automatically.*

Indeed Burke (2007:412) has written of her study of men in Higher Education that:

most of the men cited laziness as the key obstacle to their educational success both at school and in their current courses, resonant of feminist literature on boys and schooling.

She reports that the literature suggests that boys need to avoid, or appear to avoid, academic work if they are not to be singled out in some way. It was shown in the last chapter how Tony had presented just such a narrative to me and the contrast with Alice’s self-statement “*I was a goody goody*” is stark. From the narratives of Rosalyn and Maggie it would appear that some of the girls

in my study managed to resist certain limiting gender constructions more than the boys. However, there is some evidence from all three of the boys in this study that the social context in which they are embedded has a significant effect on the boys' attitudes to study. At University, for example, all of the boys began to take on the student identity more comfortably. Nick, for example, said in his first interview when thinking about starting university:

*I think me as a student makes sense*

And as we have seen, for Tony, becoming a university student seemed to give him a solid sense of self not experienced before. However, it must also be noted that Tony put his ability to be academically successful in his first year down to living in an “*unusually studious environment*”. He still needed to put a little distance between himself and his success! Presentations of self here emerge as complex and contradictory tussles between the personal and the social.

### **Family resources and privilege**

The previous section explored some of the different ways the young people engaged with cultural representations of gender in their constructions of themselves. Their class positioning also had a fundamental impact on their sense of self and in this section I focus on the way transition highlights the relational quality of the self and the social world in terms of notions of class and privilege. The transition to university unsettled the young people's understandings of themselves in relation to societal structures. Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and social capital are useful in explaining how the young people's families have ensured their sons and daughters are able to engage with the world with a certain confidence and trust by dint of their class. However the young people's narratives demonstrate that going to University provokes a re-think; their position in their social world has to be re-calculated as that world became wider and more diverse. The concepts of similarity and difference are significant in self-identity and it will be shown that greater exposure to this at university impacts on the young people's sense of who they are.

Bourdieu's work on different forms of capital has been extensively debated and utilised to analyse the transmission of privilege and resources through families. Much of his work concerns Higher Education's instrumental role in the process. The concepts of *habitus* and social capital are useful in elucidating the ways in which the young people makes sense of themselves in the educational

contexts they have been embedded within. Bourdieu's (1990a) work on *habitus* enables an exploration of the incorporation of the social into the self. The every day practices and understandings of the young people in my study are signifiers of culturally produced identity. Bourdieu wrote that *habitus* is embodied, that is that

it is expressed through durable ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking (Bourdieu, 1990a cited in Reay 1995:354).

All of the young people in my research had at least one parent who had been to University (two mothers had only very recently gained their degree), and four had older siblings who had already been through the Higher Education system. Thomas and Quinn have argued (2007:8) that:

Transition and experiences within higher education are... highly influenced by parental education and cultural capital that is transmitted to their children.

For all of the young people, with the exception of Chantelle whose narrative I discuss below, it had always been assumed that they would go to University. They had a realistic understanding of the demands and expectations of Higher Education.

They also had the benefit of a certain amount of social capital. Bourdieu (1997:51) wrote about social capital as another way in which families are able to transmit resources which oil the wheels of social functioning and facilitate future career paths. He wrote:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.

There are many instances of this in the narratives of the young people, for example Pippa's understanding of how to operate in Freshers' week was informed by the experiences of an older sister; Alice's aunt gave her very detailed career advice based on her own position as a teacher. Martin, whose narrative will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, found being at university very stressful. His ability to call on the advice of a medical uncle played a key role in him managing to complete the year. A final example is that Vicky's competence in French was facilitated by being able to stay with a French friend of the family before entering University. In these various ways knowledge and understanding are communicated through family processes and affect a person's functioning in a social context. They shape both present and future imaginings of the

possible. Shored up by social capital the young people begin to sense what choices are available to them. This interplay between themselves and their family networks is an experience of identity.

### **Transition and experiences of difference and 'other'**

Ball et al (2000:4) have noted that several recent studies of youth transition have concluded that young people believe that they *do* have choices and that

opportunities to participate in education...provision tended to obscure the structural and material continuities which patterned their 'choices' and life decisions.

They go on to note that the effects of this are that there is a belief that "luck, hard work and sheer determination are the bases of success" (Ball et al. 2000:4).

This would appear to sum up some of the girls' narratives about choice and gender above. They do recognise that there is a difference in access to resources by gender, and they articulate this, but they do not allow themselves to be limited by it. The difference with the young people's sense of class positioning is, as Ball et al note in their study, that it is, at least in the sixth form college, unnamed, a 'taken for granted'. Whereas gender, ethnicity and disability were all spoken about in the first interviews with the young people, class was not mentioned except by Chantelle. Lawler (2008: 126) helpfully discusses the way in which middle class-ness has been positioned as the norm in society. She writes that:

Class has become an absent presence; that is, it circulates socially while being unnamed.

She draws on Bourdieu to explain the ways in which the middle-classes become the arbiter of what is valued in society:

What gets to count as tasteful is simply that which is claimed as their own by middle-class people (2008:126).

It is these processes which explain why while at sixth form college class- based structural inequalities did not feature in the young peoples' narratives about themselves and their experiences. Bourdieu has referred to *habitus* as a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:128). In the college, middleclass-ness was experienced as a comfortable 'fit' between family and school ethos and these class identities were implicitly confirmed in opposition to those students from working-class backgrounds, many of whom had not made the transition to college. In the university context, however, class became fore-grounded as another group was experienced

against which the young people came to measure themselves, not this time the working class but those from a very privileged background. The experience of university rendered class inequality starkly visible and for many of the students the realisation that despite the assumed comfort and privilege of middleclass lives lived up to now, in this university context they had shifted from being in the 'haves' to the 'have not so much' was enormously powerful. A new identity was constructed, that of the "comprehensive school kid". The narration of this identity had several versions as will be shown through Alice, Rachel and Chantelle.

Burke and Jackson (2007:112) have written:

Notions of self are always tied to notions of the other, and disidentifications and othering are key processes in the formation of the self.

For Alice the high number of very rich students at her university was initially a shock, and was experienced as a 'them and us' which caused her to reflect on her own identity:

*there are a large proportion of people from a lot of really big private schools, famous ones, well I've never heard of them but ones that are obviously quite high up the league tables and they all tend to stick together...they started talking over me at the seminar I was like fine ok don't listen to me then but then I realised that if they're going to be like that then I don't really care that much cos I don't wanna be friends with somebody who's like that.*

Finding herself confronted with a group of young people who had had very different lives caused her to evaluate her own experiences and what attending a mixed-sex comprehensive school had given her:

*The thing that sticks out for me is the fact that a lot of people from the private schools are really cliquey. I feel I'm better prepared to go out and talk to somebody who's just there rather than go out and ring up my friend who's just a couple of floors away that I know from home (like they do). Like my friend Lou, she's got this friend here from when she was about 4 and she barely ever sees her cos they just agreed that it was just the best thing for them not to stick together, they give each other that space so they can make their own friends and in that respect I think that's a lot better than some of the posh people. I know it sounds really old fashioned but I just think that I'm better prepared for things. Another thing, like a lot of them went to single sex schools, like with Charlotte, and you can kind of tell that she's not*

*grown up with boys and when it comes to relationships, she's always like boys, boys, and manic not like the rest of us are.*

Alice also felt that her less privileged background meant that she was better prepared for the knocks that life would throw at her. Reflecting on herself against an imagined life of comfort and advantage she found a pride in her educational success:

*I do think ha ha I'm here and so are you and you paid however many thousands of pounds a year to get here and I'm here all on my own merit!*

During the year, Alice began to differentiate among the homogenous group of "rahs" (a term used for this group of very privileged university students from the south to the north of the country). She made friends with some of the students she had initially seen as 'other'. She spoke about the sharing of experiences and the understanding of different values as she began to socialise with friends from different social backgrounds to herself. Where there was a conflict of values, for example when a new friend expressed racist views, Alice found herself in the position of having to articulate where her position differed. Standing her ground was experienced as a solidifying of what she came to realise was important to her.

Not all students were able to 'hold their own' in the face of the power and authority which accompanies class privilege. Another student, Rachel, described well her decision to ignore rather than mix with such students because they made her feel uncomfortable. She explained that, since being at university, she had realised she was more shy around people she didn't know than she had thought. This led into a discussion about "*posh students from private schools*". Rachel tried to explain the feelings that being with this group of students engendered, and as she did so unwittingly described a feeling of inferiority and the way class divide is perpetuated:

*I've met a load of people who you know they went to private schools in London and they all know each other and they all have this dress sense which isn't like my dress sense, and speak about things which I don't know what they're talking about, and, like, even though I know they're really nice I don't know what to talk to them about.... I just feel a lot more self conscious around them which I've never felt before...I guess around them I sort of feel, like, I just feel like, I just don't fit in really and sometimes university as a whole I feel like I don't really fit in.*

Alice and Rachel show differing ways in which their experience of 'other' affected their on-going identity-work. There is a third way in which identities were constructed in relation to this group of students who represent a very different lifestyle and ideology. Chantelle, for example, saw this privileged group and decided that by taking on some of their characteristics opportunities might be open to her. She considered changing her accent and explained how a trip to Singapore over Christmas would enable her to buy Gucci and Armani at cut price. So whereas Alice intersected the group and used the interaction to sharpen her sense of a different self, and Rachel chose to keep away from the group, Chantelle's attitude was "*if you can't beat them join them*".

### ***Chantelle***

Chantelle was an only child. Her mother was a bank clerk and her father a not very successful antiques dealer. There was not much money in the home and Chantelle was the only one in my sample who qualified for a grant as well as a loan to put towards her living costs while at university. Chantelle described herself as disabled and in all interviews it was her disability and how she was managing it that headlined her story. She also came from a family with little tradition of higher education except for the fact her mother became a mature student at a local university when Chantelle was 13. This was enormously significant for Chantelle and, together with her early experiences of disability, determined her to construct an identity in resistance to normalised discourses about gender, disability and social class.

I first interviewed Chantelle before her A level results had been released. Later in the summer she texted me to tell me she had got the necessary grades to take up her place to study Ancient History. She wrote that she was "*still in shock!*" For Chantelle academic life had been a struggle. She took three years to get through college as in her first year she took sciences which she felt unable to take to A level. She then started all over again with Classics, French and Fine Art but her view of herself as a student was that success would only be hers through sheer hard work. She said of herself in the first interview "*I've got a lot of determination and grit*". She told me her French teacher at College had said to her "*if you get a B it will be the biggest turn-around in history*" and in some ways comments such as these from teachers acted to reinforce that determination. Born with a disability that caused her to limp, she was bullied at school, and that, she said, had made her strong.



The second time I saw Chantelle was towards the end of her first university term. She was studying Ancient History and Classics at a prestigious London university. This is what I wrote in my research journal after that interview:

*Chantelle sat perched on the bed looking frail and ill at ease. Her halls of residence in a large Victorian building looked grand from the outside but inside had been divided up into charmless narrow slices. The lofty ceiling of this drab room seemed to emphasise her smallness. Unlike all the other students I've visited, Chantelle has been unable to stamp her mark on this place. But interestingly, the main focal point was a pile of enormous books – Greek literature, a Latin Reader etc- and as the interview unfolded it became apparent that this did represent well the identity she had begun to develop. Disappointed with the lack of social life she had been anticipating, she was beginning to throw herself into her work with gusto.*

Chantelle was clearly having a difficult time, but it felt too risky for her to be too honest about her experiences and so the interview at university was peppered with references to her “*grit and determination*” and the future. Most of the other students in the Halls were international students who were very quiet and focused on their studies. In her first, pre-university, interview she had described how she was anticipating having lots of friends at university and being very out-going and friendly. But unfortunately the particular halls of residence she found herself in could not facilitate that kind of identity. She says:

*I've made a few friends here...It's not really how I expected. I thought everyone would be getting involved in doing fun things...I had an image of university as everyone getting very drunk and running around in halls but its not like that it's quite, everyone's quite sensible...but I spose it means I get a good degree. So it's alright. There are some nice people here.... I've worked really hard to get here so I don't wanna get chucked out*

Chantelle felt, and looked, like a fish out of water. But only in the third interview, which took place at the end of her first year, could she acknowledge just how unhappy she had been during that first term and a particular low point was when she was fined £50 for playing her music too loud and upsetting her student neighbours.

Her way of making sense of this experience of difference and the 'other' in the formation of self (Burke and Jackson 1993:112) was an attempt to emulate and incorporate some of the signifiers of legitimacy that she witnessed in the privileged group of students. For example she said that she had wondered for a brief time whether she should work on making her accent "*more posh to fit in*". She also decided to make changes in her dress. She said:

*I'm going to Singapore at Christmas with my boyfriend and I'm going to pick up loads of Gucci and Dior – its dead cheap out there.*

Reay (2001:338), in a discussion concerning working-class relationships to education, draws on Lawler (2000) to argue that "authenticity is a classed concept". Chantelle illustrated this inability to feel comfortable in the academy, at least in her first year there. Reay argues that many working class students experience a lack of fit between themselves and the university. She writes that for working-class students within the middle-class-ness of Higher Education, "the threat of losing oneself...is as likely a prospect as finding oneself" (2001:338).

In the third interview with Chantelle when she returned home briefly after her first year, I was not sure whether she had lost or found herself. She talked mostly of being a Classics student and of the status this afforded her as it was a fairly elite group. She had been in a Greek play performed publicly and had had to sing in Greek. She was becoming proficient in Latin, so much so that she had been asked to visit local schools to tutor some of the students there. The last time I spoke with Chantelle it seemed to me that her identity was in transition, destination—at present—unknown.

### **Identity and power: doing ethnicity**

This chapter has considered how the young people in my study negotiate structural discourses and positioning in order to construct subjective identities and find their own individual place in society. The young people have been conveyed as active agents in the constructions of identities while recognising that social structures shape and limit choices. The interplay between personal and social life has been highlighted. In this final section I pay attention to the way in which social differences are differentially imbued with power and that the relationship between identity and power is crucial in understanding how the young people make sense of themselves and their social

contexts. I raise these issues with reference to two of the young people, Sangita and Jessica, and consider how they fashion their ethnicity into their sense of self.

Sangita was the middle child of three. Her mother was white British and her father Indian. She referred to herself as half-Indian and this dual heritage formed an important part of who she considered herself to be. The influence of her family, and particularly her Indian relatives, was conveyed emphatically in her stories about the values she held, the skills she possessed and the choices she had made. She discussed the Indian emphasis on working hard and studying to the best of one's ability. She thought this had impacted a great deal on her educational life; she described herself as a good student who worked hard, and whose self esteem was affected by the grades she achieved. She always had to do her best.

At University she was disappointed at the lack of students from black and ethnic minority groups, and although most of her friends were white, she made a point of hooking up with other students from different ethnic backgrounds.

Jessica's father was white British and her mother Indian. She did not mention her ethnicity when I interviewed her as others had. I followed up the interview with an email in which I commented on this fact and I invited her to say whether this was significant. She replied with the following:

*I don't think that my ethnicity affects who I am at all because I just don't think about it. If anything I tend to just think of myself as British, not because I'm embarrassed or don't like being part Indian but just because I see myself as just being the same as everyone else around me and they tend to be British. I don't think that it affects how I see the world as I don't ever tend to think about my ethnicity.*

These two very disparate accounts of how the young women narrate identity and ethnicity demonstrate the different ways young people manage the interplay between personal and social life. Subjective identities are formed:

Through a combination of available discourses, personal experience and material existence (Epstein 1993:18)

Epstein also notes that the discourses and material conditions that are available from which to fashion identities "will vary across time and place" (Epstein 1993:19), and Roseneil and Seymour

(1999 cited in Burke and Jackson 2007:115) write that “[a]ll identities are not equally available to all of us”.

It could be argued that both Sangita and Jessica are at liberty to interpret discourses about ethnicity in different ways because what they do have in common, their class, is imbued with power which enables the freedom to choose. Both Jessica and Sangita have professional parents. They are beneficiaries of the cultural capital and *habitus* which make them at home in the middle-class social contexts they inhabit. Burke and Jackson (2007) use the concept of intersectionality to explain how identities are fashioned “around complex and intersecting social differences” (p.115) and that identities are fundamentally enmeshed in relations of power.

\*       \*       \*       \*

Within this chapter I have argued that the young people are at a point in their lives when they are finding ‘their own place’ in the intersection between personal and social life. The young people are constructing identities in awareness of, and often in opposition to, traditional cultural meanings and discourses about who they are and how they should be. Transition to and between educational contexts intensifies identity-work as it brings with it exposure to a broader social and cultural mix. This precipitates reflexivity within the engagement with difference and otherness.

The circulation of power within all social relations ensures that all the choices and constraints encountered and negotiated by the young people are deeply affected by the unequal distribution of power in society. Throughout the chapter I have made reference to the fact the young people construct identities often in awareness and sometimes in opposition to the available constructions of class, gender and race (c.f. Ball et al. 2002; Burke 2007). These constructions and ‘truths’ are shaped and reinforced by powerful hegemonic forces embedded in the power relations with which society is riven. I have also drawn on Lawler’s work to highlight that power relations not only legitimise certain ways of being and doing, but that power also creates absences and silences. Lawler refers to the ‘hidden privileges of identity’, that is what is valued in society is ‘that which is claimed as their own’ by privileged groups (Lawler 2008; 126). Until the young people entered sixth form college, class was a ‘taken for granted’ a ‘not discussable’ (Volman and Tan Dem (1998) discourse. It was the physical absence of peers from less advantaged backgrounds once the

transition had been made to sixth form college which began to highlight for the young people their class identity, an awareness, as has been argued in this chapter, that took significant shape once at University. Absences are slippery phenomenon. They lurk in the shadows and are only revealed in certain conditions of light. So, for example, in this chapter I have discussed the way both Jessica and Sangita did –or did not- ‘do gender’. However, there was no such discussion about the ‘whiteness’ of the other ten young people. A discussion of their ethnicity did not feature in their narratives and I reinforced this absence in the writing of this thesis by making no comment about it. Thus silences are perpetuated and the thesis itself becomes embedded in, and contributes to, the circulation of unequal power relations.

Sangita and Jessica’s stories are positioned as those of ‘other’ in terms of ethnicity and gender. But, as I argue within the chapter, in terms of class, they are not. The concept of intersectionality helpfully disentangles different subjective and structural experiences to highlight the complex nature of identity formation. Such identities as those of Jessica and Sangita reveal

the multiple layers of injustices that operate around processes of identity formation.

Learner identities are discursive as well as structural, tied to social inequalities and cultural misrecognitions (Burke and Jackson 2007:125)

The chapter has also raised issues about the cultural capital and social resources derived from their families that the young people have been able to draw on in their educational journey so far and again highlights the significance of power relations in identity formation. In the next chapter I move on to consider the ways in which the young people are able to develop their own resources within networks which sustain them as they forge their new lives. I explore connectedness as an experience of both support and identity.

## Chapter 5 Identity and connectedness

Findings from the first round of interviews which took place when the young people had only just left sixth form college revealed the crucial role that friendships played in both support and identity-building. Much of the work of friendship was played out in the group context. In this chapter I use the young peoples' narratives to explore the dominance of group- life and community in their lives at school and college and also its re-creation once at university. The various displays of connectedness seem to be an important site for learning and identity.

However, as the young people's university narratives unfolded I was particularly struck by the significance and *quality* of the relationships the young people quickly forged in their new environments. Whereas much literature on adolescent friendships has emphasised these relationships as facilitating self-exploration and identity formation, there is less focus on the role of friendship in the development of strong supportive community networks characterised by commitment, trust and reciprocity.

The young people in my study brought both skills and experience from their pre-university lives to engage in relationships, and some very deep friendships, which offered support and facilitated survival in the new environment of risk and uncertainty. In their study of friendship, Spencer and Pahl conceptualise friendship as a "kind of social glue" (2006:1) and they reveal the existence of "hidden solidarities" in personal communities that people develop around themselves. They argue (2006:15) that this finding is in contrast to the social narratives of the "corroding effects of individualization" that have been the subject of recent commentaries on postmodern society, and write of "a serious misunderstanding of the dynamics of micro-worlds, and particularly the role of friendship and trust" (Spencer and Pahl 2006:3).

Although Spencer and Pahl do not focus on the micro-worlds of *students'* friendships, this notion of "hidden solidarities" is one which usefully characterises what emerged from the findings of my research. It is a term which conveys the quality of the relationships, founded on loyalty and trust, which could be said to provide social capital from which the students draw to get them through transitional insecurities. In this chapter the term connectedness is used to encompass an array of

different kinds of social interactions the young people engage in as they journey along their educational pathways. The narratives speak of significant friendships, communities of student practice and strong continuing bonds with family, all contributing to both the support and the developing identity of the young person. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the use of emotions in the development of connectedness. The narratives portray many of the young people as skilled operators in the group context and I endeavour to unravel some of the processes involved in this.

### **Friendship and group-life**

The significance of the friendship group in the lives of the young people while at school and college emerged from all of their narratives. When prompted to talk about friendships, it was the friendship *group* rather than the dyad or the 'best friend' which was fore-grounded. The young people lived their adolescence in groups. Alice, for example, spoke about the importance of the group, although also commented on the need for dyads and triads within that:

*I've always enjoyed sort of having lots of friends and going out and all sitting around and doing things... like when it's someone's birthday and everyone goes out, that's what I really, really like. And I've always been like that. I don't mind just a couple of people but I just really really enjoy it when everyone's there.*

Alice also shows that there is prestige being in a large group. When, in the pre-university interview, I asked who she might be drawn to at university she said:

*I think it's the big group thing again like if somebody's with more people then I would probably be more likely to go up to them and say like "hi" whereas if it's just someone sat on their own I would be like you must be sat on your own for a reason. It's really bad I know, it's really awful.*

So being in a group confers an identity and a status of '*having friends*'. The need for connectedness, both actual and perceived, appears to be a driving force among the young people. Being alone and friendless is a shameful state. Alice explained that in the first weeks of University:

*if I'm walking on my own I always use my mobile so people know I have friends.*

Jessica also emphasised the way students immediately formed groups on arrival at university. She said:

*Mum and Dad brought me up here on the first day and it was really scary. There were loads of people around, they'd come the day before and they were already in little groups.*

Alice explained that the group is a less intense form of social interaction. When friendships are new and un-tested, the group feels safer:

*I don't know it's weird cos also if you went up to someone and you were just sort of like 'hi how are you?', 'yeah I'm alright'. And it would be really awkward at first. Whereas if you were in a group of people then if you were sitting next to a person that you didn't really want to talk to then you could change and you could talk to someone else and see what they're like, sort of thing.*

Nick, too, described the group as a social medium which provides safety. In his case, safety appeared to be derived from the large size of the group. His descriptions of the way he managed social groupings at school were amusing stories of a disaggregated group of individuals who hung around together for no reason other than they didn't want to be on their own. The group seemed to sweep up and accommodate large numbers of young people, tolerating a wide array of difference and negating the need for painful in-group/out-group negotiations. The enormous size of the group meant going anywhere was problematic – no-one wanted to invite the group to their house, they were too young for pubs and clubs and so tended to fill out rows in the cinema or just hang around in parks. The passivity with which he approached this need for friendship meant that making friends at university was the primary source of concern for him. He said the thought was “petrifying”. In fact when I visited Nick at the beginning of his second term at University, he had very successfully developed a large group of friends based on his Halls of Residence. Interestingly, he had re-created the amoeba-like friendship network that had provided both comfort and frustration for him when at school. He felt well-connected and content.

Rachel, however, had a more mixed experience during her first few weeks of university. She openly stated how much she hated Freshers' Week. She found the “falseness” of it, and the pressure to be unfailingly sociable tiresome. Good solid friendships were slow to develop and Rachel made some interesting observations on her relationships with boys as opposed to girls (see below) and the different categories of friends she acquired during her first year. Rachel, like many



of the young people, spoke of the development of friendships with intuitive reading of social interactions and the use of self within them. These insights caused me to reflect on the processes involved in effecting connectedness.

### **The art of making friends**

What more specifically “petrified” Nick about going to university was the problem of knowing how to make friends:

*I used to be really rubbish at the very first meeting of new people, saying hello and stuff. But I think I'm better at that now....but now my big worry is that I'll meet people, say hello and talk to them in classes or just after classes but then how do you get to that next stage, do you just say 'oh do you want to go out sometime?'- it's a big thing.*

Nick had arrived to talk to me for the first time with his girlfriend. As I explain in chapter 2, this, and the fact he wanted her to sit in on the interview, initially threw my well-made methodological plans into disarray. However, his girlfriend's insistence on 'chipping in' in the interview made me realise that here I had a willing and interesting research subject and I would be missing a trick not to include her in my study. This was Rosalyn. She listened as Nick was discussing his fears about making friends at university. Nick then started to reflect and take some comfort from the fact he had indeed been more successful at developing friendships at college.

*Yeh its now got to the point where its not 'shall we go out?', its 'well what's happening?'- its pretty much an assumption now that we'll all go out every Friday and Saturday.*

He then paused and appeared somewhat bamboozled by the group process. He said “It's a bit weird that....I don't know how I did that.” At this point Rosalyn interjected:

*Its quite simple really if you think about it. I came along and just begged everyone to invite you everywhere.*

Nick looked crushed.

*Oh, so I didn't even do that myself then....*

This exchange alerted me to the fact that they, and other young people in the study, invested much thought and energy into the *process* of making friends and relationships. That young people

have a developmental need for friendships and peer groups is well-established, but in this and other interviews the finding emerged that young people draw on a range of skills and strategies to negotiate their place in relation to others. They often did this with significant insight and expertise at handling difficult social interactions, and, as the above illustrates, some young people have more confidence in this regard than others. In this and the subsequent chapter I endeavour to unravel the processes behind making effective relationships. Reflexivity and an ability to read and use emotions appear to be highly salient.

### **Different kinds of friendships**

Vicky said :

*A lot of people say that when you go to university, the friends that you make here are really your true friends and you'll stay in touch with them for the rest of your life. They're different from the ones you made at school who you've just been dragging a long with pointlessly....*

Pahl (2000) analyses the role as well as the nature of friendship. He draws on Aristotle's philosophical writings about friendship to draw a distinction between friends of "utility", friends of "pleasure" and friends of "virtue". The first two categories are friends who provide practical support and company based on activities. Friends of virtue have deep communicative bonds; they are "soul-mates" (Stern-Gillett cited Pahl 2000:21). The fact there are different kinds of friendship performing different functions comes through the students' narratives very clearly, as does the students' awareness of this and their ability to manage the differing kinds of relationships. For example, there was much talk about the distinction between friends the young people lived with, friends that were in the same seminar groups, and friends that were friends through more conscious processes of selection. This latter group was where 'soul-mates' were found and formed. The young people that shared flats often engaged in practices and functions associated with family and this will be discussed further below. The study groups, both formal and informal, could be construed as communities of practice where the focus was on helping each other be immersed in the academic and social practices entailed in being a student. Some examples of both support and identity-building derived within these groups were discussed in chapter 3. Some friendships quickly outlived their usefulness. Alice described how some friends functioned as stepping stones into the university life, only to be sunk when more solid friends were found:

*The very first day I came up here, I went to dinner. It was a bit like being thrown into one of*

*those holiday camps- you know, when your parents go on holiday and they stick you in the kids camp. You don't know anyone... You have to be so polite, well, I mean if someone rubs you up the wrong way, or if they have views you don't agree with, well you don't really want to load yourself down with them but you're just so desperate you hang onto them -until you find others and its safe to drop them.*

### **Friendships and gender**

Many of the young people commented on both the depth of the friendships they made at university and also the rapidity with which friends became close. Alice referred to the way "everything seems speeded up" since she started at university and Pippa said:

*By the middle of the first term I felt as close to my friend Ella who I only met six weeks ago as I did to my old friends from (HomeCity). We knew each others' life histories.....we're gonna live in a house together next year.*

Another finding which emerged was the prevalence of cross-gender friendships. There is scant literature on friendships between boys and girls although Allan (2008:5) has recently noted that:

*There may be a growing acceptance of cross-sex friendships, particularly among younger cohorts.*

This finding is worth further consideration and the possible implications of cross-gender friendships will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. Here, however, I use the young people's narratives to suggest some benefits of such friendships.

Five of the nine girls said they found it easier to make initial friendships with boys than girls and making friends with the boys was often cited as a strategic move to avoid being friendless in the first few weeks. Maggie said:

*The formation of girl groups took a lot longer than boy groups ... the people that I spent my first two weeks with were just completely boys cos I think girls take a little bit longer to feel comfortable with each other I dunno but from what happened up here I think girls tend to hang back a little bit in terms of making girl to girl friends.*

Rachel expressed similar views and she went on to analyse why it might be:

*well when I first started uni I met loads of boy friends because I find it easier to talk to boys when I first meet them because making friends with boys is easier than with girls because if I don't like them that much and they don't really like me I don't really mind, but with girls if I've made friends with them and then they say they don't really like me I'll probably be more offended. You feel like when you ring people up you don't really know if it's a boy I wouldn't feel as funny as if it's a girl I'd feel more self-conscious ...I just seem to care more about the opinion of girls.*

Rosalyn also commented on the 'lighter' nature of friendships with boys:

*I've got friends who are girls and friends who are boys. If I want a one to one I'd prefer it to be with a girl but the boys can be really good fun. Yeh, if it was like a group situation I'd prefer it to be more boys.*

Tony also had something to say about cross-gender friendships:

*In my halls I made two or three really good friends, one was a girl who has always helped me academically and personally through conversation. I think girls find it easier to share feelings openly, and I often find women easier to talk to about personal things, whereas guys as groups will not do this as much, but rather on smaller scales, such as two men talking together about things.*

Finally, the story of Martin and Nick is presented here to illustrate that close supportive friendships were not the prerogative of the girls.

### ***Martin and Nick***

Martin portrayed himself in narratives in ways that put me in mind of a chameleon, except instead of different hues of colour being emphasised according to its environment, different aspects of his identity were either brought to the fore or diminished according to who he was with at the time. An example of this in the first interview was that he had been travelling with a friend who was shy and reserved and that meant that he, too, had become shy and reserved so the two of them had not had a lot of fun while touring.

At university, this trait had more far-reaching consequences because he found himself accommodated in a flat with extremely quiet and studious students. He therefore felt unable to

kick-start the more sociable side of himself and became extremely depressed and friendless. The theme that ran through his narrative was one of passivity, of finding himself in a difficult situation and being unable to help himself out of it. His one life-line was a friend from home who had started at the same university at the same time. This friend was Nick, also in my sample. When I interviewed Nick he mentioned that he saw a lot of Martin, but it was only when speaking to Martin that I realised the full extent of how important this friendship had been in helping Martin stay at university. Martin had used Nick as a conduit into a large friendship group based on Nick's halls of residence. Nick had accepted this unquestioningly; even to the extent that Martin kept his sleeping bag rolled up in one corner of Nick's room as he was such a frequent guest. Martin told me:

*I'm pretty certain that I would have dropped out of university if (Nick) hadn't been here.*

This narrative, and others told by the young people, highlighted for me the quality and significance of the friendships formed during the transition to university. The narratives uncovered the "hidden solidarities" referred to in the opening of this chapter. Friendships have also been seen to cross the gender divide providing some evidence for Allan's statement that:

(gender's) power in shaping friendship eligibility is less marked than it was (Allan 2008:5).

### **Friendship Groups and identity**

As well as social support, friendships offer a site for identity-building, and several of the young people indicated that membership of a group was the result of active and purposeful negotiations which were explicitly concerned with construction of identities. Maggie's description of adolescent experimentation with dress, concomitant leisure pursuits and, implicitly identity, illustrates this active process:

*I can remember half way through high school ... the different changes in styles was incredible due to (class-mates') different leaping from one group to another, being attracted to the way one group dresses so starting to socialise with them and dressing like them and then getting tired of that and then going somewhere else....*

Adolescents are acutely aware that how they dress, how they speak, what music they listen to and how they spend their leisure time all send out messages of identity which are differentially

accorded status and affect acceptance or rejection by the many different groups which intersect adolescent populations. These everyday practices comprise lifestyles and “lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily activity” (Giddens 1991:5). In a culture in which even the measurement of the diameter of your hooped ear-rings makes a statement, choice of dress can be seen to be a risky business. Maggie, interviewed having just left sixth form college, expresses this:

*Yes sometimes you could feel insecure a lot because you're not really sure and when you're surrounded by people who are sure of what they want to wear, and what they want to listen to and what they want to do it's sometimes very intimidating when you're not sure.....(in early adolescence) you're feeling so rushed to kind of fit into a certain clique. But looking back on it now it just seems so silly that you were so rushed to discover who you are cos how you want to dress and stuff it comes over time and... now I realise that you can socialise with these people without turning into one of them ....You can socialise with someone who's into completely different music scenes to you and not dress the same as them, maintain your sense of self. That's what I mean about being so secure now ..I can dress how I want to dress cos there's no one else influencing you and you know that now... Its refreshing actually, really refreshing.*

Maggie's acknowledgement of the group's constraining influence on identity is echoed throughout the young peoples' narratives. This challenges Giddens' (1991) work conceptualising identity as self-reflexive and self-constructing with the self at the centre exercising lifestyle choices. The young people in my study were at a life-stage dominated by choice. Their narratives of decision-making among personal, social and academic choices emphasised both the array and also the limitations of choice available to them (Lawy 1998). Choice is circumscribed in significant ways by both social position and material resources (Hendry et al 1993), and also the effects of day-to-day group-life on young people which shape identities through facilitative and constraining properties.

The power of the group was revealed by many of the young people in their first interview when describing school and college experiences and the problematic nature of group-life. Three of the 12 volunteered the fact they felt bullied at school, and an additional one, Vicky, stated in her opening statement about school-life that she *was* a bully. Tales from both male and female students of in-fighting and constant fallings in and out of friendship were common. Alice explained

how this affected more than taking care not to step outside the dress code. For her, certain aspects of *herself* were constrained. She believed she had become more assertive since starting university and able to deliver difficult information. For example, it was her who had to tell a friend that she was not invited to join the house she had found for the following year.

*At home I wouldn't have been able to do that cos I would have been too scared of everybody going "well actually you can't do that to me" cos in the past it has been horrible. But here if someone says, "well I don't like you for doing that" I think "well you've only known me two months" do you know what I mean? and I'm more able – not to be argumentative for the sake of it, but if I've got something to say that might cause a bit of upset, I might be more likely to say it now. So yeah instead of sitting back and doing nothing you have to just get on with it really. You have to as well, you have to make your own way here..*

Studies of friendship indicate that people of similar class are drawn to each other and that in many ways friendships are chosen to confirm rather than disrupt self-identities (Allan, 2008). However, just as in the previous chapter experience of social difference was seen to provoke re-evaluation of social identity, similar processes can be seen in new friendships causing re-evaluation of personal identity. Rachel expresses this in this passage:

*Since I've been at uni and mixing with lots of different people I've found out lots about myself..like I'm a lot shyer around certain people than I thought I was.. like I'm not very good at acting and I'm not very good at being myself around new people so I feel uncomfortable...like it was alright at college cos I just knew everyone...and another thing I've realised is that I can be really moody, as most people can, but I don't think I realised the extent of it cos my family and old friends they just put up with it but I've realised it a lot more because I don't know these people well enough so I've had to stop...*

Pippa experienced exposure to others' beliefs as a shock which confirmed her own. Although she got on with her flat-mates at one level, she said, she would not choose to live with them next year:

*I'm not into their music and stuff, they have completely different life-styles and its funny cos a lot of them are northern and maybe that's the reason but you know (HomeCity) is quite pc and my flatmates are all, not homophobic but they're kind of not very used to it and they'd say things I'd find really difficult like once they were like 'imagine if one of them lived with us' and I was like 'what?' and they were like 'someone who's gay' and I just went 'oh my*

*God', I mean I know everywhere is not as cosmopolitan about um gayness as (HomeCity)but really.....I couldn't live with them.*

So the transition to university accelerates the process of finding out about the self, its values and its capabilities. Alice says “*you have to make your own way here*”, but the narratives reveal many ‘hidden solidarities’ among family and friends, a network of support that is underpinning that journey. One way the young people support each other is by creating friendship patterns based on a familiar blue-print, that of the family.

### **Friendships recreating family**

In my interviews with the young people while in their first year at university I was struck by the ways in which their families continued to be present though absent. Holdsworth and Morgan (2005) have commented on the growing recognition of the significance of the family in recent studies on transition. The family is a source of identity, of social support and also provides a template to inform, both consciously and unconsciously, future relationships. Here, I explore ways in which the friendships developed often recreated family relationships.

Sangita, in an end of year reflective account wrote very clearly about friends taking on the role of family:

*I also really liked the fact that I made friends with boys, for example I consider my male housemates to be like my brothers really, they were all so helpful and good to have around. They even became all protective when I started going out with my boyfriend whom they didn't like to start with! In my flat I was actually a bit of a mother figure though, I was constantly cooking and washing up! Being at Uni has made me appreciate friends, and how you can rely on people. Before I went, my parents said 'oooh you'll meet your friends for life' and I really didn't believe them. But its SO true, you really trust your housemates and rely on them. It is a completely different skill/friendship to any others I have ever experienced. Sometimes it can get claustrophobic and you have to know where to draw the line and when you need space.*

Rosalyn also illustrates the way in which students provide support for each other. She spoke about birthdays and how in those first few weeks when the students realized people had a birthday they would make a point of buying a cake and generally making a fuss of them as they had no family to



do that for them. There was much talk of “*looking out for your flat mates*” – an assumption that people would find certain things hard and it was important to be there for them. Rosalyn talked about staying up all night with a friend whose long-term relationship from back home had become a casualty of the move away to university. “*Well you have to, don’t you? We’re all in this together*” she said.

Morgan’s (1996) work analysing the family as a collection of practices, that is what people in the family *do* rather than what the family *is*, enables a deconstruction of the family and the opportunity to see the potential for other relationships taking on some of the same functions and role. In many of the young people’s narratives there is evidence of loyalty, reciprocity and obligation towards certain of their friends, particularly those they lived with. Flatmates were often distinguished from other kinds of friends. Pippa actually made the comparison between flatmates and family. She said:

*They’re always there and you chill out with them, and that’s OK, but you wouldn’t want to, like, socialise with them.*

### **Managing the group: the development of life skills**

As I spoke with the young people I was struck by how skilfully they often managed themselves in social situations. I present narratives from two of the young people here, Pippa and Sangita, to illustrate this. Having ascertained that the young people’s lives are lived in groups and that these are essential for identity and support, my research then prompted the question: where do young people learn the skills of social and group life? The narratives of both Pippa and Sangita emphasise the role of family in preparing them for the trials and tribulations of social life.

#### ***Pippa***

Pippa’s narrative of being bullied at school was one of triumph over adversity. Aged 12 her parents’ marriage broke down. At the same time she started secondary school, and found herself the subject of bullying. What was particularly difficult was that a girl she had been very close friends with suddenly became one of the main persecutors:

*I think it affected me cos I went through a weird transition cos I’d been best friends with someone at junior school and we’d always been really tight and we really knew each other*

*well and it was weird cos when I got to secondary school it all changed and you know how people change and it became a bit of a clique and it started in group-bullying really, so the girl that had been my best friend told the girls not to be with me..and it was kind of just like, I think this one girl to be honest was just really insecure and people started picking on each other and then she started on me ..sometimes just cos I was doing my work..and that did really upset me and with stuff going on at home and I could have done with some support I think it was the one period in my life I think it was like in year 7 and 8 I was really quite unhappy.*

Pippa was the youngest of three siblings and she enjoyed a very close relationship with both siblings as well as her mother and father. Her mother in particular had given her much support during these unhappy times and suggested Pippa come away with her to a summer camp of an Alternative Community. This proved to be a turning point for Pippa. The experience of being accepted by that group gave her the confidence to make some dramatic changes to her friendship patterns at the beginning of the next academic year:

*I just ditched those friends completely and just broke away from that group who weren't very nice. I didn't really have the confidence to do that before but then became part of (organisation) and got on really well with people and it made me have confidence and I just came back from that and I just stopped being friends with them and it was really hard cos obviously I'd been really close to them and they were really horrible about me leaving the group but from then on I was just solidly happy so it was the best thing I did.*

When I asked Pippa how she felt the alternative community group had changed the way she was able to handle the difficult school interactions, she said:

*I began to feel I actually had something to offer, I think I just thought previously that I was just a bit rubbish and that people didn't think there was too much to me and then I've been, I don't know. I've just bought a lot to this camp and it just made me really happy about myself and I was alright and then I just came back and sorted it out. And then seriously from then on I've been completely fine.*

Pippa presented as a confident, determined young woman, clear about what she wanted out of life. She was eager to be involved in my research and very happy to talk about herself in an

articulate and thoughtful way. She had obviously reflected on the distressing episodes in her life – the bullying and her parents’ divorce – and was able to be clear about what she felt she had learned from them. The community camp she spent time in every year had fostered a belief in the importance of collectivity and community and had informed her choice of degree subject. But it had also provided her with some life skills which enabled her to manage the problematic school group.

For many of the young people in the research, their experiences of being in groups and groupings meant that by the time they arrived at university, they had developed the social skills necessary to negotiate group-life. The new situation of starting university enabled them to draw on these social skills, such as assertiveness and mediation, and by employing them they realised something about themselves and their identity. Several students commented on their surprise at their ability to manage group-living and the complexities of establishing rules and routines among a group of hitherto unknown individuals.

### ***Sangita***

Sangita was one of these. Here she describes some of the day to day practices that necessitated skilful handling:

*Sangita     Like to be honest I found it quite hard when Dan (flatmate) after the first couple of weeks he started to walk around without his top on..we were in the kitchen eating and I just felt uncomfortable ..*

*HL:             How did you handle that?*

*Sangita     Well Sarah (flatmate) and me we did say something, but you can't really tell him cos he lives here but we said it made us uncomfortable... .. people not doing their washing up is another thing. Cos I'm quite..I don't mind about mess, but dirt I hate and it's just got to the point where I'm like for god's sake we've literally had to just sit down and be like look will you please do the washing up, it's been four days and there were pots and pans and nothing to use so ...It's hard to tell someone cos you're not really in charge of them. They're in charge of their own stuff. Also.....there's the heating as well, debates about that cos.. there's a thermostat in the kitchen and everyone keeps changing it. And so*

*sometimes you come in and it's really cold and sometimes you come in and really hot. . Debbie likes it really hot and she turned it up to 30! We were all just sweltering.... We managed to keep it constant and it's about 22 now some people like it hot and some people like it cold and so you've got to come to a compromise...*

Sangita's growing competence at managing these social situations can be seen as an experience of identity. She was able to explain her social abilities with reference to pre-university experiences. She developed a certain independence while studying her A levels by having a job in a shoe shop which both afforded her some financial independence but also, importantly, she reported, taught her how to work and get on with a whole range of people. The family, too, had given her some important social resources. She commented on the skills she believed she had to both make friends and also handle the difficult situations which often arise when living in groups. This ability, she thought, had its roots in watching and hearing about her mother, a teacher, manage the tensions inherent in class-room teaching.

Various adolescent experiences, then, provided life lessons from which the young people derived skills. Psychologists have long known that peer group interaction is crucial in the social and emotional adjustment of young people, and also in the development of social competence (Heaven 2001). The young people's narratives illustrate that significant lessons have been learnt (sometimes painfully) in the group processes of secondary education. This goes some way towards answering the question posed at the beginning of this section, where do young people learn the skills of social and group life? However, within the narratives of Pippa and Sangita, as well as other young peoples', there is evidence of skilful use of awareness of self and others and, crucially, a literacy in the use of emotions. Both Pippa and Sangita refer to the role of the family, in particular the mother, in both supporting and modelling the deployment of emotional understanding and social skills. In the following section I draw on the concept of emotional capital to open up a discussion about how emotions are used in the lives of these young people both as a resource and also as an experience of identity.

### **Emotional capital**

Bourdieu wrote (1997:43) that:

Capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital...as cultural capital.. and as social capital

Diane Reay has offered an extension of Bourdieu's conceptual framework in the guise of emotional capital. The concept of emotional capital has been developed chiefly as a heuristic device to analyse the emotional resources utilised primarily by mothers to nurture, guide and support their children's educational progress (Reay 2000).

The concept is useful in an exploration of the young people's narratives in that it provides a means of bringing the role of emotions and emotional work into the analysis of how the young people derive both support and identity as they make the transition to university. Emotional capital, it seems to me, is stitched into the seams of the young people's narratives rather than it being the centre piece. It is a taken for granted and found in the young people's throw away lines. Like emotional labour more generally, it is the sub-text rather than the text itself. And yet, emotional capital offers significant support.

Some of the myriad ways in which the young peoples' families contributed resources – tangible and intangible – to support the young person in making an independent life have already been discussed. Reay's work on emotional capital has focused on mothers' involvement in their children's schooling and examples include helping with homework, intervening when the child is having difficulties at school and general support and encouragement. Reay (2000) acknowledges that emotional capital differs from other forms of capital theorised by Bourdieu in that it does not automatically link to educational success. She also distinguishes it from "emotional involvement", that is emotion generated within interactions between parent and child but which is not necessarily channelled towards the child's educational success. Emotional capital is, rather:

the emotional resources passed on from mother to child through processes of parental involvement (Reay 2000:569).

As parents cannot be as directly involved in their child's university education as when the child was at the local school or college, in my study emotional capital was seen in other gestures that symbolised the continuing "devotion, generosity and solidarity" (Bourdieu 1998) of the parent. Maggie's mother had given her a student cookbook just before she left home. Maggie understood the symbolism. She said that her family knew she was "*rubbish at cooking*" and the gift signified

that her needs had been anticipated. Satisfaction of need is a fundamental aspect of babies' ability to separate and trust. This gesture, then, was symbolic of the enduring attachment between parent and child, and conveyed significant support. Food is also symbolic of nurturance, and Vicky's mother had secretly packed 'goodies' of favourite sweets as well as more nutritional 'cuppa soups' into Vicky's suitcase as her way of extending her role over distance.

Two of the young people made off-the-cuff remarks about their mothers providing health advice- Sangita had just come off the telephone to her mother asking for advice about her stomach pains when I arrived for the interview, and Jessica, in a conversation about how much partying she was doing at university muttered:

*I'm gonna phone me mum for multi-vitamins though cos I'm scared that my body might pack up on me.*

Chantelle, who we saw in the last chapter initially found life at university extremely difficult, told me in a throw away line that her mother phoned her every other day just to say "you can do it, girl".

And finally, as I was sitting in Alice's student bedroom I was amused and touched to see that Alice's mother had sent her an Advent Calendar on 1<sup>st</sup> December, a gesture that was much appreciated by her 19 year old daughter. The calendar symbolised the link between university and home, past and present, child and adult, in many different ways and, like all the examples above, was an experience of significant parental support.

Emotional capital has been a useful device in the interrogation of my findings and warrants further analysis in two respects. Firstly, my findings showed fathers, too, expended emotional energy in supporting their children at university (for example Rachel described how her father regularly cut out articles of famous chemists to support and inspire her). Secondly, emotional capital is most effective when young people are not only the recipients of the deployment of parental emotions, but when they are also able to use emotions competently themselves. Much of the literature fails to make this distinction between parents who mobilise emotions on behalf of their children and those who also pass on the emotional literacy training manual. Allatt (1993:158), however, emphasises this point in her discussion of the transference of skills between generations in relation to social and cultural capital in her work analysing of the role of family processes in 'becoming privileged':

While individuals might be born into a rich store of social and cultural capital embedded in a family's social networks, this inheritance is not necessarily sufficient to maintain the advantages it might offer. Not only must the young learn the skills of exchange (sociability) which sustain these relationships, but also those skills which enable them to create social and cultural capital of their own.

The young people in my research have been shown to operate with varying degrees of expertise in social interaction.

When the power relations that circulate within society are made explicit and a spot light is focused on the way 'truths' are constructed and legitimised within power relations, it is possible to interrogate this notion of ability to make 'effective' relationships further (Bourdieu 1998). The perception of what is or is not effective in terms of social interaction can be seen to be part of the dominant discourse of success/failure that is embedded in the value system of the Higher Education Institute. The emphasis on the 'Student Experience' which has become part of the debate about how to both attract and retain students in the university has legitimated a discourse of influence over the students' social as well as academic lives (e.g. 1994 Group 2007). As I have noted throughout the thesis, students are encouraged to engage at many and different levels with their new university lives. Identities, then, can be seen to be shaped by power relations operating throughout the university, and just as in society as a whole there will be some students who 'succeed' in taking on the 'successful student' identity and others who fall outside it. There is a professional driver to answer the question 'what works?' which imposes a dichotomous way of thinking on behaviour and being, and identities, both from within and also when viewed objectively, are influenced by these powerful forces. Absences and silences are created by this process –that is, those students who cannot or choose not to connect and engage in the social life. So, transition to university is normalised as activity around connection, and as that body of knowledge becomes legitimated, hierarchies are formed. Martin is a case in point here. As well as feeling unhappy in his first term at University, he was very conscious of the fact he had 'failed' in some way and this was taken into his understanding of himself and his identity.

\*       \*       \*       \*

In this chapter I have discussed the various accounts of connectedness as it emerged in the young people's narratives, and have endeavoured to show that the young people derive significant

support as well as sites for identity-building among the relationships they develop. The quality and strength of the relationships the young people forge as well as a greater flexibility in making friends across gender divides has been noted. Consideration of emotional capital has shone the spotlight on the role of emotions in connectedness and I have argued that some of the young people have shown themselves to be skilled at social interactions which necessitate the insightful use of emotions and awareness of the self and others. Power is an integral element of all social relations at both the structural and cultural levels. The role of gender and the use of emotion has been explored as an example of the way in which dominant structural discourses have profound implications for identity.

Connectedness encompasses family relations as well as peer relations, and experiences within the family have been seen to affect the ability to make relationships in the young people's new lives. The family is a site of support, identity and learning. Connectedness allows for the interplay of the personal and social and reflexivity has emerged as a crucial process which connects experience, learning and the construction of the self.



## Chapter 6 Conclusions: Identities under construction

The findings indicate that the young people in the research were hard at work exercising different degrees of agency in the construction of their self-identities. The context of transition is highly significant in this process. In times of transition identity becomes self-conscious and the research captured something of how the young people managed to find their own way between the hard landscape of structure, particularly class and gender, and the everyday terrain of personal life. Power relations which operate at the structural, cultural and personal level throughout society have been shown to have profound effects on the young people's experiences of identity. The young people were seen, to a large extent, enjoying the relative privileges of class while actively wrestling with the cultural representations of gender. In their personal lives their experiences of connectedness-derived through both family and group processes- shaped their sense of self and it has been argued that dominant professional discourses of 'what works?' in relation to transition to university has had the effect of legitimating knowledge which creates identities of success/inclusion and failure/exclusion. In this chapter I endeavour to pull together some of the themes of identity emanating from the findings. Although connectedness emerged as significant in the development of identity, the young people's narratives also conveyed weight attached to uniqueness, being different and forging one's own path. This then raised questions about how much freedom they did in fact have to exercise choice and formulate life-plans. At this time in their lives the young people were seen to be constructing identities with their feet in the present but with their gaze directed into the future, and aspirations were an important part of their identity. Social structure and concomitant power relations are crucial in bounding those aspirations and Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* provides a useful analytical tool with which the relationship between class and identity can be probed. My findings have also highlighted the role of connectedness in both social support, and personal and social identity. Processes which facilitate connectedness include reflexivity and emotionality, and below I discuss both the use of reflection and emotion as experiences of learning and identity.

### Identity, choice and life-plans

Giddens (1994:74) has written that:

choice is... to do with colonising the future in relation to the past

and the findings did indeed show that the young people considered themselves to be 'in transition', somewhere between the realities of the past and present, and the imagined possibilities of the future. Transition involves choices about which direction to take. The young people knew that choices they were making- for example about study of A level and University subjects - were choices that had implications for both their present and future identities. As they grew older, they became more confident about choosing subjects which made a statement about their personal identity rather than the need to fit in. Nick, for example at last felt able to indulge his interest in animals and signed up to study zoology at University, and both Roslyn and Maggie knew they were stepping out of gender- line to study science. In fact an emphasis on positively wanting to be different by the time they entered sixth form college crept into the narratives of many of the young people. This was in contrast to the narratives from secondary school in which the constraining effects of the group on identity were evident. This ability to more easily shake loose from the grip of the group in late adolescence is consistent with findings from psychological research (Heaven 2001).

Making choices is an experience of identity because it involves recognition of the limitations of choice and in this way confirms social positioning. Choice-making is an exercise of power. Reay et al (2001) have argued that young people tend to have a sense of what life plans are appropriate for 'a person like me' and choice-making can be seen, partly, as 'a process of psychological self-exclusion' (p. 863). Although Reay et al are referring to more working-class youngsters making choices about Higher Education here, these 'emotional constraints' on choice are applicable to the young people in my study. All of them had life plans of some sort. Alice was clear she wanted to be a teacher. Nick had some notion, though as yet unformulated, about being a researcher. All aspirations were in the bounds of the known, although Chantelle's aspiration to be "*something big in the city*" also points to the influence of personal and family values. Her early experiences of feeling different because of her disability, and the unusual trajectories of both her parents' careers had instilled in Chantelle a world-view that 'anything's possible'. Her identity as a 'survivor' and one for whom challenges were there to be surmounted demonstrates the way issues of agency, control, power and choice are complex interactions between family and social structure.

Giddens (1991:5) has argued that life-planning is an important part of the “structuring of identity”, although Brooks and Everett (2008)’s research qualifies this by demonstrating a relationship between class and the ability and need to plan. In my research, life-planning, although a “complex, interactive, culturally grounded process” (Hodkinson 1996:126) was much in evidence in the narratives of the young people, playing a key role in the construction of identity.

### **Identity, the family and *habitus***

Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of *habitus* and the different kinds of capital that individuals are able to bring to bear on their engagement with the world offers a way of thinking about identity as a product of family and cultural resources and as such is embedded in notion of power and power relations.

All of the 12 young people in my research had at least one parent who had gone to University, including two of them (Rosalyn and Chantelle) whose mothers had graduated only recently as mature students. Both these came from families where there was a smaller reserve of cultural capital residing in the family vault: there was not much family tradition of entering Higher Education. However, the very recent experiences of the mothers’ engagement with undergraduate study were highly significant in both Rosalyn’s and Chantelle’s narratives. They were recounted by both girls as proof that going to university could be done and that it was a worthwhile pursuit. For all 12 young people, the concept of *habitus* conveys well the ‘taken-for ‘granted’ attitudes towards Higher Education. Most of the young people answered the question about why they wanted to study at University with a version of Maggie’s “*I just always thought I would*”. Further, all had chosen prestigious universities. Choices were made through discussions with family and college teachers. The concept of cultural capital is useful in explaining the different ways in which families are able to transmit and mobilise resources which ease the young people’s pathway into Higher Education. Two of the young people, Tony and Martin, had parents who worked in Universities and although this gave them a particular confidence and familiarity with academic conventions and systems, there were sufficient narratives about university life embedded in all of the young people’s social contexts for university to feel reasonably known and manageable. This relatively privileged group of students had, then, been able to project themselves into their new environments with the help of a significant leg-up from their families. The second round of

interviews conducted with them gave me insight into how far they had been able to stand on their own two feet once at university.

### **Social capital as connectedness**

The narratives demonstrated that ‘making your own way’ - a phrase repeatedly used by many of the young people - wasn’t quite the lone journey the choice of words might indicate. Social capital generated through the families of the young people underpinned their pathways and provided a safety-net when they were in danger of falling off. Social capital is a concept that has recently been much explored and contested in literature across a range of disciplines, used as a way of conceptualising the social processes, power relations and practices that individuals engage in to give and derive support. Some theorists (for example Putnam 2000) use it to explore societal cohesion more widely. In my research, I use social capital to characterise the networks of family and friends that operate as a resource to ease the transition to university. As chapter 4 demonstrates, there are many instances of family networks being drawn on in this way in the narratives. The regular practices of emotional investment in the lives of the young people by parents have been shown to convey a constant ‘attending’ of the family. And the on-going ‘virtual’ presence of the family is made possible by the proliferation of technological modes of communication – mobile phone conversations, texts, emails, interactive networking sites, and so on. The young people and their parents were in constant connection with each other.

Social capital’s concern with relationship, and in particular the recent ideas emanating from sociology on intimacy (Gillies 2003), renders it a useful perspective from which to discuss some of my findings. My research showed that although social capital was highly significant as a resource to be drawn from, it was also crucial the young people had the ability to be able to create social capital themselves (Allatt 1993). They did this through the friendships and other relationships they developed. They, mostly, went about social interaction in a skilled and purposeful manner. For example, the narratives convey the development of “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998) where skills connected to study and survival were exchanged. Sangita also demonstrated how such communities were important sites of identity, and it is this aspect of situated learning that its initial exponents, Lave and Wenger (1991), highlight. However, what is less emphasised in this research – and which my own research found to be highly significant – is the social capital such communities afford, and this in turn is predicated on the development of strong, purposeful

relationships. The ability to develop effective relationships is crucial in generating social capital. The same skill in building networks comprising significant, but differentiated, relationships can be seen as the young people make friends- a finding consistent with Spencer and Pahl's (2006) work on personal communities and social capital.

### **Friendship, gender and intimacy**

Building a network of friendships was the first task of university life, and the young people all set about this with serious endeavour. The quality of the relationships they developed rendered them sites of considerable support and intimacy.

Sociological literature on intimacy and "the pure relationship" points to a reconfiguring of relationships in late modernity. Claims about the ascendance of intimacy disrupting traditional power relations and democratising and transforming personal relationships, particularly those between heterosexual couples "with radical consequences for the gender order" (Jamieson 1999:477) have been both forwarded and contested. Jamieson's (1998:1) contention is that intimacy

is at the centre of meaningful personal life in contemporary societies

and her work explores how far there is a societal change in personal relationships centred around intimacy.

Psychological research has also focused on the nature of intimacy. Intimacy develops in adolescence and is related to the propensity to share personal thoughts and feelings with others. This willingness to self-disclose is, in turn, predicated on "loyalty, mutual commitment and mutual trust" (Bauminger et al 2008:411). Bauminger et al emphasise that managing intimacy involves negotiating the "dialectic of intimacy that includes both closeness and autonomy" (page 423). They write:

Intimacy does not necessarily mean closeness, but rather the ability to negotiate closeness. Intimacy incorporates several abilities: to seek support, provide support, negotiate, and feel comfortable as and with an autonomous self.

In my research, intimacy was much in evidence in the narratives of the young people. It provided both support and learning. Jamieson (1998) has coined the term “disclosing intimacy” to convey intimacy which involves openness, the sharing of thoughts and the expression of feeling.

Several of the young people’s narratives revealed how very close friendships had been made once at university with a speed and to a level of intimacy that took the young people themselves by surprise. The narratives suggest that although both the boys and girls in my study were capable of intimacy, “disclosing intimacy” came more easily to the girls. However, this must be elaborated. Firstly, as I show below, given an appropriate context the boys *were* seen to be comfortable with emotionality and self-disclosure. Secondly, it is important not to equate closeness exclusively with behaviours stereotypically exhibited more proficiently by females who are seen in society through the operation of power relations which create ‘truths’ about representations of gender as the ‘intimacy experts’. Wood and Inman (1993:282) refer to a

Reliance on a feminine ruler to measure intimacy.

And, in conveying accounts of significant friendships narrated by the young people-including between the boys- I hope to avoid “popular notions of boys as being emotionally illiterate” (Frosh et al 2002:47). As in Frosh et al’s study on young masculinities, I found that disclosure is dependent on context.

### **Cross-gender friendships and identity**

The quality of the relationships forged between the young people cut across structures of gender. It seemed to me that for both males and females friendships with the ‘other’ gender were significant experiences in the reflexive project of the self. However, there is a relative paucity of focus on cross-gender friendships in the literature.

Several of the girls mentioned that their social ease with boys as non-sexual friends came from their co-educational school experiences where friendship groups were both single and mixed sex, and a couple of the girls contrasted themselves in this respect to girls from single -sex schools who appeared, they said, to be less able to relate to boys as “just friends”. For five of the girls, making friends with boys was cited as part of their survival strategy as it was reportedly easier to make

initial friends with boys than girls. Conversations with boys, as Rachel described it, tended to span a broader range of topics and

*its kinda like, y'know jokes and stories about what's happened rather than what someone said to someone else and what that meant and stuff like that.*

Boys also seemed to be a popular choice when there was a need for fun and as Rosalyn expressed it “*lightness- you know, nothing heavy*”. Rachel and Rosalyn here seem to be touching on the differential use of language and communication by gender that has been explored over the last decade in research emanating from the work of Tannen (1990). Thompson (2003:112) draws on Maltz and Borker's 1982 studies of children's interactions through play:

American girls and boys differ in the following aspects in the way they use language: Girls learn to create and maintain relationships of closeness and equality, to criticise others in acceptable ways, and to interpret accurately the speech of other girls (1982:205), whereas boys learn to assert one's position of dominance to attract and maintain an audience, and to assert oneself when others have the floor (1982:207)

The relationship between language, power, gender and identity is complex and I cannot do justice to the burgeoning literature on this here. However, these cross-gender friendships did seem to open up possibilities of different forms of expression and communication for both the boys and the girls. As there is a significant relationship between how individuals express themselves and identity (Thompson 2003), engaging in such 'other' communication patterns could be construed as an experience of identity. Different facets of identity are revealed and practiced in different contexts.

Although the boys talked rather less about cross-gender friendships than the girls, one of them, Tony, described the way in which having a female friend was important in enabling the expression of emotion generated by the break-up of the relationship with his girlfriend. Also, the exchange between Nick and Rosalyn referred to in the last chapter allowed me to witness first-hand Nick's reliance on his girlfriend to oil the wheels of friendship on his behalf so skilfully he had no idea of her role in his sudden popularity.

The narratives point to both males and females benefiting from cross-gender relationships- there was an exchange of communication skills across the gender divide, and, as Wood and Inman

assert, closeness is derived through “a breadth of intention, meanings, and behaviours” (1993:292). Whereas both genders made very significant friendships, the boys *tended* to do this through instrumentality and girls *tended* to do this through emotionality. The close friendship between Nick and Martin was symbolised by Martin’s sleeping bag kept in the corner of Nick’s room, an example of what has been termed “closeness in the doing” within male friendships (Swain 1989 cited in Wood and Inman 1993). The girls in my study, on the other hand, ‘did closeness’ through emotional expressiveness and self-disclosure. Cross-gender friendships, then, can be seen as sites where girls learn about friendship through ‘doing’ and boys learn about friendship through ‘being’ thus disrupting dominant constructions of gender.

As family practices and obligations become uncoupled from family relationships and enacted within other kinds of personal interactions, “closeness in the doing” may become less of a male prerogative thus reducing the (contested) dichotomy between instrumentality and emotionality (Duck and Wright 1993). There were many examples of girls expressing closeness in terms of familial obligations, and this way of relating came to be symbolised for me by the birthday cake Rosalyn bought for her flat-mate because his mother was not there to do it. In these and other small incidences of friendship a variety of practices and behaviours are brought to bear which have been learnt from family and cross-gender friendships.

### **The role of emotions in identity: the heart of the matter**

As I listened to the young people’s narratives I was struck by the way their experiences were presented as experiences of very intense emotions. For example, when I met Sangita in her university flat she was positively bursting with happiness and excitement about her new life. In contrast, Martin told me his first term had generated feelings of anxiety and panic he had never experienced before. And Alice described her situation as a “*roller-coaster of emotion*”. Emotion appeared to be at the centre of their learning. The intensity of their experience opened them up to insights and learning about themselves as well as to others.

Emotionality is an experience of identity: as the young people use this part of themselves to develop relationships and manage complex social situations, they discover something about themselves and their ability to take on their new environment. This environment comprises an emotional as well as physical landscape. Some of the young people were able to articulate how they were able to operate in social situations with reference to modelling, for example Sangita



watched and listened to her mother. Other aspects of social processes I was able to observe for myself. For example I saw how Nick replicated patterns that he was already familiar with, in that his social network at university mirrored the large and unwieldy one he fell into in secondary school. Chantelle, too, drew on emotional reserves and social skills already developed by childhood experiences of feeling 'on the outside' of group life because of her disability, to manage uncomfortable feelings of difference during her first year of university.

### **Emotional literacy**

The concepts of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1996) and the arguably less contradictory term emotional literacy (Orbach 1999) are imprecise concepts but are increasingly being used in professional discourse to describe "the importance of recognising feelings (our own and those of the people we are working with) and responding appropriately to them"(Thompson 2006:122). The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)'s Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme draws significantly on Goleman's conceptualisation of emotional intelligence. Goleman's emphasis on the utilization of emotional and social skills to understand relationships and handle conflict has been seized in an attempt to tackle playground bullying and the importance of emotional self regulation and motivation has been linked to educational achievement (Goleman 1996). Thompson and others in the field of social work argue the idea has a much longer history and firmer foundation in social work.

That women are the emotionally literate ones in society is one of the grand public narratives, but my research indicated that reality is more complex than this. Hochschild's (1983) work was seminal in conceptualising the use of emotions in social life. She asserts that the evidence is clear that women do more emotion managing than men because in general women are dependent on men and therefore:

one of the various ways of repaying their debt is to do extra emotion work- *especially emotion work that affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others* (1983:165- italics in original)

She traces how women's emotional skills which have long been assumed to be natural, are a result of their position in relation to men.

She writes (1983:167):

sensitivity to nonverbal communication and to the micro-political significance of feeling gives women something like an ethnic language, which men can speak too, but on the whole less well ....This talk is not, as it is for men off-stage, the score-keeping of conquistadors. It is the talk of the artful prey, the language of tips on how to make him want her, how to psyche him out, how to put him on or turn him off. .... Being becomes a way of doing. Acting is the needed art, and emotion work is the tool.

It follows, then, that where cross-gender relationships are becoming more equitable through processes such as intimacy as discussed above, shifts in social structures will bring about concomitant shifts in the use of emotions. The narratives of Nick, Tony and Martin clearly demonstrated that their emotional life played an important role in their sense of self and their ability to connect to others.

### **Reflexivity and its role in learning about identity**

In this research I have identified reflexivity as a crucial process in learning and the construction of the self. By reflexivity in this context I mean an ability to reflect on the self and connections with others by mobilising both cognitive and affective processes in an on-going iterative dialogue with the self about the self. Learning and change are outcomes of these reflexive processes. Within the research there were many incidences of the young people engaging in such reflexivity. Pippa and Vicky both narrated how they had reflected hard on their difficult adolescent relationships with consequent changes in their behaviour and decisions about themselves in relation to others. Maggie articulated clearly her inner-dialogues when she told me about how she was coping with her new college life and what that meant for her identity and Alice showed how she and her friends used each other to reflect together how well they had all done surviving the first few weeks of university. Sometimes known patterns of relating were used to reflect on new ones, for example Sangita's use of "*(my flat-mates are) like brothers*".

One of the questions which arose for me through the research was what are the conditions which facilitate and promote reflexivity? Reflexivity as I have described it above is contingent on an ability to exercise self awareness of affect as well as cognition. So are some people better at it than others? Specifically I was drawn to considering the effects of gender on reflexivity. This arose because analysis of the young people's texts revealed far fewer incidences of the kind of reflexive statements exemplified above in the narratives of the young men. My research study included just 3

males because only 3 presented themselves- an indication itself, perhaps, that boys are less comfortable than girls with communicating reflexivity. The following exploration focuses on those three young people's patterns of reflexivity as demonstrated through the research process.

### ***Martin***

Martin appeared interested in my research and willingly presented himself as a research subject. Even so, the interviews, particularly the initial one, were somewhat slow and stilted. Martin was undoubtedly a bright and thoughtful young man but he tended to hold back from using the reflective space afforded by the research except in two aspects. Firstly, in both interviews the narratives are punctuated with phrases such as *"here's an interesting thing for your research"* and *"you might find this useful"*. He seemed to be offering up reflections not for himself but for me. Those reflections were indeed interesting and insightful but he, personally, was somewhat disengaged from them. An example is describing school social life:

*You'll be interested in this, it wasn't just the girls that had big bust-ups; there was a lot of in-fighting between the boys, too.*

His role in that group was presented as a passive observer. There was also a lack of affect in the narrative. This changed when I interviewed him once at university, and the second noteworthy aspect of Martin's reflexivity was how the crisis of the university term provoked a greater degree of self-reflexivity embedded in powerful emotions. In this second interview Martin described the unhappiness, anxiety and disappointment the start of university life had brought for him. He was surprised to find himself in this position; he felt he had been unlucky in his allocation of unsociable flat mates. Again, his situation was offered to me as an interesting experience, told with insight but passivity. Martin described an emotional experience yet there was little sense of agency. His approach to reflexivity can best be explained by Mezirow (1991:108) who claims it is important to distinguish between reflection and reflective action:

Reflective action is making decisions or taking other action predicated upon the insights resulting from reflection.

Mezirow also emphasises that reflective action precipitates learning about ourselves. Martin was thoughtful and introspective, but there was less evidence of him actively engaging with his environment in the self-reflexive project compared to narratives of others of the young people. Starting at university was an emotional experience and the expression of affect distinguished the second interview from the first. However, Martin's narratives suggested to me that a sense of agency may play a key role in the construction of identity in transitional times.

### **Identities of absence**

Throughout the thesis it has been emphasised that identities are created in the tension between similarity and difference and also along the dichotomy of have/have not, is/is not. However, power relations operating within society ensure that it is more complex than this. The identities of the young people in the study have been analysed in terms of intersectionality, and the interweaving of differentially powerful elements of subjective and structural experiences which make up identity have been noted. Where hegemonic discourse values certain ways of being or doing, it also de-values the absence of these attributes or practices. It was seen that ethnicity can be 'othered' in that only those young people from ethnic minorities narrated their ethnic experiences whereas the 'whiteness' of other young people was assumed and un-spoken by both the young person and also the researcher. Identities of absence are created wherever power relations operate and it was argued that the development of a body of knowledge concerning the transition to university has been embedded with notions of success and failure. Recent emphasis on the student experience, generated through concern about retention and drop-out, has involved regulatory discourses which have spilled out of the classroom in to the students' social life. Martin felt he had failed because he was unhappy and had made few friends. There was an absence of connection in his narratives. Identities are multi-faceted and fluid, however, in this particular respect Martin was grappling with an identity of deficit. Reflexivity is required by the researcher to be able to disentangle and objectify the complex play of power in the construction of identities which has the potential to categorise and condemn.

**Tony**

Tony was another young person who was very willing to engage in the research to be helpful to me. Like Martin, he came from a family where one parent was an academic, and he took the identity of 'research subject' seriously. His interviews were thoughtful, but it was when he conveyed those thoughts and feelings on paper that he produced accounts highly reflective and indicative of much learning and change (extract attached in Appendix C).

Tony illustrates that reflective performances of identity favour a variety of stages. For Tony, it is in the writing rather than the verbalising that he is able to make connections between self, experience and learning. Tony's thoughtful accounts also raise the issue of temporality. Written at a point where he has been able to put some distance between himself and the events, does that affect the effectiveness of reflection?

Giddens (1991) discusses the key role of reflexive awareness in self-identity and the use of personal journals in the project of narrating the self. Within the discourse of social work, Taylor (2006:192) argues the importance of reflective accounts of professional practice in the development of professional learning. She argues that the reflective accounts which are required from social work students in their social work education are more than tools for demonstrating their practice to assessors. These accounts of everyday routine processes are written as performances of identity. She writes (2006:194):

Identity is closely connected to issues of representation; how we represent ourselves and others is something to be worked at, performed in specific instances, be they face to face encounters with clients, behind the scenes talk or written representations of practice...we make our identities in the course of our everyday lives in interaction with others.

**Nick**

Nick has already been shown to be actively engaged in reflecting on himself and his identity, particularly his student identity. In the dialogue between him and Rosalyn he showed less ability to be reflective of his role in interpersonal relationships until Rosalyn's comment forced him to re-assess. With feedback, Nick became reflective. The facilitating effect of another in stimulating

reflexivity was also in evidence in the exchanges between Nick and myself. It became apparent in my research that I as the researcher played an important role in students' reflexivity.

An extract from my research diary illustrates this. After the interview with Nick at university I wrote:

*Nick is obviously enjoying life in the north: as a summarising statement I said he seemed very content up here, he seemed 'to fit'. The way he beamed 'That's nice' made me realise I had made a statement that would form an important part of his identity. He had described to me his developing confidence, his contentment, and how much a part of the place he felt. But in my throwing back to him those reflections I had cemented something for him.*

Finally, my own place in the generation of the findings must be acknowledged. I am a mother of daughters, not sons, and it could have been my own awkwardness generated by a lack of familiarity with communicating with boys that affected the way the male research subjects used – or didn't use- the research space for reflexivity. Given that my findings point to the importance of context on reflexivity all aspects of context, including the researcher role, must be considered.

Ruch (2000), writing within social work discourse, has described four categories of reflection, each of which involves the use of a different kind of knowledge to bring to bear on the reflective process. The one she terms "process reflection" is described as the application of concepts derived from psycho-analysis to the reflective process. Transference and counter-transference are processes which weave through all personal interaction, and the research relationship is no different. Such process reflection also highlighted the partial nature of the narratives the young people gave me. Trawling through the pages of interviews I was struck by the absence of narratives of drink, drugs and sex. I noted this in my research diary:

*The students have obviously given me an edited version of their lives at university. Through unconscious processes we must have been operating that familiar parent-adolescent defensive pact 'You don't want to tell me and I don't want to know!'*

## Family and identity

Finally, as a way of pulling together this exploration of identities under construction it seems fitting to return to the site of the family:

the first and most significant context in which the child's sense of self develops (Schofield 2008:43).

The social positioning of the family in society and how this impacts on identity has been discussed drawing on some of Bourdieu's work. It has also been apparent through the different narratives how crucial is the family's role in shaping identity. Young people model their behaviour on family interactions and practices (Sangita, Rosalyn). Their sense of self is fuelled by the family's culture and history (Sangita, Vicky). They imbue family scripts that become guiding principles which shape world views (for example Chantelle's *"I'm a survivor"*). The family also provides significant and on-going support, both materially and emotionally.

I have argued throughout the chapters that being socially and emotionally proficient is both an experience of identity, and can generate crucial social support for the young person. The family has been shown to be one site where the young people were able to learn how to use emotions. Work from Hochschild set this in a social context and ways in which the use of emotions is circumscribed by gender has been posited.

There is, however, another aspect of family relations which has a significant effect on identity and the ability to engage with the social world. Much of the discussion about identity has focused on both present and future orientations, but the roots of identity are embedded in the trust and ontological security generated in the very first experiences of personal interaction. Psychological research has demonstrated that the quality of attachment relationships between the parent and child is strongly related to the child's ability to form close quality relationships with peers and friends in adolescence and later life (Bauminger et al 2008). Trust and ontological security have been used within literature concerned with social and cultural capital to convey economic and material exchange relationships. However, within psychoanalytic discourse these terms convey something about the deeply embedded sense of self rooted in early attachment experiences. Internal working models theory suggests the fixed representational models that individuals use to predict and relate to the world are established very early on in life (Holmes 1993). The quality of

the secure base the young people in my research started their journey from will affect their experiences en route. My research cannot possibly make any claims about the young people's early experiences, but this quote from Rachel seemed to sum up what it means to feel secure about one's place in the world. In the pre-university interview she was musing on what it would be like having to make friends at university. She said:

*I know I'll be scared but I also know I'm gonna be alright. I think it's cos I have faith that people are going to be alright.*

The quality of the foundations, then, profoundly influences identities under construction.



## Chapter 7 The End

The end of a story does not have to be predictable, but it must be meaningful. In short, a narrative must have a *point*.....the question every narrator tries to fend off is, 'So what?' And for narratives to have a point, they must incorporate this important element of bringing together disparate elements into a single plot (Lawler, 2002:246).

In the previous concluding chapter I brought together some of the threads that ran through many of the young people's narratives and used both well-established and emerging literatures to help render them meaningful. In these few next pages I want to briefly summarise the main findings in relation to the research questions I posed in the introductory chapter, and also address what this thesis has added to an understanding of how young people's experiences of transition from sixth form college to university impact on their sense of self and implications of this for professional practice. I will conclude with a discussion about narrative methodology itself and argue that narrative methodology has much to offer the interrogation of identity. However, the role of emotion in narrative suggests the skilled use of emotion is a crucial research tool, and the complexity of narrative demands reflexivity and transparency. Narrative methodology raises questions about 'truth' and whose story is narrated in any research.

### **How do the young people experience transition and what is the connection between transition and identity?**

The young people *did* conceive of themselves as being in transition. Some articulated clearly the 'betwixt and between-ness' of their current lives, suspended between school and employment, and their family home and new home. Being in transition had significant effects on identity, and this thesis makes a contribution to the existing research on transition because it has been able to interrogate the specific connections between identity and transition. I have shown that transition involves four aspects which have significant impact on identity. Firstly, transition encapsulates a quality of temporality which concerns both the present and the future. It pushes the young people to conceive of making the transition to university as an opportunity to make a 'fresh start' and the new identity is future-oriented; transition shapes future as well as present selves. Secondly,

transition disrupts the normal flow of life and often involves choice-making. Making choices, particularly those which will have future implications, brings identity into sharp relief through reflexive processes. Thirdly, transition to university involves moving into a broader landscape bringing encounters with a wider range of people. This forces issues of similarity, difference and otherness into the frame. Identities are reflexively constructed through understanding of similarity and difference, and transition provides the space where the young people are faced with both possibilities and limitations. On the one hand the broad social mix of university students provides an awareness of heterogeneity that the young people had not experienced before, with all the potential for new identities this opens up. But on the other hand, butting up against otherness and difference in this way solidifies and limits identities. This often resulted in learning that involved a significant shift in the meanings previously held about the self in relation to the social world. Fourthly, transition precipitates mechanisms for connectedness, and connectedness is significant in identity. The research has shown how the new experiences for these young people 'opened them up' to social encounters and they were able to develop rapid, trusting relationships because of the intensity of the transitional experience.

### **How does connectedness impact on identity?**

The term connectedness has been used in my research to capture the all-pervading, on-going relating which dominated the narratives of the young people from the stories of friendship groups at school, to the strategic relationships with study peers and the strong bonds made and maintained with friends and family when at university. Connectedness also refers to the way young people are connected in wider social relations such as age, gender, class and race.

The significance of friendship between young people has been well-researched across a range of disciplines. Choice of friends tends to reinforce social positioning (Allan 2008), and friendships are important sites for identity and, as has been shown through recent ethnographic studies of girls' friendships (Griffiths, 1995; Hey 1997), are significant in the exercise of power and intimacy. My own work confirmed the quality of relationships the young people were able to develop, many of which indicated a blurring of the distinction between family and friends: trust, loyalty and obligation could be seen to be associated with both, and young people often made specific reference to this. Two aspects of connectedness are particularly note-worthy for their contribution to existing knowledge about friendships and identity. Firstly, findings echo Spencer and Pahl's

(2006) assertion that the role of friendship has been under-emphasised in social capital. The young people derived significant social capital from the relationships they formed, capital which they could draw on to nourish, support and maintain their new lives. This was an experience of identity in that it enabled individual potential to be realised – people can be braver with a social safety net beneath them- and it also developed relating aspects of self.

Secondly, there have been very few accounts of cross-gender friendships in the literature and yet these friendships in my research provide an important site for the development of different ways of being and doing which disrupt existing gender-determined modes. Shifting configurations of relationships have been noted and discussed in recent sociological literature (Weeks et al 2001; Morgan, 2002), and criticism has been made of those who over-blow the significance for wider structural relations of the transformation of intimacy (Jamieson, 1999; Giddens 1992). However, in this group of young people under scrutiny, there was evidence of personal change and benefit for both genders as a broader range of possibilities of being and doing opened up through the cross-gender friendships. There may be potential in further study of this emerging trend of friendship patterning.

### **What are the processes that facilitate connectedness, and how can these be incorporated into a developing sense of self?**

My research has illuminated the importance of being able to manage and negotiate group-relations and has focused on the processes at work in this. To this effect, the concept of emotional capital was examined and it was seen that parental investment of emotional capital in the new lives of the young people was significant. It eased their ability to ride over the difficulties and disruptions of the transition and enabled them to engage with their new university contexts.

I concluded that the concept of emotional capital might usefully be extended to incorporate something more than the deployment of emotions as a resource the young people are able to draw on. The literature on emotional literacy, a concept currently in vogue in educational policy and with very deep roots in social work (Howe, 2008) and psychoanalytic discourse (Orbach, 1999), was used to highlight the skill needed to work with emotions. It was shown in the research that some of the young people were highly proficient in the use of micro-social skills generated through intuitive understanding and deployment of emotions. The current literature on emotional capital does not drill down as deeply into how emotions can best be used as a resource as I have

endeavoured to do in this research. Emotions used to nurture, support and encourage the next generation's foray into educational pursuits which maximise their future life-chances is one thing. Transmitting the key to unlocking how emotions, both one's own and others', can be read and mobilised in the on-going micro-processes of social life is another. The research showed how some of the young people have this ability and others had less so. The research indicates current DCSF initiatives to promote social and emotional skills in primary and secondary schools may have more far-reaching benefits than previously thought. Whether emotional literacy *can* be taught as current educational policy intends, warrants further investigation.

### **What is the role of agency in the young people's identity-work?**

There is a very large literature focused on the analysis of the relationship between agency and social structure in the shaping of identity. Findings are context specific, for example where choice of educational career is under scrutiny, the effects of social structure are very significant (Ball et al, 2000). Where young people are researched exercising choice about lifestyles, the role of agency is highlighted (Lawy, 2002, 2003). In my research, the young people had chosen universities commensurate with their perceived social positioning- 'good' universities but self-limiting processes inhibited them from aiming for 'the best'. These structuring influences were rarely articulated in the narratives, however, until the experience of transition threw them into the spotlight. The young people experience the constraining and facilitating forces of social structure at some points in their lives more than others. Transition is a time when the influence of social structure becomes more visible in their lives with concomitant impact on identity as I have indicated.

There was evidence of some of the young people, particularly the young women, consciously wrestling with culturally- generated gender modes of being, either resisting the constraints they imposed or finding ways of at the same time seeming to fall in with and also disrupt gender expectations (for example Jessica). Most of the young people were middle class beneficiaries of cultural capital and *habitus*, but one of the young people, Chantelle, started university with fewer family resources from which she could draw. Her narrative is a success story chiefly because of her own resilience, and overall it was the exercise of agency in all of the young people's lives which dominated their narratives. There is choice, no choice and there is the illusion of choice. Narrative can only capture fragments of these processes at play in young people's lives because it is agency

which drives their narrative and limitations and constraints tend to be hidden, part of the backcloth rather than the woven patterns of the tapestry.

### **What does the study of the young people in my research project indicate about the role of reflexivity and narrative in the reflexive project of the self?**

Narrative methodology is based on a body of theoretical knowledge conceptualising the role of narrative in giving meaning to experience over time. At times of transition, when the normal flow of life has been disrupted, narratives are particularly helpful in making sense of interconnections between disparate events. Narratives are cohering threads piecing together a sense of self and therefore narratives and identity are closely linked. However, the concept of reflexivity, although crucial in the “identity project” is not well-analysed by writers such as Giddens (1991), and I set out to explore these processes. Reflexivity was shown to be context-dependent, and learning was derived from reflexivity. My research endeavoured to elucidate the nature of that learning- could it be termed transformative? My conclusions are that many of the narratives conveyed an emerging sense of agency which the young people experienced as personally transformative. The role of emotion plays a vital part in analysing the narrative data here, the researcher using her own emotional literacy to notice and feel the emotion that is conveyed in the young person’s narrative. My research has been an emotional experience in many ways. The use of emotions has emerged as playing a key role in the identity of the young people. My final observation is that emotions are also an extremely important instrument in the conduct of research. Throughout the thesis I have alluded to concepts drawn from psychoanalysis which helped me to understand better what was going on at an emotional level both for the research subject and also between the research subject and myself. Kleinman (2002) is one of several feminist researchers writing from within the sociology of emotions who has viewed the neglect of emotions in social life and in research as a result of masculine paradigms of knowledge.

### **The use of narrative methodology to analyse the construction of identity**

Finally, I will end with my thoughts on the use of narrative methodology as a means of capturing the unfolding identities of the young people in my research. It is a methodology in relative infancy and although there is much literature about its theoretical underpinnings, there is less on application. For example, Elliott (2005) has noted the paucity of material on the ethical

considerations of narrative methodology. I hope throughout this thesis I have been able to contribute some thoughts about the ethical challenges, particularly those emanating from the potential blurring of researcher/researched narratives as the researcher and researched adopt different and multiple positions within the interview (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). Narrative methodology has the capacity to empower the person at the centre of the research because the narrator and her narrative drive the research. It is also a methodology which calls for the skilled use of emotions by the researcher if the emotions which are at the heart of the narrative are to be expressed and captured. Narrative methodology demands reflexivity to make transparent the multi-layered weaving of narrative and interpretation. Narratives are co-constructed at the point of telling, and the researcher reconstructs them in the writing: they can only ever be partial and fluid. Narrative methodology is complex, demanding, messy -and has been enormously instructive and enjoyable.

### **The contribution of the thesis in relation to its professional relevance**

The thesis contributes to the expanding knowledge about the effects of transition on young people. Educationalists and those working in Health and Social Care with young people have recently begun to understand that times of transition need to be managed carefully. This thesis has provided a detailed analysis of the processes at work at times of transition and how this may impact on identity. This reinforces the need for those working with young people in a range of contexts to attach importance to transitional times, spaces and places.

The thesis has also emphasised the role of emotion in learning and identity. The professional relevance of this is very significant as it gives weight to recent Department for Education initiatives such as SEAL in primary and secondary schools. Evidence has demonstrated the link between emotional regulation and emotional literacy and positive school outcomes. Social work research has identified the importance of emotional regulation in building resilience and developing friendships. This thesis has shown the operation of these processes in the Higher Education context and raises important issues for professionals working with young people making the transition to Higher Education.

Finally, the thesis makes a timely contribution to the debate on the point of Higher Education. At the time of writing the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (the Browne Report 2010) has reported, suggesting student fees for University study are raised. It is

likely that this will cause greater numbers of young people to question the value of Higher Education. The thesis has shown the many different ways university life impacts on the development of young people. It has also made claims about the circulation of power in the corridors of the Institution and the power imbued in social relations which exist in that context and more widely. Processes of connectedness involve connections of power. If young people are denied access to Higher Education through financial concerns the very many transitional experiences, personal and social, documented through the narratives of the young people in this thesis will be unavailable to them impacting on both present and future identities, and reinforcing the unequal access to power in the construction of identity.

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## Appendix A

**Table 1 Young People in Study<sup>2</sup>**

<b>Name and age at first interview</b>	<b>College</b>	<b>Ethnicity (self-defined)</b>	<b>Who am I?</b>	<b>A levels achieved</b>	<b>Subject studied at university</b>
Alice 18	Edburton Sixth Form College (Home City)	White British	I am a student, a good friend- often a peacemaker or neutral in arguments. Relatively confident with myself and others.	Geography C  History C  Media Studies A	Geography
Chantelle 18	Edburton Sixth Form College (Home City)	White British	I am a singer in the band. I have a genetic disorder. I spent 3 years at college	French B  Classics B  Fine Art A	Ancient History and Classics

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<sup>2</sup> Names and identifying features have been changed

Jessica 19	Mary Magdalene High Sixth Form College (North City)	Half Indian Half English	I'm a very sociable person and love my friends. I don't seem to do a lot except school work, going out with my friends and watching TV. I could do things independently if I had to, I would just prefer not to.	Maths A  Biology A  English Literature A	Maths
Maggie 18	Edburton Sixth Form College (Home City)	White British	18 year old female at the moment working full time in retail. This September will be starting a Bio-chemistry degree. Am competitive. Am size 10.	Maths A  Chemistry A  Biology A	Biochemistry
Martin 18	Edburton Sixth Form College (Home City)	White British	I'm a student going into University to study Economics. I don't have a job at the moment. I live with just my dad.	Social Science A  Graphic design A  Politics A	Economics
Nick 19	Edburton Sixth Form College (Home City)	White British	I play/listen to music. I play in orchestras and Big Bands bass guitar and trombone. I'm interested in biology, specifically evolution and animal behaviour.	Biology A  Politics A  Maths A Chemistry A	Zoology

Pippa 18	Edburton Sixth Form College (Home City)	White British	I'm an enthusiastic individual, intrigued by a lot that surrounds me. I actually love learning and learning others' wisdom. I am part of an organisation called XXX	History B  English Literature B  Psychology C	Comparative religion and social anthropology
Rachel 19	Edburton Sixth Form College (Home City)	White British	I went back to college to do re-takes because I didn't revise. I enjoy walking and swimming and get restless easily. I like being outside. I'd say I make friends quite easily and most people who know me like me. At some point in my life I see myself being a teacher	Law B  English C  Chemistry C	Chemistry
Rosalyn 18	Havelock Sixth Form College Home City	White British	I am a very gregarious person, I have a wide group of friends male and female. I am a musical person, play sax and sing, and performing, composing and listening to music are integral parts of my life. My academic side is ambitious and driven, but it is mostly my enjoyment of it that keeps me in academia	Chemistry B  Politics C  Maths C	Chemistry
Sangita 18	Edburton Sixth Form College (Home City)	British/half Indian	I am 5'2", half Indian. I play the cello. I'm going to study French. I love shoes!	French B  English Lit B  Music D	French

Tony 18	Edburton Sixth Form College (Home City)	White British	I do a lot of music- I play bassoon in several orchestras and it is a large part of my life. I am quite lazy- I find it hard to get down to things and concentrate. I live with my dad and have had to commute to school and college for 5 years. I prefer to be economical rather than buy brand-names. I'm not a big lover of fashion	Music B  Physics A  Philosophy A  Politics A	Politics
Vicky 18	Edburton Sixth Form College (Home City)	White British	Soon to be a French student at ..University. I'm passionate, strong-willed, stubborn from time to time. Undecided about many things and happy to be. Comfortably laid back	French C  English B  Art C	French



**Table 2 Young People in Study: methodology**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Dates and location of interviews</b>	<b>Additional documents of evidence</b>	<b>How came to be part of study</b>
Alice	05 July 2006 at researcher's home. 04 December 2006 in Alice's university room	08 July 2007 additional written reflection on the first year at university	Alice volunteered herself after hearing about the research through word of mouth
Chantelle	04 July 2006 at researcher's home. 21 November 2006 in Chantelle's university room. Phone interview 23 August 2007	Texts on receipt of A level results	Chantelle's French tutor at sixth form college referred her
Jessica	Written response to questionnaire September 2006. 04 November 2006 in Jessica's university room.		Jessica is known to me through family contacts and was interested to be part of the research
Maggie	06 July 2006 at researcher's home. 26 October 2006 in Maggie's university room		I contacted Maggie after her name was suggested
Martin	31 August 2006 at researcher's home 13 February 2007 in Martin's new university room		Martin's name was suggested to me by a work colleague
Nick	15 September 2006, with his then girlfriend (Rosalyn) also part of this study, at researcher's home. 13 February 2007 (after been at university one and half terms) at University.		Nick's name was suggested to me by Martin

Pippa	31 August 2006 at researcher's home. 06 September 2007 at Pippa's home in HomeCity		I contacted Pippa after her name was suggested to me
Rachel	24 August 2006 at researcher's home. 19 February 2007 at Rachel's university social bar. 08 July 2007 at Rachel's home in HomeCity.		I contacted Rachel after her name was suggested to me
Rosalyn	15 September 2006 at researcher's home (with Nick, also in this study). 20 November 2006 in Rosalyn's university room.		Turned up with boyfriend. Hey 1997:41 "research in the real world is lived as a series of rapidly unfolding and occasionally unpredictable events about which one has to make practical decisions".
Sangita	12 September 2006 at researcher's home. 20 November 2006 in Sangita's university room.	Sangita also sent me a written reflective account in July 2007 at the end of her first year at university	Sangita's name was given to me by her sixth form college French tutor
Tony	07 September 2006 at researcher's home. 09 October 2006 in Tony's university room.	Tony also sent me a written reflective account in July 2009 at the end of his third year at university	I contacted Tony after his name was given to me
Vicki	06 July 2006 at researcher's home 04. January 2008 at researcher's home.		Vicki's name was given to me by her sixth form college French tutor

## Appendix B

### Instrument 1 Questionnaire to start Interview 1

WHO ARE YOU?
Tell me 5 things about yourself, about who you are or what you do
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
<b>Relationships</b>
Name some people who are important to you and why
Think of a particular friend. How would s/he describe you?
Would you agree with that description? In what ways do you think s/he has got you wrong?
<b>Stories about you from your childhood:</b>

Have you got any particular incidents you can remember from your childhood?
Are there particular stories about you or descriptions of you that your family tell about you?
<b>Interests</b>
What is important to you? Why?
<b>What kind of person do you hope you are or would you like to be?</b>
Who do you admire or aspire to be (someone you know or someone from the media)? Why?
<b>Being at college</b>
How have you changed in the last year?
How have the subjects you're studying affected or changed you or your ideas?
<b>Into the future</b>
When you think of yourself at college or university how do you see yourself fitting in - what will you find relatively easy and what do you think you'll find difficult?

## **Instrument 2 prompts for Interview 2**

### **Settling In**

- Describe the day you arrived at university
- How was the first week?- making friends, first seminars
- Experiences of Fresher's week
- Relationships with flatmates
- Relationships with home

### **Course**

- Experiences of learning- comparisons with A levels, feelings about own abilities in relation to group, where does learning take place
- How is the course taught, relationships with tutors, mentors, peers

### **Friendships**

- Who? Where from? Who have you found yourself spending time with?
- Socialising patterns

### **Living independently**

- Development of skills- social, domestic (cooking etc), finances
- Getting on with flatmates

### **Identity**

- How did you find yourself introducing yourself? First conversations? Who were you drawn to?
- Issues of similarity and difference with other students

### **Links to previous interview**

- Refer back to how student predicted university would be like- what has been anticipated, what has surprised you? How does it compare to how you imagined?

### **Learning and change**

- Have you learned anything about yourself? Can you identify any changes?
- Do you act/dress/feel different in your new environment?

## Appendix C

### Extract from Tony's end of year reflective account

*In my second year I had a girlfriend... Seeing her did take me away from my house dynamic a little meaning that most of my personal learning was with her... I could talk about personal feelings. My two housemates were also doing scientific courses, meaning that my academic and 'more intellectual' conversations were limited. In my second year I did less well academically, and I do feel that the outcome had something to do with not being able to discuss ideas and course content with people...*

*(In) my third year I lived with four others.... the dynamics that existed between us were very good, but I rarely discussed personal issues with them, and used them more as a social outlet for doing things with. We would have 'philosophical' (read drunken) discussions about the news and grand issues but not about anything that was affecting us..... I know that the two guys that joined us did speak about personal things together, but it had been easier for them to do so as they had lived together for 2 years previously and built their friendship in this way.*

*Around Christmas of my third year my girlfriend broke up with me. I did know I could speak to my housemates but at no point felt comfortable doing so, as it may have strayed from what I saw as the boundaries of our friendship or perhaps the identity that I had constructed within that group - we often lived on taking the piss out of each other in any way possible (and) ... I became a little isolated.*