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**‘Barriers’ to Participation in Higher Education?:**

**Depends who you ask and how**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, we draw on evidence from a large-scale research project to explore the metaphorical concept of ‘barriers’ to participation in higher education (HE) and to show how our data challenge the idea that non-participation by under-represented groups can be attributed to individuals experiencing a range of readily identifiable barriers. First, we briefly outline the perspectives of policy and practice stakeholders in widening participation (WP) in HE which suggest that the discourse of barriers is central to their understanding of ‘non-participation’ and how to reduce it. Second, we introduce findings from two case studies. Each case study consists of interviews with an individual aged over 21 who has the qualifications (level 3) to enter HE but who has not (yet) done so, as well as members of his or her self-nominated ‘networks of intimacy’ (Heath and Cleaver, 2003) consisting of friends and family. These interviewees do not tend to talk in terms of barriers in their accounts of their educational, employment and personal histories and the influences on their participation decisions. This evidence suggests that patterns of participation and non-participation in HE are strongly embedded in and explained by people’s interwoven social, historical and biographical circumstances and experience. This article contributes to the debate about the utility of the barriers metaphor and challenges the policy assumption that individual non-participation can be ‘solved’ solely by the removal of pre-defined obstacles. We conclude by arguing that the opportunity to collect multiple accounts with members of social networks indicates the value of looking at participation in and decision-making about education across the life course and as a socially embedded practice.

## **‘Barriers’ to Participation in Higher Education?: Depends who you ask and how**

### **Introduction**

There is a rich tradition of research that uses the concept of ‘barriers’ to investigate and help explain uneven patterns of post-compulsory and adult educational participation (inter alia Cross, 1981; Woodley et al., 1987; McGivney, 1993). This work has given rise to a three-way classification of barriers as: ‘situational’ (e.g. costs, time, geographical accessibility of the provision and factors which are relevant to an individual’s circumstances); ‘institutional’ (e.g. flexibility with regard to mode of attendance, time-tabling, and admissions procedures and requirements); and ‘dispositional’, relating to individual motivation and attitudes to learning (often reflecting previous educational experiences). More recently, research on the identification of sociological explanations for the persistent under-representation of those from disadvantaged groups in higher education (HE) (inter alia Bowl, 2001; Hayton and Paczuska, 2002; Ball et al., 2002; Archer et al., 2003) has tended to focus on the long-term and persistent role of structural (race, gender and class) and cultural influences on participation decisions.

Despite the existence of an extensive literature identifying and addressing the barriers to participation in HE (and other forms of post-compulsory education), Gorard et al. (2006: 5) conclude that there are still weaknesses in the evidence base and the ‘analytic utility’ of the metaphor. They highlight two weaknesses that are particularly relevant to this article. The first is that most data on barriers to participation in HE have been collected from applicants or participants, rather than those who have *not ever* enrolled (exceptions include Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Connor, 2001; Bowl, 2005). The second is that the bulk of research is focused on young people expected to enter at age eighteen-plus as full-time students. This focus is reinforced by the preoccupation of policy makers and policy on widening participation (WP) in HE on young adults and the achievement of the Government’s target that half of all 18 to 30 year-olds should experience HE by the year 2010 (see Fuller and Paton, 2008 in press). Less attention has been directed at

understanding patterns of individual participation and decision-making across the life-course. In addition to these shortcomings, we would also argue that not enough attention has been given to investigating the collective as well as personal nature of decision-making about educational participation. Evidence from our recent research<sup>i</sup> helps address these gaps through its focus on adults aged over 21 who have the qualifications to enter HE but who have not done so, and on the influence of family and friends on their decision-making about education.

The metaphor of ‘barriers’ is ubiquitous in WP in education policy and research discourses (Gorard et al., 2006). In terms of WP in HE, public policy is framed around the notion that people who fail to make the transition from ‘non-participation’ to ‘participation’ are in ‘deficit’. Policies, then, are designed to overcome the barriers that prevent such individuals moving out of the less desirable and into the more desirable state or, put another way, to provide solutions to the perceived problem of uneven levels of participation across social groups. As Gorard and his colleagues (2006) have recently argued, explaining non-participation in terms of barriers provides a basis for action to solve the problem: removing the barriers will enable more people to participate. They suggest that: ‘The metaphor of “barriers” to participation is an attractive one that suggests an explanation for differences in patterns of participation between socio-economic groups and contains its own solution – the removal of the barriers’ (Gorard et al., 2006: 9). Accordingly, measures have been introduced, through initiatives such as Aimhigher, to: raise attainment and aspirations; provide more effective information and guidance; make university more accessible through the development of local partnerships between schools, colleges and universities; structure funding arrangements (e.g. bursaries and fee waivers) to encourage those from lower income households; and so on.

This article is arranged in four sections. The first introduces our research project. Section two briefly outlines the perspectives of policy and practice stakeholders in WP in HE. This evidence was collected during the initial background and contextualising stage of our study. The analysis of this confirms that the discourse of barriers is central to the respondents’ assumptions about why some individuals do not participate and, therefore,

also informs their approach to tackling non-participation through attempts to remove the barriers. Following this discussion we proceed, in section three, to draw on the findings from interviews with members of two social networks. Each case study network consists of interviews with an individual aged over 21 who has the qualifications (level three<sup>ii</sup>) to enter HE but who has not (yet) done so, as well as members of his or her self-nominated 'networks of intimacy' (Heath and Cleaver, 2003) consisting of friends and family. The language of barriers is much less explicit in these interviewees' accounts of their educational, employment and personal histories, and the influences on their decisions. We suggest that the differences between the perspectives of policy and practice stakeholders on the one hand and non-participants in HE on the other highlight the limitations of the barriers metaphor as both 'explanation and solution' for non-participation. In the final section, we outline a range of provisional conclusions which we hope to develop as our analysis progresses.

## **The Research**

Our research is concerned with exploring how and in what ways (non-) decision-making about HE might be embedded within networks consisting of family members and friends, and to what extent future participation in HE might be conceived as within the bounds of the possible. 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 HE is embedded and co-constructed. Our focus is on the experiences of individuals who are 'potentially recruitable' to HE - defined for the purposes of our project as those whose highest level of qualification is at level three or 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.

The study employed a multi-level methodology and involved two main stages. In phase one, desk research was used to analyse existing quantitative data and to review empirical, conceptual, methodological and policy literatures. We also conducted 27 key informant

interviews across a range of organisations with policy and practice interests in HE participation<sup>iii</sup>. These data helped to provide the broader context for our main research and, in some cases, provided us with access to potential research participants (see Johnston and Heath (2007) for further details of how we generated our case study sample). The second phase was based on qualitative exploration of sixteen case study networks of intimacy. This involved initial interviews with an ‘entry point’ sample of 24 individuals aged over 21 who were ‘potentially recruitable’ (as outlined above) to HE. These interviews provided an overview of the individual’s educational and employment histories and allowed us to gain a picture of their broader social networks. Entry point individuals nominated people whom they felt would be prepared to participate in the study. Members of an entry point individual’s network typically included family (usually across generations) and friends. It is important to remember that those we have interviewed are a self-selecting group and that nomination by some interviewees of only a small number of people does not necessarily indicate that they are part of a ‘thin’ social network. From the entry point sample, we went on to research sixteen networks of intimacy, each consisting of approximately five to six people (although this varied considerably)<sup>iv</sup>. The network sample was diverse and consisted of people from a range of educational, social and economic backgrounds.

The design of the interview schedule for use with our case study participants posed a challenge as we had to find ways of speaking about non-participation in HE in networks where participation was not the norm. In particular, we were concerned not to imply that the pathways interviewees had followed were somehow inferior to those of individuals who have experienced HE. Consequently, the interviews invited respondents to talk about their ‘educational and employment decision-making’. This allowed interviewees to provide their own accounts and reflections on the pathways they had taken, their patterns of participation and the factors and people that had influenced their decisions. We took the view that this approach would provide respondents themselves with the opportunity to talk in terms of barriers to participation, if they so wished. Each interviewee was given an informed consent form to sign which explained the research in full and assured them that their confidentiality and anonymity would be protected throughout the research process

(we did not disclose any information given to us in the interviews to other members of an individual's network). The final stage of the network research involved a second, more detailed and focussed interview with each of the initial entry point individuals to explore themes and issues which emerged across each network.

Within the entry point sample were those who had not participated in HE but who may well do so in the future, alongside those who in all probability would never participate in HE. This ambiguity of status, however, was integral to our research design, as we were interested in the factors which might trigger a shift from non-participation to participation, as well as the factors which might make future participation extremely unlikely. Our research suggested that the terms 'non-participation' and 'participation' were problematic, and challenged static and binary divisions, as well as the value-laden nature of these notions, which position 'non-participants' as if in deficit.

It is on just this binary division that the metaphor of barriers gains its purchase as it is located within a broader 'container metaphor' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), which perceives participation and non-participation as two bounded spaces. People are distinguished by whether they are viewed as being in one 'box' or the other, with movement between the containers perceived as being 'into' or 'out of'. Though there is no natural physical boundary between the two states, a metaphorical boundary (barrier) has been constructed. The size and nature of the barrier(s) depend mainly on the characteristics of those doing the boundary crossing and the accessibility to them of the provision available from educational institutions.

### **Stakeholders: barriers as individual, real and imagined**

The first phase of our project provides the broader context for our main research. Desk work and meetings with representatives of bodies responsible for developing national WP in HE policy confirmed well-rehearsed rationales underpinning attempts to widen participation, of which the following statement from the HEFCE website is illustrative: 'Our aim is to promote and provide the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it. This is vital for social justice and economic competitiveness' (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/>).

This aim has given rise to the creation of substantial policy initiatives such as Aimhigher which rely heavily on the assumption that identifiable barriers are preventing many young people from lower socio-economic groups participating in HE.

Aimhigher is a national programme which aims to widen participation in higher education (HE) by raising the aspirations and developing the abilities of young people from under-represented communities. Overwhelmingly these are people from lower socio-economic groups and disadvantaged backgrounds. Aimhigher partnerships build cross-sector relationships which break down the barriers which institutions and systems can unwittingly create for learners.  
(<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/aimhigh/>)

Interviews were carried out with 27 representatives from a range of regional and local organisations with policy and practice interests in HE. As with the network interviewees, each key informant was taken through an informed consent process prior to the interview taking place. The geographical focus for the study and for the identification of local and regional key informants was one county in the south of England. The sample was generated through two main methods. We drew up an initial target list of national, regional and local organisations addressing participation issues in the selected county. A snowballing technique was then used to develop and extend the sample. Our early key informants were able to identify other ‘players’ in the local stakeholder landscape and we successfully followed up many of these contacts. This was a particularly effective way of exploring the range of organisations involved (peripherally and more centrally) in such a complex and diverse area of practice. The evidence from key informants drawn on in this article was based in: regional organisations; educational institutions providing further and higher education<sup>v</sup>; training providers (voluntary and private sector); and employers.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature, thus allowing interviewees to say what was important and relevant to their role and organisation, as well as inviting them to respond to a range of specified topics, including their perceptions of the factors (including barriers) affecting take up of HE. The interviews provided rich insights into the various perspectives and voices positioned within different levels of the stakeholder landscape. From the perspective of our project, perhaps the most important finding was that none of these key informants was



primarily concerned with how participation in HE could be widened for adults at different stages in the life-course. The focus was firmly on young people. Where organisations were interested in the educational participation of older adults, they were concerned in the main with promoting basic skills and qualifications up to level two (five General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at A\* to C or vocational equivalents). Analysis of the data also suggested that the discourse of barriers was central to interviewees' understanding of and approach to addressing non-participation. Ironically, given the metaphorical status of the barriers concept, interviewees were often preoccupied with whether the barriers faced by their WP target groups were 'imagined' or 'real'.

The key informants perceived that young people from under-represented groups see the barriers to HE as revolving around cost, attainment and identity, all of which contributed to what they saw as 'low aspirations'. Overall, as the following quotations illustrate, the interviewees were preoccupied with encouraging such teenagers to view HE as a possible option and, in so doing, to raise their aspirations.

I still think that the major issue is aspiration...in that I would include issues where people question the relevance to them as a family, or as an individual, of higher education. Isn't higher education meant for others? (College staff)

I think the [issue of] self belief particularly for young people for whom it is not in the family culture, or the racial culture, or whatever. I think that self belief is one. Of course the issue of specific qualifications, you know, the appropriate range of 'A' levels or whatever...may be an issue, but probably that is less of an issue. I think inevitably the third one is finance, or perceptions of finance, and that is on the one hand pressure we referred to earlier about 'isn't it about time you got out earning'...and also the perception of debt coming from tuition fees and so on. (Representative from Connexions)

It may be perceptions of what higher education means and whether it's for them really...what the sort of, the whole commitment and what's actually involved in being involved in HE I think could be an issue; a sort of perception issue. (Representative from the South East of England Development Agency)

There was a strong conviction that WP practitioners could make a difference by providing relevant experiences and accurate information to targeted young people. In this sense, stakeholders tended towards a deficit view of individuals who do not participate, on the basis

that their ‘decisions’ are associated with their incomplete and inaccurate knowledge and mistaken understanding of what HE is like. The role of WP initiatives is to provide opportunities for young people to engage in activities such as university visits, talks at school by university staff and summer schools.

Many of those working with school students felt that an important part of their role was to correct misconceptions, particularly around cost and educational attainment, that they saw as common amongst those who would be first-in-family entrants to HE:

I think a lot of worries about finance are largely imagined, in that I think for a student to go to university, although there is a cost element, it isn’t going to be as expensive as they think it’s going to be.... I don’t know that students always appreciate that they don’t have to pay that [the loan] back right away. (University WP staff)

I think there are the academic beliefs as that...perhaps I can only go to university if I get very, very high grades.... I think some students don’t fully appreciate that if they don’t get top grades it doesn’t matter. (University WP staff)

There are two key points to take from this section. First, that these interviewees were highly familiar with the discourse around factors, including barriers, affecting individuals’ take up of HE. Second, they acknowledged the existence of barriers to HE such as cost, family background and low aspirations, but considered these to be (mostly) surmountable and probably not as difficult to overcome as some young people believe. Put another way, these data broadly reinforce the assumption underpinning WP in HE policy and initiatives, that the existence of barriers explains the under-representation of certain groups and that removing them is the solution to achieving more even representation in HE across the whole population.

The next section focuses on the analysis of data collected from our social networks. As mentioned earlier in the article, these interviews gave respondents the opportunity to provide accounts of their decision-making about educational participation as well as their employment experiences and personal and family background and relationships. This has produced sets of related interviews that require an analytical approach which allows for similarities and divergences within and between networks to emerge. The accounts

generated in this part of our research have generated evidence which undermines the usefulness of the barriers metaphor in understanding and explaining patterns of non-participation.

## **The Case Studies**

We have selected two networks of intimacy or case studies to discuss in this article. These two networks have been selected as in both cases the entry point individuals' future engagement in HE was spoken about as a possibility and the two individuals could be seen to have what Quinn (2005) has called 'imagined social capital'. The findings from the two case studies will be outlined separately in order to illustrate the distinctive nature of each network's experiences and attitudes and the context for decision-making that this creates. The evidence reveals the longevity and complexity of social influences which make the entry point individual's future enrolment in HE more or less likely. It also draws attention to the largely similar accounts of, and attitudes to, educational participation and progression found in case study two, in contrast with the more divergent accounts located in case study one. We use pseudonyms throughout the discussion of both of the case studies to protect the anonymity of our interviewees.

### Case Study One – Jamil Masuka

Jamil Masuka is a twenty-three year old male, of mixed heritage (White British/Black African) background who lives in an isolated small town area in the south of England. He left school with good GCSE grades (C and above) and ambitions to become a pilot in the Royal Air Force. He went to college to study for A levels but dropped out in his first year of study because he felt socially isolated at college as most of his friends had left school to go into work. Jamil now works as a bricklayer and has achieved National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) levels one to three through day-release study. He is currently studying part-time for a BTEC National Certificate in Building Studies at college and feels that by getting this qualification he will be able to prove to himself and his employer that he is capable of much more. Jamil has considered going to university on completion

of his BTEC course to do a construction-related degree. He regrets dropping out of his A level studies but now feels that he has the confidence and vocational maturity to study for a HE qualification.

Jamil nominated ten members of his network, consisting of both family and friends, for interview. For the purposes of this article, we will be drawing on interview data with the five members of his network who seemed most relevant to the decision-making process. Details of the network and the characteristics of its members are illustrated in the network map diagram shown in Figure 1.

## Father

- Name: Abdul Salam Masuka
- Gender: Male
- Age: 56
- Ethnicity: Black African
- Lifestage: Lives with partner and two children
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Unemployed
- Highest level of qualification: Postgraduate diploma
- Has experience of HE? Yes

## Mother

- Name: Sophie Masuka
- Gender: Female
- Age: 50
- Ethnicity: White British
- Lifestage: Lives with partner and two children
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Bank Cashier
- Highest level of qualification: CSEs (the Secondary Certificate of Education no longer exists – equivalent to level one)
- Has experience of HE? No

## Entry point

- Name: Jamil Masuka
- Gender: Male
- Age: 23
- Ethnicity: Mixed (Black African/White British)
- Lifestage: Lives with parents
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Bricklayer
- Highest level of qualification: NVQ level three
- Has experience of HE? No

## Friend

- Name: Jason Challis
- Gender: Male
- Age: 22
- Ethnicity: White British
- Lifestage: Lives with partner
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Trainee Licensed Conveyancer
- Highest level of qualification: Degree
- Has experience of HE? Yes

## Friend

- Name: Michael Black ('Micky')
- Gender: Male
- Age: 49
- Ethnicity: White British
- Lifestage: Lives with partner and two children
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Bricklayer
- Highest level of qualification: CSEs
- Has experience of HE? No

## Friend

- Name: Simon May
- Gender: Male
- Age: 25
- Ethnicity: White British
- Lifestage: Lives with partner and three children
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Labourer
- Highest level of qualification: None
- Has experience of HE? No

Jamil has grown up in a family that strongly values education and that places a lot of importance on gaining further and higher qualifications. Jamil's father, Abdul Salam, has a particularly strong commitment to HE, seeing it not only as a route to professional occupations, but also as a sign of social status. His views are strongly influenced by his upbringing in Africa. He says, 'I come from a country where education is paramount and the higher the qualifications you have, the better it is'.

Abdul Salam's family has a long history of HE participation. His parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles are all educated to degree level and there was a strong expectation that he would follow a similar educational trajectory, which he did. Explaining this normative culture, he says, 'Everybody in my family has been heavily into education.... I think the expectation was that you would just carry on [studying after age sixteen]. You would go to university and so on'.

Although Jamil's mother, Sophie, has herself not engaged in further or higher education, she has been very supportive of her husband's efforts to instil the importance of education into their children (although it is fair to say that the pressure has come predominantly from Abdul Salam). She says, 'My husband has made me realise the importance of education. He's influenced my opinion on this.... Where Abdul Salam was brought up...it's a privilege to be able to have an education, it's cherished to have that opportunity'.

The social and cultural expectations, embedded in the family and strongly advocated by the father, were that Jamil and his siblings would follow in his footsteps and gain HE qualifications. However, much to Abdul Salam's dismay, two of his sons have not as yet achieved this level of qualification.

Echoing broader trends of increased female university participation, Michelle, Jamil's sister has been the only sibling in the immediate family to gain a degree. Her mother feels that this is in part due to the dispositions and expectations of her friendship circles. As she explains:

Michelle was much easier because her friends were all very competitive and all very going to go to university and I think this makes a difference as well, the peers that your children have, as to what their aspirations are going to be. If they have close friendships and are competitive with one another then, the influence isn't just family, it's external as well. (Sophie, mother)

The role of friendships in educational decision-making is an important one and is starting to have more prominence in the educational choice literature (e.g. Brooks, 2005). In Jamil's network of intimacy, his friendships have played, and continue to play, a critical role in his decision about whether to participate in HE. He strongly relies on them as a source of knowledge and advice. However, although educational success is an important part of Jamil's family habitus, this is not of the case with all of his friendship circles. The dominant discourse amongst his peers is that HE is a 'waste of time' that leads to large debts and no guarantee of graduate employment. Reflecting on his own HE experience, Jamil's friend, Jason says:

I suppose looking back I wouldn't have done the politics degree.... I didn't enjoy university you know.... I wouldn't go back and do it again. I wouldn't be 100 per cent convinced it's worth a) the time investment and b) the debt.

Jason feels that having a higher level qualification is not much use in an isolated small town job market. Level three qualifications, in his view, are adequate enough to get good local jobs. He says:

I'm not convinced [that having a HE qualification] makes that much difference to overall job prospects at the end of the day. You know a lot of [local employers] wouldn't want degrees and things like that... It's not unusual [in this area] for someone that sort of left after GCSEs or maybe A levels to be in the same position as someone who has been to university.

This scepticism about the labour market returns of university, which is embedded in Jamil's friends' dispositions, reflects a very pragmatic response to local job opportunities. 'Getting a skilled trade' is construed as the route to success in the local labour market. This view is neatly demonstrated in the following quotation:

Skilled people are of far more value in society now, for example, Jamil with his bricklaying, than somebody who has just got a lot of letters after their name. With what Jamil does, he will never be out of work, whereas somebody with a lot of letters after their name, they'll find it hard to find a job. (Simon, Friend)

Jamil has very mixed educational perceptions and dispositions in his network of intimacy.

His family, and in particular his father, had strong ambitions and expectations for him to go to university at age eighteen and he continues to exert pressure on him to participate. Jamil's father advocates a discourse of 'education for education's sake' in the spirit of learning and associates educational qualifications with increased social status. His friend Micky, and to some extent his friend Jason, value HE but prefer to see it as a lifelong vocational learning opportunity to better oneself in a skilled trade or specialise in a professional occupational route. This discourse is much more instrumental in character as the next quotation demonstrates:

I think [higher education] is good but you know some people come out with degrees like in English or History and I think 'what use are you gonna put that to?' What's the point of spending three years of your life getting that if you're not actually gonna get a job at the end of it!? (Micky, friend)

On the other hand, some of Jamil's peers are of the opinion that HE is a waste of time, particularly given the lack of graduate opportunities in the local labour market, and instead would rather see him 'work his way up' in the bricklaying trade, eventually achieving self-employment.

Jamil finds these push and pull factors difficult to manage. The broader context of his network's contradictory dispositions, perceptions and experiences is clearly impacting on his education and employment decision-making. Ambivalence about the importance of HE is being expressed in his network of intimacy and Jamil is making efforts to manage and negotiate his way through some of these uncertainties. University is clearly part of his 'horizon for action' (Hodkinson et al., 1996) but he has limited 'hot and cold knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) sources and social capital to draw on for information about HE provision. Although he sees his BTEC qualification as a pathway into HE, he is unclear about his reasons for wanting to go to university. If he does go, he



knows he would like to study locally but has little idea about which construction-related degree courses are on offer or whether he would study full- or part-time. Living in an isolated area of the county makes travel to study an issue for him as there is a clear lack of HE opportunities in the area in which he lives. He also has concerns (reinforced by his friends) about university being a 'waste of time', associated with loss of earnings and a route into debt. Although potentially recruitable to HE, it is not yet clear whether Jamil will or will not decide to take this path.

### Case Study Two: Joanna Sharpe

The entry point individual in this network is Joanna, who is 32 years old. Her father is a mechanic and her mother, a shop-worker. Joanna is married to Peter. The couple have two sons aged six and three; the older boy is autistic. They live in a small town in an isolated part of the county. Joanna works three days a week as an administrator in the health service. She left school at sixteen with several GCSEs at grade C and went to college where she studied to become a medical secretary and gained a Diploma in Secretarial Studies (level three). More recently she has gained an NVQ level three in Business Administration through her employment. Joanna nominated six members of her network for interview. Details of the network and the characteristics of its members are illustrated in the network map diagram shown in Figure 2.

## Friend

- Name: Susan Bryant
- Gender: Female
- Age: 31
- Lifestage: Lives on own, one child
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Human Resources Manager
- Highest level of qualification: Certificate in Personnel Practice
- Has experience of HE? Yes

## Husband

- Name: Peter Sharpe
- Gender: Male
- Age: 37
- Lifestage: Lives with partner and two children
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: ~~FT~~ Building Surveyer
- Highest level of qualification: Degree
- Has experience of HE? Yes

## Sister-in-law

- Name: Helen Andrews
- Gender: Female
- Age: 31
- Lifestage: Lives with partner and two children
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Trainee Paramedic
- Highest level of qualification: Diploma in Sports Science
- Has experience of HE? No

## Entry Point

- Name: Joanna Sharpe
- Gender: Female
- Age: 32
- Lifestage: Lives with husband and two children
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Human Resources Administrator
- Highest level of qualification: NVQ level three
- Has experience of HE? No

## Friend

- Name: Gill Henson
- Gender: Female
- Age: 50
- Lifestage: Lives alone, no children
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Unemployed
- Highest level of qualification: HE Diploma
- Has experience of HE? Yes

## Friend

- Name: Jane Walker
- Gender: Female
- Age: 41
- Lifestage: Lives with two children
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: Human Resources ~~FT HR~~ [\[see comments in Susan Bryant\]](#) Officer
- Highest level of qualification: Certificate in Personnel Practice
- Has experience of HE? No

## Brother

- Name: Tom Andrews
- Gender: Male
- Age: 29
- Lifestage: Lives with partner and two children
- Geographical location: Isolated small town
- Occupation: ~~FT~~ Water Process Operator
- Highest level of qualification: GCSEs
- Has experience of HE? No

All members of the network come from similar socio-economic backgrounds (often describing themselves as working class), with similar experiences of, and attitudes to, education. None in the sample had parents with degrees and most of their parents had left school at the earliest opportunity. The transcripts are littered with references which reveal interviewees and their families' relatively low expectations regarding attainment during the compulsory schooling phase and initial post-compulsory participation.

Most interviewees progressed to some form of post-compulsory education or training. Generally, the interviewees spoke about a lack of advice, guidance and support in relation to their post-sixteen decisions. However, the patterning of their initial post-compulsory transitions is reflective of an opportunity structure in which university was still considered an elite option and leaving school at sixteen to go out to work was common. The following quotation is illustrative:

...my parents didn't really want me to go on into sixth form or go to university and I think at that time, when I was leaving school, university and that...was more for what you considered to be the really, really bright students. (Jane, friend)

It is striking to note the extent to which members of this network have participated and re-participated in education and training. All have engaged in courses leading to further qualifications since completing their initial post-compulsory studies. There is a strong link between their involvement in 'lifelong learning' and vocational development and employment. Qualifications are viewed as important in terms of gaining more financial security, better job prospects and accessing more satisfying careers. In Joanna's case, she gained a range of secretarial skills and diplomas at college before joining the Community Health Authority (later the hospital health authority where she still works in the human resources (HR) department). Since working in HR she has gained her NVQ level three. Part of her job involves providing administrative support for employees following a range of courses. This experience has helped to 'open her eyes' to the variety of careers that are available in the health service, particularly in the allied medical field (e.g. nursing, dietetics, speech therapy and so on), and the diverse backgrounds of those pursuing qualifications in mid-life. Joanna finds this inspiring:

...I meet amazing people in my job now and I think, wow...I've seen loads of nurses that have been like nursing auxiliaries for years and they're going to, 'oh, I'm going to do it...train to be a nurse'...and off they go and three years later they're a nurse.... I just really admire them.

Joanna's husband Peter envisaged that his National Diploma (level three) in Business Studies would lead him into office-based employment. However, he ended up doing bar work and studying part-time for an accounting technician award but did not complete the course through lack of interest. He then had a variety of jobs, 'looking for something interesting', including financial advisor, bar-man, store-man and insurance broker. It was while working in a timber yard that Peter realised that he was interested in building design and construction, and contacted Learn Direct<sup>vi</sup> for advice on courses. As a result of this he undertook (while still working) a variety of distance learning modules with the College of Estate Management and eventually attained a degree in surveying. He currently has a permanent job as a building surveyor with a large public sector employer and is happy that he has a job in which he is interested and can progress: 'It's nice having skills that not everybody has, like a doctor or somebody like that...that's a good feeling, curing a problem or curing someone's illness...'.

There are other similar accounts of 'lifelong learning' in the network, characterised by positive outcomes in terms of achievement, enjoyment, improved self-confidence, career progression and mutual support. For example, although Jane left school at sixteen, she has pursued several courses over the years, including an A level in Psychology, training as a massage therapist and fitness instructor and, through her current job in HR, a Certificate in Personnel Practice. She is also about to start the Diploma in Personnel Practice which is a two year degree level course. As the following quotation indicates, and like many adults making the transition to HE in mid-life, her motives are instrumentally and expressively oriented (Fuller, 2007): 'I need to have some good solid qualifications to put myself in a better position and have more earning potential...it's my dream to be at a graduation ceremony and be the one who has achieved' (Jane, friend and work colleague).

The importance of mutual support for lifelong learning is evident in Joanna's network and seen as necessary by several interviewees to overcoming a legacy of weak self-belief and confidence in their ability to achieve educationally. Joanna aspires to having a professional identity and career, and cites her husband, colleagues and friends as examples of people who she perceives as already having them. Joanna's horizon for action has expanded in adulthood and through the relationships she has forged through marriage, friendship and work. Her earlier standardised biography, characterised by tacit decision-making based on gender and class expectations, has begun to loosen up as her awareness of possible options grows. However, Joanna currently positions herself as a mother with dependent children and it is clear that this standpoint (McCarthy et al., 2003) is highly relevant to her current and potential choices. Joanna is keen to progress her career through the pursuit of higher level qualifications but does not feel that now is the right time for her to engage in these opportunities (see Fuller et al. (forthcoming) for further discussion of the role of gender in Joanna's education and employment decision-making).

Joanna's account of her childhood, pre-sixteen and initial post-compulsory transitions reflects the then-existing opportunity structure, and gendered and classed expectations: her account of her current life-stage reveals both push and pull factors. The network culture of lifelong learning, the importance of working hard and the growing development of the concept of 'career' are pushing Joanna towards engaging in higher level education and training. In this regard, she can be seen, through her inter-personal relationships, to be accumulating types of social capital including 'bridging' (Putnam, 2000) and 'linking' (Woolcock, 1998) which are moving her towards new forms of participation. On the other hand, the normative expectations embedded in her network regarding gender roles and responsibilities can be interpreted as constraining factors, or even as pulling her back. The extent to which these perspectives will continue to influence her educational and career decisions is critical to understanding Joanna's 'imagined future'.

McCarthy et al. (2003) discuss approaches to analysing sets of related interviews. They identify the degree of similarity and difference between interviewees' accounts as a central theme. This insight has been helpful in analysing the data collected from the two case studies. In relation to Joanna's network, the analysis has revealed a strong degree of similarity and the emergence of what might be termed a joint account around earlier educational experiences and lifelong learning, as well as a 'network culture' of educational decision-making. This convergence of accounts can in part be explained by the fact that Joanna's network is not inter-generational. In relation to Jamil's network, the analysis revealed more divergence between the perspectives collected. In particular, we drew attention to intergenerational differences between Jamil, his peers and his parents with regard to the value of a university education and the factors influencing educational decisions.

### **Concluding Remarks**

We would like to end this article by offering a range of tentative conclusions. The findings from our interviews with WP in HE stakeholders about their work and WP issues confirms the centrality of the barriers discourse to their understandings of 'the problem' and how it can be tackled. There is a danger that the sort of research undertaken by this community can perpetuate this analysis. For example, one of our interviewees commented on research undertaken by his organisation:

...we do ask questions now about what might be preventing you from accessing learning, ...so it's a sort of self-fulfilling [prophesy]...the question that we ask is, 'which of the following are getting in the way of you moving into learning?' and we list cost, work commitments...transport difficulties, no suitable courses, disability, childcare difficulties and age. (Manager, Advice and Guidance Service)

In contrast, in the second phase of our research we invited case study interviewees to tell us about their educational (and employment) decision-making. This approach did not produce narratives which revolved around individuals' perceptions of the barriers to their participation, although they had the opportunity to talk in these terms if they so wished. This evidence appeared to challenge the notion of participation and non-participation as

separate containers and to support Gorard et al.'s (2006) scepticism about the utility of barriers as both explanation and solution to WP in HE.

The opportunity afforded by our project, to collect accounts from members of social networks at different life stages and different generational levels makes a contribution to the evidence base on decision-making about education and WP. Gathering such data allows us to:

- a) develop a more rounded explanation of the entry point individual's educational decision-making than would have been obtainable from the sole interview model;
- b) identify themes within and across networks, particularly with regard to attitudes and dispositions towards the value of HE and lifelong learning.

The lack of evidence that these interviewees construct their participation decisions in terms of readily defined barriers serves as a useful reminder to policy makers that patterns of participation in HE are anchored socially, historically and biographically in ways which are far more complex to explain and overcome than the barriers discourse would suggest.

As the data from Jamil's and Joanna's networks have illustrated, the accounts of (non-) participation are complex, nuanced, personal and connected (with others). We have argued that a focus on the social network helpfully reveals the long-term, dynamic, socially and culturally embedded, and co-constructed nature of participation biographies. Our case study research has suggested that the predominant discourse amongst non-participants in HE relates to the perceived relevance and value of HE in the context of their (changing) life-stage and life-course. It has also revealed the importance of offering individuals, such as those included in our network sample, the opportunity to construct narrative accounts of their educational trajectories and the social contexts in which their decisions are implanted.

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## Notes

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<sup>ii</sup> In the National Qualifications Framework, level three refers to the attainment of two A level passes or vocational qualifications which the framework lists as equivalent, including BTEC ONC (Ordinary National Certificate) and NVQ3. Level three includes a variety of academic and vocational qualifications including A levels, BTEC National Certificates and Diplomas and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ3)

<sup>iii</sup> See Fuller, A. and Paton, K. (2008 in press) for discussion of the widening participation stakeholder landscape. Include as reference in main text.

<sup>iv</sup> It is important to remember that those we have interviewed are a self-selecting group, and that nomination by some interviewees of only a small number of people does not necessarily indicate that they are part of a 'thin' network. An important point – move to main text.

<sup>v</sup> Since the straightforward divide between further education (FE) and HE is breaking down, we have ensured that we have included in our sample both higher education institutions (HEIs) providing FE provision and further education institutions (FEIs) providing HE provision, as well as FEIs and HEIs in their more traditional senses.

<sup>vi</sup> Learn Direct is a publicly funded provider of courses delivered via e-learning.