

**'Barriers' to Participation in Higher Education?:
Depends who you ask and how**

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Introduction

Gorard *et al* in their recent extensive review for HEFCE³ of research on widening participation in Higher Education observe:

The metaphor of ‘barriers’ to participation is an attractive one that suggests that 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, p.5).

The metaphor of ‘barriers’ is ubiquitous in the widening participation (WP) in education policy and research discourses. In terms of WP in higher education (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 individuals moving out of the less desirable and into the more desirable state. Accordingly, measures have been introduced 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 wavers) to encourage those from lower income households, and so on.

There is also 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

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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, admissions procedures and requirements); and 'dispositional' relating to individual motivation and attitudes to learning (often reflecting previous educational experiences). More recently, research focusing on the identification of sociological explanations for the persistent under-representation of those from disadvantaged groups (*inter alia* Hayton and Paczuska 2002; Ball *et al* 2002; Archer *et al* 2003; Bowl 2001) has tended to focus on the long-term and persistent role of structural (race, gender and class) and cultural influences on HE participation decisions. For example, Ball *et al* (2002) argued that those young people with access to rich and diverse forms of social, cultural and economic capital were likely to be 'embedded choosers'. University for this group was seen as part of a 'normal and necessary' step between school and career. In contrast, the decision-making of young people from less advantaged backgrounds, who are often first in family to be considering HE, is contingent on them 'overcoming' a range of difficulties.

Despite the existence of extensive literatures identifying and addressing the barriers to HE (and other forms of post-compulsory education), Gorard *et al* conclude that there are still weaknesses in the evidence base and the 'analytic utility' of the metaphor (2006, p.5). They highlight two that are particularly relevant to this paper. The first is that most data on barriers to participation 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 18 plus as full time students. This focus is reinforced by the preoccupation of policy makers and WP in HE policy on young adults and the achievement of the government's target that half all 18 to 30 year olds should experience HE (see Fuller and Paton, 2006). Less attention has been directed at understanding patterns of individual participation and decision-making across the life-course and, we would argue that, even less has been spent on researching decision-making as a relational social process.

In this paper, we draw on evidence from our current research⁴ to revisit the metaphorical concept of ‘barriers’ to participation and to show how our data disrupts the rather ‘cosy’ and somewhat tautological relationship between barriers as explanation *and* solution for the under-representation in HE of certain groups. We do this by drawing on two contrasting sources of interview data and approaches to conducting interviews. First we briefly outline the perspectives of policy and practice stakeholders in WP in HE, which confirms 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’ consisting of friends and family. The language of barriers is much less explicit in these interviewees’ accounts of their educational, career and personal histories and the influences on their decisions. In the final section of the paper, we outline a range of provisional conclusions which we hope to develop as the study and our analysis progress. However, before turning to the data, the next section introduces the research project.

The Research

Our research is concerned with exploring how and in what ways (non-) decision-making about higher education might be embedded within networks consisting of family members, partners 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 higher education - defined for the purposes of our project as those whose highest level of qualification is at Level 3 or equivalent and who have subsequently neither participated in HE nor are currently applying to do so. Our interest is in ‘non-

⁴ The project is titled: Non-participation in Higher Education: decision-making as an embedded social practice and is funded under the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (award no: RES 139-25-0232) – www.education.soton.ac.uk/nphe for further details

participation' across the life course, so we are prioritising life stage rather than age *per se* within our sampling strategy.

Summary research design

The project is employing a multi-level methodology involving two overlapping and interacting phases:

Phase 1: desk research analysing existing quantitative data and reviewing empirical, conceptual, methodological and policy literatures

Phase 2: primary qualitative research conducted in two counties in the South of England and involving:

- a) Interviews with 32 key informants representing a range of national, regional and local organisations with policy and practice interests in HE participation and ranging from the creation of policy through to its implementation and delivery.
- b) Interviews (approx an hour in length) with an 'entry point' sample of 30 plus individuals who are 'potentially recruitable' to HE, defined for the purposes of our research as those whose current highest level of qualification is at Level 3 or equivalent and who have subsequently neither participated in HE nor are currently applying to do so. Our interest in non-participation across the life course leads us to prioritise life stage rather than age *per se* within our sampling strategy.
- c) 16 case studies, each focusing on nominated members of the networks of intimacy of individuals interviewed in stage b), and consisting of around six or seven interviews per case. These interviews last approximately 90 minutes and explore the personal background, educational and career experiences of respondents and invite an assessment of the extent to which they believe they might have influenced, and in return been influenced by, others in their network.
- d) Follow up interviews with entry points to the 16 networks (yet to be undertaken).

In relation to the case studies, 13 have been 'opened up' and are currently in various stages of completion. Our sampling strategy is based in the first instance on the identification of entry

point individuals whose current highest level of qualification is at Level 3 or equivalent and who have subsequently neither participated in HE nor are currently applying to do so. The entry point sample includes then those who have not participated in HE but who may well do so in future, alongside those who in all probability will never participate in HE. This ambiguity of status, however, is integral to our research design, as we are interested in the factors which might trigger a shift from non-participation to participation, as well as in the factors which might make future participation extremely unlikely. Our research to date nonetheless suggests that the terms 'non-participation' and 'participation' are problematic, and our evidence is challenging static and binary divisions, as well as the value-laden nature of these notions, which position 'non-participants' as 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 or the other 'box', with movement between the containers perceived as being 'in to' 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 institutional offer.

The design of our case study interview schedule has also posed a methodological challenge as we have had to find ways of talking to people about 'non-participation' in HE, when it would have been outside of the norm for their network for them to have participated. In particular, we have been concerned not to imply that the pathways they have followed are somehow inferior to those of individuals who have experienced HE. In response we have structured our data collection around the more neutral topics of 'educational and employment decision-making' as this allows interviewees to provide their own accounts, reflections of and values on the pathways they have taken. We will argue that this approach generates evidence which challenges the 'analytic utility of the barriers metaphor' (Gorard *et al*, 2006, p.5).

In the majority of the networks opened up so far, there has been also been a discourse of 'non-decision making' particularly in relation to initial post-16 decisions which have revealed the dominance of standardised post-16 biographies where HE was not routinely considered as

an option. We suggest that the acknowledging ‘non’ or tacit decision making’ is important. It provides an alternative (and less value laden) lens through which to make sense of educational biographies than those which simply attribute non-participation to the existence of barriers, which the subject has failed to surmount.

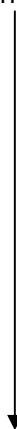
Stakeholders: barriers as individual, real and imagined

Interviews were carried out with 32 key informants mainly during the period May to August 2006. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. At this stage the detailed analysis is incomplete so the findings reported here should be seen as provisional. The stakeholder data provides the broader context for our main research.

The profile of our key informant sample is as follows:

		Number of interviews
Macro level	National policy makers and organisations	5
	Regional and sub-regional policy makers and organisations	6
Meso level	Publicly funded intermediary organisations	5
	Higher education institutions	7
Micro level	FE and FHE colleges	5
	Training Providers	2
	Employers	2
	Total	32

Policy Inception



Implementation and Delivery

The interviews provided rich insights into the various perspectives and voices positioned within different levels of the stakeholder landscape (see Fuller and Paton, 2006). From the perspective of our project, perhaps the most important findings was that no stakeholder organisation (or representative) had WP in HE through the life-course as its core concern.

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 2.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature, thus allowing key informants to say what is important and relevant in their role and to their organisation, as well as inviting them to respond to a range of specified topics including, their perceptions of the barriers to take up of HE⁵. Analysis of the data indicates that the discourse of barriers is central to interviewees' understanding of and approach to addressing 'non-participation'. Ironically, given the metaphorical status of the barriers concept, they are often preoccupied with whether the 'barriers' faced by the target groups are '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, the stakeholders in our sample 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)

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, the view of stakeholders tended towards the deficit view of individuals who do not participate on the basis that their 'decision' is associated with their incomplete and inaccurate knowledge and mistaken views about what HE is like. The role of WP initiatives is to provide opportunities for young people to engage in activities such as visits, talks at school by university staff and summer schools:

"...in Year 8 we get 100 students in for a non-residential two day academic event, in Year 9 there's a taster day..., in Year 10 they do a three day residential and Year 11 another taster..., so it's building a relationship." (University A WP staff)

⁵ Other topics included: approaches to WP, the focus of their WP activities, the data they have on participation trends, and partnership arrangements

Many of those working with school students felt that an important part of their role was to correct misperceptions (particularly around cost and educational attainment), that they feel are common amongst those who will 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 B WP staff)

“I think there has been a belief that you have to be academically clever.” (Aimhigher 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 B WP staff)

There are two key points to take from this section. First, that when invited to identify and talk about their perceptions of the barriers to HE, these stakeholders were highly familiar with the policy discourse and categorisation of what the main barriers comprise. Second, although they acknowledged the existence of barriers to HE such as cost, family background and low aspirations, and institutional accessibility, these were (mostly) considered surmountable and probably not as difficult to overcome as some young people believe. Put another way, these data broadly reinforce the view that 'barriers' are both explanation for and solution to uneven HE participation across the population.

In contrast with the key informant interviews which collected data from individuals about their professional interest in and experience of WP issues, the next section focuses on the early analysis of data collected from our case studies or 'networks of intimacy' (Heath and Cleaver, 2003) consisting of family and friends. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the interviews did not focus explicitly on barriers to educational (particularly HE) participation, but rather on giving interviewees the opportunity to provide narrative accounts of their educational and employment decision-making, 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 Case Studies

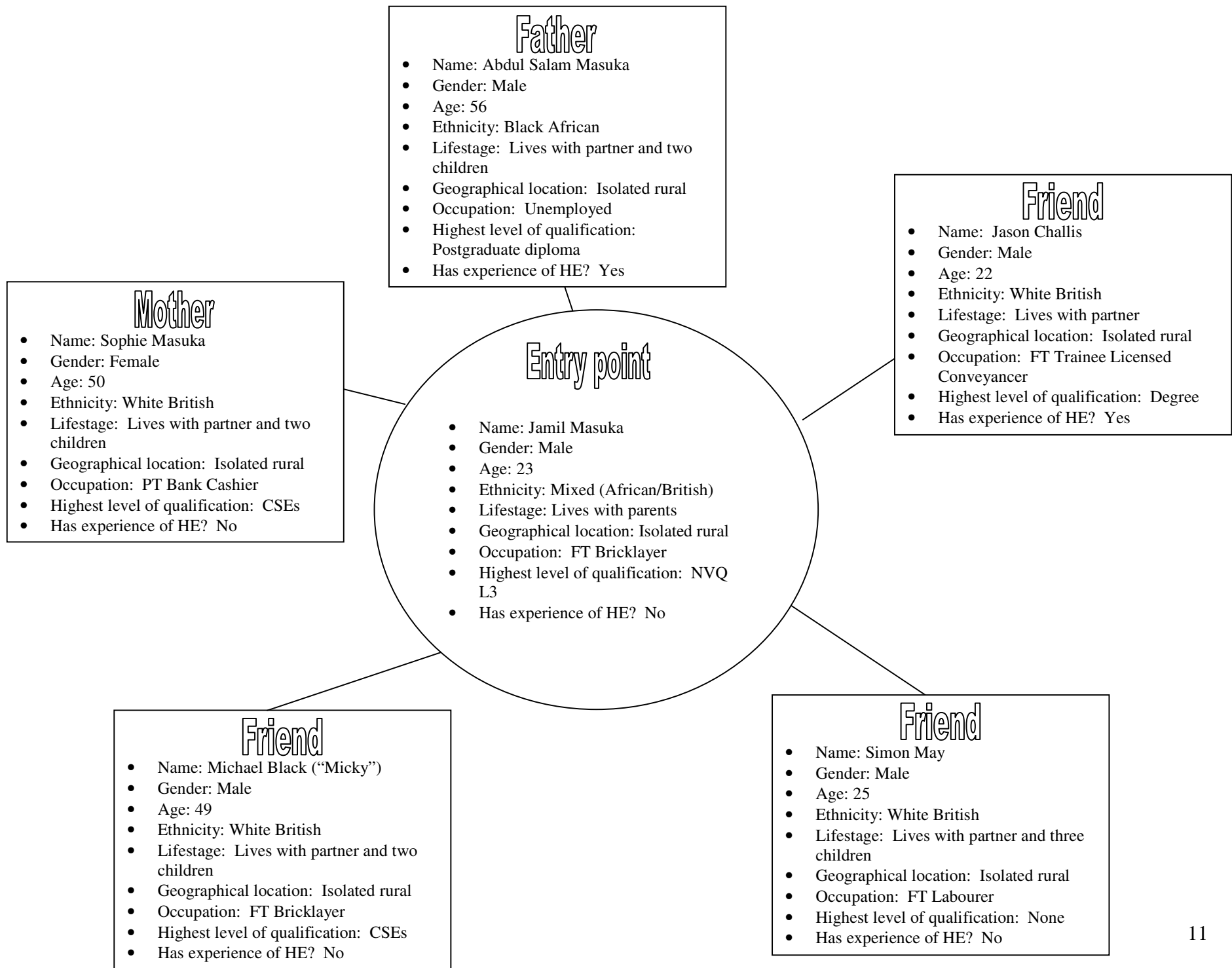
We have selected two networks of intimacy or case studies; to discuss in this paper. Access to each network, has been made via our 'entry point' individuals (see Heath and Johnston 2006 and Johnston and Heath 2007 for more details on sampling and access issues). These two entry points have been selected as, in addition, to having level 3 qualifications, their future engagement in HE was spoken about as possible. In this sense they could be seen to have what Jocey 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'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 in case study 2, in contrast with the more divergent accounts located in case study 1. In the final section of the paper, the discussion will draw out cross network themes and provide conclusions.

Case study 1 – Jamil Masuka

Jamil Masuka is a twenty-three year old male, of mixed heritage (White British/Black African) background and who lives with his mother, father and younger brother in an isolated rural area in the South of England. At age sixteen, he left school with good GCSE grades (C and above) and ambitions to become a pilot in the RAF. He went to college to study for the four A Levels required for entrance into the RAF but dropped out in his first year of study because "I didn't apply myself so struggled to keep up with the workload". He also felt socially isolated at college because most of his friends had left school to go to work. Dropping out of college, against his parents' wishes, was a difficult decision for Jamil at the time and it meant that he had to rethink his career plans. To tie him over, he found employment at a local travel operator and worked for this company for a year. Jamil was very unhappy in this post; he felt unfulfilled and there were no prospects for progression. He left to take up a labourer's job in a local construction firm that his friend told him about. This company put him on an apprenticeship in bricklaying and through this he achieved NVQ levels 1 and 2. He started the NVQ level 3, and then

was told by his employer that they were no longer willing to fund him to do this course, so he left to work as a bricklayer for a different local construction company (his current employer). This company were happy to fund him to complete his NVQ level 3 through day-release, which he did. Jamil really enjoys working in the construction industry and has plans to work his way up. He is now studying part-time for a BTEC National Certificate in Building Studies at college (equivalent to two A Levels) and has day-release from work on a Monday to do this. This two-year course is being funded by his employer. Jamil 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 Levels but now feels that he has the confidence and vocational maturity to study for a higher education qualification.

Jamil nominated ten members of his network for interview, consisting of both family and friends. Interviews for this network are ongoing so for the purposes of this paper, we will be drawing on interview data for five members of his network. Details of these network members are illustrated in the following network map diagram:



In summary Jamil's network has the following characteristics:

- There are six members of the network including the entry point, Jamil.
- There are five males, and one female aged between 22 and 56 years old.
- The network comprises family (Jamil's mother and father) and three of Jamil's friends. Network members span two generations.
- Two members of the network have achieved level 2 qualifications as their highest level of qualification. One of the members of the network has no qualifications.
- Two members of the network have higher education level qualifications (level 4 or above).
- Most of the members of the network are partnered with dependent children. Jamil's friend Jason is partnered with no children. Jamil is single and lives with his parents.
- Most of the network members are in full-time employment. Jamil's mother works part-time and Jamil's father is out of paid work.

Education and Career trajectories – evidence of divergent accounts

Analysis of Jamil's network interviews demonstrates how education and career decisions are embedded in different biographies and changing opportunity structures. Jamil's parent's education and career decision-making is strongly characterised by their generational positioning. Although his mother and father took two very different education and career trajectories, they did so within the classed, gendered and racialised constraints of what was expected of them. In many ways their choices demonstrate non-decision-making in the sense that they reflect standardised biographies constrained by the social and political conditions of the time. As Sophie, Jamil's mother explains:

“I think my educational career was already decided long before I made any decisions. I didn't have any real choice in the matter. The environment that was around in the early seventies wasn't one of encouraging young people to continue with their education. At home, if you were a daughter, it wasn't encouraged. The way women were perceived back then, we weren't expected to be of independent means. I feel looking back on it, the opportunities weren't

there for women like they are now. That's why I encourage my children to take every opportunity that is there."

The experiences which Jamil and his peers have had are very different to his parent's generation and are very much the product of a society characterised by an increased array of opportunities and risks (or choice biographies as Giddens, 1991 and Beck, 1992 prefer to call it). Their lives are increasingly lived as reflexive projects, characterised by the necessity of having to make choices and decisions in all spheres of life, including post-compulsory education and career decisions. These decisions however, are strongly embedded and co-constructed within 'networks of intimacy'.

The value of higher education – evidence of divergent accounts

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, Abdu Salam, has a particularly strong commitment to higher education, 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, father)

Abdul Salam's family has a long history of higher education involvement. His parents, grandparents and aunties and uncles have all been educated to degree level and there was a strong expectancy that he would follow a similar educational trajectory, which he did. Explaining this culture of expectancy 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 16]. You would go to university and so on... So they were saying to me you know 'you go and get the qualifications and then you can do whatever you like once you've got those qualifications, nobody can take them away from you.'"

Although Jamil's mother; Sophie, has herself not engaged in further or higher education qualifications, she has been very supportive of her husband's efforts to instil the importance of education onto their children (although it's 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. At times we’ve come into conflict because in this country, young people are expected to have a lot of say in what they do themselves and parents aren’t expected to make the decisions for them. Whereas where Abdul Salam was brought up... it’s a privilege to be able to have an education, it’s cherished to have that opportunity... in his family education it is very, very highly thought of and it is expected that you just carry on studying.” (Sophie, Mother)

The social and cultural expectations, embedded in the family and strongly advocated by the father, were that Jamil and his siblings would follow in their father’s footsteps and gain higher education qualifications. However, much to Abdul Salam’s dismay, two of his three children that have compulsory education have not as yet achieved this level of qualification. As Sophie, his wife explains:

“The two boys that have already left school, erm they both had very firm ideas of what they wanted to do. Azmeer wanted to be in the marines and that was very against his father’s wishes. His father was trying to channel it through going in as an officer and Azmeer continuing to get an education, but Azmeer didn’t want to do that, he just wanted to be a marine. We had some very heated discussions at the time. But Abdul Salam had to accept that it was the children’s choices what they wanted to do. I think Abdul Salam found that very difficult to see his children not following in his footsteps and his family traditions.”

Azmeer, joined the Royal Marines but was discharged under medical grounds. He now works as a Police Officer in London. Reflecting on his eldest son’s education and career choices, Abdul Salam says:

“I think as far as my three children are concerned, they now believe the benefit of going to university, getting qualifications, getting the higher education. I think Azmeer understands the importance of it, but has chosen what he wants to do. My feeling is; go and get the qualifications; you could always be a police officer. You can have a Masters, a PhD and still be a police officer.”

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

“Sophie 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.”

The role of friendships in educational decision-making is an important one and is starting to have more prominence in the educational choice literature (Brooks, 2005). In Jamil's network of intimacy, his friendships have played, and continue to play, a critical role in his active decision whether or not to participate in higher education. 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 true of all of his friendship circles. The dominant discourse amongst his peers is that higher education 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 one hundred per cent convinced it's worth a) the time investment and b) the debt."

Jason feels that having a higher education qualification isn't of much use in an isolated rural local job market. Level three qualifications, in his view, are adequate enough to get good local jobs. He says:

"I'm not convinced [having a higher education 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. I mean obviously I think if you're sort of talking about the financial benefits of getting a degree then you're talking about urban locations... An electrician in London might earn £25,000, he will probably only earn £15,000 down here... 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 higher education qualifications, which is embedded in Jamil's friend's dispositions, reflects a very pragmatic response to local opportunities. "Getting a skilled trade" is constructed 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 where they'll get job satisfaction." (Simon, Friend)

Micky, another of Jamil's friends, has been central to Jamil's education and career decision-making. He taught him the trade of bricklaying but now wants to see him better

himself by going to university and getting a construction-related degree (e.g. architecture or quantity surveying). He stresses the importance of having labour market experience before doing higher education qualifications and feels that Jamil's current lifestage circumstances are the ideal circumstances for him to return to studying:

"I know he wants to go to uni[versity] and I think it would be brilliant, it really would, because I have said to him 'if you do go on to uni[versity] then you've always got something under your belt nipper' I said 'because you've done your bricklaying apprenticeship' I said 'half of the people that are going to university haven't got a Scooby do [clue]' I said 'what a person can put down on paper doesn't mean they can do it with their hands with a brick and trowel... it will benefit him if he decided to go because he knows the practical side before he's gonna learn the theory... and if he does go to uni[versity], if it's anything to do with the building trade and he's gonna get out of it and earn his money that way, it would be far better for him that actually laying bricks for the rest of his life... he's in a unique position at the moment, he's only got himself to keep. He's got no mortgage, he's got no responsibilities so now is the best time to do it!"

Jamil has very mixed educational dispositions and perceptions in his network of intimacy. His family, and in particular his father had strong ambitions and expectations for him to go to university in the traditional model of attendance at age 18 and he continues to exert this 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 higher education 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, many of his peers are of the opinion that higher education as a whole 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 are clearly impacting on his education and career decision-making processes. Ambivalence about the importance of higher education is being expressed in his network of intimacy and Jamil is making efforts to manage and negotiate his way through some of these very fundamental risks and uncertainties. University is clearly part of his 'horizon for action' (Hodkinson et al. 1996) but he has limited 'hot knowledge' sources (Ball and Vincent, 1998) and social capital to draw on for information about higher education provision. Although he sees his BTEC qualification as a pathway into higher education he is unclear about his motivation 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 rural area makes travel to study an issue for him as there is a clear lack of higher education opportunities in the area that he lives. He also has concerns (reinforced by his friends) about university being a "waste of time" and associated with loss of earnings and a route into debt. Although potentially recruitable to higher education, it is not yet clear whether Jamil will or will not decide to take this path.

Case Study 2: Joanna Sharpe

The entry point in this network is known as 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 rural part of the county. Joanna works three days a week as an administrator in the health service. She left school at 16 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 3). More recently she has gained an NVQ3 in Business Administration through her employment. Joanna nominated six members of her network for interview.

Friend

- Name: Susan Bryant
- Gender: Female
- Age: 31
- Lifestage: Lives on own, one child
- Geographical location: Isolated rural
- Occupation: FT HR 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 rural
- Occupation: FT Building Surveyer
- Highest level of qualification: Degree
- Has experience of HE? Yes

Entry Point

- Name: Joanna Sharpe
- Gender: Female
- Age: 32
- Lifestage: Lives with husband and two children
- Geographical location: Isolated rural
- Occupation: PT HR Administrator
- Highest level of qualification: NVQ L3
- Has experience of HE? No

Sister-in-law

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

Friend

- Name: Gill Henson
- Gender: Female
- Age: 50
- Lifestage: Lives alone, no children
- Geographical location: Isolated rural
- 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 rural
- Occupation: FT HR 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 rural
- Occupation: FT Water Process Operator
- Highest level of qualification: GCSEs
- Has experience of HE? No

The chart maps out the network and the characteristics of its members. In summary the network has the following characteristics:

- There are seven members of the network including the entry point, Joanna.
- There are five females and two males aged between 29 and 50 years old
- The network comprises family (Joanna's brother, husband and sister-in-law) but is not intergenerational, and three of Joanna's friends.
- Most members of the network achieved some GCSEs at grades A* to C, and two females achieved A levels but did not proceed to university.
- Most of the network members participated in initial post-compulsory education and have re-participated during their adult lives.
- The network has experience of HE, with four members having HE level qualifications (level 4 or above). All the higher level qualifications achieved in the network are vocationally oriented.
- There is a mix of life-stages including: four members who are partnered with dependent children; two sole parents with dependent children and one single person with no children
- The employment status of the network members is mixed: four are in full-time employment, two are in part-time employment, and one is unemployed.

Our initial analysis of the interview transcripts reveal a range of themes that help explain Joanna's educational biography and why she may participate in HE in the future. The first two themes reveal similarities between the interviewees and the emergence of 'joint network' accounts. The third theme reveals what McCarthy *et al* (2003, p.1) call the 'relevance of standpoint differences' based in this case on gender.

Pre-16 and initial post-compulsory education - evidence of a joint account

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. For example, Joanna and her brother both talk about their parents as 'good hard working people' but who did not promote the importance of education or associate educational success with their children:

"...I know they wanted me to do well and be happy but they certainly didn't think, they never gave the impression I could do much more than you know...never ever discussed the possibility of A levels or university." (Joanna, entry point)

"...if you did your best that was good enough." (Tom, brother)

"They [his parents] didn't actually discourage me from education but they weren't encouraging so consequently I drifted along." (Peter, husband)

"There was no pressure to achieve anything, there was also no accolade when you did." (Gill, friend)

Another area in which this network tends to a joint account relates to their experiences of school. There are several examples of where respondents talk of not being inspired by school or positively engaged in learning, for example:

"I didn't get any... support from school. I don't think that half the teachers knew who I was...it was just not an inspiring place for me to be." (Joanna, entry point)

"I can't remember ever having any bad relationships with teachers...I think I just muddled along." (Jane, friend)

"I never had any teachers that I found to be memorable in terms of inspiring me to work harder ...but at the same time they were never negative." (Peter, husband)

There were examples of individuals who enjoyed their schooling. One particularly enjoyed the sport and another, Susan (friend) who gained A levels said:

"It was the best experience for me in my life."

In contrast, Tom (brother) did not like school, he struggled with some aspects of literacy and now wonders if he is dyslexic and remembers being "wound up" by his peers. He commented:

“...my perception is that I got classed as quite thick, but now looking back and doing what I’m doing now it was just I got it drummed into me at primary school by one teacher.”

Turning to post-16 transitions, most interviewees progressed to some form of education or training. Two of Joanna’s friends stayed on to take A levels but neither proceeded straight to university. Both entered the labour market, but one only for a year before she started her full-time training to become a speech therapist. After their O levels/GCSEs three members of the network, including Joanna and her future husband, moved on to Further Education College to pursue vocational qualifications (National Diplomas), one joined a Youth Training Scheme in the retail sector and two got jobs. Generally, the interviewees spoke about a lack of advice, guidance and support in relation to their post-16 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 16 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 and my parents, you know, they were more gently persuading me to go out to work...it was quite easy to get a job at 16.” (Jane, friend)

The network evidence is in keeping with findings in the extant literature that indicates that family background and experience of school are important factors in explaining patterns of participation in initial post-compulsory and higher education (see for example Gorard and Rees, 2002; Feinstein *et al.* 2004). The emerging analysis of the data collected in this case study resonates strongly with Feinstein *et al* (ibid) that parents’ educational background has a strong influence on their children’s educational participation and achievement. We would argue their experience of compulsory education and post-16 transitions is indicative of ‘normal biographies’ (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) for people from their social background and generation, and this helps explain the convergence of their accounts.

Lifelong Learning – evidence of a joint account

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, 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 an NVQ level 3 in Business Administration. 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, dietician, 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 mean we've got nurses qualifying all the time and they're in their fifties and things.”

Joanna's husband Peter envisaged that his National Diploma 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 (level 3) 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 work, 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 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...” (Peter, husband)

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 16, she has pursued several courses and 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)

Peter commented on the encouragement he has received from family and friends on his achievements as a mature student:

"they're really happy and pleased...they're impressed as well, they think I've done really well."

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. Peter comments on the encouragement he has received from Joanna (and other friends and family). Jane and Peter say that they are trying to encourage Joanna to pursue further qualifications.

The majority of members of this network are parents with dependent children and so are at a similar life-stage. They interpret their career aspirations partly in terms of self-fulfilment but also in terms of providing for their families and enabling a 'good' quality of life. Tom, Joanna's brother, has a strong work ethic which he says he has learned from his parents. His experience of school was rather negative but he has been in continuous employment and is now established in a job where there are some opportunities to train. Working hard and acquiring skills are seen as integral to his sense of self, ability to provide for his family, and his sense of 'belonging' to his social network.

'Imagined Future' – the relevance of gendered standpoints

At the time of her initial interview, Joanna talks about her educational and career decision-making and that of her friends and family. She aspires to have a professional identity and career and cites her husband, colleagues and friends as examples of people who have or who are developing them. Joanna regrets that she was not made aware of a fuller range of careers while she was at school and college. In speaking about her current life, Joanna positions herself as a mother with dependent children and it is clear that this 'standpoint' is relevant to her recent and potential 'choices'. McCarthy *et al* (2003, p.4) cite the following definition of standpoints as, 'concrete, materially grounded or shared experiences, socially defined group identities, or collectively articulated political viewpoints' (Henwood *et al* 1998, p.7). Her adoption of the maternal standpoint (i.e. relevance of the issues she shares with other mothers of young children) appears highly relevant to understanding her decision-making and her 'horizons for action'.

Joanna weighs up what courses of action would be possible and when, and concludes:

"Be something [professional training] you know maybe in time I would."

Her husband Peter believes that Joanna could develop her career and attributes her earlier lack of progress to low self-confidence and lack of family support:

"She was actively discouraged by her parent that she's a girl, she's never going to amount to much, if you like."

However, the following comment confirms the gendered and relational nature of the couple's decision-making: "she could do more with education but now she's focused on the children...[she could do more qualifications] ...in time, yes."

The influence of gender and life-stage, and in particular the maternal standpoint is evident in this network. For example, Jane, Joanna's close friend and work colleague talked about her changing educational and career aspirations, as mentioned earlier, she is about to start a Diploma in Personnel Practice. In this quotation, Jane links social change and her own circumstances:

“I think I had different aspirations then. I wasn’t thinking much beyond getting married and having children because when my generation, that was how we saw our lives, that we’d go and get ourselves a nice little job and then we would get married. I was married at 19...had my first child when I was 22 and that was all I was aspiring to do. So it’s changed...I’m divorced and the children are growing up.” [they are 16 and 18]

The mothers in Joanna’s network are all a) in employment, b) keen to progress their careers through the pursuit of professional qualifications and c) primary carers for their children. Consequently, they have many issues in common, although Jane and Susan (friends) are both divorced and foreground their need for financial security and independence. They are in both in full-time employment whereas Joanna and Helen her sister-in-law works three days a week. Speech therapy is one of the careers that appeals to Joanna: “I’d like to be a speech therapist or something like that...you know...what a lovely job.” Gill, another of Joanna’s friends worked as a speech therapist for many years. However, Gill is single with no children. A theme then in this network revolves around educational and career decision-making from the point of view of motherhood and the gendered expectations that persist in relation to this standpoint.

Joanna’s ‘horizon for action’ (Hodkinson *et al.* 1996) 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. Joanna is aware of examples of working mothers who have become professionals:

“I’ve seen a number of, loads of nurses that have been like NA’s, 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. They both had children and ...you know...they do it, and I just think I really like that.”

Joanna’s account of her childhood, pre-16 and initial post-compulsory transitions reflects the then 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, 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

'bridging' and 'linking' social capital which is moving her towards new forms of participation. On the other hand, the normative expectations around gender roles and responsibilities can be interpreted as constraining factors, or even pulling her back. The extent to which these divergent perspectives will continue to influence her educational and career decisions can be revisited in our second interview, and through an exploration of her 'imagined future': when (in relation to paternal and maternal standpoints) will be the right time; how old (independent) will her children need to be?

Discussion and conclusions

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 inter-generational differences between Jamil and his parents with regard to the value of a university education and the factors influencing educational decisions.

In looking at educational and career decision-making across the two networks we can also identify some themes-in-common. The notion of standardised biographies arose in both cases, particularly with regard to initial post-compulsory destinations, which appeared to suggest tacit decision-making reflecting the underlying socio-historical conditions and existing opportunity structures. However, the notion of 'choice biographies' seemed to be growing more salient as interviewees become increasingly aware of a range of possible 'lifestyle options'. Overall, there was also a strong vocational discourse underpinning participation decisions. This was evident in the alignment many respondents suggested between their career aspirations and the need to gain professional or higher level qualifications.

In addition, the evidence presented in this paper, suggests to us the value of drawing on the concept of standpoints to develop the project's ongoing analyses. Standpoints relating to gender, life-stage and generation provide ways of developing aggregated accounts and through which to identify convergence and divergence between categories of respondents (e.g. mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, young people and so on) within and across networks. As McCarthy *et al.* (2003) also indicate, this approach to making sense of sets of related interviews, is likely to be fruitfully extended through links with the structural categories of class and ethnicity.

We would like to end this paper by offering a range of tentative conclusions, which we aim to develop as the project and related analysis progresses. First, that the opportunity to collect accounts from people at different life stages and different generations indicates the value of looking at educational decision-making across the life course and in its socio-historical context. Second that gathering multiple accounts with members of social networks, as opposed to single accounts from the potentially recruitable (to HE) individuals, allows us a) to develop a more rounded explanation of the entry point's educational decision-making than would have been obtainable from the sole interview model, and b) to identify themes within and across networks, particularly, with regard to standpoints relating to gender, life-stage, generation and class. Third, there is the methodological (and tautological) point that interviewing WP stakeholders (or other individuals or groups) about their perceptions of barriers to HE is highly likely to elicit talk of barriers. A comparable point can be made about surveys (see for example the HE module in Youth Cohort Survey 11) that are designed to investigate educational decisions by inviting respondents to tick which of the reasons provided deter them from participating. In similar vein, one of our stakeholder interviewees commented on his own organisation's research:

“...we do ask questions now about what might be preventing you from accessing learning, full stop...so it's a sort of self-fulfilling [prophesy]. So 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.”

In contrast, we have invited case study interviewees to tell us about their educational (and career) decision-making and influences and have steered away from using the language of participation/non-participation and barriers. We have argued that this

approach helpfully reveals the long-term, dynamic, socially and culturally embedded, and co-constructed nature of participation biographies. Evidence produced via this approach challenges the notion of participation and non-participation as separate containers; the 'analytic utility of the barrier metaphor' (Gorard *et a.* 2006, p.5) and its worth as both explanation and solution to WP in HE.

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