

**Two Sibling Case Studies: Decision-
making about Higher Education Pathways
as an Embedded Social Practice**

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**Decision-making about Higher Education Pathways as an
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Introduction

This paper is based on interview data arising from the ESRC-TLRP funded project, *Non-participation in higher education: Decision-making as an embedded social practice*. This project is examining the extent to which higher education is conceived as 'within the bounds of the possible' for non-participants with Level 3 qualifications and is exploring how attitudes to higher education and decisions about non-participation are embedded within 'networks of intimacy', consisting of family members and close friends. The study hypothesises that such networks - linked as they are to varying forms of social, cultural and economic capital - provide a critical context within which individuals' thinking about participation is embedded and co-constructed.

This current paper focuses on the members of those networks of intimacy who have achieved higher education degrees (or those who aspire to). It suggests that the educational decisions of those members are similarly embedded and co-constructed within the networks, although with somewhat different outcomes from the non-participants for reasons which will be explored.

The paper explores these issues through examination of one pair of siblings, and one small group of three siblings in another network. Each pair or group has one sibling who has chosen *not* to go on to higher education, despite

² Professor Alison Fuller is the project Principal Investigator, with Professors Fuller and Heath acting as co-directors of the project. Drs Brenda Johnston and Martin Dyke are co-investigators on the project – ESRC RES-139-25-0232. Full details of the twelve-person team, as well as working papers related to the project, can be found on the project website: <http://www.education.soton.ac.uk/nphe>

having the qualifications to do so and one or more siblings who have entered higher education.

This study provides a useful opportunity to explore how decisions to enter higher education are embedded within various individual and structural factors. Exploration of the boundary where some family members enter higher education and others do not is likely to be an important area for policy makers. As well as highlighting the processes graduates and higher education aspirants go through in their educational decisions, we will indicate any implications for policy.

In the paper, we describe firstly the overall research design of the project. Secondly, we discuss some theoretical underpinnings of the analysis used in the paper. Thirdly, we move to describing the different sibling pairs/groups. Fourthly, we explore how we can explain aspects of these descriptions according to the theoretical literature. Fifthly, we draw out why the siblings may have arrived at different decisions as regards higher education. Finally, we explore policy implications of the analysis.

The research design

Our project has had two main stages and draws on a variety of methods. The first stage of the research included: (1) the production of a series of literature reviews; (2) secondary analysis of Labour Force Survey and Youth Cohort Study data to explore the characteristics of 'non-participants'; and (3) 30 interviews with key informants in the WP arena, operating at local, regional and national levels in the UK.

The second stage, which is currently well under way, is qualitative in nature and is based on an exploration of sixteen case study 'networks of intimacy'. Our focus is on the experiences of individuals who are 'potentially recruitable' to higher education - defined for the purposes of our research as those whose highest level of qualification is at Level 3 (A level or vocational equivalent) and who have subsequently neither participated in HE nor are currently applying to

do so. Our interest is in non-participation across the life course, so we are prioritising life stage rather than age *per se* within our sampling strategy. We have conducted introductory interviews with individuals who meet our sampling criteria in order to gain an overview of their educational and career history, alongside a sense of the nature of their broader networks. These individuals have then nominated members of their broader network of family and friends who might be prepared to talk to us about their own educational and career histories, with the exact number of those nominated varying from network to network. The final stage is to return to the entry point person for a second more detailed and focused interview. These second interviews are currently being carried out and processed. All of our entry point contacts are resident in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, which include areas with high levels of non-participation. Members of the networks are mainly, but by no means exclusively, clustered in the south of England.

Some theoretical underpinnings

A major objective of our research is to explore decision-making – or possibly, non-decision making - in the context of an individual's wider network of friends and kin, in order to examine how attitudes, dispositions and practices which exist *across* a network impact on those of the individual. So the starting position in our research is to reject the notion that decision-making is an essentially individualized process, and to focus on decision-making as an embedded social practice within and across generations, as well as across the life course. Life course and generation are key concepts underpinning our understanding of these processes.

The term 'life course' is used to refer to 'a sequence of socially defined events and roles enacted by an individual over time' (Giele and Elder, 1998, p.22). Unlike the term 'life cycle', it does not assume that those events and roles are biologically determined nor that they will necessarily proceed in a pre-defined sequence. Nonetheless, there is a powerful normative element to popular understandings of the life course, inasmuch as individuals themselves often judge certain events in their lives to have occurred at the right or the wrong time. And perceptions of 'the right and wrong time' (which can be linked to

Merton's notion of 'social expected durations') tend to be strongly linked to an individual's generational positioning: whether in terms of *family* generation - , i.e. grandparent/parent/child – or *cohort* generation, i.e. membership of a particular cohort, for example the generation raised during the Second World War, or the 1960s generation (Miller, 2000).

Giele and Elder (1998) highlight four aspects in particular which provide a useful focal point for considering the ways in which decision making can be construed as deeply embedded within the behaviours and dispositions of networks, reminding us not only of the complexity of decision making, but also its embeddedness in history, biography and structure.

- *Location in time and space* which is concerned with historical, generational and geographical positioning;
- *Linked lives* which is concerned with social integration, ties to and interactions with others at cultural, institutional, social, psychological and sociobiological levels;
- *Human agency* which is concerned with individual goal orientation and active decision-making
- *Timing of lives* which is concerned with how and when a person undertakes actions and responds and adapts to events (p.8-11).

Life course models arise out of historical demography, the sociology of aging, life history and the psychology of developmental stages as well as panel studies and longitudinal surveys (pp.13-22).

In the context of educational sociology, there is of course a rich tradition of work which focuses on the ways in which decision-making can be construed as an embedded rather than an individualised process, with the work of Bourdieu standing as a critical benchmark and inspiration in this respect. Many studies on educational choice seek to explore the transfer of resources and forms of capital between generations (for example, Reay et al, 2005, and Ball et al, 2000), but rarely do they focus on more than two generations and even more rarely do they extend beyond the parent-child relationship. Our study is, then, relatively unusual in seeking to explore the influence exerted on

decision-making by a diverse range of personal contacts - whether parents, children, grandparents, siblings, partners, friends or workmates - and in particular in seeking to foreground the network itself as an important unit of analysis. Our approach is allowing us to analyse individual accounts of decision-making (as is more often the case within research of this kind), alongside both *relationship*-based accounts (the specific interaction between the decision-making of an entry point person and that of their mother, for example, or their best friend, or their partner), and *network*-based accounts, which may be embedded across the network as a whole or within specific parts of the network.

Moreover, we are setting ourselves the task of simultaneously investigating both past and current influences on educational and career decision-making, involving network members who may or may not have exerted influence in the past, and who may or may not currently exert influence. This approach is not without its challenges, and these include the challenges of interpreting multiple and often conflicting accounts within any one network of intimacy, the need for interviewers to interact with several individuals across each network, and the difficulty of investigating a complex decision making process, ongoing over many years. Luscher's (1999) concept of 'ambivalence' serves as a useful framework for understanding some of these challenges; he notes that 'the observable forms of intergenerational relations among adults can be socio-scientifically interpreted as the expression of ambivalences, and as efforts to manage and negotiate these fundamental ambivalences' (Luscher, 1999). We are very conscious of these ambivalences within the rich data which are being generated within each network.

Issues related to standardised and choice biographies (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991) are relevant to our interpretations of networks. Writers such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) have suggested that lives are increasingly lived as reflexive projects, characterised by the necessity of having to make choices in all spheres of life, and no longer necessarily following a pre-ordained, linear ordering. They suggest that:

People now live in a 'risk society' in which stable and relatively predictable 'normal biographies' are being replaced by 'choice biographies'. In such a society, individuals are no longer bound by structural guidelines concerning work or residence, so must negotiate their own route within the world to which they are wholly accountable. Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) term such a transition the 'detraditionalisation' of society. In traditional society, people had a fixed place in a rigid social system like the family, class or industry. In today's western society, changes in structural institutions have called into question traditional norms and values that have been handed down and encouraged the active construction of our people's own identities and choice of lifestyle (Paton 2007).

Others, e.g. Du Bois Reymond (1998) are sceptical about how far choice biographies affect more than an elite in society.

Additional notions which we will refer to are, firstly, those of "hot and "cold" knowledge. Ball and Vincent (1998) highlight differences between "hot" knowledge (supplied by family friends and personal relationships) and "cold" knowledge (supplied by formal, official sources of knowledge such as might exist on websites). Secondly, standpoint concepts (Ribbens McCarthy et al 2003) highlight the embeddedness of attitudes, perceptions of opportunities and aspirations within families. They cite the following definition of standpoints (positioning as e.g. fathers, mothers, teenagers) as, 'concrete, materially grounded or shared experiences, socially defined group identities, or collectively articulated political viewpoints' (Henwood *et al* 1998, p.7 cited in Ribbens McCarthy *et al.* p.4).

Having introduced the project and some of our underpinning conceptual frameworks, we now turn to a consideration of particular case studies.

The Case Studies

We have selected two networks of intimacy or case studies to discuss in this paper. Access to each network has been made via our 'entry point' individuals (see Heath and Johnston 2006 and Johnston and Heath 2007 for more details on sampling and access issues). These two networks have been selected because each contains (1) an entry point sibling with Level 3 qualifications who has chosen, for now anyway, not to go on to higher education and (2) at least one sibling who has gone on to higher education.

Comparing and contrasting the sibling decisions highlights both significant contextual influences and reasons for individual differences.

Case study 1 The Hanleys

The network background

Jackie and John Hanley are the two siblings in this case. Jackie is 29 years old and studying full-time for a degree at red-brick university. Her degree programme is science-based. She lives in a shared student house and has a partner, but does not have children. John is 34 years old and is our entry-point person for this network. He has a Level 3 management qualification, gained during the last few years from the local further education college and paid for by his employer. He is married with two young children.

In terms of the network background, the Hanley family come from an isolated, small town location. Jackie describes the effects of the isolation:

Because it's so isolated, it takes effort to leave it and do stuff and a lot of people just can't be bothered and it's expensive to keep going ... to do stuff. It's just an island mentality, a lot of people like to stay put and be safe on their little island. It's a nice place to be and I can see why a lot of people want to stay there but I don't know, I guess it's just what they know. ... you use what's there rather than going out and looking for different things because it's too much effort, so if it's not there you don't do it. And there isn't a university here so unless you have that push to get away you don't do it.

John and Jackie's parents have been divorced for many years. Their mother is a caretaker. As Jackie says of her mother and maternal grandparents:

I don't think they've ever needed to progress themselves that much. They've just needed a job and I guess they've never aimed for what they actually wanted to do, they've just taken what came along like I did with my first job. I didn't have any sights set on anything, I just took what came along.

Their father, who now lives abroad, has had a wide range of jobs (e.g. psychiatric nurse, social worker, drugs counsellor). Members of the wider network have a range of jobs. John's mother-in-law has a clerical/administrative post in a small company. John and Jackie's aunt is a nurse. Their uncle is a maritime official with a very responsible job.

In terms of educational qualifications, there is a wide variety within the network. One person has Level 1 qualifications, two people in the network

have Level 2 qualifications (GCSE or equivalent) and another Level 3 qualifications (A levels or equivalent). Jackie and John's cousins have gone on to higher education. Their uncle has a Level 4 professional qualification.

In terms of a discourses and dispositions within the family, there seem to be two main strands, one happy and content and the other restless, bored, striving. John articulates how he and his sister, Jackie, represent the different strands:

I'm much more grounded. .. my sister ... she's going to be like him [father] I think, can't stick, I'm bored with this, I want to go and do something else. But I think he's very, I don't know, ambitious. You know, brave, to jump ship so many times like he has, especially when he was bringing up sort of a family. ... I just think it's quite funny the amount of jobs he's gone through. But that's just the way he is, he's just different to me. I take more after my mum's side of the family, you know, like I said about my grandfather, he was very sort of stable.

John and Jackie's mother echoes this assessment in her interview. In the wider network, John's mother-in-law who has had many difficult situations to cope with in her life talks about her basic contentment:

I've always been happy with my lot. I've not ever been one to probably search for other things, I've always been happy with what I've been given.

We will turn now to Jackie and John's individual stories.

Jackie's story

Jackie Hanley lives in a shared student house in the city where she studies.

She does not have children. At school, she did GCSEs:

I got three Bs, five Cs

Jackie went on to study for A levels (Sociology, Drama and French) although this was not with a specific motivation in mind:

I didn't actually know what I wanted to do so I just said well I'll stay in sixth form, because I was completely clueless all through school about what I was going to do when I left, so I stayed as long as possible.

However, during sixth form, she became ill.

I spent so much time off school I had to pick one subject so I ended up with one A level.

Jackie explained the kind of support she got from her family at this stage:

I think my mum used to encourage me but not to the extent that she pushed me. I would decide what I wanted to do and she'd just tell me if it was good or bad. I think when I was younger my brother helped me a lot when I was at school ... but I used to talk to him about stuff and I think I may have talked to him about going to university

.... But he didn't go, he just went to college so it's not like everyone in the family went and I had to go, so there was never any pressure on me.

Jackie's mother confirmed that she had encouraged and supported her children in their decision and study. She thought that seeing her struggle and work hard had been influenced them both to work hard. Jackie confirmed in interview that her mother had been a positive role model for her.

Jackie left school determined to work not study, although many of her peers went on to university. As she explained:

... everyone did. You know they moved from school to university and I was like I just don't want to. And when everyone else went I was like yeah well everyone's meant to go to university. I knew my mum couldn't afford it anyway so I was just like I don't want to. But I guess it was that point, everyone went off to university, that helped me now to come because I thought well if they did it and they can get through it then maybe I can do it as well. And I think I needed that time in work to be able to come here now and get the confidence and the independence to be able to do it, whereas I don't think I was ready then.

There was a split between what Jackie's friends from school did:

My close friends all got jobs because they went to college and then got jobs but a lot of my school friends that I saw sometimes they went off to university and are now doctors and teachers and stuff, yes a lot of them went.

Formally, Jackie had the option of going to university at the end of her schooling. However, she was afflicted by the illness which had affected her A levels as well as being concerned about the costs of university to her mother. As she had no strong desire to go to university, she did not do so at that stage.

Jackie took the first job she could find as an office junior and stayed for eight years. In this time, she had a supportive employer who allowed her three years of day release for an NVQ 3 with a private training provider. She found the NVQ easy, relative to A levels, but was positive about it and valued the qualification now. However, the company grew and changed in character. Work became tedious and less friendly

After the NVQ, a David Attenborough programme on television prompted her to take a short Open University course on mammals.

The Open University course, in turn, prompted Jackie to apply through UCAS to study Zoology at university, but she was turned down. She telephoned the admissions tutor and was told in no uncertain terms to go back and get her A levels. She telephoned again at which point the tutor had just heard of a one year full time science foundation programme.

I was just bullying him basically. I am coming, what can I do?....

Jackie visited the university and was persuaded by another tutor to do the Foundation Year.

I enrolled on the course and then I went up there and started.

The foundation year and the degree have been a huge challenge. The courses followed were chemistry, biology and mathematics. Jackie explained that:

There is no way I could have got through my degree without the foundation. [year]

It was:

Very tough but very valuable.

It's not what I expected at all. Doing zoology I thought I would be studying animals basically, like playing with some occasionally. I've done a lot of dissection, which is really disgusting because I'm a vegetarian as well and I don't like you know, I'm doing zoology because I want to help animals and I'm cutting them up, and they kill so many animals for us to just study them

As well as academic challenges, there have been social challenges at university:

If someone said shall I go, you know I'm thinking about going back to university at 26 I'd tell them to think about it very seriously because it won't be what they expect. They probably won't fit in very well because of different age groups. I wouldn't say don't do it, I'd just say think about it really hard just because I found it so hard and I'm still finding it hard now.

There were also challenges from her family:

My mum thought I was crazy, she still can't understand why I came now. She knows it's what I wanted to do ... She was very anti-me coming to university. Because she didn't want me to leave XX and my dad's over the moon that I've done it because apparently that's what he wanted to do when he was younger. (*Jackie*)

I think my mum just wanted me to have some stability and do what my mother's done, get a job [locally], have a family, be in a little safe bubble down there, but I guess I'm not like that.

Although there has been ambiguity from her family in their reactions to her leaving the local area for university, support and encouragement from family and friends have been important to her staying on. In interview, her aunt

mentioned how proud the family felt at Jackie's achievements. In interview, her mother explained how she had supported Jackie both in terms of encouragement and financially in her university studies.

Jackie also has a strong work ethic, another key to her staying on at university, and a wish to prove she could do it.

Jackie feels she has got more out of her studies than she would have done had she gone straight to university from school:

If I did it straight from school I would have done a rubbish course that I didn't like. I came here for a purpose and you know because this is what I want to do now, whereas a lot of people are at university just because.

Jackie talks about her plans for the future which include children:

Yes, I think I'm going to start having a family soonish, maybe within five years or just after five years, and then bring up the family and then go back into education again later on possibly, if I get round to it. I'd like to.

Jackie talks about how the nature of her decision-making has changed as she has got older:

Since I left school until I came to university or until I decided I just plodded through life and just did what came along, but now I actually aim for things and have goals myself and I'm more motivated to get up and do stuff. I'm moving my life along rather than just rolling with it. So I'm pleased I'm doing it, I just wish I'd kind of, it's like a little click that happened and I just realised that I needed to sort my life out and now I'm doing it I wish I'd done it earlier because I guess I never felt in control of my life but now I do. There's only me that can do it.

Yes, I wish I'd done it sooner and I wish a lot more people would have the guts to do it but they don't. I know a lot of people just dawdle through life because that's just what happens rather than saying actually this is what I want to do and I'm going to go and get it. So that's where my attitude has changed now. I can actually do that whereas I never used to.

Jackie has moved from default decision-making to more active, "choice" decision-making.

John's story

John Hanley lives in the same isolated small town location with his wife and two young children. He is a highly-skilled boat builder supervisor. When he was young, he did an apprenticeship and since then has done many internal courses in the organisation he works for. A couple of years ago, he did his Level 3 Management qualification as required and paid for by his employer in

order to develop him for the team leadership role they wanted him to undertake.

At school John did GCSE's:

I think it was about six or seven, the usual ones, maths, English, geography, science, computer technology, French. There were a couple of others.

Then he entered sixth form. However:

I didn't fit in because the people who went on into the sixth form weren't the people I mixed with, you know, ... they were the people who were more academically minded at school, you didn't socialise with that sort, ... The people who tended to be in the sixth form tended to be ... very focused, whereas I wasn't and I didn't fit in from the word go.

Some of the people, there were about four other people who were in the same position as me, just did it like just to hang on a bit longer to see what you really wanted to do. But at the time I did feel, I felt confused, I was having mixed emotions. One of the big reasons was all my friends had all left school and got apprenticeships or had gone to college, but most of them were working and were earning money and wasn't, and that was very hard ... and you've got absolutely no idea what you want to do when you've finished in the sixth form, and the work is not really, it wasn't really what I wanted to do in the end.

Here we see the influences to leave school exerted by peer groups. We can also see how John found it hard to cope with the uncertainty of not knowing what he would do later on.

John left sixth form early on to start an apprenticeship, found for him by his grandfather, as he described:

So my grandfather, he worked in XXX as an engineer, and I've always been interested in boats and the sea and I sort of made a few suggestions to him you know, do they take apprentices on, you know, I'm quite interested in doing boat building or maybe going into boat designing or something like that, or doing some kind of thing, and he just basically said to me one day, you know, I'm quite good friends with the manager of this boatyard, I'll have a chat with him and see how it goes. And of course I got a phone call halfway through the school term and it was the boatyard man.

It is worth noting that one of John's friends whom we interviewed also found his first job in a local company through similar family connections.

John described his views of schooling and decision-making with some insight, describing how he does not like to make major decisions and prefers to go with the flow of events (emphasis ours):

I think it's just the social side of it [school], you know, you've got all your friends there and you haven't got to worry about anything, you know. ... It's all handed to you on a plate. You go to school, you know, you do your lessons, you get your homework and then you do your exams. It's all a process and I'm one of those people who can quite happily just sit on the bus and go along with it you know. When you have to make mind-splitting decisions like having careers evenings, that was it, I switch off, I don't really want to know. I'd rather them tell me what job I'm going to do and I'll go and do that for a bit until I think I don't like this.

John describes his career development in similar terms:

I had to join this training scheme, which basically for three years they followed my apprenticeship and made sure that all my work was up to date. And it sort of went alongside my apprentice training actually in the boatyard and that's basically what happened, I just basically sat the apprenticeship and it was like a conveyor belt to where I am now really, it all just happened. It was just lucky really. If there wasn't an apprenticeship available I don't know where I'd have ended up, I don't know what I'd have ended up doing.

John identifies strongly with his employer's values and enjoys working there.

John describes his "lazy" attitude to learning now:

I wouldn't go round to the college and sit there and say I want to do this course. I'm too lazy. I'd expect it to come to me and that's what happens here. They put you on courses here [his workplace] all the time you know.

He describes positive attitudes to learning which relates to his job and especially values learning from other people on the course he did:

The course was very useful, yes. I got a lot out of it. Meeting the other people was good, that was the best bit of it, you know even though we work one way here, not everywhere's the same and people have different ideas of how they deal with things.

General analysis of Jackie and John

If we return to Giele and Elder's (1998) concepts, we can look at how Jackie and John's decisions were embedded in their location in *time* and *space*. This was a *time* when the possibility of A level study was open to people like them (although it was not perceived as an automatic progression or necessarily useful in this network or the segment of society in which they moved). In the previous generation such study had not even been a possibility. Although Jackie did not really perceive university study as possible financially or desirable when she left school, she did have the model of other girls in her class going on to higher education. Moreover, her cousins had entered higher education.

In terms of geographical *space*, the family lived in an isolated geographical location, making higher education (apart from study through the Open University) a distant and difficult option involving dislocation from family and friends.

In terms of *linked lives*, we can see the family discourses in which the two siblings operated, the social and cultural expectations within which they live and which affect their dispositions, attitudes and behaviours. On the one hand, there is the contented, accepting, somewhat passive, normative discourse (mother, mother-in-law, grandparents) which nonetheless may involve considerable life challenges and difficulties. On the other hand, there is a restless, striving “choice” discourse embraced by John and Jackie’s father. Both paths are available as models and each sibling apparently moves towards one model, although it is important to remember that Jackie describes herself very much in the passive, accepting discourse in her younger years. However, Jackie’s mother indicated striving, uncertainty and headstrong behaviour at all ages. The family is supportive of work and education. Everyone works solidly – they have to in order to make a living.

The immediate family does not have a large amount of *formal educational capital* to draw on, although cousins have been through higher education and in an interview with an aunt, she claimed to have helped Jackie with her application forms for higher education. Moreover, Jackie does have the model of her school friends who went to higher education to suggest the possibility that she too could do it. In entering higher education, Jackie’s path is somewhat haphazard rather than a carefully supported, well understood process. The family, however, does have certain kinds of social capital it draws on. For example, John found his apprenticeship and started on his path to a highly skilled career through his grandfather’s connections and his friend found a job in a similar way, suggesting that use of this kind of social capital may be commonplace in this network. The family has not had large amounts of financial capital to draw on, especially when Jackie and John were growing up. Their mother worked as a caretaker. Finance was viewed as a definite restricting factor by Jackie when she thought about going to university

immediately after school. However, finances have eased over the years. Jackie's mother is now partnered with someone who has a good income. She is able to contribute financially to Jackie's expenses at university each month, although Jackie also has two part-time jobs as well as studying for her degree. Earlier, Jackie's mother was also able to help her son save for his own house by providing accommodation for him and his wife while they saved for their own house. A certain kind of financial capital has been around to help both siblings.

Employer engagement in training was valuable and central to the education of both siblings, Jackie through support for her NVQ3 and John through support for his apprenticeship, various in-house courses and then his management qualification. In John's case, this was not just support in terms of time and finance, it was also in the sense of there being a clear relationship to his work needs. Jackie is more prepared to learn for learning's sake as evidenced in her Open University study and later higher education decisions.

The family is prepared to be supportive to education to some extent and even be proud of educational achievements, but there is some ambiguity. Jackie's mother is both proud of her daughter while thinking she is "crazy" to go to university, an exemplification of the kind of ambivalence discussed by Lüscher (1999).

In terms of *agency*, Jackie and John made decisions in similar ways until their twenties. They made decisions by default, following peer and family guidance and tradition, that is they followed standard biographies (Beck 1992 and Giddens 1991). At that point, Jackie changed and decided to strike out making decisions that were not standard decisions for people from her family background. Before she made her major decision to study at university, she was already putting in extra hard work on top of her job studying for her NVQ and then later her Open University course. Following Beck and Giddens' understandings, she could be seen as entering into a choice biography. However, her decisions are often imbued with risk and happenstance. Her entry into the foundation course happened as a result of her ringing the

admissions tutor back who happened just to have heard about the foundation course which he told her about. This was not a carefully considered decision, selected out of many options.

Jackie relied heavily on “hot” knowledge sources (family friends and the personal contact with the admissions tutor) in finding out information and making her decision about her university study, echoing the kinds of “hot” knowledge arising out of localised social capital that her brother used to find his first job.

It is interesting to note that while in many networks we have worked with, women are strongly affected by their gender standpoint (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2003) of being mothers and carers, and men tend to have the freedom and support to further their education, as they are positioned as breadwinners, in the case of Jackie and John it is the brother who is more likely to be constrained by his family responsibilities than the sister, at this point anyway. In interview, their mother confirmed that it was her son who was family oriented rather than her daughter.

One to higher education and one not: why the differences in decisions

Both Jackie and John came from very similar backgrounds which have affected their decisions strongly as discussed above. However, by their late 20s/early 30s their educational decisions had diverged considerably. Why is this? John is at a different life-stage from Jackie in that he has a wife and two young children. Even if he wanted, it would be more difficult for him to uproot himself and to move away to study in higher education. Jackie has fewer commitments in that sense and that may be an underlying preference and disposition rather than a neutral condition, although she does speak about hoping soon to become a mother.

John also has an interesting, challenging job with every indication that it will remain so while Jackie had been finding her job undemanding and unrewarding as the organization changed.

Jackie had the model of her school friends who had gone on to university to follow while John did not mention any of his friends who had gone on to university, although both had cousins who had entered higher education.

There does seem to be an underlying dispositional difference whereby John is interested mainly in learning related to his job which has clear aims while Jackie is interested more in learning for its own sake and willing to see where it takes her.

Case study 2 The Drews

The network background

The two sisters in the Drew network are somewhat older than Jackie and John Hanley. Nicola is 46 and Liz is 48. Nicola works part-time as a midwife and has a degree in Midwifery. She is married and has four children. Liz is our entry-point person for this network and has an NVQ3 in Early Years Childcare, gained in the last few years and paid for by her employer. She is married and has two children. Nicola and Liz's half-brother, David, is 34, unmarried and without children. At the time of interview, he was in the final stages of finishing a PhD and working part-time in the hospitality sector as well as lecturing part-time. All three siblings attended the same local comprehensive school, David more than a decade after his sisters, the school which Liz's children now also attend, almost thirty years after she did. Nicola and Liz's mother died when they were young children and after a few years their father remarried, to David's mother, when they were both still in early secondary school, but she too died when he was about 18. Their father worked in a bank as a senior cashier for a high street bank.

In terms of the network background, the members are geographically spread out over England, although the two sisters live locally in a big city. David lives in the north of England.

In terms of educational background, the siblings' father who was 76 had a School Certificate, but in the absence of parental encouragement or knowledge of other options had left school at sixteen to join a bank although he had clearly done quite well at school and has enjoyed informal learning since. He spoke about "my love of books" and his long-standing interest in geography. As his son David explained:

He believes more in educating yourself through your own reading really.

One of Liz's friends who was in the network had Level 3 qualifications. Nicola and Liz's children are still at school.

In terms of a general discourse in the family, there is a strong strand which voices the notion that people should be allowed to develop as they want, that support will be offered for that. David articulates the family's attitudes:

I feel like in our family people have made their own choices and each family member supports the other one, but people haven't felt they've got to achieve things or there's routes that they should follow.

David explained how his father had been tolerant of his children's choices and hoped most of all for their happiness:

it comes down to this whole thing of sort of tolerance and freedom of being allowed to choose to do what you want really. He's certainly happy with what I'm doing but I'm not sure I know what his dream was, I don't think he's ever said I want you to do that and it would really make me happy if you did that. I think as long as his children are happy with what they're doing that's the thing that's important, I think.

There is a strong interest in informal, rather than necessarily formal learning, although Nicola and David have clearly participated in a prolonged way in formal education. "The bank" was, at one stage, hugely important as an employer in this family, employing the father and two daughters. This is a network where certain members have struggled to cope with the untimely death of a mother which has had a long-lasting effect.

The family is repelled by hard-sell, materialistic environments. The main reason that both Nicola and Liz left their banking careers was the repugnance they felt at the move focus on selling products to customers, rather than offering service. Their father refused a promotion towards the end of his

career as he was more concerned with the quality of his life. David has not pursued a career likely to bring great financial rewards.

David articulates the nature of the family as being loose-knit, each living his/her own independent life often at a considerable geographical distance from other family members, but getting on well:

I'd say we're not a close family. That's not to say that we don't get on, we don't tend to be a family that lives in each other's pockets and consult with each other a lot, although we get on very, very well, so no, I'm also living really for at least 10 years I've lived in the north of England so there's not really been that exposure. I have got nephews that are now about 16, who perhaps if I was much closer to there'd be more chance perhaps if I wanted to influence and say will you each think about higher education. I think they probably will be, but I don't think that's anything to do with what I'm doing.

Liz describes how she telephones her father, who lives in another part of England, perhaps once a month and perhaps sees him once every three months when he visits he stays in a Bed and Breakfast rather than staying with either of his daughters.

David also articulates a caring element in the family tradition:

I think we've all been motivated by things that aren't financial and also by things that I think relate to, well I wouldn't really like to say the caring profession, I think it's quite interesting that one sister is a midwife and the other sister works with pre-school children and I'm working with students, so they're all kind of I suppose peopley jobs really ... to do with offering support, either educational support or, I can't find a word to unite them all, but they're all very different from what I see as being company jobs or sales jobs, quite the opposite to that.

There is a tradition of working to live in the family as distinct from living to work. David explains of his father:

My father's view of work was that it was a means to an end really. Work actually gave you the time to spend with your family to pursue your interests.

Although David and Nicola have clearly had to work hard to attain their qualifications, they are clear that their work life is enjoyable and that it should be so, but it is not their major source of identity and that it is important to have a balance of roles.

Nicola's story

Nicola Machin is Liz Drew's sister. She lives with her husband and four young children in the same city as her sister. At school, she did GCSEs and went on to sixth form college to do A levels. However, she left after only a few weeks.

She found it hard to cope with not knowing what she was going to do at the end of her courses:

... I wanted to do three A-levels and they wanted me to do four, so I ended up doing subjects which I didn't really want to do and I never really settled, because I think I didn't have an idea of what I wanted to do. This was partly the problem; I never thought 'I want to be a doctor' or 'I want to be a midwife' or 'I want to'... you know, do hairdressing.. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. And I found it quite hard to work hard, I think, not knowing where I was going.

Nicola moved to another sixth form college where she stayed about two weeks. She felt that she had come at the "tail-end" of a generation where children, especially girls, were not pushed either at home or at school to achieve educationally. She contrasted this with the situation of her children now:

[My friend] came from quite a similar background to me. And whereas with our children's education, we're quite pro-active and saying 'well, any idea what you want to do?' you know.. And we know what they're doing and we encourage them and, you now, you can't make them, but we encourage them and we talk about what their options might be and... There didn't seem to be a lot of that in our house, and ...I think it might be a generational thing, that actually, being girls, even.. we might have been at the tail end of the generation where you got secretarial jobs or became hairdressers, and then had a family. And that was the expectation. I don't know.. And also in our family, nobody at that point had been to university, and I think maybe university was for very, very clever people. But really, I mean, the same as my friend. She was very similar to me academically. We weren't brilliant at all. But we were good average and whereas these days it would be an expected thing, I think maybe in those days it wasn't. Erm.. and we weren't sort of pushed, and from the school there was no expectation either, particularly. Although some.. I think some of them did go, some of the girls did go to university, but we weren't... but then a lot of my other peers didn't either, so... Yes, I think it's quite interesting actually. I think it's... yeah.. I think it is a sort of combination of factors really. I think we were at the sort of tail end there. I think it's quite different today.

Nicola then moved at 16 years old to work in the bank where her father worked. He found her the work and as she could not think of anything else she wanted to do, she worked there:

My father said 'oh, they do want some staff and .. come along for an interview' sort of thing. So it was more or less handed to me on a plate. I didn't even have to look... I don't think... did I ever look for some jobs? I don't think I did. I can't remember looking for any jobs.

She stayed for thirteen years.

This period was financially very helpful to Nicola and her husband as banking paid quite well and offered benefits such as shares which were untaxed over a period of years and which they used to help them through some of the leaner training and part-time work periods ahead:

I think if we hadn't had those years working in a bank, even though I hadn't worked full time since our oldest child was born in 1990, it was, you know with him working, it was enough to keep us afloat really.

Nicola then had the first of her four children and took a career break for several years. At the end of her career break, she went back to work part-time in the bank, but discovered a changed ethos and different ways of working which she did not like and which turned her towards education again:

The bank's philosophy had changed. They used to be you know, the customer was the important thing, it was very much focused on what the customer wants and giving them what they need and... And it went very much over to sales and sales targets and selling people things. Which you thought actually 'well, I don't like the product' you know, why am I going to sell something which I don't think is any good. So it all became very focused and it began about that time, and actually it's just got worse and worse, I think.

I had to go back to the job which I hadn't enjoyed. And it was actually a big spur which made me collect my thoughts, think 'I don't want to stay in this job. If I'm going to have to work, I want to work at a job I want to do.

At that point, she made a major decision to become a midwife and at the age of 36, when she had three young children, she started a science-based Access course as well as working part-time. Nicola did careful research to work out which career she wanted to pursue and what qualifications she would need:

I got a huge careers book from the library and I went through it ... And I thought 'what would fit in with what I... what will fit around the family, that I can study locally, that I haven't got to travel miles... you know. I knew I was probably going to have to do a degree course and it would... obviously and having a young family I wanted it to be local.

Out of this process she came up with about five different jobs that she felt were suitable. One crucial factor was the extent to which the job would allow her to prioritise caring for her family. She discarded teaching as an option as she thought it would entail too much working outside official hours. She knew from her husband's training as a teacher that this would involve too much extra work:

If you're single, or if there's just the two of you, I think it's different, but I think with all the pressures of family life I didn't want to be bringing lots of work home and things.

Nicola decided on midwifery on the basis of this very reasoned, pragmatic, and quite instrumental approach which relied on "cold knowledge" rather than the "hot knowledge" of personal connections. Moreover, she limited herself to

applying just to the university in the city in which she lived, deciding not to apply for courses in surrounding cities as she could not cope with the travel and childcare burden.

As well as providing her with the academic qualifications she needed, the college where she studied for her Access course also helped her with her UCAS application which was very valuable as she knew nothing about applying for university.

Nicola and her husband both did further training and supported one another throughout this process. Her husband did an Open University degree when the children were very young. Nicola had originally had to go out to work again as her husband, who had also worked in the bank, started to retrain as a teacher. She found the juggling of part-time work, study and family care difficult. But her husband has always been supportive, as she has been to him:

my husband ... has always been very supportive. And you know, that is a huge factor. I mean, I could never have done it without him, because, you know, he's had to pick up the pieces if I've, you know, been... during the actual training you know, you're expected to work shifts and things, so if I've had to go in early or work late or weekends, he was always the one who obviously had to look after the children, cook meals, shop... so he had to be a 'stand in' for me. Which actually is quite positive because you know, for the children, I think. Erm... so yeah, I mean, he was fantastic. He supported me all the way through, and if things were difficult or erm... But then I supported him when he was as well, so.. but I think you know, that's a huge factor. You do need the support.

Her husband's parents were supportive also with childcare.

Money was tight and the family had to spend carefully:

We're very careful with our money I think. Because we've always had to be, had to be, you know, when I wasn't working and things, with the small children so we've never had expensive tastes or anything. You know... not at that stage, not extravagant holidays or you know, we were watching the pennies really.

Nicola's father was pleased that she had studied further and qualified as a midwife:

She's done extremely well and I mean now she at 40 did all this studying to become a qualified midwife, which she's done and passed.

She elaborated on what she thought his feelings were:

I think he's probably quite pleased about it. But you know, for years erm... you know, he was disappointed when I didn't carry on at college and things. I think you know, he's.. he knew that I should have carried on, but you know, it's very difficult as a teenager; you don't know where you're going and what you want to do, and especially if you're not enjoying the subjects you're doing particularly, and you're feeling pressurised again; I felt very pressurised into being made to do things, and I didn't feel there was any point so again I sort of got out really; that's what I tend to do if I'm not happy about things.

Nicola found the role model of a friend from school who had gone on to study nursing encouraging to her:

She did an Access course as well. So she was always a couple of years ahead of me. So I knew she'd done it as well. So I think you know, sometimes you hear of people doing it and you think 'well, if they've done it, you know, there is a possibility I can do it. Why can't I do it? She's no.. really no different to me'. Erm, so yeah, I think you know, it can have a positive effect on people; make people realise that there are choices, even when you are a bit older, that actually you can change careers.

Nicola had a clear feeling that had she started to think about changing her career at 45, that would have been too late "to do anything major".

Nicola finds midwifery enjoyable and fulfilling:

I've been doing it for 2 ½ years and yeah, I'm enjoying it. And it's nice... and I think what I do like about midwifery is... it's obviously lovely to be with somebody who is having a baby, which is such a life-changing event and you know, it's so special. But also there's so much variety in the job, and when you go in you don't know who you are going to see that day, what you are going to be doing, where you... which ward you are going to be working on erm, you know, so that's quite nice.

However, her family comes first:

I've always thought with my job, you know, the family do come first, so the job is secondary to that. And I think certainly with midwifery, and you get this with a lot of the single midwives, you know, it just... midwifery is their life actually. And I'm not really prepared for it to be my life, you know, it comes second to the family.

Liz's story

Liz's mother died when she was 10 years old. Her father remarried two years later. Liz never got on well with her step-mother and was not happy at home. In addition, she was bullied at school, probably because of a "pronounced stammer" and because she was "weedy", "spineless" and "nervy". She did poorly in her examinations at 16, although being in a top stream when she entered secondary school, leaving school with three low-grade CSEs.

So I was pretty hopeless. I sort of turned everything on its head, just gave up. But I suppose it was circumstantial really.

The school which Liz attended did not push her, although the school is now very conscious of Ofsted results and league tables and encourages as much achievement of formal qualifications as possible, as Liz was able to point out because her children now attend the school.

As with her sister, when Liz left school, her father found her a job in his high street bank where she worked for two years:

This was 1974. You didn't.. I don't think you needed O-levels then, or GCEs or whatever they were called, and my Dad actually managed to get me an interview to work.. because my Dad worked at the bank as well. So I went into XX Bank and I stayed with XX Bank for a few years.

I wanted to be a graphic designer but erm I found out I had to get my diploma of art and design; my Dip.AD at college, failed all my O-levels and knew I couldn't do that, so then I think I just settled for anything really and I think I was quite easily pleased and just went into the bank, because my dad got me a job in the bank.

She then moved to London where she found first one job and then another and another for herself. Most were in banking.

Still in London, Liz married and divorced in her twenties and then remarried. She then moved out of London to another city and had children in her early 30s. At this point, she left full-time work in the high street bank she had gone back to and took small part-time jobs:

I did some telephone interviewing for the Office for National Statistics. And that's one of the jobs you get when your children are little, and just little part-time jobs like delivering parcels.

When her children were a bit older, Liz returned to more demanding employment. She did not want to return to banking as the nature of the job had changed as she explains, becoming less focused on service and more on selling:

I never really wanted to go back to banking because it was very.. um, I did go back one year and .. is it called 'career break' when you go back for two weeks, when you leave and have children I think you can go back for two weeks up to five years and guarantee your return position; I think it's called a career break. But I just didn't like the hard sell, the .. oh, when you just can't talk to customers anymore, you have to try and offer them a mortgage or a loan.. you know what I mean; you have to offer them a mortgage or a loan, or 'have you thought about this Mr. Blake'? Do you know what I mean? I just felt very uncomfortable doing the marketing; that's what it is, I just didn't want to do that.

She worked for two years in a Special Needs School and then started working, without qualifications in a pre-school. She described how she tumbled by accident into a pre-school job:

But just by complete chance, the actual opening in pre-school ... That was just complete chance. I was literally at a make up party or Body Shop party or something, and someone was there and said, um.. 'Oh, what are you doing?' I had obviously expressed, erm, I don't know if I'd actually left Hope Lodge School; the autistic school but I'd obviously expressed a real dislike, that I wasn't enjoying my job, if not, and by chance somebody had just left Brook pre-school in Bitterne and they were looking for somebody just for six weeks; for half a term, and they said 'why don't you come in for a few sessions a week just to help out', so it was literally just by word.. you know.

Since then, she has worked part-time in various pre-school settings for the last eight years. A few years ago, her then employer paid for her to do an NVQ3 in Childcare which Liz found a challenging and stimulating experience:

I was very, very pleased when I got that, because that's the.. it's a bit of a milestone for me, um.. When I first started the course, because I went straight into an NVQ3 having not done the NVQ2, some people step up gradually but I went straight into the NVQ3 and when I first did it, for the first few months, I thought 'Oh God, what on earth am I... basically, 'what have I done?' It was very scary ... The criteria and the initials and the formula for things, but then once I was up and running and had a few pieces of work back, and a few pieces of work back with positive feedback, I think I just ran with it. I started to get very good results and I sort of, if you understand, for the first two months it was a very wavering experience, then it was just great; I loved it and I didn't feel ... I had a real buzz for the homework and just liked to read and write reams and reams of ... It just made me feel a bit more important; a bit more intellectual.

Liz spoke about the importance of satisfying work for her mental health:

I like being useful; I like being .. I like helping people, I like working you know... And I know I'm a better person mentally when I come home with the children and I've worked all day; I know I am.

However, she says she is not "hugely ambitious".

At the time of her interviews, Liz was going through quite a turbulent period. At the time of the first interview, she was unhappy and stressed in her work and by the time of the second interview, some months later, she had resigned from her senior job in the pre-school and going back to work in a junior role in another pre-school. She was uncertain whether she should try to have a change of career or whether to pursue further study in pre-school childcare. Her worry about this was that it would further entrench her in a management role which she did not enjoy. Liz had considered doing an NVQ4 in pre-school childcare and had attended an open evening for people thinking of the

option. She had felt inspired to do the course by the event. However, returning to the stresses of work had changed her mind and brought back doubts about whether she wanted to remain in the pre-school field. She thought that in her new working environment, she might feel more encouraged about studying for the NVQ4, but was concerned that as a junior employee she might antagonize her manager who was trying to obtain her NVQ4 if she herself wanted to study for the qualification.

As part of this period of exploration of alternative options, she applied for and got a job in a call centre which would have been well-paid. However, she declined the job because it would not have given her job satisfaction:

I actually got a job which was extremely well paid but the job satisfaction wouldn't have been there at all and that's very important to me.

Liz describes how the two sisters have different approaches to their children's education. Nicola and her husband supervise their children's study more closely than do Liz and her husband. Liz describes her sister's children as more "pushed" whereas:

I'm very laid back about er... education and obviously I want them to do their best but I won't... you know basically I won't push them hard, sort of thing. I just say 'do your best, try hard, you must study, you must get this done.

I think possibly Nicola and Mark do drive them a bit harder. Possibly, I don't know, but I get that impression. You know, I've been round there in evenings before, a few years ago, and Mark's sort of doing, or helping Martin with his homework and stuff like that, where ours were very... probably ... not slovenly in comparison, but, you know what I mean, it's their effort. I always said to them 'Homework is your own work; I'm not having anything to do with it, but you can look at it here, or it's on the internet, or you must do this'.

Liz has a far less supportive home environment than her sister as Nicola explained:

Liz erm.. you know, I think she would like to, but I think you know, I don't know if she necessarily gets the support from the family, that's the thing. ... She does an awful lot in her house and I would say that she does nearly everything. And the family aren't very... I don't think they necessarily... but I don't think she gets the support that she should.

Liz herself reported that:

When I was doing my NVQ3 he [her husband] used to get very cross with me if it... being honest, fed into family time or, being selfish, 'cooking the dinner' time or doing this. He used to say 'Oh you're always doing that'. So he started to ... we had a little blip for about a month when I was working on And it really was quite intense. And

he said 'oh, this bloody course', what have you... But generally he was quite supportive then. I think he knew that I was a happier person doing it, or trying to better myself.

Financially, Liz's position is rather precarious as her husband who is self-employed has a sporadic, seasonally based income so they tend to live a somewhat hand-to-mouth existence, juggling benefits and an uncertain income:

I think he's a bit cross with me because he sees me, so called 'sat around all day' not thinking about all the other things that are involved. And I say 'well, you know, we are getting benefits and, you know, if I was out working we'd lose those.' And also I've said to him, because I know he's got work in September and October, we should be okay for now. You know, and I've said 'I will ...' just reassuring him really I said 'you know that I would always get a full time job if I had to'.

In addition, her husband has been unable to work for prolonged periods over the years because of ill-health, leading to severe financial problems in the family. His ill-health is likely to continue and indeed increase over the years, making it likely she will have to work full-time.

Financial constraints make it difficult for her to study further or change career:

I've got to be very careful if I do change career and change jobs, because of.. well I'm sure you'd find this out anyway, or it might come up, but basically because we're on quite a low income you obviously have to worry about your tiers of money, because you might lose some things like tax credits and other things like that.

Liz is not materialistic, a view reinforced by a period of clinical depression a few years ago which made her focus more on the people around her.

However:

I'd like to be more financially secure, definitely. I'm fed up with looking over my shoulder all the time.

Liz frequently describes herself as a rebel, but describes herself how this rebellion did not work effectively when young when she initially left home:

I wanted to leave home because, on a personal level, I wasn't getting on terribly well with my step-mom. So I wanted to leave home anyway and I just saw an advertisement in the paper one day for something totally different, working in a department store in London, and I just went, and my Dad said to me 'you could have.. you could easily get a transfer with XX Bank and I think ironically, I think XX Bank actually offered me a transfer to Curzon Street, Mayfair or some branch, some wonderful branch somewhere, and to be, of course, rebellious, when you're 18, you know, you don't do anything your Dad says; well most people don't, so I started off in this department store, and it was dreadful. I only stayed there two or three months and then I managed to get a job at Bank of America in London. So I gradually drifted back to banking, having possibly cut my nose off to spite my face.

Her father explained that he thought:

I suppose it was losing her mother. She's more or less thought she had to make up her own decisions.

Liz reflects on the role her early unhappy family life had on the rest of her life:

I do question whether my whole career and my life really, would have gone on that way, had it not been for my step-mom, because you don't know really do you? I do think I was maybe, what's it called.. subconsciously sort of pushed, you know, into that move but I was more rebellious I think than my sister anyway, I had that streak in me, so yeah, it could have been very interesting, had my Dad not re-married, but that was nice for him so...(both laugh).. you see, you can reflect now; you can be more level-headed about it, but at the time it was awful, because I couldn't stand her.

David's story

David studied for GCSEs at the local comprehensive school, A levels at the local college and then went straight on to study for his undergraduate degree at Oxbridge. He did not study very hard at school or college or even university, but he did become more interested in formal education as the level got higher. David talked about being the first in his family to enter higher education, saying that there was little pressure for him to do so, but also no opposition.

I'm the first person in the family that's been to university. My father would have gone if he'd been younger, it's just at the time when he was 18 in 1948 people weren't going to university as much then. He did National Service. So it wasn't assumed that I would go necessarily. I did well at school and it was an option but I wasn't consciously being prepared for it.

After graduating from Oxford, David worked in a restaurant chain for seven years, moving around the country to different branches. During this period, he started doing a part-time masters degree and later a PhD which he had almost completed at the time of interview. David describes his need for variety and a broad experience in life, although he is aware of the consequences of pursuing interests in the way he has done:

I'm very glad that I've been involved in things like working at 7am in the morning in a large hotel, which is completely the other side of the coin to teaching very able students about Jane Austen, so I'm really glad I've got the variety. I'm a great believer in not living life in a very narrow way, trying to be exposed to different things, so I'm very glad I've done that, although I do kind of feel now that I wish I'd got something more solidly achieved by now and I was in a full time job rather than doing bits and pieces here and there at 34, 35. When one compares oneself to ones peers who are very settled from the point that they've been in a job for 5 or 10 years

David talked more about his family's attitude to higher education:

I would say that my family always supported higher education but on the other hand haven't seen it as something that's essential for you to do if you don't feel it's what

you want to do. It's kind of tolerance in a way, it [higher education]'s not suitable for everybody.

His father is clearly proud of his son's educational achievements. David explains how:

My father is talking about looking forward to coming when I've finally finished my PhD and the graduation ceremony and so on.

General analysis of Nicola, Liz and David

If we consider Giele and Elder's (1998) concepts, we can see how the educational decisions of these siblings were embedded in their location in time and space. As with the Hanley siblings, A level study had been a possibility for the two sisters but was not expected, either by family or by school. Again, as with the Hanley siblings, advanced study had not really been a possibility with the parents' generation. In David's case, he was somewhat younger than his sisters. The school had still not reached the stage as with the Nicola and Liz's children where educational qualifications were pursued as far as possible for all pupils against a background of league tables. However, advanced levels of education had been open to him and he gone with the flow of expectations around him. It should, of course, be remembered that it had not reached that stage for the Hanley siblings who are around the same age as David, but it could be that in his network there was somewhat more of an understanding of educational accomplishment. His father, after all had entered the equivalent of a modern day sixth form, was an avid reader and had a white-collar job. However, even in the era of comprehensive education and when A levels were theoretically widely accessible, actual availability was patchy in terms of them being viewed as a useful and desirable path forward in the families in this study.

Unlike with the Hanley siblings, Nicola, Liz, and David had grown up in a big city and were far more geographically mobile so there were not any geographical limitations on the higher education easily accessible to them. Even when Nicola decided that she wished to become a midwife, she had a range of regional institutions to choose from and was able, although it was

somewhat risky given the strong competition for places, to limit herself to applying only to the most local institution actually in her own city.

In terms of *linked lives*, the family discourse is one of choice, of tolerance of others' choices and of the importance of happiness above that of ambition or material gain. Family members work solidly, but the two sisters work part-time as motherhood and caring responsibilities are prioritized. The family is far more loose-knit than the Hanley family. The family is supportive of educational choices, but will not pressurize members to undertake education, apart from the youngest members currently going through the school system who are growing up in the era of league tables for schools and other forms of encouragement to obtain formal qualifications at school.

The siblings had little *formal educational capital* to draw on in terms of other family members. However, Nicola and David were able to call on institutional support. David attended a school where the route to Oxbridge, and presumably other universities, was offered to him without him having to make large efforts. Nicola did not seem to have drawn on her younger brother's first hand knowledge of higher education, which was after all far removed from the practical, local, instrumentally focused vocational higher education which she pursued. However, she was able and willing to pursue "cold" knowledge sources and had the support of her Access course college in helping her with the UCAS form. Her entry into higher education was carefully considered and instrumentally focused on the end result of a secure manageable job making careful use of the support available to her. This contrasts with Jackie Hanley's somewhat haphazard choices, love of subject and absence of consideration of an employment aim. However, both women required dedication, focus and considerable amounts of energy as mature students both enter into higher education and then to work their way through their higher education degrees.

In terms of *employment capital*, the family were able to draw on their connections in the bank to gain employment for both Nicola and Liz. Their father had, in fact, originally obtained his employment in the bank through his

father's connections with the local bank manager. Jobs in the bank provided secure, prosperous pathways for young people with moderate levels of education and an interest in interacting with customers. Probably, this type of non-competitive, nepotistic job pathway into banking no longer exists.

In terms of material capital as well as emotional and childcare support, Nicola's husband provided much needed support for her to get through higher education, as she had done with him. Even with these sources of support, it was a struggle for her to juggle her way through her higher education and the preparatory Access course. Liz's husband is less prosperous and at best ambiguous in his attitudes to her study. Although Liz was proud of achieving her NVQ3, it was hard for her to continue beyond this given the lack of material and childcare support around her. And this was combined with her uncertainty about which career path she should pursue as well as probably with long term confidence issues.

In terms of *agency*, Nicola and Liz make decisions differently. This seems to be rooted early on in their lives and may be a reaction to their mother's untimely death. Both took the standard option offered to them when they left school and entered banking jobs found for them by their father. However, thereafter Nicola considered decisions carefully and made "prudent", carefully balanced decisions which Liz seemed locked into "rebellious" behaviours against difficult situations where the rebellion was not productive in terms of reaching desirable outcomes. David also rebels, but gently against conventional employment expectations, instead pursuing interest and experience, which involved a prolonged involvement with formal education, rather than a more conventional career path. We see in the decisions made in this network the effects of catastrophic family events. A mother died young and at least one of her daughters, Liz, had a strong negative reaction.

Gender plays out in complex ways for these siblings. It might be assumed that David's entry into higher education, in contrast with his sisters' entry into the bank after GCSEs, was related to gender differences. However, there was no mention of this in interviews. It was more of a story of an absence of

clear direction from home and a focus on the siblings' own choices. David's entry into higher education seemed more related to his younger age and changes in the focus on higher education at school than to anything else. However, as adults we can see Nicola and Liz's lives clearly influenced by their perceptions of themselves as mothers and the responsibilities involved in that. In speaking about their current lives, they position themselves as mothers with dependent children and it is clear that this 'standpoint' (Ribbens McCarthy et al 2003) is relevant to their educational and employment 'choices'. Both work part-time in order to allow time for their family responsibilities. Nicola considered studying only in her home city because of the difficulties of juggling family responsibilities with traveling. Both had interrupted careers around the time they had small children, working in paid employment only on a sporadic basis in Liz's case and hardly at all in Nicola's case for several years. Both embarked on second careers involving children, either in terms of education or healthcare. In Nicola's case, it was her husband who went out first to retrain and she followed in his footsteps. In Liz's case, her husband was uninterested in retraining.

Two to higher education and one not: why the differences in decisions

David's case seems relatively straightforward. He was ten years younger than his sisters and entry into higher education was more of an expectation at his school by that stage, although the comments in the previous section *General analysis of Nicola, Liz and David* pp.29-32 about the Hanley siblings who are in the same age range as him should be borne in mind.

There was no indication in any of the interviews of education being viewed as more useful for the brother than the sisters. However, Nicola did make her comments about coming at the end of tail-end of a generation where girls became secretaries or hairdressers. She did suggest that there was little active support educationally in her family as she was growing up. It should also be remembered that her mother died when she was young and that there are some indications of a difficult relationship between Nicola and her step-

mother from Liz's interviews as well as between Liz and her step-mother. Possibly the step-mother was more supportive to her own son.

Clearly a supportive partner was crucial to Nicola undertaking her studies to become a midwife and equally clearly this kind of support was missing in Liz's case.

Role models may also be important. Nicola mentions the friend who was a couple of year ahead of her as an encouragement in her long path through higher education. However, Liz does not mention any positive role models. The friend she nominated for us to interview in the network, perhaps significantly, speaks about wanting to do higher education, but has also lacked effective support and has not managed to do higher education although she has wanted to. There is a certain amount of tension, and good sister/bad sister patterns in the family for Nicola not to be a role model for Liz. She is more likely to be a means whereby Liz feels inadequate.

Policy implications

Some people at least, even in the days of comprehensive schooling and availability of A level study, may have missed the opportunity of higher education at school leaving age through circumstances such as low expectations at school, family background, untimely tragedies such as parental death, and illness. How best can such people be offered support to continue their education later in life if they want to?

The case studies above indicate several areas where support looks as if it could have a useful role. (1) More effective careers advice at school/college could have a role and indeed will have changed in its nature since the times of the people in the stories outlined above. Careers advice at that stage is striking by its absence in all the cases discussed above. (2) Careers advice later on might clearly have a useful role. The information that Jackie Hanley received was somewhat haphazard and not very kindly given, although it was ultimately effective in that she registered on a foundation course. Is there scope for more co-coordinated guidance targeted at potential non-traditional

students who may not have effective “hot” knowledge sources? Clearly focused, determined individuals such as Nicola can access “cold” knowledge sources such as careers information, but she may be exceptional. (3) Educational achievement tends to be harder for older people, in that they may often have childcare and other caring commitments. Some of that support will have to come from within their families. However, policy could look at areas where outsiders could assist in terms of providing information and advice as well as childcare. (4) Liz indicates that potential loss of benefits and tax credits affects her educational and employment options. Examination of the consequences of current benefit and tax credit arrangements for the educational and employment options of married women might be useful.

Secondly, the role of achieving skills and education through employer support is important in three of the stories above. Jackie, John and Liz all received significant amounts of employer support for their work-related education which presumably added considerably to their effectiveness in the workplace. In John’s case, although he has not yet had higher education, he may be encouraged to pursue further managerial qualifications by his employer. He is already a highly skilled individual, making a strong contribution to our economy even without higher education. This model of work-related learning, supported by employers is likely to be productive for many people who like practical learning and for many employers who want a labour force where individuals are challenged to develop their potential. It is hard to comment at the moment where Jackie’s higher education is likely to lead her. Which of them (Jackie or John), or will both of them, make a strong contribution to the national economy? In Liz’s case, employer involvement in encouraging education at NVQ Level 3 was crucial for encouraging her to do her NVQ qualification. With further employer support, and if she can find an employment situation in which she is happy, it is not out of the question that she would study further. Her first experience of such education was positive. Without such employer support, it is hard to see how someone such as her with little support at home and probably an underlying lack of confidence in her ability to achieve educationally would want to or be able to achieve educationally.

Transition from compulsory schooling is a critical time when decisions which will have major effects on a person's educational and employment pathways are taken. However, this is a time when young people often have little sense of a clear direction about what they want to do in terms of employment or the long-term implications of decisions. This is combined with a striking cultural background in the UK where many parents encourage their children to make their own decisions with greater or lesser degrees of material and emotional support as distinct from a situation in many cultures where strong parental guidance is given (which has its own disadvantages). At best, this combination can lead to fortunate productive explorations and outcomes for the individuals and families concerned. At worst, it can lead to decisions with unproductive outcomes in terms of emotional satisfaction, financial remuneration and future employment prospects. (Such decisions may include decisions to enter higher education directly.) This will always be a risky life stage and policy should perhaps seek ways of providing external support mechanisms to change direction for those who made decisions at the end of compulsory schooling which may not have worked out well in the years ahead as well as seeking to provide effective careers guidance in compulsory education.

There do seem to be underlying dispositional differences as regards education and learning between the people in the case studies above. It is unclear exactly what dispositions are or how they arise. However, as the years go by people seem to have different capacities for being interested in learning for its own sake and learning within the framework of a particular, often work-related purpose. This suggests that it will be necessary to have a range of educational options open for the existing and future labour force, rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

Conclusions

The above case studies are suggestive rather than conclusive about various complex issues related to (higher) education. Analysis of the remaining people in our sample with higher education, as well as those without, will

provide a broader and deeper understanding of such issues. However, even an initial analysis of the data highlights its complexities but also suggests fruitful paths forward for issues significant in both data analysis and policy.

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