

**Belonging to University: The Experiences of Undergraduate
Students who are Parents**

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Abstract

Rising numbers of undergraduate students are ensuring that participation in higher education is a normative pathway to professional development. Students who are also parenting return to HE for a variety of reasons but often to improve their employment prospects. In university, they intersect with traditional and non-traditional students but have their own unique challenges. Very little is known about this group but what the literature has shown is that they have rarely followed the normal trajectory of entering university after compulsory education ends, they have more personal life and work experiences than traditional students and they may have very different aspirations and motivations to study than is typically expected of an undergraduate student. Unlike the traditional student model of a young, carefree and independent person, students who are parents are inextricably bound to maintaining and supporting their family life as they study. These differences place them in a unique position as students. Students who are parents often have substantial life experiences but their alternative pathways into university mean they have little in common with many other students, facing casual discrimination and at risk of being othered among a younger, unburdened majority. Yet they are adaptable, capable students who strive to make themselves at home in HE. Through Thematic Analysis, this study explores the experience of eight undergraduate students who are parents in a research university. The perceptions of these students in relation to their sense of belonging in their university is investigated in the context of their lives as parents. This exploration includes exploring the nature of their pathways into university, the responsibilities they manage alongside their studies and the relationships students who are parents make with others in university.

Drawing on perspectives provided by the theories of Bourdieu, Bronfenbrenner and Baumeister and Leary, the reasons why students who are parents sometimes feel marginalised and othered among traditional students because of their age and lifestyle can be identified. To circumvent the possibility of alienation, older students who are parents apply their experiences of adult relationships, employment, and parenthood to connect and communicate while in university. They meet the potentially conflicting demands of parenting and studying by creating a student persona unique to their situation, blending their role as a caregiver with that of an independent learner in the student community. This study is intended to present an insight into the lives of students who are parents prior to entering higher education, and how this and other factors, notably that of having dependents, affect their integration into university.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this study, the position of undergraduate students who are parents in university is explored from the perspective of their sense of connection with the institution, their relationships with other students and individuals within its sphere. Widening participation projects in the UK have promoted the inclusion of non-traditional students into HE. These students come from previously underrepresented social groups and include mature students, who are usually regarded as being over 21 (Saddler & Sundin, 2020). Many widening participation students reach HE via a non-normative path, an observation often true of adults returning to education (Mercer, 2010). Among the non-traditional mature students accepted into university are older learners in the 25+ age group, including those who are parents and carers. Students who are parents comprise a largely unrecognised cohort as there is little or no requirement from the Higher Education Funding Councils of England and Wales for universities to gather information about student's family backgrounds, or how many undergraduate students have caring responsibilities (Moreau & Kerner, 2012).

Most students who are parents are mothers, there are very few accounts of student fathers in the literature (Estes, 2011). As well as being students, they are responsible for raising children and supporting a family, yet in university, they are bound by rules, regulations, and policies designed to manage the behaviours and meet the needs of a much younger age group (Kasworm, 2010; Moreau & Kerner, 2012). Kasworm (2010) explains that as parent students tend to be older than mainstream traditional students, they may have challenges to their student experiences. They may have little in common with childfree students because of their adult responsibilities, they may be unable to socialise in the same arenas and are unlikely to blend in with classes (Kasworm, 2010). Developing working relationships with a group of

younger people who have different, possibly opposing outlooks on life may be an uphill battle, increasing the stress of studying (Kasworm, 2010). In the following section, we will briefly outline the key features of the evolution of HE in the UK in order to understand the positioning of students who are parents before going on to explain their relationship with the concept of widening participation.

1:1 The Higher Education Landscape

In order to understand the positioning of undergraduate students who are parents, this section will briefly outline the key features of how the higher educational system has evolved in Britain. Higher education in developed countries has changed dramatically over the last three decades (Burnell, 2015b; Saddler & Sundin, 2020). Across the UK, HE has been expanded beyond the earlier, exclusive model of educational provision to an elite minority whereby a university education was open to the privileged few. Prior to 1960, universities in Britain were autonomous bodies of education funded directly from a University Grants Committee with no input from central government (Pratt, 1997). Other “further education” institutions, built to provide technical education were funded and maintained by local government. In this sense, universities operated as separate from other policy considerations such as provision of a skilled labour force or lifelong learning considerations.

Some of the technical institutions, seeking greater freedom from local authority control, became universities. Consequently, they no longer met the needs of the community as an institution facilitating the practical, skill-based education of a local population. Instead, the universities offered places to the better educated and more affluent elite (Pratt, 1997).

Following the Robbins report of 1965 (Pratt, 1997), the “binary policy” of HE became

embodied by combining existing colleges to create thirty polytechnic colleges and thirteen new universities. The new polytechnic colleges offered more practical education than the universities. The purpose of the polytechnics was to provide a more accessible system of HE than the elite universities. They were intended to meet the needs for commercial and industrial knowledge rather than academic teaching, allowing for people unable to reach university to gain new skills and training of value to the local economy (Pratt, 1997). Just 6% of young people reached university in 1960 (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009), compared to a participation rate of over 40% among young people in the UK in 2015 (Boliver, 2017; Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2017).

Implementing the binary policy ensured HE became available to a broader section of the population without disrupting the autonomy of the university system. (Pratt, 1997). In 1992, the Further and Higher Education act rebranded the polytechnics as new universities (Boliver, 2017). However, former polytechnics, with their grounding in teaching, never acquired the same academic prestige as the older, research-based universities (Pratt, 1997). Consequently, researchers are seen to differentiate between “older” and “newer” universities, pre and post 1992. Non-traditional students, an umbrella heading which includes students who are parents, tend to be found mostly in the post 1992 universities as the admission requirements are sometimes less strict, they offer newer courses and appeal more to students from working-class roots (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003; Lyonette, Atfield, Behle, & Gambin, 2015). These complexities mean that any consideration of student belonging needs to also take account of the context within which the student is situated. The growing inclusion of non-traditional students into the university system after the 1992 changes created pressure in the policy and practice domains of HE to understand, categorise and measure the unfamiliar student population (Thomas, 2020).

The Department of Education and Employment white paper “The Learning Age” was published in 1997 when it was accepted that Britain needed to improve the skills base accessible by commerce and industry (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). The interest lies now toward the attrition rates of these students who seem to be at greater risk of dropping out of their courses (Cotton et al., 2017). As a consequence it began to be understood that non-traditional students, such as students who are parents, have different needs and obligations to the traditional student profile, that can hinder their sense of belonging to their institution despite their personal strengths and contribute to their lower retention in higher education (Xuereb, 2014). Research undertaken across various developed countries in different HE institutions suggest that national and local policies and practices applying to non-traditional students, can strongly influence how well these students manage (Cotton et al., 2017).

Although there is no agreed definition for non-traditional students, they often have a disrupted record of education, are often older than traditional students and come from very different backgrounds and cultures, may be disabled or married and have children (Evans, Rees, Taylor, & Wright, 2019; Forbus & Newbold, 2011; Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

In characterising students who have parenting responsibilities, the term “students who are parents” is chosen to clarify their status throughout the text in order to avoid confusing them with being the parents of students. In some particular situations pertaining only to female students who are parents, the term “student mothers” may be applied. To comprehend how student who are parents differ from other non-traditional students, some thought needs to be given to clarifying what these differences are and why they can be considered a separate minority group.

1:2 Defining the student who is a parent in Higher Education

While the concept of a student who is also a parent is readily understood, the mapping of a student who is a parent onto the language of the university is surprisingly difficult. Students who are parents do not sit neatly within any of the administrative categories prevalent within higher education (Estes, 2011; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). The term “non-traditional student” is an umbrella term frequently used within HE policy and practice but fails to convey the individuality or different needs of the diverse groups within it (Van Rhijn 2016). Widening participation is in a sense, an administrative category, everyone within this category will be considered non-traditional, but there are also students who fall outside despite not being normative students. It is possible for a student who is a parent to be both recognised and categorised as a traditional student but to the exclusion and absencing of their role as parent. While unusual, for example, a young parent may be able to navigate the path to university in the typical way and without identification/disclosure to the institution (Wilsey 2013). Conversely, an adult may make their own way back to HE without being part of any formal widening participation programs (Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2017; Saddler & Sundin, 2020).

Students who are parents do not always fit entirely with the category of ‘mature student’ since this indicates only a student over the age of 21 and does not automatically take account of the additional responsibilities synonymous with parenting. The language available to describe this group is also ‘clunky’, student parents can lead to misunderstandings, students who are parenting may more appropriately point to the active aspect of the caring duties yet simultaneously confuse whether the student is a parent. Notions of caring leads to similar complexities, we might consider that the group under consideration have active caring duties but then who do we mean, people who care for somebody else in their home full-time? Or

people who have any caring responsibilities? This is the foremost reason some researchers talk about the invisibility of students who are parents in academia, as there is no consistent way in most universities of even counting how many parents are enrolled (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009; Moreau 2016).

Parents and carers comprise a largely unrecognised cohort as there is no requirement from the Higher Education Funding Councils of England and Wales for universities to gather information about the student's family backgrounds, or how many undergraduate students have caring responsibilities (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Most students who are parents are mothers, and they are in a unique position. They encompass a mixed age group ranging from those in their late teens or twenties with infants to older parents with teenagers or adult children, so there is considerable diversity within the group (Lyonette, Atfield, Behle, & Gambin, 2015). The intersection of many of them with mature student definitions blurs the recognition of students who are parents as a group with particularities of their own (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). Comprising a heterogeneous minority group among the stereotypical traditional student body, they have taken a non-normative pathway into HE, veering from the socially expected trajectory of focusing ahead on family life and instead returning to school (Mercer, 2010). These alternative routes to university, coupled with the responsibilities involved in caring for a family, make students who are parents significantly different to students who go into university after leaving school (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011).

Since being a parent is such a large part of their lives, the emotional aspects of their past, present, and possible futures are paramount to how their stories are understood in relation to their time in university. The available information about students who are parents as a

particular group is still somewhat limited, and much of the literature appears to be focussed on their structural issues such as childcare and finances. There is yet little literature centred upon the achievements of students who are parents. The areas of interest appear to be concentrated on the barriers they face, which tend to present an overall negative portrait in which affirmative observations are outweighed. In the following rationale, an argument is presented that knowledge about the sense of connecting to and belonging in university of students who are parents will add to the understanding and recognition of their needs in university and the contributions they make to higher education.

1:3 Study Rationale

Having friends in university, feeling they are part of a relatable peer group and being able to work in groups are all elements that foster feelings of belonging in new students. (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Meehan & Howells, 2019). While the number of studies into the issues of student parents and mental health in HE is growing, there is very little information or interest in the quality of the relationships the parents develop within university. A rapport with lecturers, tutors and other staff are sometimes briefly mentioned as important, but with no depth or further enquiry (Forbus & Newbold, 2011; Moreau & Kerner, 2012). Yet such relationships are critical to most non- traditional student groups, especially in their first year, if they are to feel a sense of connection and belonging to university.

Students who are parents are usually older than traditional students, so there is often a generation gap between them that initially presents a barrier of communication between them (Lin, 2016). Marandet & Wainright (2010, p.800) mention that the initial “cultural clash” with younger students who have very different attitudes and lifestyles changes over time,

with the students who are parents becoming more tolerant and familiar with them. Likewise, they considered the possibility of the younger students becoming more mature (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Kasworm (2010) suggested that adults applied acquired skills of negotiation and communication to improve their relationships with traditional students. Although Kasworm (2014) identified some negativity in the relationships between students who are parents and traditional students, she also observed how students who are parents have a great deal of respect for the intelligence and hard work of the traditional students.

Although here are many studies of non-traditional students which include students who are parents, there are few that refer only to students who are parents (Appendix 1:1 Studies Specific to Student Parents). The examples in existing literature sometimes mention the alienation students who are parents experience in university, and that they find it difficult to feel they belong (Cho, Roy, & Dayne, 2021; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lyonette et al., 2015). However, they do not approach the issues of the sense of alienation or belonging in university of students who are parents in depth. Peer relationships between undergraduates is considered to be an important element of engaging with university, and a significant factor in fostering a sense of belonging (Meehan & Howells, 2019). How students who are parents relate to traditional student undergraduates, and how these interactions affect their sense of belonging in university, is less clear.

Thomas (2012) explained how the concept of belonging within the university community is essential to the wellbeing of a student if they are to succeed in HE (Thomas, 2012). It seems that full-time undergraduate students who have caring commitments are unlikely to relate to, or be included among peer groups formed among traditional, care-free, and often younger students, and rarely share the opportunity to engage with university society and culture

(Moreau Marie pierre, 2016; Wilsey, 2013). This observation leads to the current research question examined here. As students who are parents cannot prioritise their engagement in university, or have a similar level of involvement in university life as most traditional students can expect, how do they reach a sense of belonging in university alongside their existing commitments of raising children? To begin to answer this question and understand more of the missing detail about students who are parents, Thematic Analysis was chosen as a qualitative process of inquiry through which their experiences can be discerned. This method provided an opportunity to look more closely at what being in university means to student parents and how they succeed or fail in making meaningful relationships with other students in higher education.

1:4 Overview of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into seven chapters. The first chapter has introduced the focus and rationale of the thesis. A short synopsis of each subsequent chapter is offered below.

Chapter 2: Literature review.

This chapter provides an overview of the historical, political and cultural concepts relevant to the accommodation of students who are parents within university.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework.

This chapter includes an outline of the conceptual and theoretical theories, of Bourdieu, Baumeister, and Bronfenbrenner that underpin the methodology of this study. Alternative theories are briefly explained and acknowledged. The reasons for the final choice of theory applied to the data are also summarised.

Chapter 4: Method

The design and method chapter detail the philosophical background of phenomenological theory, which explains the concept of bracketing to separate out the researchers' personal preconceptions throughout the process of analysing the data. A description of how the interviews were obtained and managed is given, and the ethical considerations discussed. An explanation of Thematic Analysis is given.

Chapter 5: Analysis Part 1

The analysis begins with themes about the life stories behind the participants decisions to become undergraduates. The students who are parents talk about the changes in their lives that made a degree a goal to be achieved and explain why they have not entered higher education previously. The analysis then moves on to exploring how they make the adjustment to the unfamiliar environment of university.

Chapter 6: Analysis Part 2

The analysis continues with themes relating to the participants struggle to find their place in higher education. A focal issue is how the students who are parents manage their differences from other, more traditional students and recognise their own unique competences. These themes exemplify ways in which students who are parents experience a struggle to belong in higher education, their sense of their othering from the traditional student and their attempts to reconcile their multiple roles.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions

The discussion is presented in the form of three key findings summarising the salient points that can be drawn from the analysis, integrating the theories of Bronfenbrenner, Bourdieu and Baumeister with the experiences of the participants. The limitations of the study are given, future directions for study in the field are suggested and implications for practice are discussed. The conclusions are then drawn.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Sociology and psychology have provided substantial literature to understand the positionings of people in HE with the intersections of gender and class providing a particular contribution or lens with which to understand students who are parents (Burke & Crozier, 2014; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Moreau Marie pierre, 2016). The respective literature bases would be too expansive to fully review in this thesis, but a brief overview is provided below in order to understand how these ideas have influenced the project. The literature review first outlines the national policies that affect how students who are parents are positioned in relationship to the traditional student, before moving on to examine how cultural expectations built around gender and parenting appear to be in conflict with the social norms of HE. Lastly, the emphasis turns to the integration into universities of students who are parents, and how they reconcile their educational goals with the realities of managing a family.

2:1 The Notion of Widening Participation

“Widening Participation” is a term used to define the accessibility of HE to students from social and economic backgrounds who historically, had neither the early education, family connections or financial capital to be accepted into university (Budd, 2017; Moreau, 2016). The scope of whom widening participation seeks to support differs but can include people from ethnic minority and underrepresented communities, socially and economically disadvantaged groups, care leavers and young carers, adult learners and parents (MillionPlus, 2018). Although there is no agreed definition for non-traditional students, they often have a disrupted record of education, are often older than traditional students and come from very

different backgrounds and cultures, may be disabled or married and have children (Evans et al., 2019; Forbus & Newbold, 2011; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Essentially, non-traditional students come from social arenas which have no traditional affinity to HE through family links or economic class. The precept of the widening participation movement is a long-term policy to broaden the representation of these students in British higher education, increasing opportunities to access university by means of creating alternative routes of acceptance such as access and vocational courses (Burnell, 2015b; Evans et al., 2019). Having the opportunities for adults to upgrade their skills and education is essential in deprived districts if they are to improve their employment prospects (González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009).

Widening participation has been advocated by the educational authorities of the UK since 1997, and a white paper in 2003 (DfES, 2003, p22) referred specifically to universities adapting to be more conducive to mature students, as upgrading adult skills and qualifications can lead to improving economic leverage and a fairer society (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). However, students from less wealthy families and areas remain under-represented in HE in the UK, especially in the more elite universities, alongside other social groups who are effectively educationally deprived (Budd 2016). The stereotypical image of the traditional student continues to influence the concept of HE, at both state and local levels. Many universities continue to focus policies, teaching methods and regulations around traditional ideals, risking the marginalisation and alienation of students in the widening participation bracket (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Lyons, 2006a; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Consequently, non-traditional students sometimes feel compared and judged against traditional students, as though they are inadequate (Lyons, 2006b).

Once accepted into university, the non-traditional students, including those who are parents, are expected to learn in the same way as young students who have been recently schooled, successfully negotiated exams, and come from backgrounds with some familiarity of university culture. If non-traditional students find it difficult to adapt to the educational environment, it is possible for their institution to assume that the students are at fault for not being fully prepared or up to the required standard of competence, rather than reflecting on or revising policies or practice that function to discriminate against non-traditional students (Burnell, 2015; Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008). Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) explain how after the 1990's, in order to meet the demands of widening participation, HE became a more market-based resource than it had in the past. The increase in students required the system change from being elitist in nature to accommodating a far wider section of the population (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Alongside these changes, corporate-style management of universities became the norm, in which the student is generally regarded as a consumer of a product, thus relieving HE institutions of responsibility to manage policy and practice changes to benefit non-traditional students (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009; 2016).

Promoting wider access to higher education for all ages took priority in The Welsh Assembly plan for HE titled: For Our Future: The 21st Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales (2009). The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales set out to create accessible routes into HE (the Strategic Approach and Plan for Widening Access to Higher Education), in which offering flexible and part-time opportunities for mature learners to reach entry levels became a core principle (Evans et al., 2019). Analysing the widening participation policies across eight universities in Wales, Evans (2017) observed the teaching universities as being motivated to encourage mature applicants, associating with local colleges, and providing

access and part time courses to facilitate later entry to university. The research institutions tend to focus on persuading young people to aim for university, with less interest in older learners (Evans, et al. 2019).

Students who are parents tend to be portrayed as being less favourable to older universities because of their historical values and hierarchical position as more elite institutions (Moreau 2016; Reay, 2004). It is implied by some researchers that the teaching universities are more focused in supporting mature and working students to raise their attainment levels to university entry standards through compatible courses than research universities (Budd, 2017; Evans, et al. 2019). Each approach works towards goals of widening participation, but from a different direction and to a different result. As with the overall picture of HE in the UK, the older universities appear to favour younger applicants (Evans et al., 2019). One of the factors believed influential to curtailing the changes that could make some HE institutions more conducive to students who are parents is the adoption of a neoliberal political outlook to their policies and practices (Moreau & Kerner, 2012). The basic principle of this system, that the individual is responsible for their own choices, and the possible effects on HE is explained briefly below.

2:2 The political climate in which parents become students.

Neoliberalism is an ideology dating back to 1938, loosely describing marketing capitalisation, in which the social structure is maintained by competition (Miller, 2014). The basic assumption of neoliberalism was that every individual has an equal right to decide their own future and are held to be entirely responsible for their decisions. The presumption is that as long as the individual works hard and merits the reward they seek, nothing will stand in

their way to achieving the desired goal (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Miller, 2014). However, in practice, not all individuals have the same resources and status to begin with, making personal potential much harder to reach, (Burke & Crozier, 2014; Miller, 2014). Applied to higher education, a student is seen as responsible for adapting to and using education as a commodity available to anyone, but with the caveat that if there is something the student is unable to cope with, they are at fault. As the emphasis lies more in the competitive market for students, provision is modelled around the concept of traditional students, while making changes to accommodate diverse groups such as parents becomes a justifiably refused expense (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). The Neoliberal discourse takes the view that education is a personal choice of any individual and making it work is their own responsibility. Students who are parents are expected to take complete responsibility for themselves and must make the adaptations they need to fit the institution. The environment, policy structure and culture of a university is not held to account as a contributory factor in non-traditional student's problems. (Moreau & Kerner, 2012).

The overall ambivalent attitude towards students who are parents in higher education stems from ideology underpinning the educational system that places university students as consumers of a product. This invokes the neo-liberal policy of transferring all responsibility to the individual, in higher education, the approach separates the notion of student from any consideration of other responsibilities in their lives (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009).

Universities are generally orientated towards the inclusion of traditional, school-leaving students and not geared to meet the needs of students who are parents (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Burke and Crozier (2014) attribute this orientation to the "masculinised pedagogies" of higher education, which maintain learning as a gendered process, emphasising the

historical ideal of promoting rational, objective thought over emotion and attachment (Burke & Crozier, 2014).

By drawing upon an intersectional lens that would include gender, class, race, and other non-normative aspects of the student who is a parent it becomes clear that the social and cultural expectations of parenting impose a conflicting pressure against returning to education (Osborne et al., 2017). Parents are not necessarily women but any person who is parenting is subject to the gendered nature of the mother role (Estes, 2011). Underlining the modern bias against students who are parents, particularly mothers, is a predominantly feminist concept of equal opportunity, which implies that women must accede to male standards to achieve equal status to men. In education, this is demonstrated not only by the historical exclusion of women from learning, but by the modern observation that most influential academic figures are white, western males (Moreau 2016).

2:3 Gender Positioning the Student who is a Parent in Higher Education

HE is an arena historically associated with the Cartesian division of rational thinking and affective emotion (Moreau 2016). The archetypal student is that of the rational, reasoning male student of science, because for centuries women were considered to have an inferior intellect to men (González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009; Moreau 2016). Separating cognizance from the corporeal gave credence to the idea that rationality and emotion exist in opposition, reflecting the cartesian duality of mind and body (González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009). As emotion was deemed to be a feminine quality, women could not be truly rational, so they had no place in science and education. (González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009; Moreau 2016). The primary caring role of parents is in contrast inextricably bound to their emotional lives, and

therefore inconsistent with the conventional, quintessential ideal of a university student (González-arnal & Kilkey, 2009).

The field of HE in the twenty-first century is rooted in the cartesian duality of mind and body, the philosophy underlying the pursuit of scientific knowledge of the Enlightenment.

Centuries of academia considered the rational, enquiring mind to belong essentially to a white able-bodied male, abstracted from the caring and nurturing experiences that constructed his emotional personality (Moreau 2016). Considering women as “irrational” because of their unavoidable enmeshment with reproductive and caring roles, the first universities excluded them entirely (González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009; Moreau & Kerner, 2012). In this view, any person who is positioned as carer or parent is therefore automatically othered from education because the two are historically mutually exclusive. Penny Burke and Gill Crozier (2014) look at HE from a feminist perspective, arguing that although women are no longer denied any level of education in Britain, the teaching profession still leans into the patriarchal foundations of pedagogy. To be acceptable as a real university student covertly means emulating an outdated ideal of unfettered, rational masculinity, disassociating from exploring emotional depth and wellbeing (Burke & Crozier, 2014). There are powerful and complex forces at play here, that we only have time to touch upon briefly, but the following section will briefly outline the ways in which students who are parents may be affected by the historical disparity between concepts of gender and independence in HE.

To have a “public space” such as a university where people appear to enjoy freedom from any social burdens or caring responsibilities there will be a private space in which others, usually women, are accountable for the emotional, nurturing roles enabling those freedoms. Thus, equal opportunity in education entirely fails to question equality beyond the academic

sphere, so the needs of students who are parents often present as problematic (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). While widening participation has opened HE for parents to become students, the actual accessibility to engage in study is hampered because the structure of their private lives conflicts with the requirements of university. The equality of opportunity is undermined by university practices and policies designed to meet the needs of traditional, unencumbered students which fail to encompass the flexibility needed by students who are parents (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009).

University education has for so long been a privilege of middle and upper-class culture, the lack of preparation they have compared to traditional students leaves the students who are parents feeling less competent (Burnell, 2015b). HE is seen in these views as a historically and fundamentally gendered environment. The axiom of the entrenched masculine pedagogy places students who are parents, especially mothers, by default to a position of marginalisation yet to be rebalanced with authentic integration (Moreau, 2016). Rather than being part of a homogenous group sharing similar motivations and goals with other mature students, students who are parents in university are idiosyncratic, managing responsibilities other mature students may not have (Lin, 2016). Like many non-traditional students, they are at particular risk of not completing degree courses, as issues with funding, having to work and not being able to adapt to the culture and habitus of the university are amongst reasons given. For students who are parents, the incompatibility of studying and raising a family is sometimes insurmountable (Cotton, Nash & Kneale 2017; Moreau & Kerner 2015). They may have complicated skill profiles that are not readily understood by HE. Often, for example, but not always, they will be older than other students, and with that have more life and employment experience, but may have less academic training, have greater demands on their time and considerable personal responsibilities (Chung, Turnbull, & Chur-Hansen,

2017; Lin, 2016). It becomes clearer that students who are parents, whatever their social background, are in a unique demographic and social position. Moreau Kerner, 2012).

2:4 Motherhood, Parenting and HE

In their widely sourced research into gender discrimination in the workplace, Verniers and Vala (2018) present the possibility that such discrimination is justifiable through erroneous but ubiquitous cultural myths about motherhood. Included in these traditional beliefs are ideas like that all women have special capacities for housework and are naturally equipped to be competent parents. They are assumed to be able to bond effortlessly with their children, faultlessly managing every aspect of their upbringing, as long as they stay at home with them. Consequently, mothers who want to leave the home to work may be regarded as indifferent to their children's needs, neglecting the critical bonding with their children and risking the integrity of their family relationships. The writers suggest the myths they describe create an intrinsic barrier to all women seeking a career, since motherhood is widely thought of as inevitable for most women. This perceived threat to family stability seems to underlie the sexist distrust of women progressing in their career fields (Verniers & Vala, 2018).

For students who are parents, particularly the mothers, the choice to combine family life with full-time study comes pre-loaded with a multi-faceted potential for emotions of guilt. Rachel Brooks (2015) observed the cultural and spatial nature of these conflicting demands experienced by student mothers in Britain in comparison to student mothers in Denmark. In Danish society, which has abundant state-subsidised childcare facilities, mothers working or studying full time is a normal situation. Attending a nursery is customary for pre-school children and considered as a formality rather than a privilege (Brooks, 2012). In a country

where the state accepts funding provision for childcare, menfolk in Denmark (and other Nordic countries) are apparently more interested in having an active role in childrearing than most European fathers. This difference in gender attitudes mean Danish mothers are free of the expectations to be solely responsible for their children, and unlikely to feel guilty about leaving them to work or study (Brooks, 2012b).

In Brooks view, the comprehensive, conscientious mothering expected of a British mother causes a conflict between two social ideals of being a diligent parent and becoming a valuable employee, a conflict that may lead to deep-seated and negative feelings of guilt for a student who is a parent. These negative emotions are stronger among student mothers from a lower social and economic background, who are more likely to fail, are less likely to achieve higher paid jobs and through another myth of motherhood are also assumed to be less capable parents (Brooks, 2015). The burden of obligation has multiple sources, mostly engendered by the antagonism of managing the opposing roles of being a mother and a student. Areas of potential anxiety and conflict include the amount of time spent away from the children and partners, having to leave housework unfinished to complete study work, causing a drain on the family's financial resources by being at university and missing lectures or deadlines because children are unwell or care options have failed (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

Students who are parents are likely to have taken a break from education to have a child, so their understanding of teaching styles may be out of date, and they may be unprepared for the standards expected of them or experience in using relevant study resources. They have many responsibilities and priorities other than study, but the invisibility of students who are parents in HE means they are often not included in discussions of policies and practices (Lin, 2016;

Moreau & Kerner, 2012). They are responsible for raising children and supporting a family, yet in university, they are bound by rules, regulations, and policies designed to manage the behaviours and meet the needs of a much younger age group (Lin, 2016). The considerable differences of profile from the stereotypical traditional student create inherent barriers to finding a sense of belonging in university for students who are parents.

2:5 Understanding Students who are Parents and Belonging in University

The need to belong is a significant human need, and when people are compelled to be together even in short-term situations, they will seek to form positive social connections. Failure to fulfil the need to belong has the potential to cause adverse psychological effects, such as depression and loneliness (Baumeister & Leary 1995). Having a sense of belonging in university is important to all students as when they feel connected to and part of the institution, they are less likely to give up on their studies (Thomas, 2012). Baumeister (1995) comments briefly in his review on the nature of belonging that personal achievement is more meaningful when it is endorsed and commended by someone else, and that such approval enables sociable discourse to be established (Baumeister & Leary 1995). This viewpoint would indicate that any student who may experience challenges to developing a social network at university may experience broader struggles with their sense of belonging, and be less likely to complete their degree (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Students who are parents are likely to believe that their academic competence is less than that of other students, especially when they first start their courses (Mercer, 2010). These feelings may stem from poor recollections of their early schooling that lead them to doubt their academic abilities, worrying that they are too old to learn or not having the social support they need from their

family and friends. All these are among factors that can undermining the self-confidence of students who are parents (Lin, 2016; Mercer, 2010).

The struggle to belong and the apparent hostility of many HE institutions to learners who are parents appears to stem from the political attitude of the 1990's that people have personal responsibility for how they use opportunities. Applied to education, any questions of answerability about how university policy might disadvantage some non-traditional student groups effectively deflects any questions of responsibility back to the individual (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Instead of connecting any difficulties they encounter with the organisational structure of the university, the parents assume they have to resolve their issues themselves (Brooks, 2011). A lack of approval and support, either from outside or inside university, reduces the parents' self-esteem even further making it more difficult for them to feel they belong. Consequently, students who are parents can feel isolated and disconnected within university even when they have functioning social networks and close relationships outside (Lin 2016; Marandet & Wainwright 2010; Mercer 2010). The concept of care is disconnected from the management of HE at a national and institutional level, making students who are parents' interlopers within the system. They are susceptible to ostracism because they illuminate the division between the nature of care and the ideal independence of education from such responsibilities. (Moreau, 2016).

The neo-liberal masculine hegemony of HE and the emphasis on market performance redefines students as "rational economic subjects" (González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009) and reinforces the concept of the independent, care free student who will help maintain the performance rating. This role is one that students who are parents, especially mothers, will have difficulty fulfilling and feeling 'belonged to'. Under neo-liberal style national policies,

mothers are expected to devote much of their time and resources solely to raising their children (Brooks, 2015). In this sense, they belong to the role of preparing the young for education and not to be educated themselves. The market-driven style of HE and the expectations of mothers to be assiduous parents make parenting and studying appear virtually incompatible (Moreau 2016). University courses that are more congruent with parenting, like part-time and long-distance degrees and vocational courses, seem to be offered mostly by the lower status universities where a good economic payback is less likely. This relegates most students who are parents to the less respected institutions where the likelihood of achieving substantial financial rewards from a degree is more uncertain. (Moreau & Kerner, 2012).

Rather than seeking help from the institutions with their problems, parents tend to deal with everything on their own. They also tend to assume the blame when conflict between their parenting and their studying arises (Kasworm, 2014; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009).

Younger parents and single mothers are especially likely to be thought of as unsuitable students, as they are sometimes construed by some staff as lacking experience both as mothers and learners (Moreau & Kerner, 2012). There are international examples of good practice that better promote a sense of belonging in diverse student populations. The Social Democrat approach in Denmark, for example, whereby supporting students who are parents is an intrinsic part of the universities responsibility to ensure they overcome the disadvantages. Rachel Brooks (2012) highlights the cultural differences of educating between a neo-liberal and a social democratic system in her comparison of students who are parents in Britain and Denmark. Alongside demonstrating the contrasts of the neoliberal, market-led system of HE in Britain at a social level, Brooks also introduces some of the cultural attitudes towards parenting that we examine more closely in this review, namely, the burden of the

expectations upon a mother to maintain primary responsibility for her children (Brooks, 2012).

In the Danish samples, there was much less difference between the experiences of parent students in the “Older” and “Newer” universities, which are not divided in terms of status and prestige in the same way as British universities. Unlike many of the UK mothers, Danish mothers have little issue with finding and financing suitable childcare places since Denmark has affordable and plentiful state provision. This level of provision negates the need to rely on family friends and schools to fill in gaps while parents take time to study, and in Denmark, mothers expect to study or work full time. In Brooks sample populations in Denmark, the parents assumed studying for a degree to be equally important to both parties and something to take turns doing. As students who are parents, they are free to manage their identity without having to focus on being either a parent or a student (Brooks, 2012).

Mercer (2009) explains how students who are parents are making a non-normative shift, an unexpected and challenging change of direction from their normal social setting. Traditional students are making a normative shift, they are doing something predictable within their social circles and status (Mercer, 2010). Moreau points out that there are academics who believe students who are parents underestimate the demands of university and have misunderstood what a degree will entail (Moreau, Kerner, 2012). She suggests some academics see students who are parents as problematic, because being responsible for children will cause them difficulties beyond the scope of the university to solve. This attitude stems from the neo-liberal foundation of HE that learners are expected to adapt to their institution, not expect the institution to change for them. The students who are parents only become visible when they conflict with the normal expectations for an independent learner

(Moreau, Kerner, 2012). Others view them as heroes (or heroines) who make superhuman efforts to cope with the daily demands of family life and manage university as well (Moreau, Kerner, 2012). Recognising their motivation and determination to be in HE, some staff appreciate the ability of students who are parents to cope with multiple tasks and situations (Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Moreau 2016).

Although students who are parents are in a situation where they may gain considerably in terms of education and personal achievement, there is a sense emanating from the evidence that they are “lucky” to have been granted a place. However, depending on relatives while trying to develop a new role and identity as a student as well as a mother risks stress not only to the individual, but to family relationships as well (Smith, Fisher, & Ramprogus, 2020; Sweet & Moen, 2007). Only those courses where more mature women tend to be found, such as nursing and teaching, seem to have a built-in structural tolerance and flexibility toward students who are parents. However, the requirement of work placements typical of these degree programmes, often away from home, sometimes undermine these better support levels, and create stressful situations for the mothers (Lyonette et al., 2015). It appears that even the colleges training predominantly female professions assume that it is the parent who has to accommodate the institution, not the institution that could find ways to accommodate the parents (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009).

Lyonette et al. (2015) reports student mothers relying on practical support not only from partners, family, friends but also from individual lecturers (Lyonette et al., 2015). Students who are parents are often observed to have close relationships with their extended family, depending on this support structure instead of turning to their university facilities (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lin, 2016; Smith et al., 2020). As they already have an established network

of trusted support in their existing family and friendship circles, they may just prefer to rely on these networks instead of the services offered by their university. With different needs to traditional students, it may be that support services in some universities fail to cater for students who are parents, deeming them responsible for their own problems if they have chosen to study in an environment designed to cater to young, single people (Lyonette et al., 2015). These discourses uncovered some animosity toward students who are parents not fitting the standard mould of “student” well enough to be accepted by some academic staff, while others appreciate the sacrifice parents are making (Lin, 2016; Lyonette et al., 2015).

Student fathers have different challenges to those of student mothers in the UK, reflecting the social division of labour that decrees women are responsible for the home while men are the “providers” who go out to work (Brooks, 2012). Student mothers usually retain their day-to-day duties of managing the children’s timetable and the domestic housework, studying for them is regarded as something of an additional hobby to her life. For the fathers, study is an acceptable alternative to employment and prioritised over any family obligations in the same way as his work. Women are expected to continue as the primary carer in the family as well as being a student, men can expect their female partners and family to continue to accommodate his needs as a student (Brooks, 2013). In an economic climate that can include pushing mothers to become employees, the pressure on fathers to take on some of the domestic roles is growing but it is still mothers who face criticism if they are not always with their children (Estes, 2011).

In summary, in the UK women tend to be expected to meet almost impossible standards of parenthood by dedicating their time and aspirations entirely to their children if they are to consider themselves a “good” parent. The historic view of Bowlby (1953) that children will

be damaged by maternal deprivation may have been long disproved, but the idea mothers are the only people who can properly raise children is still pervasive. A mother who takes time away from her children to work or worse still, study, will have struggle to meet acceptable levels of good parenting as well as the ideal of the “good student”, as the two activities are both endlessly demanding of time and attention (Moreau, Kerner, 2012). One result of the social pressure women feel to be exemplary mothers is that reducing the time they have to spend with the children in order to study invokes a sense of guilt (Smith et al., 2020). Rachel Brooks (2013) comments that while some feminist writers claim that in countries such as Denmark, which foster equality and value caring, men still have more freedom than women to make decisions about how much they undertake in these areas. However, there appears to be less of a social sense of male entitlement in Denmark according to Brook’s observations, and HE in Denmark appears to have a more gender-balanced and inclusive culture than that of the UK (Brooks, 2012, 2013).

Much of the commentary around the subject of students who are parents tends to be focussed on the structural, mechanical and cultural barriers they face in HE. The body of literature describing students who are parents has concentrated mostly on the negative aspects, such as finances, unfriendly policy and the difficulties of childcare because these are the areas which affect them adversely. Yet many students who are parents can and do find university a positive and fulfilling experience and succeed in their aspirations (Lyonette et al., 2015.) There are some very positive points raised within the texts. The fact that students who are parents are in university to be included in studies proves they must be able to surmount the obstacles and make progress with studying (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). Being able to meet and overcome these challenges has been seen as an opportunity to improve the sense of self-worth, as successfully resolving the dichotomies between studying and parenting can

lead to positive personal outcomes such as increased self-efficacy and resilience (Smith et al., 2020). Some find their sense of identity changing and strengthening as their interactions with their family and university develop, while some rebuild their self-esteem around the conception of a studious parent as an inspirational role model of learning for their children (Estes, 2011; Mercer, 2010).

2:6 How Students Who Are Parents Own Their Graduate Aspirations

The concept of the work life balance to explore the connections and interactions of working and managing family life is only partially applicable to student parents. Students who are parents who also work have not only to deal with the dilemma of combining work with an already demanding role as a parent, but with an equally demanding role as a student. In a research university organised and operated around a youthful, single student population, students who are parents have few peers (Kasworm, 2010). Student mothers who work and study have a threefold arena of disparate commitments that contrasts with the duality of comparing working and family life. Each role affects the other and the combination impacts wellbeing in complex ways. Adding studying to existing responsibilities compromises what little leisure time student mothers have, forcing them to prioritise family time over personal needs, and they still take the responsibility of managing the household and domestic necessities (Smith et al., 2020).

Having to retain the gendered role of being the primary carer for the children causes conflict when studying is perceived to be an end to a personal goal (Smith et al. 2020). The personal goals students who are parents are pursuing through HE overlap into three broad categories: wanting to gain a qualification to enable them to enter or further their progress in a preferred

career, raising their educational level to improve their prospects in the jobs market and maximising the family's future earning potential by inspiring the children to engage with learning through the parents example (Lyonette et al. 2015; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; van Rhijn, Lero, & Burke, 2016). Various factors impact how these goals play out after graduation in terms of improving financial security and social mobility in the long term.

In 2015, researchers Lyonette, et al. (2015) applied information from the Futuretrack programme of Warwick University to assess how well student mothers can reach their goals in HE. Student mothers appear less likely to be in full-time work or self-employment after completing higher education, and more likely to be out of the labour market than childless and younger students. Analysing factors that affect parents returning to former employment or entering non-graduate employment after graduation, it becomes apparent that being a parent is less significant than the social economic background of the student. Gaining graduate level work depends mainly upon what kind of degree is acquired, where and how well it is achieved and the age of the graduate. Many students parents in the later responses to Futuretrack are in a lower- paid, part-time and non-graduate position close to home, because of the same restrictions around moving to a new location that defines their choice of university (Lyonette et al., 2015).

Student who are parents often have jobs and children settled in school. Attending university has to be juxtaposed with school, nursery, work and domestic arrangements as well as university timetables. Consequently, they are often dependent on the support of their extended family to help with childcare (González-arnal & Kilkey, 2009; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Since it is this support making studying possible, moving home to be in reach of a chosen university is a contradiction in terms, unless the rest of the family relocates

as well. Consequently, the degree course or qualification a parent in an economically disadvantaged situation can choose to study is limited. Their choice is restricted by what is available where they live at the time of application, as is the quality of the delivery of the teaching (González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009; Moreau & Kerner, 2012). Student mothers often return to the work they had before they entered university, taking breaks after studying to give more attention to their families. Unlike the childless control groups, students who are parents are less able to spend time gaining experience in unpaid positions or travel long distances to take up better paid jobs. The benefits of having a degree are not solely judged by students who are parents in terms of financial return (Lyonette et al, 2015; Sweet & Moen, 2007). Returns in the shape of enhanced self-esteem, greater personal confidence and being able to engage with their children's education are intrinsically important and valuable to graduate students who are parents, especially mothers. Survey answers from a small number of student fathers show they mainly chose to enter degree courses to further their careers, placing higher emphasis than mothers on the reputation of the institution and the specific course offered (Lyonette et al., 2015).

Overall, Lyonette et al. conclude that higher education does not seem to affect social inequality or facilitate social mobility for student mothers. Reasons for these relatively poor outcomes include the mothers having local limits in their choice of university, educational limits in their choice of degree courses and family limits on their choice of employment. (Lyonette et al., 2015). However, students who are parents, especially mothers, take more things into consideration than just the measurable and tangible outcomes of better jobs and higher pay. Through being undergraduates, they achieve new knowledge and expand their skills, increasing their self-confidence in their ability to learn and use their intelligence while they are improving their social status as better educated parents (Burnell, 2015; Smith et al.,

2020). In appreciating the value of education, they instil the normality of studying into their children's lives. Instead of feeling they are failing as parents, they see themselves as prevailing because their children have them as a healthy role model for successful study, thus blending the antithetical identities of parent and student into a single, original category of the student-parent (Estes, 2011; Kasworm, 2010; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Smith et al., 2020). In terms of supporting students who are parents there is a limited literature base with which to direct intervention. Lin (2016) put forward a number of suggestions about how teaching staff might work to alleviate some of the critical stressors for student parents, including ways to improve and facilitate relationships between the students who are parents and the mainstream students. She regards such interventions as essential to reduce the risk of them dropping out (Lin 2016).

The potential lack of communication with traditional students, coupled with being an outsider in the university ethos, leaves students who are parents dependent on their own self-reliance to successfully navigate their way through university (Kasworm, 2010). The dedicated support services within universities are normally structured around the needs of the younger students. Moreau and Kerner in their 2012 investigation into the experience of students who are parents, analyse discursive approaches toward students who are parents in the conversations. They find university staff have opposing attitudes toward them, some see students who are parents in HE as a problematic group; only when they are having difficulties and need support do they become visible to the university system. (Moreau & Kerner, 2012). Universities making allowances for parenting students "add on" provisions that can be viewed as further distinguishing the students who are parents as separate from the main student body. Such provisions may do nothing to change the overall antagonistic framework

in their favour and leave students who are parents to resolve problems themselves (Kasworm 2010; Moreau & Kerner 2012).

This chapter has outlined how previous research has sought to characterise the difficulties students who are parents encounter in finding belonging in education, while also recognising their strengths and highlighting the affirmative aspects HE offers them. Drawing on work by various writers, for example, Burnell (2015), Reay, Crozier and Burke (2010) and Thomas (2002) and their focus on widening participation and non-traditional students it is possible to see some of the historical and contemporary circumstances that help to understand why mature and parenting students may have problems assimilating with academic settings in university surroundings. Attention now turns to outline the conceptual and theoretical theories that underpin much of the described research and that which has been used to guide the methodology of this study.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Belonging is a complex construct that philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists have sought to understand. To help characterise the challenges these students face belonging to university, there are a number of relevant theoretical models that could be appropriate. Of these models, one that required consideration was Self Determination Theory, but the style of the data collection and the chosen method of analysis contraindicates the application of this theory in this instance. Instead, the models adopted to guide the presentation are those of Bourdieu, Baumeister and Bronfenbrenner.

Self Determination Theory (SDT) was first put forward by Ryan and Deci in 1985 and has since become an established framework for the study of personal development, motivation, and psychological wellbeing. The theory focuses on the idea that people are inherently motivated to learn and grow as individuals, and that this growth is enabled when the three fundamental needs of Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness are met (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Autonomy is a state in which an individual is acting from a place of self-motivated control, engaging with learning situations from their own volition. Competence refers to the feeling of being in a position where the individual is confident of meeting the demands upon them and have positive opportunities to build upon their skills. Relatedness involves experiencing acceptance by others, which strengthens feelings of connectedness and expedites a sense of belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2020). SDT is a very broad theory proven across many different areas of psychology where motivation, emotional regulation and intention are of concern, and is applied extensively in educational and health research, as it prioritises the role of the individual self in the process of development (Ryan, Deci, Vansteenkiste, & Soenens, 2021).

As a primarily empirical and deductive framework, STD would be an entirely appropriate tool in the study of students who are parents in a situation with a larger population, or a project with multiple universities involved. However, the localised nature of this study leans into a heuristic, inductive perspective allowing for a more personal and nuanced portrayal of the participants.

The diverse nature of the participants, along with their widening participation status, led instead to the choice of the philosophies of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979-2005), Baumeister and Leary (1995) and Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979). Bourdieu's concepts of class values and educational elitism demonstrate some of the reasons behind the discomfort of non-traditional students in HE. The interactions of students who are parents at university can also be viewed in the light of Baumeister's (1995) explanation of the sense of belonging as a human need, to better understand the apparent lack of belonging students who are parents face in HE. Baumeister represents the sense of belonging as an integral part of wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). That students in university need to feel they belong in order to thrive is a well-documented phenomenon, (Meehan & Howells, 2019; Thomas, 2012), supported by Baumeister and Leary's work. The ideas of Bourdieu and Baumeister are nested within and juxtaposed with the work of Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979), who emphasises the importance of dyadic interaction in the process of development. Bronfenbrenner's later work on the influence on individual development of Proximal processes, Person characteristics, Context and Time is included as these concepts are helpful to understanding the relevance of consistent relationships in university to learning.

3:1 Bourdieu and the Aristocracy of Education

Bourdieu (1977) defines the reciprocal relationship between the social structure and the mindset that embodies it as habitus. The ideas, values and social norms of the people and institutions around them as children create and reinforce the way that a person thinks about and interacts with their social environment. Ways of behaving, methods of managing daily life, their outlook on social issues, their expectations, their perception of their world, are all governed by a complex social system which, in turn, is internalised and perpetuated by those who are part of the system (Maton, 2014). For example, a working-class person is likely to be comfortable in a working-class environment. He or she is in tune with how other people around them view the world; they can reasonably predict their reactions, choices and behaviour because they share social norms and values. They also share similar resources of wealth and education. They live and work in the same field; a term Bourdieu uses to describe a characteristic social environment. Bourdieu insisted that a field was not a system or theory. Each overlapping field has identifiable internal structures and identity, and represents a sociological aid to identifying how a specific area of society is constructed (Maton, 2014). One specific area of interest to Bourdieu is elitism in education, which explains the frequent application of his theories to discourses of widening participation.

From Bourdieu's perspective, a working-class person does not struggle to belong in higher education because of a lack of aspiration but rather because working-class people may be excluded from the material resources and cultural understandings that are favoured by higher education – the rules of the game as it were. Bourdieu describes how, in comparison to the habitus and field of the European working class, the wealthier middle classes have greater financial and educational resources (Burnell, 2015). The affluence of the middle classes

allows access to artistic and cultural opportunities, including access to better standards of education. Class conventions have historically discouraged working-class people with their own sphere of cultural experience and assets from entering university while encouraging the expectations of the wealthy to achieve success in university. Middle-class families traditionally have the required resources of cultural and financial reserves to access and practice learning and study (Burnell, 2015; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009).

Therefore, while there have been gains in widening participation (outlined in Chapter 1), HE is seen essentially as a preserve of those students whose families have the reserves to invest time and money into the deferred rewards of HE. This is especially so because of the normative progression to HE from further education – thus children who are raised in affluent families who are more able to accommodate an extended financial dependence are more likely to be able to stay on the educational path for longer. The middle class habitus incorporates the confidence and expectation to maintain their social position, while that of the working class appears to be self-limiting in terms of career expectations and educational expectations (Burnell, 2015). A non-traditional student whose life experience differs from the middle-class habitus may have the intellectual ability to adapt to the academic field, but their habitus, their social mindset, may not change so easily. Bourdieu reasons that it is the unconscious class mindset of the non-traditional student that causes them to feel ill at ease and out of place within university culture. The habitus of the student has to change, while the habitus of the university remains the same (Burnell, 2015). They have not accrued the cultural capital from their social origins and will find it difficult to conform within the academic setting as they lack the social knowledge and self-possession to be fully part of the new field (Burnell, 2015).

Bourdieu's vision of society included the concept of cultural capital, the cultural wealth of experience of art, music, literature, and private tuition available to the wealthier strata of the population. This imbues students from these classes with a shared understanding and knowledge of culture that has historically been largely unavailable to people outside of the circles of privileged society. Cultural capital, in conjunction with the privileges of the middle- and upper-class habitus, includes the understanding of academic language needed to be successful in adapting to university (Burnell, 2015; Cotton et al., 2017; Reay et al., 2009). Reay (2004) remarks upon how the interconnected elements of field, cultural capital and habitus which work together to create the principle of practice. Practice is how the individual applies the innate understanding of social rules and etiquette generated within their habitus into everyday situations (Maton 2014). Bourdieu's formula was that $(\text{Habitus} \times \text{Capital}) + \text{Field} = \text{Practice}$, which Reay understands to mean that cultural capital is a driving force of the creation of habitus. The close relationship between habitus and field in which the world is recreated in the mind of the actor leads to the situation where a person is comfortable within the mental and physical habitus they evolved in (Reay, 2004). Maton (2014) discusses the low expectations of working-class, formally poorly educated people described by Bourdieu, as being created from outside by the pressure from more powerful segments of society to preserve their elite status, and from the inside by the sense of belonging within the working-class social framework.

Using Bourdieu's lens, students who are parents will be likely to be disadvantaged in higher education as they struggle to belong, because of the possibility of a dearth of cultural capital and material resources. Returning to education as a parent is a way to accumulate educational and cultural capital (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Because of their non-normative, non-conformist status, working-class students who are parents tend to be marginalised by other,

normative groups in HE, a situation in which, in fact, their cultural capital may decrease (Brown & Nichols, 2013). While it is by no means a given that students who are parents will be from a working-class background (see our definition on page 11), because of the way that HE is funded in the UK and the material investment demanded by undergraduate students, students who are parents are most likely undertaking their first degree, and because of that they were more likely not to be on a university pathway at 18. We do however recognise the complexity in this positioning, and it forms part of the challenge in recognising and developing interventions for this particular group of students. Since students who are parents do not necessarily have similar socio-economic status or education, the philosophies of Bourdieu alone are not enough to satisfy the demands of this project.

Bourdieu's original presentation of working-class people as being responsible for their "lowly" status because of their unmindful acceptance of social subordination is also questionable, as it seems to deny individual determinism and the wider social forces and institutions that shape social systems (Burnell, 2015b). Burnell, however, attests that evidence from research has shown that for adults in HE, habitus may have less persistence than Bourdieu believed. Bourdieu's earlier writing neglects other socially divisive issues such as race, gender and disability, although he later accepted gender differences to be an underlying factor in the creation of Habitus (Reay, 2004). However, in his later work, Bourdieu addresses the cognitive aspect of habitus such as the development of morals, ethics and reflexivity, which the earlier rendition of his ideas had left in doubt (Reay, 2004). Bourdieu, however, intended habitus to be used as a fluid concept, underpinning rather than defining unconscious social structures. Therefore, having a predisposition to a familiar social landscape does not mean an individual cannot or will never change. Instead of repeating inherent patterns of thought and behaviour, parents returning to education are often

challenging their personal academic and social barriers. As well as developing learning skills, they are creating new values and goals for themselves and their families (Burnell 2012; Mercer 2010; Wilsey 2013)

Applying Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field to studies of non-traditional students has been effective where working-class students, a demographic which often includes parents, are the focus. His theory appears to help explain and define the contrasting nature of the non-traditional student's background with that of traditional students and the university culture. The concept of Habitus is a useful means to understand how social arenas are constructed by the people who inhabit them (Reay, 2004). The influence of Bourdieu's theory in the context of the present study lies in the apparent difficulty student parents have in fitting into academic culture. His overview of the interplay between social class constructs recognises and highlights some of the potential sources of friction affecting the relationships of student parents within a university.

Students who are parents face difficulties and obstacles other traditional students do not have, due in part to a lack of equal cultural capital in comparison with traditional students and an unfamiliarity with the habitus and practice of the university environment (Cotton et al., 2017; Reay et al., 2009). From Bourdieu, the defining message appears to be as much an explanation of the hopelessness of poverty as it is an interpretation of how power and wealth functions in society. He takes a negative view of the possibility of non-traditional learners succeeding in education, as he seems to believe the real resistance to learning emanates from an ingrained, unconscious acceptance that such education is unattainable. Bourdieu sees this acceptance as being fundamentally created by an elitist social system effectively withholding education from a large part of the population. Allowing a few acceptable people from lower

class backgrounds through HE sometimes, helps convey an impression that a lack of ability to succeed in university is a consequence of individual foresight, and not a result of a system closed against them (Burnell, 2015). Consequently, students who are parents can be seen as starting from a default position of disadvantage which in research, may translate into a bias presupposing failure and over emphasising successes (Burnell, 2015).

Yet despite these disadvantages, students who are parents and other non-traditional students evidently can adapt well and succeed in HE, managing the transitions between their educational and social fields as they pursue self-improvement (Reay et al., 2009). The work of Bourdieu is important in that he offers explanations for some of the social challenges that student parents face in HE and deflects blame from the individual student. Nonetheless, in Bourdieu's view an individual is unlikely to succeed in overcoming the inertia of their original social situation and break away from its constraints on their behaviour (Reay, 2004). This view is problematic if the positive outcomes seen among the participants are to be fully explored. Students who are parents can surpass their disadvantages and successfully navigate HE, and a central component in achieving this is to be able to feel they belong to university. To understand more about the nature of belonging and what a sense of belonging means to a student who is a parent, an understanding of the observations of Baumeister and Leary (1995) will be advantageous.

3:2 Baumeister and the Need to Belong

In 1995, Baumeister and Leary reviewed the available evidence supporting the belief in the human need to belong as a basic drive to make meaningful relationships with other people. Having such relatedness would create a sense of wellbeing, while not having interaction

would lead to distress. The compulsion to seek companionship and form social groups is found across all cultures and societies, where friendships and communal groups are natural phenomenon that need no specific advantageous circumstances to exist. Equally ubiquitous as the formation of relationships is the painfulness of breaking social bonds, even those that are expected to be temporary. The need to belong appears to be strongly influential on human thinking and emotions. Strong and stable relationships help to foster positive emotions, while a lack of relationships is associated with anxiety. Baumeister observed through his review that a great deal of powerful human emotions relates to a sense of belongingness. Those in a position to feel they are part of a social group or network appear to be happier, calmer and less physically and emotionally stressed. The evidence led Baumeister to ascertain that as not belonging had such consistently detrimental effects on individuals, it warranted defining as a human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Feelings of belonging in university are fostered and strengthened by several factors. A critical advantage is having parents and family members who have been to university, or schooling that has given the student an insight into the culture of university before they transition into higher education. Such students know what to expect, how to behave, and what will be wanted of them, they carry the cultural capital to integrate more easily into the higher educational system (Meehan & Howells, 2018). Student parents, while not exclusively working-class, usually lack helpful understanding of the university ambience to begin with, especially as they may have had a long break since they were last in education. They can encounter mixed emotions, veering between apprehension and earnestness, as they try to find their way around the unfamiliar social and cultural environment. (Christie et al., 2008; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018).

For traditional students, building robust friendship groups with which they can share their experiences, support each other and work and play together is an essential part of the university experience. Alongside a supportive peer group, a further factor in developing a sense of belonging is being able to build rapport with teaching staff (Christie et al., 2008; Freeman et al., 2007; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). Thomas (2012) also stressed the importance of supportive student friendships as having a crucial role in facilitating the social engagement of students with university, especially in regard to developing a sense of belonging. Making these important friendships is more difficult for students who live off campus and have other commitments, like students who are parents (Thomas, 2012).

Taking part in extracurricular activities like societies, clubs and Student Union events are more than just social events. Doing so makes avenues for new and valuable connections within the university and eventually may influence achievements beyond graduation (Stuart, Lido, Morgan, Solomon, & May, 2011). Obviously, not all traditional students manage to blend seamlessly into university life, but for students who are parents being involved in campus life and extracurricular activities is barely possible when they have a family to care for. Making friends among the younger learners is a questionable achievement for students who are parents, because of the difference in age they cannot easily share interests and outlooks (Christie et al., 2008; Lin, 2016; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006).

In summary, cultivating a sense of belonging in university is an uphill struggle for parents who are students as they have reached HE via non-normative pathways, and do not share the same educational frame of reference or the same level of individual independence as traditional students. From the perspective of Bourdieu, parents who are students originating from social backgrounds with less access to the cultural and financial resources traditionally

associated with university level study are entering a potentially challenging situation of having to orientate themselves within an unfamiliar field of practice (Burnell 2015). However, while students who are parents are non-traditional, they are not always working class. Bourdieu's impressions of a situation of discord arising through a conflict of culture are not always applicable, and even when they are, the conflicts can be overcome as students adapt to the new setting (Reay 2009). Bronfenbrenner (1970, 2001), instead of focussing on social and cultural norms and divisions such as class status, considers the individual in terms of their development as a consequence of their journey through life and across time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Using the concept of the interlocking layers of society Bronfenbrenner describes as systems, the student who is a parent is seen as a unique creation of the social and political era through which they have become adults. Within the influence of the systems, each individual lived situation and interactions with other people have the potential to enhance a person's development, which Bronfenbrenner explains in terms of Proximal processes, Person characteristics, Context and Time (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). In this contextual view, a sense of belonging in university for a student who is a parent involves not only adapting to the university but integrating university into the complex lives they already have. Baumeister (1995) emphasised how people need not only to feel they belong in a social group of which they are a part, even if that group is by nature likely to be short-lived, but that people also need to feel that their achievements are recognised and validated by other people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995 p498). Students who are parents tend to be excluded from friendship groups and social circles of traditional students in university because of the fundamental differences in lifestyles, educational backgrounds and age (Lin, 2016; Lyonette

et al., 2015). Consequently, they have either to find alternative ways to communicate and connect with the student community or remain isolated within it.

3:3 Bronfenbrenner and the Systems

An alternative model of how student parents succeed or fail with integration into university may lie in the theories proposed by the developmental specialist Uri Bronfenbrenner (Adams, 2018). Written between 1970 to 2001, the Bioecological Theory of Human Development began as an explanation of the importance of social context on individual development. The theory considers a human's personal growth as a process governed by the changing influences of relationships with other people and the social contexts within which the relationships occur (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Bronfenbrenner promoted the concept of the social environment, or ecology, as a series of interconnected concentric layers. Each layer, or system, influences the individual, the closest layers are those in which the individual is an active participant, and the outer layers are those which they may never directly encounter. These layers are termed the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- The microsystem is a place, or setting, where a person experiences first-hand ongoing contact with others, has recognisable roles and is involved in day-to-day activities.
- The mesosystem incorporates various microsystems a person may be part of; for a child, this could be seen as the settings of home and school, while an adult might be part of a home microsystem and also that of a workplace and a social group. Each time a person moves into a new setting, for instance, a new job, they expand their mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- The exosystem comprises settings in which a person has no direct influence or contact, but which may indirectly influence them. As Bronfenbrenner's priority lay with children, he gave examples such as a parent's workplace or the school board to illustrate the nature of an exosystem. Rules and guidelines originate in the exosystem and affect the individual within it, without the individual influencing the rules that are made.
- The macrosystems are the superordinate cultural and political patterns of a country reflected in the beliefs and practices of the inner systems. The structure of the macrosystems encompasses differences between religious and social subcultures, including the disparities between rich and poor citizens. These cultural archetypes maintain the ecologies of the inner systems but, like people, are susceptible to change over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Within the theory of ecological, social systems, Bronfenbrenner later (1993) embedded a further model explaining the relevance of each individual's reciprocal relationships within each system to their continuing development. The four components of this model are Proximal processes, Person characteristics, Context and Time, the PPCT model (Tudge et al., 2016). Proximal processes describe interactions with an environment, and the people connected to it, that engender "psychological growth" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These are more than communications with other people; the elements of the environment are equally important in creating a situation from which the individual derives and constructs their meaning of reality. Such situations may occur more than once or be part of a sequence or cycle of events. (Griffore & Phenice, 2016).

Person characteristics, as envisaged by Bronfenbrenner, describe how the temperament of an individual facilitates how they make sense of a proximal process to derive an outcome conducive to their personal development. “Generative force characteristics” describes tendencies to be investigative, able to create and stay attentive to the situation, and the capacity to accept the postponement of reward. “Disruptive force characteristics” are those that lead to difficulties with situations or events, such as impetuosity, aggressiveness and the inability to postpone reward. “Resource characteristics” define qualities that help an individual gain improvement from proximal processes by employing knowledge from prior events (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Bronfenbrenner’s descriptive characteristics recognises the structural considerations as with Bourdieu but also offers an affirmative insight as to how parents may approach higher education. They have experience of engaging in diverse interactions in the ecological systems around them, in the extended timeframes necessary to foster personal development (Adams, 2018). As proximal processes are interactions between people, adverse circumstances can negatively affect the quality of the processes, even if disruptive force characteristics are not involved. For example, in a situation where a student fails to relate to, or communicate effectively with a lecturer, the proximal processes between the teacher and student essential to the student’s development could be disrupted or impaired.

These processes, according to Bronfenbrenner, occur within the ecology of microsystems and under the auspices of the macrosystem, and the circumstances that the systems create are crucial to understanding the relationships and outcomes observed in the context of the systems (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Time is viewed via the concept of the chronosystem. The umbrella term chronosystem refers to the timescale of a person’s life, involving the

generation to which they are born, the consequences of local and world events on their lives, and how affairs in their personal lives alter their perspectives over time. Bronfenbrenner divides his chronosystem into three dimensions. Microtime describes how proximal processes may follow on or fade out, mesotime relates to the frequency of proximal processes through real time, and macrotime portrays the momentum of wider society as attitudes and prospects shift and change with political and cultural modulations (Adams, 2018). Through Bronfenbrenner's lens, the development of an individual takes place through complex interactions that are continually energising and modifying their understanding of the world. These interactions are reciprocal events between people and the environment in which they occur, influenced by characteristics of the individual as well as events and social factors beyond the immediate sphere of activity (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The lack of social engagement with university typically experienced by students who are parents limits their available interactions, reducing their potential for personal development.

Bronfenbrenner argues that a process of self-development is engendered each time an individual has a life event, or a series of encounters that encourages them to broaden their understanding of their reality. While he accepts that the circumstances of an individual's upbringing may impact their life choices and opportunities, he also states "Human development is the process through which the growing person acquires a more extended differentiated, and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties of, sustain, or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content (Bronfenbrenner, Parker, 2020, p27). His overall message is that an individual who, from an early age, experiences positive interactions with other people and their environment will be capable of

integrating, participating and diversifying in wider environments as an adult (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

3:4 Applying Bronfenbrenner to Student Parents

In his first model of the Ecology of Human Development, Bronfenbrenner postulated his 29th hypothesis that the development of the individual will be augmented as a result of being involved in various social settings and relationships, particularly, if the other people in those surroundings have more experience. Founded in the idea that development can flourish when an individual has to become familiar with the skills needed to manage in multiple different situations, Bronfenbrenner suggests that broad experience in communicating with others and adapting to new environments fosters resilience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Chung, Turnbull and Chur-Hansen (2017) describe resilience as an ongoing process of acquiring the skills to adapt to and cope with crises and hardship. The idea is that adults who have overcome and recovered from “normal” stressful events in their lives successfully are likely to be more resilient, and better equipped to cope with such pressures in future than individuals who have not had to make such adaptations. Students defining themselves as non-traditional because of being older, employed or a parent appeared in their study to have significantly higher levels of resilience than other students (Chung, Turnbull, & Chur-Hansen, 2017). They suggest this greater resilience gained from a broader and more arduous life experience is more likely to support than detract from academic accomplishment. For student parents, those skills may be more easily garnered since they are used to managing and adapting to new situations in their adult lives (Chung et al., 2017). But their resilience and tenacity in arriving at HE is not the full story, and the literature review evidences that despite skills, knowledge, and experience,

students who are parents can and do struggle to belong in HE (Adams, 2018; Kasworm, 2010; Lin, 2016).

The process of becoming an undergraduate student is nerve-wracking for all students. For those students who are the first in their families to attend university, they may come from backgrounds which have little understanding about the culture of a university, how they are meant to behave as an undergraduate, or what to expect from staff and other students (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Of the problems and anxieties parents face when they begin university, many are not unique to parents but are shared by other groups of non-traditional students. Chris Laing (2005) cites research observing that non-traditional students (who are defined in the study as student groups who are “disproportionately under-represented” within HE) are also likely to have erroneous assumptions about how university functions and may have little experience of independent learning skills. They may expect university to be a continuation of school and be influenced by popular but unreliable preconceptions about university. An assumption is made in some research that the non-traditional student will lack the cultural capital of traditional students. Since they have not shared the groundwork of preparedness and practice in self-reliant learning, it is suggested that the non-traditional student has no means to accrue the relevant skills needed to be successful in university (Laing, Chao, & Robinson, 2005).

This negative positioning of students who are parents overlooks the resilience of these students who deal daily with new and changing situations and circumstances. Students who are parents can be perceived as at the centre of a layered sphere of influence, in which every level has a direct or indirect effect upon their development at some time in their life (Adams 2018). When entering HE, working parents are extending their personal contacts in their

micro and mesosystems: they now have another area of associated relationships and demands to negotiate (Smith et al., 2020). The student who is a parent brings a wide range of such interactions to their education, along with experience of changing political and cultural trends. Through Bronfenbrenner, it is possible to view mature students in a way that incorporates their prior influences and experiences, taking into consideration the complex social interconnections they are already managing. Instead of working from comparisons against an assumed stereotype of students, the researcher meets the student who is a parent as an individual who brings a unique perspective of life to university (Adams, 2018).

Forbus (2011) explains how non-traditional adult students are equipped with better coping strategies than traditional students because they more experience in dealing with stressful situations. They have learned an active approach to managing tasks, as they are used to having to get things done within a time limit and solve problems as they arise (Forbus & Newbold, 2011). Students who are mothers share these attributes, successfully managing challenges on a daily basis as parents, they are already prepared with the tactics and know-how to cope with the challenges of study (Smith et al., 2020). This could be seen as a factor in the observation that younger students who parents are more likely to experience psychological distress and isolation in university. Older students who are parents may not only have better resources and an established support network, it may be that they have more experience of overcoming obstacles and difficulties (Cho et al., 2021). Another critical factor in the possibility of psychological distress being experienced by students who are mothers lies in the strength of their private relationships. Those who have supportive social networks with people who are accepting of their decisions and abilities are shown to be more confident and self-assured than those who do not. A sense of security in their relationships and a belief in their accomplishment as a parent reduces the likelihood of stress (Quimby & O'Brien,

2006). Although having safe relationships outside university and being confident as parents and students supports the wellbeing as of a student who is a mother (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006), these elements alone do not necessarily help them to establish a sense of belonging in university (Lin, 2016; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Mercer, 2010). Having visualised the theoretical underpinning of this study in more detail, despite rejecting the model of STD as a foundation for the project it will be expedient to keep the basic tenets in mind as the analysis progresses. The methodology employed, and the application of the phenomenological approach, is described below in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Method

4:1 Design

The design for this qualitative study is that of a thematic analysis of interviews with full time undergraduate students who are also parents.

4:2 Participants

The inclusion criteria specified any full-time undergraduate students aged over 18 with parenting or caring responsibilities as respondents, however no carers without children of their own came forward. An early discussion was had about whether to restrict inclusion criteria to mothers. This approach could be argued and defended on the basis of the gendered nature of mature students/returning students and normative motherhood. However, given the dearth of information about this group, and a desire to be inclusive to the full range of parenting, the invitation made no mention of gender or study discipline as a participatory condition. As a result, one male came forward for interview and his experiences formed a valuable strand of the analysis. To indicate the heterogeneity of the group, and to bring the participants to the forefront for the reader, an outline of the participants individual characteristics and personal backgrounds is given. The information about the participants described in the section below is taken from the original transcripts.

Eight students who are parents were interviewed, seven mothers and one father. The participants were studying in various departments in a rural Welsh university, including social sciences, geography and law. Of the eight participants in the study, seven are female

and one is male. Their ages range from twenty-five to forty, and the ages of the children are between infancy and late teenage. They include single parents, a part-time parent, one from an ethnic minority background and some who continue to work as well as study. None of the participants live on the campus, and two of them have substantial distances to commute.

The participants presented as skilled and experienced adults. Four of the students who are parents have attended Access to Education or similar educational courses and one had brief experience of university in the past, while three had no further education but held sufficient qualifications from other sources. All of them manage their studies alongside their accountability to their families. The burden of childcare when the dependent younger children are not in school or nursery is carried by close relatives, while the teenagers sometimes have to manage for periods of time for themselves. One participant is responsible for a young adult with a disability. All but one of the participants talked about their prior experience of the workplace in the interviews, from this we can infer most of the parents have a sound understanding of work ethics and associated skill sets. They spoke of familiarity and practice with obligations such as completing tasks within a set timeframe and approaching situations with an objective attitude. Several participants, for example explained in interview they have held positions requiring them to be trained in managing confidentiality. Irrespective of their different ages, each of the participants have unique experiences of adult relationships, friendships and interactions that influence how they cope with the university environment.

4:3 Analytic Framework

Thematic analysis (TA) is a qualitative method designed by Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, intended for “identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data.” (Clarke & Braun, 2017 p297). TA is not specifically associated with any specific underlying theory, but that does not mean it is atheoretical, it can be applied to a variety of theoretical foundations (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Reflexive Thematic Analysis is an inductive process that seeks to understand the meanings embedded as patterns within data obtained from the lived experience of others. These patterns can then be arranged into themes which make manifest intrinsic meanings derived from the original data. (Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019).

As the data for this study are drawn directly from first hand interviews with a small number of participants, the philosophical framework of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has been chosen as it is an approach facilitating the understanding of how people make meaning from their experiences, and in turn, express how they perceive that meaning to others. The underlying philosophical basis is built upon the work of the phenomenologists Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. The significance of Husserl’s philosophies to phenomenology is that he created the concept of bracketing in order to reach an understanding of consciousness. Bracketing enables an individual to become aware of personal prejudice or bias, whether confirming or denying, and to be deliberately non-judgemental is a critical skill of a phenomenological researcher. Heidegger went on to clarify the interconnectedness of people and human experience, and Merleau-Ponty recognised the relevance of the embodied form as a vehicle for human interconnectedness. Sartre illustrated in his writing how the interconnectedness of the

individual is contingent on the presence and actions of other people in their environment. The essential concern of phenomenology lies in understanding the nature of experience, which can be described, but never completely shared. No observer experiences an event through the same physical senses or is affected by the same psychological influences as another (Amos, 2016). Consequently, the meaning derived from, or attributed to an event or experience is unique to the individual. As an understanding of these philosophical foundations is indispensable to comprehending what a researcher aims to achieve using phenomenology, an outline of the original premises is given below.

The architect of the concept of phenomenology was the prominent philosopher Edmund Husserl (Stanford Enc of Philosophy, 2003). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2013) explain how Husserl's perception of phenomenology sought the meaning of personal experience through reflecting on our subjective reactions to events around us in order to become aware of the fundamental aspects of our experiences. Phenomena as considered by the philosophers refers to what is seen and experienced through our consciousness. Husserl (1931) considered that examining phenomena in such a way as to remove all associated belief and biases, eventually reaches the essence of phenomena within human consciousness. Only by observing events entirely objectively, Husserl conjectured, would lead to understanding and revealing the true meaning of phenomena (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2013). A key contribution of Husserl's work is the notion of a "phenomenological or attitude", whereby we turn our attention away from what is around us, looking instead to how we perceive activities and events we are involved with.

We each have a viewpoint on the world comprised of objects and entities and regard the world other people are seeing as the same world as our own even though they have a different

viewpoint; in Husserl's words, "the fields of perception and memory actually present are different". If we can then disconnect our judgement of the phenomena of this world, putting aside our opinions, beliefs and experience in it, we may reach an insight into our consciousness as it is unaffected by our perception of the world (Husserl, 2004). Achieving this mental disengagement from the world requires a process Husserl referred to as "bracketing", the setting aside of preconceptions to focus on our subjective awareness (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Instead of acting and reacting to the perceived world, through firstly bracketing and directing our reflections and self-awareness to our actions and reactions, then suspending our eidetic or remembered understanding of the world we may eventually reach the experience of pure consciousness (Husserl, 2004). As a philosopher rather than a psychologist, Husserl never developed his phenomenological ideas into a recognisable process. However, in formulating the concept of investigating consciousness through the recollection of experience and the idea of bracketing, a foundation was laid for Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2013 p14).

Heidegger, a student of Husserl, takes a less conjectural approach, viewing our conscious existence as being inseparable from our physical experiences. Heidegger seeks a quality he calls "Dasein" or "there being" to explain the way in which our conception of the world is comprised of our movements and relationships within it, from which we derive meaning (Shinebourne, 2011). Heidegger considers that our relatedness to people, events and things around us is a fundamental part of existence he refers to as "intersubjectivity". The intertwining of our relatedness to the world and each other, in Heidegger's view, allows us to share interpretations and understanding of events and relationships. He presents a portrait of people as existing in a physical, temporal and connected space where meaning comes about through interaction and contemplation (Shinebourne, 2011). Through this concept of

intersubjectivity, Heidegger contradicts Husserl and implies the impossibility of disengaging consciousness from the human world, because our connections to the world essentially define our consciousness. As we all live within and as part of this connected space, phenomenological interpretation can be seen as a process of understanding how other individuals create a sense of meaning from their personal connectivity (Larkin et al., 2011; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2013). In recognising that human experience is shaped by external influences of culture, race, religion and gender, Heidegger ascertains that a person's interpretation is bounded by their prior knowledge and understanding, their "fore-structure" or "fore -having" (Shinebourne, 2011).

Sharing knowledge and understanding with others relies on having a common ground and the language skills to communicate with them. The person communicates first with those closest to them, in Heidegger's terms, a person, or "Dasein", is always drawn to whoever is nearest to them (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, page 3, 2016). The unique framework of prior knowledge of each person is crucial to the researcher. Not only does the participant recount phenomena within the limits of their personal pathway of understanding, but the researcher is also listening through an equally preconditioned outlook of their own. Therefore, a researcher not only studies how a person is making sense of a situation, but the researcher has to bracket and examine how their own preconceptions and prejudices may be affecting their understanding of the person's accounts (Amos, 2016). Interpretation then arises from a hermeneutic cycle of listening, examining, reflecting, and deciphering from both empathic and critical aspects. The goals of the hermeneutic processes are to untangle the phenomena from the fore-structures surrounding it until the explicit and implicit meanings become clearer to the interpreter. The origin of the analysis, and the focus of the interpretation, is

always the verbatim account of the participant and the authentic context from which it originates and relates back to (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith,; Flowers, and Larkin, 2012).

The personal nature of connections, links and reactions to the world gives us an individual and unique viewpoint of the world. Merleau-Ponty explains how reaching this viewpoint is depends on our having a physical body (Larkin et al., 2011). Our corporeal body is responsible for enabling our interactions and ensuring our uniquely subjective outlook on experience in the world around us. Everything we perceive, we reach through our five senses of touch, taste, sight, hearing, and sense of smell. How we interpret what we perceive is modified by our social and cultural circumstances and belief systems. Sharing our experiences and expressing the meaning we make of events is governed by our preconceived view of the world, our knowledge and the tools we use, such as language. No other human individual can perceive the world in exactly the same way as ourselves, because we cannot physically share the experiences that have shaped perception from within another's body (Amos, 2016).

A crucial element of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is that as we can only reach the world through our embodiment within it, the body becomes the foundation of all lived experience. It is integral to how we shape our understanding (Amos, 2016). Consequently, the qualitative researcher can never completely comprehend the entire nature of another person's experiences, but neither can they reject or neglect elements of experience that are harder to express. The existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre also regarded self-consciousness and the search for understanding as a continual process occurring endlessly through our engagement with the world outside our bodies. Sartre, drawing on Heidegger's insights, saw the act of engaging with the world depends on our proximity to, and our relationships with, other actors

in our vicinity. He emphasised that sometimes, the absence of a particular person is a focal part of our engagement, and that the way in which we are conscious of any particular situation can be altered by the actions of others. Sartre created many vignettes of his interactions with the world through a phenomenological lens, illustrating how experience affects multiple aspects of consciousness (Smith; Flowers, and Larkin, 2012).

Through the observations and explanations of the above philosophers, we can see that experience is unique to the individual because they are reaching it through the sensory mechanisms of their personal body. It is shaped by the perception of the world from a singular corporeal viewpoint. Even when an individual shares an experience with another, the meaningfulness of that experience will be different to that of the other person because of the many physical and subjective factors affecting how they interact with the world.

Phenomenological theory is applied to try and find a way into the point of view of the participants, starting with empathic engagement and continuing through a process of hermeneutic cycles to reach an interpretation grounded in the original phenomenological narrative of the participant (Shinebourne, 2011). The hermeneutic cycle is the process through which a researcher suspends their preconceptions to understand how the participant makes sense of an experience, or phenomena, from the viewpoint and context of their personal world. The wider text illustrates the meaning of the smaller parts, and the meaning of the smaller parts elucidates the meaning of the wider text. Interpretation then evolves as the researcher makes sense of the participants sense of their experience, while maintaining their awareness of the contextual nature of the account being interpreted (Amos, 2016).

Ideographic analysis gathers detailed information on a personal, individual perception of phenomena, instead of the generalised knowledge of nomothetic data. The aim is

understanding the meaning people attribute to their experiences, with the effect of providing depth and substance to nomothetic data and conclusions. In using much smaller case samples, individuals can be portrayed in close detail (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2013). For example, a quantitative study of student parents might give the number and demographics of parents studying at university, how many children they care for and what work they do. However, the figures cannot convey how individual parents manage their lives around their study, or how they feel about connecting with other people in university. Ideographic qualitative analysis provides the connection of the person's experience to the quantitative data (Larkin et al., 2011). Qualitative analysis is not in opposition to quantitative method, but can give detailed insights into the perspectives of people involved in a particular phenomenon or field of interest to quantitative analysts (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2013).

TA is very similar to several qualitative methods that search through data to unearth repetitive or common motifs within. Reflexive TA requires a fluid approach that entails rereading, reflecting and absorbing the reader into the data they are working with. This process allows themes to be revealed that are invisible until analysis is complete. (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The theoretical basis chosen by a researcher for reflexive TA supports and shapes the analysis, the substance of the theory and its influence on the analysis being an integral part of inductive interpretation. Emphasis is given to the subjective nature of analysis, through which theory, data, coding and interpretive skills are blended to create the themes through the meditative and assiduous attention of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this respect, TA offers a valuable and informative approach to exploring the interactions of students who are parents within HE. Embracing a phenomenological viewpoint within TA augments the potential for the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of an individual's personal experience.

TA was chosen as an analytical method for this study because of the individuality of the subjects of the study and their idiosyncratic characteristics. Each have different life experiences, different educational histories and bring distinctive personal qualities with them into the university. By re-entering education later in life, student parents' step beyond their expected social and cultural trajectory. This is a non-normative shift, in which a person breaks away from societal norms to take a less conventional path. Making such changes are difficult because they are unusual and other people in their lives may not be able to easily accept what they are doing (Mercer, 2010). An essential component of inductive qualitative analysis is an empathetic approach to the frame of reference of the participant and understanding their point of view (Amos, 2016; Shinebourne, 2011). The perspective of phenomenological interpretation alongside thematic guidelines allows for a deeper understanding of their position in university in the context of the non-normative shift in their lives. The ideographic focus of the theoretical background of phenomenology is helpful in the application of TA as a means to draw out the emotional nuances of the texts given by the students who are parents in interview.

4:4 Procedure

Parents in full time undergraduate courses were invited to attend a private, one to one interview in the university premises. The commencement of the study was advertised around various university channels including through posters and the university bulletin (Appendix 1:2 Advertisement for Participants). Held in quiet places on campus, such as library rooms and the qualitative laboratory, the semi structured interviews comprised a series of questions about the participants experiences and perceptions of university, including how they came to apply for university, their feelings on starting their course and how they related to other

students (Appendix 1:3 Question Schedule). A semi-structured approach to the interviews was taken as it would give the participants a range of flexibility in how they answered questions. Semi-structured interviews allow participants and interviewers the freedom to explore unexpected issues, or to bypass questions if they are redundant to the interviewee for any reason (Sullivan, Riley and Gibson, 2014). Questions about working in groups helped to prompt answers about interactions with younger students, as we found this is one of the few situations which compel more students who are parents to communicate with them.

The final questions involved asking if the participants felt they had anything to offer university that they could not have contributed had they attended university after leaving school. A pilot interview was conducted to gain an insight as to how participants would react to the questions and to be certain the questions were suitable. There was no obligation on the part of the participant to answer every question. The interviews were recorded, then transcribed and anonymised in accordance with ethical procedures before analysis. The ethical considerations for psychological research with human participants are complex and apply equally to quantitative and qualitative research. The codes of conduct regarding ethical behaviour in psychology research are formulated by the British Psychological Society, and the application of the codes as they relate to this study is reviewed in the ethics section below.

4:5 Ethics

Ethical approval for the project was awarded by the Aberystwyth University Psychology Ethics Board, following the submission of a guided undertaking to meet ethical standards, in accordance with the four key elements of the Ethical Principles laid down by the British Psychological Society (BPS) (Appendix 1:4 Participant Information). Respect, Competence,

Responsibility and Integrity are concepts providing a fundamental foundation to ensure the transparency and accountability of psychology in practice (BPS, 2021). Applying these concepts to the participants in this study included ensuring they were aware that their right to confidential treatment of their data would not be compromised, and that use of their data in any future publication would not lead to identification (BPS 2021).

The intention was to provide a supportive environment whereby they were not made to feel belittled or judged by their beliefs, cultural background, or socio-economic class, and were under no pressure to answer any questions with which they were uncomfortable, or beyond the scope of the research. For example, while some sensitive information about their private relationships outside of university was freely given during the course of the interviews, how their status within their adult relationships was affected by being students who are parents was not an area relevant to the discussion and therefore, it would have been unnecessary and unethical to pursue such information any further. The participants were always free to take a break or leave the interview if they were unhappy with the course it was taking. The ethical approval also included a data management plan including data security and GDPR compliance (Cornock, 2017).

The BPS also provide researchers with guidelines to comply with the EU General Protection Regulations (2018) and the Data Protection Act (2018). A primary concern is that the privacy of the participant is protected, it should not be possible for anyone to identify a participant from the final research (British Psychological Society, 2018). To protect the identity of the students who are parents, the specific ages of the participants, their real names, the genders of their children, the locations of their homes and any readily recognisable details of working locations or family connections were masked, deleted or anonymised. The academic

disciplines of the students were removed or disguised, along with any stories or combination of factors provided that appeared to be particularly identifiable. Because this study emanates from a rural area with a low density of population in comparison to a larger town or city, it is possible the participants could be identified from the original transcripts. For this reason, the interview transcripts will not be made available, but remain in a password protected environment. The signed consent forms are also held in a secure location.

The explicit Code of Human Research Ethics is applicable to any form of research that is undertaken with people as participants (British Psychological Society, Code of Human Research Ethics, 2021). The foundation principles of the code involve ensuring respect of the dignity and privacy of participants, maintaining the scientific integrity of the research, being alert to the welfare of participants and understanding any risk of harm to participants or the researcher that their research could entail (BPS, 2021). These ethical principles were applied systematically to the initial contact with the participants and throughout the data collection. The eight undergraduates replying to the adverts received participant information clarifying the nature of the study, explaining how the qualitative interviews worked and stating the ethical oversight and supervision of the project.

Giving this information prior to the interview provided the participants with an opportunity to decide if they still felt they wanted to contribute to the study when they knew more about what it entailed and how it was being conducted. The participant information was discussed before the consent document was provided, with an invitation to ask any further questions about the research (Appendix 1:5 Participant Consent). These essential steps meant that when asked for their written consent, the participants had full understanding of what they were being asked to consent to (BPS, 2021), so their informed written consent could be acquired

prior to the interview. Part of the consent gave the participants the option to withdraw their information if they had second thoughts, with a final date for withdrawal set before the information from the interviews became critical to the study. A debriefing document was also provided to the participant after the interview, with the participant being encouraged to read through it before they left, so any immediate concerns could be raised (Appendix 1:6: Participant Debrief). The purpose of the debrief document was to ensure that a participant was given options to find support with any issues raised during the interviews they were unhappy with, either through the university or from an independent local or national service provider. A participant could have felt on reflection that a question had seemed unnecessarily obtrusive, or that the interview left them feeling emotional trauma, thus breaking the BPS protocol that human research does not cause harm (BPS, 2021). The debrief document allows participants and researchers the means to mitigate and resolve any related problems that might have arisen after the interview.

Student parents may be considered a vulnerable group because of the extra pressure they experience in university as a result of the responsibilities they hold. They have less free time than traditional students to study without distraction or socialise, and often have to manage complex schedules. Student parents usually live off campus and, in some cases, commute to university. They are more likely to experience financial stress as they have families to support (Forbus et al., 2011). Questions pertaining to the past may recall influences such as difficult adult relationships, or bad memories associated with compulsory schooling. The known challenges for non-traditional students to belong also presented an ethical consideration (Mercer, 2010b; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). Participants may also feel awkward or embarrassed about their relationships within university, or in discussing uncomfortable situations they have experienced while studying. They may find it challenging

to talk about issues that affect their study, like how having had a long break from education has affected their confidence as they have to learn what is expected of them in university. As a consequence, throughout the interviews the consideration of the participants wellbeing remained a foremost priority. The ethical treatment of the participants was then carried forward into the preparation of the data for the analytical procedures.

4:6 Analytical Procedures

After recording at interview, the conversations were transcribed and anonymised, names were changed and any part of the conversation that could identify the interviewee removed from each transcript. A second copy of the transcript was then coded in colour to give a visual aid to identification of the topics that were being discussed. Thematic analysis has six stages of application.: Step 1 is becoming familiar with the data through repeated readings. Step 2 entails generating initial codes identifying data relevant to the research question. Step 3 is to develop initial themes, which are reviewed in Step 4. Step 5 defines and names the themes before step 6, which is the writing up of the analysis. The 6 stages were operationalised in this paper in parallel with the procedures of phenomenological process. Each transcript was systematically coded with initial descriptive and interpretive comments added alongside the transcript (Sullivan, Riley, and Gibson, 2014). For example, from the coded transcript of Transcript 2, Rhianna,

“I felt quite American, you know when you see erm, you see kind of High School Musical and things on the television. It felt quite, quite American. I didn’t really know what to expect, I think when you first hear about lectures, seminars, it’s like “oh what’s the difference” you know” Rhianna 117-126

The initial descriptive text reads 116-119 “found lectures reminiscent of media portrayal and the interpretive text then reads” 117-122 “With no preconceptions other than TV finds lectures foreign.”

After pre-reading and familiarisation, each transcript was first considered entirely separately from any others, evaluated without reference to transcripts from other participants (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2013). From the descriptive and interpretive commentaries, individual data sets (Appendix 4 Data Sets) of superordinate and subordinate themes could be derived following the Braun and Clarke Reflexive TA guidance. The distinction of super and subordinate regarding the themes is central to phenomenological analysis and not essential to TA. What became included in superordinate or subordinate themes was decided according to the emphasis the participant gave to the points they made in the conversation and became the first codes. The colour coded texts of each participant were then transferred into an Excel worksheet where they could be viewed together in the main topics of discussion, with brief notes and line references attached. The notes allowed the content and context of each entry to be checked for relevance at each stage (Appendix 2:1 Comparison of Individual Data Sets). The first sets of themes were then grouped together at an individual level as superordinate and subordinate themes before being collected together into new overarching themes (Appendix 2:2 Overarching Themes across all Data Sets). These themes were then annotated and partly referenced in a table (Appendix 3:1 Overarching Superordinate and Subordinate Themes). Continually tracing the origins of the themes back to the transcribed commentaries maintained the connection with the participant in the context of their personal lives, in keeping with the ideographic concept of phenomenology

(Shinebourne, 2011). The table was then printed, so that final themes could be elicited by mapping the overarching themes together making up the key areas for analysis (Appendix 3:2 Photographs). These key themes indicate how the participants are making sense of something that is significant in their lives, and in doing so give them meaning. It is the meaning people attach to their experiences that allows an insight into their world, and that comes from the transcript. The themes included in the analysis presented below were developed from the final reviews as the ultimate shape of the project became clearer.

Chapter 5: Analysis Part 1, A Journey.

All eight participants interviewed in this study made their way to university through distinctly individual routes, sometimes involving personal hardships along the way. A significant feature of the conversations is that their experiences of higher education spontaneously outlined the journey to university as a non-normative shift in their lives. While there is a sense of being othered because of being a parent, the parents' explanations include an even more fundamental element. They are not only different to other students now, but they also perceived themselves as different to other young adults of their own age when they were younger. Consequently, overcoming previous disadvantages and social misunderstandings by being accepted into university represent not only a new educational opportunity, but a step into a new terrain. For ease of reading these themes have been split into two analytic chapters, titled A Journey and then Chapter 6 Finding my Place.

Chapter 5, A Journey, begins with a history of the participants as they feel it relates to their entry into university. The first four sections delve into themes of The Backstory and Getting Here. The Backstory explores the meaningfulness of events and relationships the individuals have lived through and how their self-reflection about these vicissitudes influenced their decision -making, leading them to return to university. In Getting Here, the students who are parents express their feelings as they achieve the ambition to enter university, an accomplishment tempered by the realisation that they are non-traditional students in a predominantly traditional environment. This is illustrated in the last sections of Chapter 5, through which the participants illustrate how an adult in university can feel they are imposing themselves into a conservative space in which they do not really feel they belong.

In Chapter 6, Finding my Place includes the themes Recognising the Traditional Student and The Multi-Tasking Student. The first theme, Recognising the Traditional Student, illustrates the difficulties some parents who are students have with making contacts among more traditional students. The first theme of Chapter 6, Recognising the Traditional Student, illustrates the difficulties some parents who are students have with making contacts among more traditional students. The theme of the Multi-Tasking Student presents the complex responsibilities of students who are parents through their own accounts of their daily routines and commitments. The older mothers among the participants are seen to maintain their identity in university by taking on the roles of mentors and guides to young adults around them. In the final section of Chapter 6, the participants discuss the personal qualities and strengths they believe they bring into the university.



Figure 1 Analytic Themes

5:1 The Backstory: Non-Linear Routes to Education

A significant feature of the interviews was participants' desire to tell their own 'backstory', or their relevant personal history. The backstories were inspirational narratives of achievement; fractures from education and the workplace that ultimately set the participants apart from more normative expressions of aspirations, as the pathways they have taken into HE involved prolonged breaks in their educational journeys. It is striking that while questions focussed on the present, the participants' sensemaking of these questions directed first to their past and the journey that would ultimately lead them to university. There is a sense that it would be impossible for the listener to understand why they were here now, the ways in which they do and don't belong, without understanding about what happened then. The backstory is explored first through the themes of School: The end and the Beginning, Work and being unable to get Further and Needing to Improve our Lot.

5:2 School: The End and the Beginning

The participants often addressed memories about leaving school (as a teenager) as an important element of their sensemaking about enrolling at university, experiences that for some were decades ago, but nonetheless retained a sense of relatedness for the participants. Leaving school was often explained as some sort of fracture, but also the beginning of a chain of events, including relationships, motherhood and caring that would restrain their capacity to engage with education beyond secondary school. These participants express this juncture of leaving school as automatically leading to limited options and were intertwined with a lack of agency at that time. Achieving little from compulsory schooling is sometimes a difficult memory for an intelligent person to reconcile.

“I left school at fifteen, which I did finish my education at school, but I came away with very few GCSE’s, completely disillusioned by that point and just went straight into work. And, then erm, because I met my husband at sixteen, and we was married at twenty, had my first baby at twenty three and my next one at twenty four, so and then I was divorced by twenty seven. I raised my children alone and had numerous family members to care for til the end of their lives, and so basically, I didn’t do any further education at all” Sophie 4-20

In the extract above, Sophie described being so disillusioned by school that she went straight into work. Sophie is careful to point out that she did achieve some of her GCSE examinations, but stresses they were very few. She indicates that rather than her not being capable of progressing, she was in some way sceptical that school could be of benefit to her, she was ‘disillusioned’, suggesting that school had failed her needs or expectations. She then outlined a chain of personal events, including relationships, motherhood, and caring responsibilities, which were presented as an alternative pathway which was mutually exclusive with education. Sophie alludes to the responsibilities of raising her children as a single parent and caring for family members until their deaths as being the reasons why she had no further education after leaving school. Therefore, Sophies sense making about undertaking a degree included delays causing not only fractures to her school education, but also a chain of caring responsibilities.

Similarly, Adele recalls how her education was disrupted by an early relationship.

“I was in secondary school doing A levels looking at going to Uni but then I ended up getting in a relationship, erm, he didn’t want me, kept going off and then leaving me, then getting my own life, now I realise that it was because he was not a very nice person, and was very

controlling. We did end up getting married, we had three children, etcetera, etcetera, erm, I moved house, was at a loose end, so I went to college, and did the Access course” Adele 5-20

In the above extract, Adele explained how her early plans to reach university were derailed through a difficult relationship. In contrast to Sophie, Adele was completing her A levels and held aspirations to go to university at that time, but again, a chain of events including motherhood and a controlling relationship, appears as the reason her ambition was curtailed. Looking at her relationship in retrospect, Adele suggests she regained control of her direction in life after her marriage ended and could think again about the education she wanted, which reinforces understandings of higher education as incompatible with relationships, marriage, and family responsibilities.

These participants personal stories differ but are consistent in that when their compulsory education was completed, they were unable to recognise further education as having a place for them. They explain how the conclusion of school coincided with a series of events that would cause them to feel separated from any educational ambition. For Adele and Sophie, having children at young ages and being involved in demanding relationships can be understood to have effectively ended their capacity to engage in further education even if they should have wanted it. Their caring duties are presented in such a way that it makes sense that they were not able to access education, while also conveying some insight into their personal hardships and sense of belonging.

Not being able to complete compulsory schooling with A level certificates also curbed the ambitions of Kylie.

“When I left high school at 17 I didn’t finish my A levels, so I qualified as a (job title), I did that for a few years, and I hated it. At the time I did it because it was the only thing, I could really go in to without A levels, and then I worked as a (different job title), in town for three years, roughly, full time. It was a really good job and I enjoyed it, but I just couldn’t see myself doing it forever” Kylie 4-17

After leaving school, Kylie found that without A levels her options for further training were limited, and the work she did find could not meet her long-term aspirations. Although she has not had to deal with arduous life experiences like Sophie and Adele, Kylie has nonetheless felt her life to be constrained by her lack of education beyond secondary school.

Leaving school without completing further education seemingly has had long-term impacts on the self-esteem and personal sense of value of these participants. They had educational goals and ambitions that had never been adequately addressed. Throughout the lives of the older students who are parents, these impacts were amplified by the inescapably gendered chains of life events they explained moving through. A sense of having to overcome some kind of obstruction also arose among some of the participants from life events that were unrelated to compulsory education, that came about because of changes in their family responsibilities or working life. For these students who are parents, the limitations of their education and skills were exposed when they made a reappraisal of their employment situation and made efforts to reach for a meaningful career.

5:3 Work: Being Unable to get Further

A second key factor relating to the participants sensemaking of HE was their experiences in employment. Unlike traditional students, whereby limited work experience may be expected, the employment history of the group was extensive but always not straightforward or linear. Some of the parents had been unhappy with their employment and felt undervalued, they were hoping through higher education to reach a more meaningful position. There were students who are parents who had more employment experience than others and sought to retrain, while some were seeking better financial rewards. Most of the participant students also planned to continue in employment in some way throughout their studies, as not all of them could afford to give up work completely.

Many professions that once offered promotions to capable people now require a degree to enter professionally and this societal change was reflected in the participants backgrounds.

“I couldn’t get any further without doing a specific degree, and with the way that the profession is at the moment, I didn’t kind of fancy that. Morale is quite low, and I enjoy the more [discipline indicator] side of it, so kind of decided right, it’s now or never”

Rhianna 21-28

Rhianna, above, came to university because without a degree related to the field she was already working in, she could not progress to a professional level. She wanted to practice at a higher level in work she enjoyed, but she realised that her progress was blocked until she could prove her academic aptitude, she couldn’t make any headway without a “specific degree”. For Rhianna to move forward in her work, degree level education had become

essential. Rhianna gave the sense of a lack of belonging in her employment position, her options were curtailed irrespective of experience and practical skills. Rhianna is driven to study because of the cross-over she identifies across her employment role and academic discipline. She felt the time to make the change to join a profession was “now or never”, giving the impression that if she did not take advantage of her circumstances to become qualified now, she could remain unskilled and undervalued for the rest of her career.

Losing a skilled job through redundancy could be seen as a catastrophic loss or an opportunity to make a new start.

“I was working as a [job title] for a company before coming to university and er, we suffered a redundancy as a means to move the work to another country. And so, er, when I lost the job, I didn’t really want to go elsewhere and work my way up because I wasn’t a qualified [job title]. I was there as a trainee. And so, I decided to study as a means to get a little something behind myself, and I’ve always had an interest in the subject” George 4-18

After suffering a redundancy, George had reached a turning point shaped by his lack of a definitive qualification. He was reluctant to ‘work my way up’, by starting back as a low-paid and low status apprentice again, which narrowed his opportunities for finding employment similar to what he had lost. George had determined that a degree would help him overcome the loss of self-esteem he felt when he realised his redundancy from his skilled job had left him without the means to prove his expertise. He wanted to “get a little something behind” himself, possibly something that would validate him as a worthwhile employee. With his employment ending in circumstances beyond his control, George realised the lack of any completion of his training meant the skills he had acquired were unlikely to be recognised

and compensated by a new employer. He had reached a boundary where he felt achieving a degree would enable him to advance toward his goals as he would be gaining tangible evidence of his potential.

Progressing from unskilled, labour-intensive jobs to better paid and physically easier positions can also be facilitated by a return to education.

“When I started thinking about wanting to, um, a university course: but at that time, I was not confident enough because of my English. And then I decide to just work,you, like, get very tired. So, I decided that they send me to a course I’d seen where I can maybe get a good pay as well, so then I decide the only way, I have to go back to learning. Then the kids are starting back to school, I slowly started to get involved with the education system again.

Katy 4-24

Katy made a different sensemaking of her problem with employment, offering that her body was ‘very tired’ from her manual job, and she didn’t think that she could carry on for long. However, she described how her lack of confidence in her command of the English language initially undermined her academic confidence. In the hope of a finding a job with better pay, she decided “I have to go back to learning”, perceiving that education would be her only way to reach that goal. Katy mentioned that she saw her own children going back to school as an opportunity for her to re-engage with education, reinforcing the notion that early-years childcare was incompatible with her own educational development, and perhaps that her children’s schooling awakened a sense of greater educational possibilities for her.

Although these participants are, or have been employed in paid work, not having a degree or a specific certification had limited their ability to move forward and progress. Seeking a resolution to the situation of being held back, they chose to re-enter higher education as a means to gain the skills that future employers would require.

They have all at some time reached an understanding that their employment had failed to maximise the potential they believed they had, now they wanted to stretch themselves, and prove they could achieve more than they have before. Each recognised a gap between what they knew their abilities to be and the recognition or validation of those capabilities.

Returning to higher education was presented as a way to gain the credibility of qualifications and move forward in their lives. Why a participant should choose to apply to university as a solution to ameliorate or mitigate an unsatisfactory situation is illustrated in more detail in the next theme. The accounts of the participants as they explained why they enrolled in university is important to how they are understood as students.

5:4 Needing to Improve our Lot

As the participants articulated their “Backstory”, including challenges to both their educational and employment lives, it was possible to understand more about how sequences or chains of events had impacted upon the participants aspirations. In contrast to the linear educational gateways that may be typical for-a traditional student, for this group of students there was often a complex mapping of circumstances that would lead to them undertaking a degree. In this theme, understandings of family responsibilities as a barrier to education were transformed as family responsibilities became an impetus to pursue higher education.

Underpinning this mapping was a need or desire to somehow ‘better’ their own and their

families' circumstances and complete a degree. This was seen as an affirmative choice towards improving their own and their family's situation. Unforeseen changes of circumstance or new information could lead them to examining their position in the current moment, seeking a way to improve their resources as they moved forward.

For example, in the extract below, Emily made sense of the circumstances that “brought her to university”

“Having a kid, basically, is what brought me to university. Erm, I, my partner is not British and, we met when we were both travelling and living abroad, and it was an unplanned pregnancy. I wouldn't have come back to university if it wasn't for those circumstances. He's always wanted to go to university, so I was trying to encourage him to go. And he just, he wasn't getting around to it, so I just felt like we both needed to improve our lot... .. I just decided in the end to erm, go to Uni, and erm, apply myself” Emily 4-13, 35-36

Having a child and a relationship changed the way Emily saw her life and her aspirations. She explained that “I just felt we both needed to improve our lot”; that she and her partner needed to revise their circumstances and increase their earning potential as a family. Emily implied that she was mindful of having to give up her travelling lifestyle and provide for a dependent child. In the face of her partners hesitation to fulfil his wish to go to university, she took the responsibility upon herself to enrol. In this sense, Emily's decision to undertake a degree, her aspirations and desire to progress, was attributable to her having a child to provide for. Her relationship also contributed to this change as her partner, for whatever reason, was not ‘getting around to it’, he was failing to take any steps that would attain the financial security Emily felt her family needed.

Therefore, to understand Emily's ambition demands an understanding of how she saw and positioned herself within her social context and how she perceived her ambition as a collective endeavour. In the previous theme of "School", having relationships and children were sometimes perceived as barriers and alternatives to pursuing higher education post-secondary education. However, Emily demonstrated how becoming responsible for a family could also motivate students who are parents to change or improve their situation. Her motivation, and that of other parents in the group, is bound with other relational aspects that differ in some ways to that of traditional students who may only have to be concerned with their own individual aspirations.

Other factors could also precipitate decisions to return to higher education, as George outlines below:

"I just, I fell into that position kind of, and when it was taken away from me after working my way up, I just decided that I wasn't going to do that again. Because it took me about eight to ten years to get to the point where I was sort of happy with the way it was going. So, then I thought, why not just learn something every day, again, but actually have something to show for it at the end of the day. If you know what I mean. Yeah, that was the reason that I'm coming to university George" 359-375

In this extract above, George explained how after initially "falling" into a job he had spent years in one workplace, doing a job where he could eventually feel "sort of happy with the way it was going". George implies that for much of the time he worked in his previous job, he was in a stressful and unfulfilling situation that he had been able to rebalance. But then George was unexpectedly made redundant. Instead of looking for another post, George

suggested he didn't want to have to face working his way up in a job only to have nothing when it ends. Through his redundancy, he lost everything he felt he had achieved when "it was taken away from me". There was a sense of betrayal here, that something he believed to be meaningful was stolen. George turned to higher education so he could continue to learn, "but actually have something to show for it at the end of the day" in the shape of a certificate for a proven degree. Being an undergraduate allowed George to enjoy learning again and gain some appreciable confirmation of his efforts that no employer could take away from him.

The experience of losing a job and losing the prospects it held through no fault of the employee is an experience shared with George by Maria.

"I was, like, fully trained as a, erm, the assistant manager for the (job description) so if he was on holiday or anything I was in charge of the (establishment), I was fully equipped to do it. The plan was I would after a year of working I would get my own (establishment). But of course, because I had, I became pregnant, that was then, you know, taken off the cards.... So, I actually got into university because of those merits, not because of educational ones "

Maria 74-88

Although Maria was fully trained in her post and had been promised promotion, she implies, rather than states outright, that her employers shelved her expectations because of her pregnancy. Maria's situation was directly affected by her gender, no male employee could be in the same circumstances and would not have had to reconsider their future. She echoes George's response in the use of the word "taken" in her conversation, it suggests her promised secure future in employment had been deleted. Whether because of her employers' decisions or her own, Maria found her career trajectory halted by her reproductive system and

instead, turned to HE, as the credentials gained from her training in employment sufficed to enable her entry into university.

The common threads bringing the participants together in this theme are students who are parents turning a difficult and negative situation into a positive outcome by entering university to raise their academic skill levels. In doing this they are sidestepping the channels of changing employment they may have been expected to take, and instead making an entirely new beginning. They give a feeling of a new start that will benefit their whole family. Rather than just making a career change for themselves, students who are parents are piloting a course that might make a difference to everyone close to them.

In summary, the themes of the Journey of the participants return to an educational setting outlined how, in contrast to the linear path of traditional students, the limits of their progression were defined by a juxtaposition of their family responsibilities, employment, and a desire to 'improve' their circumstances. Every journey behind the arrival of a student who is a parent in university is essentially unique, but each has elements in common with others. The presence in their lives of children, and the non-normative pathways the participants have followed into university are shared thematic similarities across the whole group. In each of these backstories, happenings and realisations in the parent's lives are seen that brought about changes in perspective. These changes invoked new appraisals of their employment and educational paths, which were not necessarily negative. There were many examples of joyful experiences like child rearing and relationships that also shaped their sensemaking about higher education in affirmative ways. But nonetheless, the students who are parents had reached a crossroads in their lives, where a major change of direction was needed to accomplish their goals. Setting out to make the non-normative adjustment to accomplishing

such proof through higher education involved a subjective, emotional element reflected in the participants accounts in the next section with the theme of ‘Getting Here’.

5:5 “Getting Here” Adjusting to a New Educational Endeavour

In reaching university and seeing the possibility of realising ambitions that had sometimes seemed unattainable, the students who are parents interviewed were making an emotional commitment and investment in their future at a very personal level. In this theme, the depth of feeling the participants encountered as they were enrolling at university is made visible in their language. In their struggle to belong, there was the sense of dislocation some students who are parents experienced in their first weeks with a feeling that among the traditional students they were somehow not real students themselves. The theme of adjusting to a new educational endeavour was explored through the subthemes of ‘Becoming a possibility: I didn’t think I’d ever get there’, ‘Just like on television’, and ‘Being a bit of a fraud’ to explore their sense of belonging, or lack thereof.

5:6 Becoming a Possibility: I Didn’t Think I’d Ever Get There

Some of the students who are parents expressed that they believed entry to university was an unlikely aspiration, since the doors to HE had long been closed to them. The reasons for that closing off lay in their previous life stories, involving families, caring responsibilities, and homemaking. Education in such circumstances appeared to be over. Even the decision to re-join the higher education pathway is difficult when the possibility of rejection seemed so high and so painful. In articulating their feelings about gaining admission to university, the descriptive language of these participants revealed how re-entering education represented an

emotional investment for these students. They had attained a consequential goal in their lives that for various reasons, had seemed unreachable. However, even when accepted to and arriving at university, the students still faced challenging experiences. The participants' early exclusion from education and belief that university would not recognise them as a valued student in some way was also present in the expressions of their first contact with HE.

“it was a very long-winded way of getting here, I didn't think I ever would but yeah, tutors last year kicked me up the backside, I met a lecturer on an open Day here, I, erm, was at this point where I went “oh my god, I really want to do this” and got quite tearful and she was like, “if your tutors have said come, because you can do it, then, then you can do it girl, get on with it..” Adele 29-406

Adele, in the extract above, conveyed a sense of the effortful journey to university in her description of her “very long-winded” route, a reference to the length of time and the many events in her life since she left school. She said, “I didn't think I ever would”, affirming both the apparent impossibility of her goal, and the emotional impact of the realisation of a long-held aspiration to be in higher education. Adele's admission of “oh my god, I really want to do this” expressed her desire to fulfil a dream. Juxtaposed with her aspiration was the underlying concern that she was in some way not capable or even unworthy of being given the chance. Adele needed the support of a lecturer persuading her to heed the advice from her college tutors and apply, because she still lacked the self-confidence to accept that she was competent enough without confirmation from other professionals. The importance and deep emotions this evoked are clear when she recounted how she “got quite tearful” when she realised her dream of being an undergraduate could come true.

Similarly, Sophie had also believed that she would not be welcome in higher education.

“Because also, the way that even from the moment I came in on that open day, it was, it’s the way that he was saying to me there’s nothing standing in your way. You know, to use terminology like that, there’s nothing standing in your way is, er, an understanding of where you are as an adult learner, is that you think that there are things that are in your way. You created all of these, in fairness, some of them are put upon you, but you have nevertheless created barriers” Sophie 172 -187

Sophie’s powerful observation, above, is that some of the barriers she believed held her back from entering higher education were of her own making, even those that she had been led to assume. Hearing a member of university staff on the open day she attended say “there’s nothing standing in your way” gave a sense of freedom from the actual barriers and those that she and others had mistakenly perceived to exist. This was not the outcome of her enquiry that Sophie had expected. She reflected the idea some mature students have been led to accept, that a university is intended only for a traditionally limited section of the population. As Sophie had explained earlier in the interview,

‘I actually didn’t think that I could ever have a university education because, I think that you don’t think you can if you’ve left school with nothing’ (Sophie 28-32).

She had understood that entry into university relied solely on having gained the right exam results in school.

In this sense, as the participants came closer to entering higher education, they described a space that was not impossible, but gradually becoming possible, a reality. The sense of a non-linear path that was present within the participants backstories was also present in their explanations of how they had joined higher education. For a traditional student, the application to university via UCAS may for some students be arduous, but it is linear and largely transparent. There was an impression with students who are parents that circumstances needed to come together, or that external support was needed because the pathways were obscured in some way. Alternative routes into university other than A levels were available but were not always easy to find.

“I just thought I’d give it a go and try in local university, and at the time it was when they were bringing out the new course and that really appealed to me. So, I applied for it, but I was actually turned down. So, I was gutted but, I went to an open day anyway with my dad, and he’s a [blue-collar occupation] in town and he knows the, somebody quite high up, so they managed to arrange a meeting with erm, someone who is in the know. So, she’s said that basically, the foundation year is for people like me who haven’t got A Levels, who need a bit more help getting to progress their career. I mean it was several years after I left high school so, I was in my twenties, so, erm, she said that once you complete the foundation year, you can go on to do any degree in the department that you want without A Levels. For me, that was amazing, because I was devastated when I got turned down over the UCAS application”

Kylie 22-52

In the extract above, Kylie explained how she initially thought she would ‘give it a go’ and apply to university. But she was rejected by UCAS on account of not having A-levels, describing the emotional impact of her initial refusal as feeling “guttled” and “devastated”

when her application failed. However, she then recounted the story that made the impossible possible. Kylie's Dad worked in the town and knew somebody 'high up'; someone Kylie and her father respected as being knowledgeable within the university. Together they were able to attend an Open Day and arrange a meeting with somebody 'in the know', who could provide the information Kylie needed. It was only then that the Foundation Route was explained as a suitable avenue – this route was for 'people like' her who had not completed A level exams. The relationships that linked her to the special knowledge about the foundation course opened up the possibility of a pathway for her. Managing to find an alternative pathway to A levels through a foundation year was a ground-breaking event for Kylie after the intense disappointment of being dismissed by UCAS. Kylie reached her goal after finding advice through making the right connection with her father's local knowledge and help. This connection provided information she had been unable to access anywhere else, providing assistance to overcome her barriers and the sense that higher education would not be possible for her. She then averred that it felt "amazing" to learn the foundation course could lead her to the degree course she aspired to.

This theme outlined the complexity of belonging for this group of students who are parents. Being told they could belong, being offered the possibility to attend university, was affirmative, and they experienced belonging when they were accepted and recognised; but their non-normative status meant that their path once they got to university was not necessarily smooth, as they found they do not always fit neatly within the university structure. Many of the discussions about contact between the prospective student and the university included fears about being unwelcome or excluded. The expressive phrases used, and the emotional details given in the participants accounts emphasise how HE is still represented as the preserve of an elite in some circumstances. Consequently, for students who

perceive themselves to be outside of the elite, achieving entry into university is a genuinely heartfelt occasion. This theme also captured the surprise and disbelief experienced by some of the participants as they recounted the moment that higher education became a reality for them, their own reservations and the encouragement that they experienced from others who helped them along the way.

Being out of education for a prolonged part of adult life created a mental barrier because returning felt so far out of reach. Finally reaching the achievement of being accepted into university meant more than an opportunity to get a degree, it was an emotional milestone for some of the parents, who had prevailed against cultural, social and physical deterrents. The next theme will explore their initial impressions of university and how it felt to enter a new field of practice in which they had little or no experience.

5:7 Just Like on Television

A further way to understand belonging in the University was through the participants expressions of early experiences of rituals such as Fresher's week and first lectures. Fresher's week marks the start of the new university year, and for most students is a crucial period in life and an opportunity to make friendships. Traditional students are often leaving home for the first time, moving into accommodation with a group of other young people, making new friends and sharing new experience. Mature and parenting students might not experience the same dislocation and change of residence as traditional students but in the parents talk about their early experiences of university, it was possible to see the magnitude of the transition they were making from their previous role to that of an undergraduate student.

Two parents, Maria and Rhianna, exemplified their first experience of being in a lecture as a feeling of being transported to an aspirational reality, like being in an American TV series, they recalled a sense of excitement and awe rather than the feeling of being overwhelmed. For Maria, her first experience of a lecture affirmed her choice to return to education.

“it was amazing because it just felt like all of the really stereotypical, things you see, like on American TV shows. You sit in this big hall, and you’ve got the person at the front with the big board behind them, telling you something and you’ve got to scribble it all down frantically, it was like, absolutely opened my eyes, I absolutely loved it. Fell in love with the whole thing like, from the get-go.” Maria 103-115

The analogy to television gave Maria a starting point to own her academic potential. The situation completely met her idealised expectations and Maria took on the role of a conscientious student, trying to “scribble it all down frantically”. Attempting to write down everything her first lecturers said highlighted her lack of knowledge about the learning systems in a university where students have access to Blackboard and Panopto recordings. The euphoria of achieving her dream was captured in her affirmation “ I absolutely loved it”. She completely immersed herself in the experience of the stereotypical university setting, she “fell in love with the whole thing”. It was something that “opened her eyes”, Maria seemed to lose any doubt she may have had that learning at this level was absolutely achievable for her. In a dearth of frames of reference for what HE really looked like, she drew upon televised media representations to make sense of her experience, something she “fell in love” with.

Similarly, Rhianna recalled a novel sense of dislocation to begin with.

“I felt quite American, you know when you see erm, you see kind of High School Musical and things on the television. It felt quite, quite American. I didn’t really know what to expect, I think when you first hear about lectures, seminars, it’s like “oh what’s the difference” you know” Rhianna 117-126

Rhianna also described perceiving an atmosphere of unreality in her first lectures, as though she was entering a different world, likening her surroundings to popular American television shows. She found the new environment felt like another country; although she didn’t know what to expect, Rhianna wasted no time in finding out, asking questions when she came across new terms, “lectures, seminars, it’s like “oh what’s the difference?” that she was unfamiliar with. Her inquisitiveness conveyed her sense of wonder in a new environment.

By independently describing their first impressions of lectures as like something from American TV shows, Rhianna and Maria referred to television images as an analogy by which they could orientate themselves, as they had no personal experience of what lectures entailed. This naivete about lectures betrayed a lack of scholastic preparation for university. They were making immediate sense of an unknown situation by claiming a familiarity with it through images and portrayals they had only encountered vicariously. In doing so, they were helping themselves to acclimatise. Rhianna and Maria belonged in the sense that they were able to participate in their novel experience, but at the same time didn’t belong because of their dislocation from ordinary life and being catapulted into an aspirational situation. Despite being able to employ an imaginative reality to help them adapt to the unfamiliar rules and requirements of university, they still find themselves doubtful about how they could fit in. In the next theme of A Bit of a Fraud, some of the concerns of students who are parents about their presence in university among younger students are raised.

5:8 A Bit of a Fraud

When starting university as an older student with a family, some of the participants explained how they felt self-conscious and uncertain about how much they stood out. Their perception of how young and competent other students around them seemed was disconcerting, and the parents thought of themselves at first as somehow less legitimate students than conventional school-leavers. This theme explored how the students who are parents' expressed uncertainty about how much of their work and experience could compare to the traditional student. They perceived that the other new students were in a very different position in their lives. They were uncomfortable among them and discussed how not being the same as the school-leavers made them feel othered as adults.

The students who are parents were very aware of how different they appeared to be from the other students around them in Fresher's week.

“Ah, it was really scary, I was really nervous. Erm, I did feel kind of, old, erm, and everyone came into the fresher's week where, you know, everybody was kind of obviously young, excited, kind of come from home and I just felt, I felt a bit of a fraud I suppose”.

Rhianna 83-89

Rhianna, above, expressed feelings of anxiety when visiting Fresher's week, to the extent of feeling a “fraud”. Among a crowd of excitable new students, Rhianna expressed feelings of being out of place, ‘kind of old’, unable to see how she could possibly fit in among the ‘young, excited’ freshers. She had a different perspective of Fresher's week than students

who were mostly much younger, she was not sharing their excitement about leaving home for the first time and was acutely aware of how she looked in comparison to them. Talking about Fresher's week she says, "it was really scary, I was really nervous". Although she softened or hedged her lack of belonging, her expression of strong emotions of fear revealed the impact of entering the new environment in which she sensed she was out of place. Saying how the other students had "come from home" gave a sense that she saw them as leaving their family behind, in contrast to how Rhianna continued to manage the needs of her family and home.

Likewise, Maria also talked about her first lecture as being "quite scary" as she recalled feeling doubtful about being a good match among other parenting students.

"I was a bit different because a lot of the other like students and parents who were older that I knew had gone to college and had Access courses while I was just like, accepted into university without any of that. So that was quite scary, going into a lecture and thinking, "I feel so out of place, I feel so underqualified to be here" Maria 91-103

Having no experience of the adult education system Maria assumed other mature students have worked through, her feeling of having no connection or similarity was not only about her fit with traditional students. Maria initially felt "out of place" and "underqualified" even in comparison to other students who are parents, because she knew did not have the preparation of further adult education she believed most other mature students had gained from attending college.

George has a succinct personal view of his position among traditional students, unrelated to his academic credentials. Using reported speech he said,

“Having a dad coming to school with you is kind of a strange experience.” George 142-144

Being a dad, he is assuming that other students around him will immediately recognise him in the role which is most important to him, which is his identity as a father, and find it an unusual situation for him to be a student. Notably, he does not refer to his age, thereby signalling like other participants that it his positioning as a dad that sets him apart rather than his age. By comparing university to school, he implies that he is envisaging the traditional students as pupils, and thinking of them as being much younger than they really are. From this initial frame of reference, George has created a division between himself and the traditional students that may prove difficult to bridge.

The potential to be disadvantaged as a student who is a parent is highlighted in Katy’s description of the slight leverage gained by going to college before university.

“But sometimes, some terminologies they probably learn from A levels, they know a little bit more than me, but because I just had a little background for the subject when I was in the college, so they accept me. I don’t feel like, “oh my god, what doing here?” I know what’s, - not at a complete loss because I just found that what I did was important for me.”

Katy 369-381

Katy perceived she had less knowledge of her subject than that of the A level students in her class but instead of feeling out of place as a student, she appeared confident that the basic introduction she learned at college would help her to be accepted by other students in her

class. Nonetheless her use of the phrase “not at a complete loss” and saying that she didn’t feel “oh my god, what doing here?” suggested she was aware of the potential for not fitting in. However, through her college experience, and by drawing on her “background for the subject” she has reason to believe that she has the competence to be in university and feels less of an imposter than the other participants in this theme.

With lengthy gaps between leaving school and returning to university, confidence in academic ability, at least to begin with, tended to be low for students who are parents. They compared themselves unfavourably with traditional students, who they assumed will be better equipped from their recent schooling to deal with the academic demands of university. However, the educational and working backgrounds of students who are parents, combined with the experiences and responsibilities of childcare defy any meaningful comparison. The participants were very aware that they were not the same as the majority of other students, who could expect to make friends as part of a peer group. The juxtaposition of identities created by the students who are parents as they aspired to complete a degree to ‘improve their lot’, and the adjustment demanded of them in the new environment, led to articulations of exclusion as they compared themselves to traditional students explored in the next chapter.

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Chapter 6: Analysis Part 2, Finding my Place

Chapter 5 outlined how the students who are parents resolved various obstacles to successfully negotiate their way into a university place, and how they managed the transition into university. Having concluded the themes relating to their journey, they told us more about how they experienced finding their place in university. Overcoming the sense of dissociation required resourcefulness from the participants, who recognised that they were unlikely to become fully integrated into the cultural dynamic of university. Unless they had the self-confidence, bravery, and essentially, the opportunity to find a way past their differences and meet someone they could connect with, the students who are parents were at risk of remaining isolated and alienated. Regular avenues into social acceptance within university were incompatible to the participants because of their ages, priorities, and commitments. Set apart from traditional students by these encumbrances and responsibilities, it was up to the parents to manage their multiple roles and forge a connection with others in the university environment.

6:1 Recognising the Traditional Student: Comparing Myself.

As the students talked in the interviews, the relationships between themselves and the traditional students formed a key and important part of their experience. This theme relates to experiences that the students who are parents had in terms of their recognition of the traditional student and their otherness, as they compared themselves to the normative and idealised popular image of a student. Most of the parents explained having very little in common with the majority of the other undergraduates. Frequently they mentioned studying alone or only having contact with traditional students, or even any students, during class.

Through the themes in this section, the potential for isolation and marginalisation of some students who are parents is shown to be in contrast with others who employ strategy to navigate the social arena of university.

6:2 I'm Not Fussed about Friends

Higher education is structured by the notion of student experience, and student experience is contributed to by the ideal of the nurtured and longstanding friendships formed at university. But for two of the participants here, the concept of making friends at university, and the benefits that are assumed to be available like the social opportunities, were not always accessible. As a result, rather than talk about the friendships formed during their university experience, they explained why they believed they were not making friends.

“I’ve only got a year left, I just want to get it over and done with, get my degree I’ve been working hard for and not let anything else sort of get in the way of that. So, at the start I think I was planning on making friends whereas I’m four years in now, and I’m really not fussed about making friends at all anymore. my friend, she dropped out after her second year so, the last two years for me I’ve found harder because we used to do a lot of work together. And now she’s dropped out I’ve not really had much in common with any of the other students to sort of build that relationship against.” Kylie 212-235

Kylie, above, was no longer concerned in her last year about mixing with other students.

There was a note of regret in Kylie’s comment that she had given up with the idea of friends in university when she had initially been ‘planning on making friends’.

Having lost the only friend that she was sharing study time with, she was working solo through the latter part of her degree. Without any other mature students to relate to in her department and no means of meeting other undergraduate parents from other faculties, she was on her own. She did not relate to any of the other student in her classes and they evidently did not relate to her, she told us “I’ve not really had much in common with any of the other students to sort of build that relationship against.” Although any relationships are a two-way process, Kylie appeared to take the responsibility on herself for feeling alone. She made sense of being alienated by accepting she had nothing in common with her class, even though if this was true, or whether she assumed that friendships wouldn’t be possible with the group. Kylie’s account testified how a non-normative, parenting student could feel entirely isolated within the university student community because of a sense of otherness that precluded the making of friendships with traditional students.

A lack of belonging to the broader student cohort was also visible in talk that outlined the students’ own experiences of categorisations:

“I just don’t feel like there has been the opportunity as well, to talk to them as much as I have had the opportunity to talk to the mature students. It seems like everybody sort of clicks in their own groups within that first fresher’s week, or the preceding, sorry, not preceding, the next couple of weeks after. And once those groups have formed, it feels like it’s a bit strange to go up to another individual you haven’t spoken to yet and introduce yourself, and it just got past the point where it was OK, and now it just seems strange to go up to someone you haven’t actually spoken to that you see every day.” George 301-317

In the extract above, George explained that he felt excluded from the strong friendship groups he saw the traditional undergraduates form at the start of the first term. George explained he felt uncomfortable and viewed these friendship groups as closed to further introductions. In contrast, he also recognised that he had some rapport with other mature students in his course. George felt it was too late to introduce himself to the other students, as though it was only permissible in a particular window of time. The listener gets the sense that once George perceived how other students formed tight groups, he saw himself as an outsider who would not be welcome. George was hesitant to communicate with small groups of new students who appeared to be close friends, as he thought his overtures might be viewed by them as “strange”. He offered little analysis of his own rationale, indicating that he viewed this situation as straightforwardly closed to other interpretations. However, George has an advantage over the other students who are parents in the study, in that he does imply he can take the time to make friends through the Societies. Yet instead of taking the opportunity, he says “I won’t do anything unless I have to do it”.

“I have, I haven’t been to any of them. I can be quite lazy sometimes; I won’t do something unless I have to do it. But it’s getting to the point now where I feel like I have to go and make friends and I should probably put myself out there and go to societies.” George 320-327

In saying “I should probably put myself out there”, George has recognised the benefits of having social contacts in university. He has considered making himself more accessible to potential friendships by putting himself in a situation where introductions of newcomers to a group are a normal occurrence.

The participants in this theme recognise they need friends and are aware they are isolated among traditional students, and that part of the reason for this isolation may be their own reticence to be social and communicative with other students. They find it difficult to relate to the traditional students around them and have been unable to meet at a level of communication that satisfies the needs of both groups. Being unable to reach any mutual understanding has the potential to lead to the kind of difficult situation recounted in the next theme. The participants do talk about making friends and acquaintances among the mature students, but they also express how mature students are a group alike in some ways to students who are parents but are also distinct from them.

6:3 Staying out of Sight

In some instances, staying quiet and out of sight was employed as a way of coping with a particular situation. When asked about why Kylie believed she had “not much in common” (6:2 I’m not fussed about Friends) she recounted an occasion when her presence was unacknowledged by a lecturer and apparently ignored by the other students. In this sense, she was not only invisible to the other students but invisible to the curriculum and the lecturer too.

“I did a, a practical one year, where we had to analyse [Biological material], and the first thing they said at the beginning was erm, if you’re pregnant you can’t do this. And obviously, I’d fallen pregnant the year before. So, if it was a year before then I wouldn’t have been able to do it, everyone was like laughing and making comments and “oh, why would you get pregnant in university?” and I was sort of sitting there thinking “Well, I did last year” you know” Kylie 443-456

As the only participant to become a mother while a student, Kylie felt othered in her class by an impromptu discussion about pregnancy, when the students and lecturer involved entirely ignored the presence of a parent of a small child in the class. Having other students around her “laughing and making comments and saying “oh, why would you get pregnant in university?” unsettled Kylie, as she knew from experience that yes, sometimes, students get pregnant. Although the comments were general and not aimed specifically at Kylie, she seemed to feel uncomfortable with the banter; interpreted by the listener as unnecessary personal criticism.

Kylie observes a lack of respect for pregnancy and understanding from the younger students as they laughed at the jokes. Kylie’s reaction of “sitting there thinking”, suggests she felt unable or unwilling to speak out as a student and a mother to clarify her own position. Yet she went on to say later in the conversation,

“I sort of, when I speak to people and somebody’s being rude to somebody I just think “that’s somebody’s son”, or “that’s somebody’s daughter” and my little one is gonna be going to university one year, I hope, and I always imagine like mine in that situation” Kylie (487-494)

Here, Kylie identifies the younger students in her class as being other people’s children, rather than her peers, and connects them with her feelings about her own child. She exhibits a depth of empathy toward them that may help explain her reluctance to comment about the above related occasion of the experiment. It could be surmised that as a younger parent, Kylie does not yet have the confidence or communication skills to convey her experiences to the other students in the class.

In the previous two themes, I'm Not Fussed about Friends and Staying out of Sight, the participants described how they and the traditional students had failed to connect, there was no energy between them. The traditional students were not making the effort to connect with the students who are parents, and in turn, the students who are parents seemed to be accepting exclusion instead of actively resolving the situation. This situation is not necessarily the default position of all students who are parents, and Kylie's experience was not replicated in any way among the other participants. The following theme shows how other students who are parents found ways to integrate themselves into the student community by engaging in a manner that made them feel more accepted.

6:4 Playing the Fool

Breaking through the invisibility of being a student parent among a traditional student majority seemed to require a high level of emotional maturity and an element of fearlessness. For some of the students who are parents, the demands upon them to 'fit in' resulted in complex experiences as they sought to balance the disparities between themselves and the traditional students. Through their experiences as parents and knowledge of younger people, they were able to create strategies enabling them to make connections with the traditional students. Instead of staying out of sight, the more mature mothers among the participants were not afraid of what other people might think of them. They were prepared to make a considerable effort to connect with the traditional students.

In these extracts below Adele and Sophie talked about seeing themselves as demonstrating to younger students that being standing out by being wrong or foolish sometimes was nothing to worry about.

“And I don’t mind being wrong. And I don’t mind if I’m in a lecture and I’m wrong and I’ve actually said to somebody, like to the younger students, “see, you haven’t all taken the mickey out of me because I got that wrong, so if you do it, it doesn’t matter” So sometimes, I act a bit more of a wally than I need to, simply so they learn that it doesn’t matter” Adele

613-624

Adele reflected how some students appeared to be self-conscious about answering questions in lectures in case they were wrong. She took it on herself to go ahead and speak even if she was uncertain about her answers, saying “I don’t mind being wrong”. Not hesitant to speak in lectures, Adele did not worry that her class would have “all taken the mickey out of me” if her lecturer corrected something she had said. Instead, she acted like a class ‘fall guy’ and tried to encourage interaction with the lecture from everyone else, explaining she wanted other students to know that answering wrong “doesn’t matter”. Stating she behaved this way “simply so they learn” indicated the nurturing aspect present across the interviews, whereby the students who are parents took responsibility for the development of students younger than themselves.

Likewise, Sophie described occasions where she made herself noticeable and relatable to the traditional students by being clumsy.

“So, I have spilt my tea all over a computer and I have dropped my bag down the stair, and I’ve crashed into the room late you know, I’m still just a normal person like everybody else. Erm, and so, I try to make sure that I give that off, I actually don’t mind looking like an idiot because just think it helps everybody, I don’t mind, it doesn’t bother me.” Sophie 658-678

Seeing such incidents as just being a normal part of everyday life and not something to be embarrassed about, Sophie explained that she was “just a normal person like everybody else”. In Sophie’s world view, drawing attention to oneself through being inadvertently inappropriate on occasion, like making a noisy late entrance to a lecture, was just another part of normality. She suggested that by being clumsy and showing that “I don’t mind, it doesn’t bother me” in order to belong she was doing something that “helps everybody”, presumably, to not be overconcerned with being self-conscious. Although the participants comments were lightly made and intended to be present a picture of mature self-assurance, they in other ways diminished their own skills and experience.

Their attitudes risked making them appear as targets for ridicule, because their actions could have been interpreted as a lack of capability. However, Sophie and Adele were unafraid to declare their presence in no uncertain terms by “being a wally” and “looking like an idiot”. They refused to be outwardly ashamed of looking slightly foolish, and instead saw their behaviour as an effort to demonstrate equanimity to the younger members of the class. Drawing the attention of other students to themselves by playing the fool was one means participants chose to make themselves visible among the majority. Sophie and Adele, knowing that being obvious in some way is not a threatening situation, infused an element of humour into situations that were potentially awkward. Reacting that way, they had a screen to hide behind which they could cover any embarrassment of their own, while appearing to be approachable.

They wanted normative students in university to see them as people they could talk to. Incidental to playing the “fall guy” position, these students who are parents were employing a real strength drawn from their life experience: that nobody has to get everything right.

Although they were uncomfortable in some ways, they were more comfortable taking risks, engaging with questions in class and less worried about getting things wrong than the traditional students. In this, they brought a meaningful gift to their courses and the younger undergraduates, with the caveat that such positioning may result in unintended consequences for the students who are parents.

6:5 The Mother

This theme shows students who are parents employing another strategy to make connections with the traditional students, by using their experience of being mothers to make themselves at home in university. Their technique was to do what knew they were good at and act like parents. It is notable here that George, our male participant, did not exhibit “mothering talk” but given a lack of other male participants it did not seem appropriate to generalise his lack of presence in this theme and George may have needed different questions to draw his experience out. To find a way around the social barriers they met in university, the mothers, instead of trying to become more like conventional students, broadened their parental role. Parents make sense of the world through their experience of raising children. Being continually responsible for a family’s wellbeing, they are used to thinking and acting in a way that is mindful of other people’s needs. Being a parent entails identifying and solving problems for other people.

“So, one of my friends, I think she was a third year when I was a second year, and at one point she, I can’t remember what she was writing, she just could not concentrate. So, I just confiscated her phone. Such a typical parent thing to do! I turned around and I went “You can either get to this word count, or you can have it in an hour’s time, you can then have

your phone and you go out for a cigarette break and then you're coming back in here and you're giving me the phone again" Maria 624-638

Seeing a friend in difficulties concentrating, Maria, above, responded by taking over the situation and applying a parental approach to the situation, "I just confiscated her phone." It appeared to Maria there was an obvious reason for her friend's lack of concentration, and that was her friend's attention to her phone. Maria effectively extended her parental identity and attitude to her friend, "such a typical parent thing to do" and acted as a parent and mentor instead of another student. Maria laid out a plan of action for her friend, she set boundaries "You can either get to this word count, or you can have it in an hour's time," made allowances for good behaviour, "you can then have your phone and you go out for a cigarette break" and decided rules "then you're coming back in here and you're giving me the phone again". Maria asserted a parental authority over her friend to help her moderate her behaviour and concentrate on completing her writing.

The older students who are mothers tried to take a position as role models to other students and tried to live up to the standard they were setting.

"I can see they maybe, me as a mirror for them because it look like for me like "no look, you're having to work at the weekend and you having to do all the course, how can you manage?" They always asking me that. And I say, "well, we have to be organised and spend more time in the library" than they're working, to catch up with my schedule, I make my schedule and can follow that. So that's been quite good for me, because for them, they just, their life is just to start, they don't have nothing else to do" Katy 396-410

Katy, above, set out to find herself some friends when she first entered university, saying “maybe I can go meet some of the international students, cos maybe I will fit well on that kind of group” (Katy 84-86). Coming from an underrepresented ethnic and/or racial background herself, she felt there would be a strong possibility she could relate on equal terms to some of the other new international students. She then saw it as her duty to set a good example to the students she mixed with, a role Katy took seriously. She saw herself as a “mirror for them”, reflecting effective time management to students asking her “how can you manage?” with the responsibilities she had. Katy encouraged them to “be organised and spend more time in the library” and talked about how “I make my schedule and can follow that”. To manage study and work around her family, Katy had to be organised in her life and shared her knowledge with her friends.

In Katy’s view, the other students only had to be concerned with their identity as students, she says “they don’t have nothing else to do”, she was assuming they only had to focus on being students while Katy was combining her identity as a learner with that of a parent and role model. She believed her mentoring to be “quite good for me”, as encouraging her friends to make schedules they could follow encouraged her to stay on track with her own studies.

These mothers interacted with genuine concern and sympathy toward other students. Emily, below, was strongly empathic towards a younger student she felt needed someone older to recognise and understand her problems.

“Erm, one of the girls had a lot of issues, she erm, you know, there was a lot going on with her. I was trying to be quite “there” for her, so I did create more of a kind of online

friendship with her particularly, just through messages. Because-and so like, trying to be supportive and I felt like she kind of needed someone that was paying attention in that way. Erm, but it didn't get too close, really... I hope it will develop over time." Emily 191-203

Recognising that the student seemed to be struggling in some way, Emily took the trouble to try and demonstrate her concern by “trying to be quite “there” for her”, she felt that the girl needed something more than her peers could provide. Emily offered friendship through “just through messages” as a channel of communication, but this did not seem to translate to face-to-face interaction. She was “trying to be supportive” because she believed she could help however, her efforts were unsuccessful, “it didn’t get too close, really” and Emily was unable to make any affiliation. Although Emily saw herself as being caring and helpful, she was not accepted as a confidante by the student. She would have liked to make better friends with them, she said “I hope it will develop over time”, but there seemed to be a question over what terms such a friendship would rest on. In hoping to make a friend of someone she perceives as vulnerable, Emily may have exposed her own need for connection.

The older mothers have a caretaking approach to the students around them, who are often non-normative students like themselves. Instead of trying to blend in with everyone else, they become parental figures to their friends in university, applying the same nurturing, maternal approach as they do to their own children. Being older than the majority of students and living a different lifestyle, students who are parents have few immediate peers available in university from which to draw friends. However, seeking out relationships with other non-normative students, may inadvertently close doors to normal university interactions.

Developing relationships through the lens of parenthood negates any reason for a parent to change the way they are used to behaving; however, it is an attitude that could become

problematic if they take the sense of authority too far. There is a risk they could overstep boundaries without supervision and caring too much about too many people could impact their own wellbeing. Despite these hazards, the students who are experienced mothers continued to make themselves available to other students they perceived as in need of their support. The final themes highlighted the complexity of the experiences of students who are parents and illustrated how they could find alternative ways to make a niche for themselves in university. They explored these avenues of communication to make sense of their dual roles of being primary carers as well as students and used them to create connections with others in university.

6:6 The Multi-Tasking Student: The Many Hats I Wear

For students who are parents, multi-tasking is an everyday situation. They are responsible at many levels for their family's wellbeing. The regular, daily commitments that make up the daily routines of a student who is a parent inevitably compromise the way in which they can experience university. Working while they are studying is sometimes part of these responsibilities. Their schedules are complicated and essential to their family life, and being a student adds to the demands they are already meeting. Many of the students explained the extra demands on their time and resources on account of their parenting role. Being the parent of a preschool child entails continual multi-tasking and forward planning, as even the simplest tasks involving small children can turn into a stressful event.

“Like, it is mindboggling how many, like, even little things, like how stressful it is to get a small child dressed in the morning. That is, that just blows my mind how difficult that is every day... if we need to leave the house at half seven to get at nursery for eight, because it's a

walk and he could be slow, so by half seven I've got to get him dressed, you know, ready for the day, I've got to get his bag done, I've got to feed him breakfast, I've got make sure he has his vitamins, I've got make sure this is done, I've got make sure my bag is done, and then you're like, ok, I need to wake up at six" Maria 549-569

Maria, above, described how her regular morning routine of leaving the house to attend university becomes a marathon, she calls it "mindboggling", she said it "just blows my mind how difficult that is every day" to get organised in the morning. Mornings are never as simple as getting up and leaving the house when there is a child involved. Everything Maria did to start the day was governed around the child's needs, "I've got to get him dressed... get his bag done... feed him breakfast... make sure he has his vitamins". Even getting to nursery was unpredictable, "it's a walk and he could be slow". She has to meet the child's needs before her own, and even account for his walking pace to nursery before she can concentrate on herself. To achieve all this and sort out her own requisites meant having to get up three hours before university lectures began, "ok, I need to wake up at six". There is no reason to think the evenings were any less complicated. Maria was casting a spotlight on why the life of a student who is a parent with young children is entirely different to that of a traditional student; she had to think of everything for somebody else.

In contrast to Maria's busy morning routines, Kylie explained why she had not tried to take part in extracurricular activities by joining a university Society or Club as her evenings were not free time for her.

"I mean, I think there's every Wednesday night they meet up. My partner works nights so, when I finish, when he finishes nursery at six o'clock, I've got to go home, put him to bed,

and then I've, I can't go out then because you know, I've got a little boy in bed and he doesn't get home from work until half past nine, so I haven't joined any societies..... If there was a like a society for mature students to you know, maybe like one evening every now and again I could make arrangements but, as far as I know, there aren't any."

Kylie 327-370

Having to care for her child alone until late in the evening prohibits Kylie from attending most social events in the university. Kylie does say that she would try and arrange a babysitter if there was an opportunity to meet other mature students, suggesting her preference would be to meet people more like herself than gatherings comprised mainly of traditional students. Even then, Kylie would not be able to commit to a regular itinerary. The domestic responsibility indicated by Maria and Kylie in this theme is not the only undertaking students who are parents may have to manage. It is important to recognise that parenting includes financial responsibility for dependants. Some of the participants thus continued to work to earn money as well as studying when they are already looking after their children. Therefore, while the participants balanced their roles as student and parent, they frequently also held the role of employee:

"I work like one day in a week, when we've got a free day, like when it's a Thursday, and Saturday and sometimes Sundays. So, it's quite heavy work. So, it's like, I still have to keep it to maintain the financial situation, like in balance, so that means I have to work as well and look after kids, but I can, I'm quite lucky as my (family member) just got retired about one month ago and that's give me quite good help" Katy 239-254"

Katy, above, explained that in addition to studying, she was doing a physically demanding job, “It’s quite heavy work” one day in the week as her family finances were not secure enough for her not to work through her degree, “I still have to keep it to maintain the financial situation”. Katy’s family depended on her continuing a manual job to safeguard the household income. Her responsibilities were much more than would normally be expected of an undergraduate student, “I have to work as well and look after kids”. Like many female students who are parents, Katy still carried out much of the childcare while she studied. Katy was grateful for having someone close to her retiring recently, she remarked she was “quite lucky”, as they could offer some support to Katy to help reduce the burden by giving her “quite good help”. Nonetheless, she still has a central role in supporting her family. Students who are parents have to find ways of reducing the burden of their commitment to allow for time to study.

There were further challenges that contributed to the theme of multi-tasking, for example, Sophie spoke about the demands of life management alongside her education, parenting, and employment responsibilities:

“When I move here my self-employment will finish, so my other business will need to find new clients because I’ll be moving, if I bother. So, at the moment, I’m still doing everything I was already doing, and I’ve just added a bloody full-time degree to it. So, what I need to do is move house and then sever some of those connections that I’ve got and hats that I wear and when that happens, erm, there will be a bit more room because you end up feeling a bit discombobulated, don’t you? You know, if you’re thirty miles away” Sophie 496-513

In this extract above, Sophie explained how she is evidently overcommitted as she tells us she is “still doing everything I was already doing” and how she had “just added a bloody full-time degree to it.” Her turn of phrase suggests that her entry into university may not have been well planned in view of her lifestyle. Used to managing her busy schedules from “my self-employment” and “my other business” from closer to home, Sophie talked about her commute to university as being disconcerting, because “you end up feeling a bit discombobulated, don’t you? You know, if you’re thirty miles away”. Being so far away from the university emphasised any feelings of disconnection Sophie felt between herself and other students, as it underlined the separation of her home life from her educational life. She was undertaking her degree while still living out of the university town and having her work and children to deal with. A solution would have been to move house, another stressful process, and to “sever some of those connections that I’ve got and hats that I wear”. Her reference to the “hats that I wear” indicated that Sophie had many roles in her life, and her student identity was not her only priority.

The students who are parents in this theme make an emotional and physical input every day into their children, their family and often the work they have to undertake to maintain financial viability. This was a typical situation for students who are parents, their demands varied according to the ages and independence levels of the children and how many other adults were involved in the children’s care, but each had all the responsibility associated with being a parent. To be a successful student as well as a parent, they needed the counterbalance of communication with other adults in university who appreciated their complex lives, who they could relate to and confide in. In the next theme, the importance of the relationships students who are parents developed with lecturers and tutors were brought forward, as these

crucial alliances imparted a sense of equality; a feeling that someone in the university understood them.

6:7 Making Connections with Lecturers

This theme looked at the accord between the participants and teaching staff. The difference of age and experience, and the lack of access to the normal social channels made finding a common ground with the traditional students challenging for the parents. The relationships they forged with lecturers and tutors became an important element in their building a sense of connection to the university. Finding they shared characteristics with staff members, like having children, being a similar age and appreciating the same jokes was reassuring to them. There was an atmosphere of mutual respect between the parents and the lecturers expressed in the conversations below. Knowing there was someone in the university who understood them and acknowledged their idiosyncrasies reinforced the parent's sense of their own value as students, as Emily recounted:

“My personal tutor in particular, she’s brilliant. I’ve actually kind of made friends with her now, I’ve probably made friends with them more than the students because she’s probably about my age, to be honest. You know, she gets my jokes, none of the students laugh at my jokes” Emily 495-502

Emily here described her personal tutor as “brilliant”, a powerful word that indicated the importance of this affirmative relationship. She was closer in age to her tutor and shared a sense of humour, something which was important to Emily. She told us of her tutor that “she gets my jokes, none of the students laugh at my jokes”. If making people laugh was part of

Emily's way of relating to people, not being understood when she found something amusing or funny turns humour into a barrier to communication. Saying "I've probably made friends with them more than the students", implied that her interactions with other students were less constructive for her.

Maria recounted the influential recognition and support she received from lecturers that helped her feel connected:

"I think the lecturers helped a lot because, you know, they'll always talk about erm, they'll talk like, say your name, they're really good at remembering them. But also, if you're interested in something, they'll often like, "oh, you should talk to this person" because they're like "oh they're doing their dissertation on this" you know, you seem really interested or they've got, they have extra information because they've looked at it in a different way. And they just, they have this natural habit of making you mingle" Maria 180-198

In this extract above, Maria explained how she felt her lecturers helped her acclimatise to university. They made Maria feel like an individual worth knowing because they "say your name, they're really good at remembering them". Because the lecturers learned her name and spoke to her as an individual, Maria felt acknowledged instead of feeling invisible. In Maria's academic department, her teaching staff actively encouraged her to mix with other students they knew to be studying topics of interest to Maria, saying "oh, you should talk to this person". When she expressed an interest in a topic, her lecturers suggested other students who could share information with her, "oh they're doing their dissertation on this" or "they have extra information", giving Maria common ground to converse with someone she may otherwise not have met. She credited her lecturers with actively encouraging her to mix in

with everyone else, including meeting with students from different year groups, as “they have this natural habit of making you mingle”. Not every department had lecturers that advocated their students to mix in the way Maria recalls. Her experience of having support to approach other students from different year groups is unique among the participants.

The parents valued having supportive adult connections within university, especially when they felt they had little in common with traditional students. As staff members helped them to feel somebody understood their position, they effectively took the place of a peer group for the parents.

“I feel like I’ve got more in common with my lecturers rather than students. Erm, my course co-ordinator now, he’s got two young children so whenever I’ve got an issue, I can go to him and I know he’s sympathetic, he understands.” Kylie 290-297

Kylie, above, also felt she has “more in common with my lecturers rather than students” and referred especially to her course co-ordinator who she looked to for advice because “he’s got two young children”. Kylie felt she had someone she could turn to in university who is “sympathetic, he understands”, she found it reassuring to talk to someone who could appreciate her position as the mother of a young child and comprehend the difficult situations this sometimes created.

The rapport the students who are parents developed with lecturers and teaching staff was mostly consistent and helpful. As the participants talked about how they related to their teaching staff, they emphasised how they believed some members of staff understood their issues as parents and non-normative students. The parents felt their lecturers, especially those

who had families and children of their own, were understanding and encouraging. In their lecturers and other staff, students who are parents had contact with other adults who were part of the university and like themselves, had family responsibilities. They felt valued by other adults, which strengthened their sense of belonging.

Students who are parents were unlikely to be involved in the social and cultural life of the university and found it hard to blend in with the traditional student majority. This left some of them with the one-to-one interactions they shared with their lecturers and tutors as their only consistent source of feeling part of and connected to the university system. In their interactions and relationships with staff members, the students who are parents felt there was a place in which their personal needs and individual qualities were recognised. In the final theme, some of the participants tried to explain how they believed their maturity and responsibility helped them to make sense of their position in university as parents.

6:8 Bringing Something to the Table

Although they were acutely aware of their non-traditional status in university, students who are parents recognised themselves as having personal qualities valuable to the higher educational setting. This theme looked at how our participants gauged their strengths to overcome the disadvantages they perceived they had through being non-normative students. As mature adults they knew they had accumulated skills, coping mechanisms and life experiences that supported their learning. If comparing themselves academically to traditional students undermined their confidence, reminding themselves of the resources they had developed as adults strengthened their resolve.

As a single parent, Maria, in this extract below, explained why she believed her life has given her a practical overview and hands-on experience of topics that younger students in her course sometimes found hard to understand.

“So, I’ve also been able to bring something else to the table. When we’re talking about certain subjects because I’m not talking about women like a personal opinion, I can often talk about them as someone who seen it as the parent. If you’re talking about erm, you know, if you talk about postnatal depression, I can talk about that either personally or as someone who supported another mum. Or if you’re talking about erm, you know, things affecting babies, often it’s very hard for someone to understand that. And although I wouldn’t understand, for me, as a parent you have a different opinion on it. I think that’s probably been quite useful in you know, seminars and discussion”. Maria 668-689

With the advantage of lived experience, Maria had a more nuanced perspective of some women’s issues than could be expected of most students “I’m not talking about women like a personal opinion”. Maria shared observations about difficult issues, such as “if you talk about postnatal depression” from a viewpoint of direct involvement, “either personally or as someone who supported another mum.” She felt she could add depth to the level of understanding of other students in the class because “as a parent you have a different opinion on it”.

Reflecting on having a different opinion or outlook on situations through their lived experiences was a natural standpoint among students who are parents, and Adele credited her personal history as a parent with helping her to cope with higher education.

“I think I’ve got the maturity to be able to, er, not run away from things that scare me and meet them head on. But yeah, at the same time say to everyone, “I understand you’re scared because I am, but hey, we can do this” and I think as a mum, I think, especially with problems and God knows what with my kids, I think I’m more adaptable. I bring that maternal empathy, and organised, and caring. I just think I handle it so much better than I would have done” Adele 476-487

Adele believed facing problems with her children had given her a less fearful outlook in life than she once had, and an ability to empathise with and encourage others who may be feeling overwhelmed. She has dealt with many difficult situations for her family, “God knows what with my kids” and successfully resolved the problems these situations presented. As a parent, Adele believed she had become “more adaptable” and less fearful of change as an adult, to “not run away from things that scare me”. Because she has had to face up to events affecting her family and deal with them successfully herself, she has been able to develop the resourcefulness and resilience to manage other daunting experiences. Adele was encouraging to people around her she perceived to be scared, saying “hey, we can do this”. She believed that as a mother she was able to “bring that maternal empathy, and organised, and caring” nature into university with her. She felt she had made the right choice to come into university as an adult, saying “I just think I handle it so much better than I would have done”. Looking at herself in retrospect, Adele suggests she feels she may not have coped well with university as a traditional student. She suggested that her considerable life experience as a mother, partner and employee had given her opportunities to develop attitudes and strategies applicable to university that were unavailable to her as a younger woman.

The participants employed the fundamental changes they had made to their personal outlook on life, accrued from their adult experiences, as a constructive basis of their approach to studying. George, below, thanked his working life for helping him evolve a work ethic he could apply to maximise his potential in university.

“I wouldn’t have my work ethic if I didn’t work first and I’ve ten years working experience. For me, it was erm, going into work, I found it mundane, boring and I find university quite fun and interesting, you’re doing different stuff and you’re learning new things every day and for me, that’s a big thing. And so, I’m more willing to put myself out and get the work done sooner rather than later, like a lot of students do”. George 267-279

George suggested it is the reality of working for a decade, “I’ve ten years working experience” that enabled him to fully engage with his course. He found learning inspiring in comparison to his previous work “I find university quite fun and interesting,” and enjoyed himself as a student after a “mundane, boring” job. George contrasts his experience of working with that of learning while at the same time applying techniques and approaches learned from working to his study. Through comparing the experience of being in higher education to how he felt about his job he made sense of his position as a student.

This theme has highlighted the wealth of acquired knowledge and practice students who are parents bring with them into university, and how they see their capabilities and proficiencies as resources to be valued and shared. The students who are parents did see themselves as very different to most of the other students in university, yet they always tried to be non-judgemental and accepting of the younger students’ behaviours towards them. Aware that the route they took into higher education was at odds with the norm, they were resigned to being

unusual students. As independent adults with responsibilities to partners and children, their attitude leaned toward defiance, a determination to own their place in university. The participants were recorded saying things like “I think I’ve got the maturity to be able to, er, not run away from things that scare me and meet them head on” Adele (Line 477), “I wouldn’t have my work ethic if I didn’t work first” George (Line 267) and “I’ve also been able to bring something else to the table” Maria (Line 668). While they may have had concerns about their academic confidence as they began university, they also had a certainty that they had the psychological tools to be good, effective, and caring students.

Chapter 7: Discussion

Taken from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017), students who are parents have achieved two of the three “end goals” of self-determination. These adults have reached a conscious, autonomous decision to actualise an aspiration in their lives, participation in HE, and have the motivation to carry it through. They have the competence to achieve their degree even if at first they are led to doubt their abilities. What is lacking is information about the element of relatedness and belonging of students who are parents within university, especially that of their relatedness to other student groups. Chapter 2 outlined how the evidence base has very little to say about these interactions and tends to present a somewhat negative overall impression of students who are parents. The pages of any university prospectus advertise the welcome faces of young, happy and by implication, single students, amplifying the popular image of the activity filled social lifestyle an applicant can expect to enjoy. However, this picture does not readily apply to students who are parents. Their different positioning in society and their unique needs as learners places them in contradiction not only to the traditional student profile, but to other mature students.

To address this gap, eight students who are parents were interviewed about their experiences of being an undergraduate in UK HE. The participants were a diverse, mature group with shared experiences and characteristics. The study sought to understand more about their holistic experience and sense-making, including emotional aspects of being a parenting student, what brings them to university, how they integrate their lives with studying a degree and how they manage relationships within university. Baumeister (1995) compellingly framed the attraction to feel a sense of belonging among others, individually and as part of a social group, as a fundamental and psychophysiological human need (Baumeister & Leary,

1995). Parents who are students need to belong to their education as would any other student but they do have inherent disadvantages for developing the strong friendships and relationships that would engender a sense of belonging in university (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Since that sense of belonging is regarded as a critical factor in successfully navigating university, how can it be achieved by a parent who is a student while they are still responsible for a family?

Chapters 5 and 6 presented themes relating to the disjuncture between the social expectations imposed upon students who are parents by being responsible for children, and how these expectations affected them in relation to being university students. Using a reflexive thematic analysis allowed for more understanding about their individual circumstances and exclusions. The themes arising from the analysis process powerfully highlighted the unique position in university of students who are parents, exploring why the participants face social and cultural disadvantages to belonging in university, and the ways in which these barriers may be overcome towards a future where all students flourish and can reach their potential. Chapter 7 now concludes the thesis by outlining how three key findings arise from those themes, and that relate to belonging/ not belonging in HE: the students who are parents often had a backstory that told them they did not belong to HE; they-experience difficulties in belonging to and engaging with the student community, and they were on a journey of finding themselves as a student who is a parent. Having briefly explained the key findings, the experiences of the participants are then in Section 7:2 re-examined in the light of the theories of Bourdieu, Bronfenbrenner and Baumeister.

7:1 Key findings.

Key Finding 1: They often had a backstory that told them they did not belong in higher education.

The analysis explored very contrasting pathways of the life of students who are parents that has separated them from the more straightforward routes of entry into university available to traditional students. The combination of lengthy breaks from educational settings and the lack of appropriate academic preparation and support generates an impression for adults who are carers that entry into university is normally limited to certain entitled people. Once accepted into university, students who are parents have to break down their preconceptions of HE and realign their thinking to adapt to the environment of the institution.

The first themes of the analysis outlined the participants' sense making about their journey to HE, and paid tribute to the unique aspects of the changes and events in their lives that precipitated a desire to become learners again. Their stories are interwoven with unrelated events and relationships throughout their lives and sometimes span long periods of time. Students who are parents often had a backstory through which they had experienced exclusion from further or higher education, and this sense of not belonging persisted even when they became a university student. For some students who are parents, early schooling left them poorly equipped to move ahead with their education, revealing details such as being disillusioned by school, "I came away with very few GCSE's, completely disillusioned by that point" (Sophie Line 4-20). Most had experienced long breaks since their compulsory education ended, with some of them picking up the threads through access and diploma courses long before applying to university. Other participants spoke of the sense of

resignation when sometimes, in their words, decades of work were lost with nothing to show and little hope of progression.

Key Finding 2: They struggle to belong to the relational aspect of the student experience.

Key Finding 2 examines why students who are parents have so little in common with traditional students, and how their obligations and sensibilities can counteract their efforts to integrate in university. Having a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need, and the foundation of fulfilling this need is to have relationships that are consistent, caring and will continue for some time (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The camaraderie and friendships formed in the first weeks among the younger students mostly escaped the students who are parents unless they had support from their departmental staff, highlighted by Maria, who commented “I think the lecturers helped a lot” (Maria Line 175-180). Some looked for friends among other mature students or international students, with whom they may felt more at ease to, support a sense of belonging. The advantage of this was to have a potential peer group that they felt they could identify with and belong to, but the disadvantage was to risk closing other doors to interacting with traditional students. Without having shared interests or other similarities with the traditional students, the students who are parents find it difficult to initiate friendships in university. They cannot see themselves as equals to the traditional students, “because for them, they just, their life is just to start, they don’t have nothing else to do” (Katy Line 396-410). Most of the participants had little in terms of experience with which they could relate to the traditional students in their classes, as in “I’ve not really had much in common with any of the other students to sort of build that relationship against.” (Kylie Line 212-235). Since they could not share the same experiences and develop learning

identities in the same way as the traditional students, the participants sought their own ways to reconcile their objectives as undergraduates alongside their roles as parents.

Key Finding 3: They are on a journey to recreate themselves as a student who is a parent.

Among the students who are parents were those who had working skills without qualification, work qualifications that had no bearing on what they wanted to do in future, and those continuing to build their skills by progressing to a degree. Such complexities set up a manifold set of circumstances within which students who are parents could be situated – they did not neatly fit the profile of an inexperienced traditional student looking to develop proficiency across a range of skill categories. The participants are not only non-normative, non-traditional students, they are equally non-normative and unconventional parents. Being a parent in the UK has narrowly defined boundaries of acceptability in popular culture, even though these stereotypes are breaking down over time, men with partners and children continue to be regarded in terms of breadwinners for the family, women still take on most of the domestic and emotional labour. By returning to university, students who are parents are to an extent defying cultural and political expectations of parenthood. They are popularly presupposed to be focussed on the support and social integration of their children, rather than following their own ambitions and aspirations to be educated themselves.

Yet students who are parents, who have often been in employment before they became students, bring with them a range of skills and strengths. As parents and employees, they have had to learn to adapt to new situations and understand what other people are asking of them. Practised in taking responsibilities in work and with the family for meeting deadlines,

they have experience in organising their time and attention. Effective communication with other people plays a major role in parenting, as does problem solving. These are attributes applicable in university and support their studying. That they are somewhat unconventional underlines the motivation of students who are parents by enabling them to move forward even in unfavourable circumstances.

To solve the dilemma of juxtaposing their lives as parents against attending university, the older mothers among the participants took their primary role into university with them. They coped with their differences to traditional students by reinventing themselves as students who were unashamedly parents. By behaving as parents among traditional students, the mothers combined the potentially conflicting roles of student and parent into a new kind of student, creating a space in university for themselves. The power of the mother figure is observable through the strength of experiences and sense-making provided by the older students who are mothers as they take on the roles of mentors and guides to the students around them. All the participants, in the conversation at interview, directly or indirectly expressed a point of view that referenced traditional students around them in terms of their being other people's children. Students who are parents strengthen their sense of connections in university through their rapport with the teaching staff. With the significant age gaps and different levels of maturity among the traditional students, the participants turned to their lecturers and tutors as equals.

7:2 Application of Theory: Bourdieu, Baumeister and Bronfenbrenner.

Through the points made in the key findings, it is possible to make further interpretations about the participants situation in university through the theoretical underpinnings of the study, beginning with the parameters laid out by Bourdieu. The need for belonging, and how belongingness is understood in terms of being in university reconsiders Baumeister and Leary's contribution to the question of how students who are parents approach friendship and relationships in university. The work of Bronfenbrenner is then utilised to explain how their outlook affects their ability to make connections with other students by emphasising the contextual positioning of a students who are parents.

Not all the students who are parents came from social backgrounds historically underrepresented in HE, yet the key principles of Bourdieu's observations about people entering university as non-traditional students are still applicable. The participants have often experienced being or believing themselves to have been excluded from HE. Achieving a place in HE then became an emotionally charged process of overcoming a sense of exclusion before they could begin a new process of belonging. Bourdieu (1977) considered that the reality of fitting into university originates in the social and cultural capital of the student, whose socio-economic status enables them to transfer easily into the institutional practice of university. Like other non-traditional student groups, students who are parents may have more limited levels of scholarly, financial, and artistic resources than Bourdieu envisaged to be necessary to be fully part of HE. From this viewpoint, they are likely to lack the necessary cultural capital and the essential knowledge of academic language and behaviour to integrate readily into university.

Meehan and Howells (2019) commented that for non-traditional students who reach HE without the appropriate preparation “coming to university is akin to travelling to a foreign country and not knowing the language and appropriate cultural practices” (Meehan & Howells, 2019 p 1378). This comment is mirrored in participants who described how entering their first lecture felt like stepping into a different world. They had no or very little prior experience of HE and were not sure of what to expect from university, or what would be expected of them. The participants were unfamiliar with the institution’s organisation and system, and as there are no demands made upon the university to recognise students who are parents, the institution is unfamiliar with them. They felt incongruous and less credible among the traditional students. Self-conscious of their age, their maturity, and a perceived lack of conventional schooling in comparison to normative students, “So that was quite scary, going into a lecture and thinking, “I feel so out of place” (Maria Line 91-103), some of them thought of themselves at first as though they were imposters.

Several of the participants, seemingly assuming that all traditional students were high-achieving school-leavers, felt awed and outclassed. Not knowing how their own qualifications compared against those with examination results, they felt othered among the other students. As many had not had the benefits of up-to-date schooling and A level tuition, the students who are parents lacked the guidance of teachers through late school to prepare them for university. Some expressed doubt when they first reached university that their academic skills could be equal to those of traditional students. Adele recalled that she needed encouragement to believe her college tutors really meant her to believe them when someone in university told her “If your tutors have said come, because you can do it, then, then you can do it girl, get on with it” Adele (Line 29-406).

Most of the participants did not know what to expect of university, or what would be expected of them. Consequently, when they started at university, some participants explained how they felt like they were a “fraud” or “underqualified” at first and did not really belong. In Bourdieu’s terms, the students who are parents were moving into a new habitus of which they had little or no experience, and their initial response was to feel out of place. Not every participant believed themselves to be less than a real student, however, as shown by the comment “I don’t feel like, “oh my god, what doing here? -not at a complete loss because I just found that what I did was important for me.” (Katy Line 369-381). As they continued in university, most of the participants were able to reconcile any faulty expectations through experience and adapted their approach to become better integrated within the university community.

Because they are so unlike the general conception of students and have taken an unpredictable, non-normative route to HE, the students who are parents are shown through analysis as outsiders. There was a sense of displacement when they entered university that Bourdieu expects from an interloper into an unfamiliar social system. This is the element of “culture shock” experienced when non-traditional students have little preparation for what to expect of university, or what university expects of them (Christie et al., 2008). Despite their shared status as students who are parents, each participant has a story behind them unlike that of any other student, and these stories are what make student parents a heterogenous minority among the traditional intake of students in university.

Baumeister (1995) presented evidence, since reiterated through many studies, that belongingness in university originates in the engagement of a student with the activities and day to day communications in university (Baumeister 1995 p512). People need validation and

recognition from others to consolidate their achievements, and a sense of approval is a necessary element of social connections that return such endorsement of achievement (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Because the participants are unlikely to be as engaged or involved in university activities as traditional students, belonging in the same way proves elusive. Unafraid of peer pressure to conform to the teenage standards of self-respect, two of the mothers took on a role of setting examples by deliberately drawing attention to how they were unafraid of making mistakes or being clumsy. Some of the participant mothers become unofficial mentors to other students, sharing organisational and time management practices with them. When other students turned to them for support, they were responsive and caring, if younger students showed understanding and empathy to them, the students who are parents felt an increased sense of affirmation and belonging. In Baumeister's terms, they are fulfilling the need for social relatedness and moving closer to a sense of belonging with the traditional students by developing a level of reciprocal communication (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In his discussions about belongingness, Baumeister (1995) hypothesised that a sense of belongingness is related to the quality of a person's social contacts, not the quantity, and that feeling social relatedness is more important than making multiple incidental interactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The participants drew on their connections with university staff to support their sense of relatedness to the institution, and felt they had someone to confide in. This is expressed in statements such as "My personal tutor . . . , she's brilliant.", and "I can go to him, and I know he's sympathetic, he understands.". Knowing that their lecturers and tutors understood their position as parents helped them feel validated in their choice to return to education and strengthened their sense of connection to their university.

Some of the reasons why finding a sense of belonging in university is so problematic for parents who are students may be better understood through Bronfenbrenner's perspective on the social context of a person's life and development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). In Bronfenbrenner's Ecological model of society, each individual moves among a layered sphere of influences. All of these systems of influence, and the individuals within them, are subject to the Chronosystem, Bronfenbrenner's acknowledgement of the passage and importance of time (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The students who are parents are in a different place in the Chronosystem of their lives to traditional students. Their life experiences, their understanding of employment, practical knowledge and the shaping of their adult personality through time influences their perception of society, so they inevitably see the world differently to traditional students. For instance, a participant talking about a subject under discussion in a class said, "as a parent you have a different opinion on it" (Maria Line 668-689). Although they shared an introduction into a new and liminal space in which both groups would progress through together, the transition into university as a parent was not the same as that of a student who had left home to live as an undergraduate. The immediate field of social contact for an adult responsible for a child is much more complex than that of a young single person.

A student who is a parent who has at least their home and family, university, and schools or nursery to contend with is part of a series of microsystems. If they have an extended family and a workplace, these add to the responsibilities. The participants are unable to fully identify as a student in the conventional, stereotypical sense, because they have to prioritise their role as a parent. If working is necessary to support the family, they will continue to work, if there is no-one else to mind the children, they have to manage the childcare. Their lifestyle and duties as a parent will continue to come before their attendance and their engagement with

university. Students who are parents are at risk of being disconnected from the communication networks of the traditional students because their responsibilities to their families, the many hats they wear, have to be dealt with before they can be involved in further activities as students. This illustration comes from Kylie, “he finishes nursery at six o’clock, I’ve got to go home, put him to bed, and then I’ve, I can’t go out then because you know, I’ve got a little boy in bed, and he doesn’t get home from work until half past nine” (Kylie Line 327-370).

The participants are already embedded into a mesosystem in which they have multiple responsibilities and obligations, they have not left home to start a new life focussed on university but will still be responsible for everything they were already doing for their families. As a result, their experience of university is unlike that of any other student. Cultural elements of fashions, popular music and pastimes alter over time, beliefs and ideals that are or were relevant to an older person may no longer be held as useful or significant by an adolescent. As these are aspects of everyday life that change across decades, even one generation can become outdated in comparison to the next, for example, take the speed at which the application and understanding of modern technology taught in schools continues to move forward. The resulting gap in values, priorities, and responsibility between the two groups may be perceived by either side as a barrier to communication.

In his later work in 2001, Bronfenbrenner added the concept of Proximal processes, Person characteristics, Context and Time to his model of human development. He believed the combination of these components, the face-to-face communication between people, the personalities of those communicating, the setting of the meetings and the repetition of the interactions over time to be a fundamental influence on human development, and that

learning and development happen as a result of all three elements combining (Tudge et al., 2016). The outcomes of these processes are intertwined with the environment they take place in and the nature of the developing individual (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Effective university learning depends in part on the engagement of students with each other, including the proximal processes that occur in study groups, seminars and social activities. One of the consequences of the social and generational differences for a student who is a parent among traditional students is that they are likely to be intentionally, or unintentionally, excluded from crucial social and educational communications between other learners in their classes, for example, “It seems like everybody sort of clicks in their own groups within that first fresher’s week” (George Line 301-317). The incongruity of the participants among the traditional students invokes a risk that some of the proximal processes necessary to their education could be compromised by exclusion from the rest of the student body.

7:3 Limitations

Written evidence of the unique position of the student parent undergraduate is still sparse in literature, despite the increased interest in the issues of widening participation and non-traditional students. The combining of students who are parents with these groups, and the extreme time limits governing parent’s lives, result in papers devoted to parents often including part-time and post-graduate students. Consequently, work undertaken just with full-time undergraduate students who are parents is unusual. Using Thematic Analysis as an inductive framework has the advantage of allowing a closer insight into the parents lives as students but a truly unbiased perspective is inevitably compromised, because of the supportive interest motivating the study. The participant students who are parents come only from one university. The university they attend is a small research university in a rural

location, where transport and childcare are more problematic in comparison to more urban areas. Long commutes on country roads for students who live in their own homes are not unusual, adding to the time and cost of being in university. Longer journeys are required to reach schools and health centres, and digital connections may be poorer than in urban areas (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014). Such issues add to the likelihood of parent students maintaining a minimal physical attendance at university, which may well contribute to the apparent reluctance of parent students to take part in research. Thematic Analysis is an adaptable and multi-functional qualitative method but does have some drawbacks. The flexibility afforded by the lack of a specific theoretical approach means that TA has no built-in ground rules to build themes upon. Likewise, researchers using reflexive TA have to be careful to match their chosen theoretical framework to the requirements of their analysis or risk losing direction (Ozuem, Willis, & Howell, 2022).

Researching the literature has its difficulties. Whichever data base is explored, using any combination of the words “student” and “parent” leads to information about the parents of students, rather than students who are parents. Seeking studies about non-traditional and widening participation students broadens the field to include studies of students who are parents. As these groups share similarities with the parents’ responses and issues, and sometimes include students who are parents, they have been helpful in presenting the broader picture but not the specific problems associated with the caring position of the parents. Consequently, it may be more useful to comb the reference lists of articles sourced from initial searches. Most of these references are not specific to undergraduates but include part time and post-graduate students, and sometimes university staff working with them. The reason for this is not a scarcity of students who are parents, or a n unwillingness to answer

but is related to the pressure on the parents' time. The questions of time and timing defines much of the parents lives as students in multiple contexts.

The analysis and key findings do show that the diversity within the group leads to intersectional considerations that make generalisations about the group difficult, but strong parallels in some areas of their experience can be drawn with existing research. Some questions of interest to the discussion were not raised for ethical reasons, for example, the effect of a parent's entry into higher education on their significant relationships. It has not been possible to include all the information from the rich data gathered within the interviews given by the parents. This study is not intended to be critical of the university.

7:4 Future Directions

In taking the research forward, a more comprehensive picture could be obtained from applying discourse analysis to further explore the institutional discourse surrounding the inclusion of student parents in university. The perspectives of lecturers, personal tutors and traditional students appear to be an essential part of fully understanding the place of students who are parents in university. Exploration of these alternative views, particularly those of the traditional students whose responses are so influential to students who are parents, will assist with the evaluations of potential interventions in the future. In a surprising finding, there was very little talk about other structural aspects such as assignments or timetabling. This point may have been influenced by the choice of interview questions but nonetheless the issue did not seem particularly salient for the participants sense of belonging. Additional investigation or a longitudinal project would allow for different layers of experience to be exposed.

7:5 Implications for practice

The findings of this novel project yield a number of practical implications for practice. Five possible areas of intervention have been drawn from the analysis findings and presented here. While the students who are parents did not belong to the category of traditional student, they also did not neatly fit the category of other groups of students who are recognised in policy or practice. The backstories of students who are parents has often left them invisible to education, and throughout the key findings are indications of the ongoing struggle to be visible. Key finding 1 describes how the life trajectories of students who are parents has often left them out of sight of formal education. When they come to university, they need to be recognised.

Recommendation 1: To allow students who are parents to be identified, or self-identify, at the point of application. Self-identification would allow for measurement as an important starting point for provision, for example, identification and measurement will enable a faculty to know how many students who are parents are impacted by a policy change. Unless there is a mechanism that allows students to identify themselves as parents throughout the application process, only those in the university who have direct contact with them will know who they are. If nobody is responsible for knowing how many undergraduate students who are parents there are altogether in the university, they will remain uncounted and invisible.

The subject of their preparation for university is also raised in Key finding 1. Bourdieu's theories suggest an explanation as to why the expectations of students who are parents are sometimes out of step with the realities of university. A way forward to improve the

assimilation of students who are parents into academic life is outlined in the following recommendation.

Recommendation 2: Offering more comprehensive orientation into university. Fresher week is a significant element of the university calendar, and it was clearly an important event for the participants in this research, but it does typically cater for the dominant traditional group. An enhanced plan of orientation into the degree course for students who are parents, like invitations to meet lecturers, experience a lecture and ask questions about teaching systems before starting their course would help to eliminate the guesswork from an already stressful situation. Students like Rhianna (analysis 5:7) would be familiarised with the differences between lectures and seminars without having to ask.

Key Finding 2 demonstrates that the unique needs of students who are parents can place them in a position of conflict with policies and practices designed to cater to the needs of newly independent young adults. Some participants found themselves at times shut out of social exchanges with the traditional students, who tend to restrict themselves to relationships within the social circles and age groups they are familiar with. To enable students who are parents to better integrate with other students and discover any common grounds, more in-depth introductions could be implemented.

Recommendation 3: Arranged and mediated introductions with other students. There are examples where students who are parents either assumed a lack of commonality with traditional students or were reluctant to engage with them. A partial resolution to such problems of communication can be found in the analysis with the experiences of Maria, who described how her lecturer had encouraged and enabled her to talk to other students with

shared interests (analysis, 6:7). These introductions had given Maria access to connections with other students that would otherwise have been unavailable. Following this example, changes could be made to how students who are parents are welcomed into classroom situations by introducing them more comprehensively to their student cohort.

Identified in key finding 3 is the observation that students who are parents tend to continue to identify primarily as parents while they are in university and connect to university through their parental persona. Without having a relatable peer group, the participants appeared over-reliant on their relationships with university staff to provide peer-level support (analysis 6:7). For students who are parents to be able to build support groups, a place in which to do so is paramount.

Recommendation 4: Providing online and physical spaces allowing students who are parents to make like friends across the university. An online space organised and mediated by the university, rather than individual parents, could bring parents of different ages and disciplines together without adding the responsibility to their already complicated schedules. Students who are parents would benefit from the provision of physical space, to make within-group friendships with other students who are parents. This option has the potential to resolve most of the problems of time and opportunity the parents face in socialising and studying with each other. The provision of such an area enabling students who are parents to meet and communicate together would mitigate the potential for isolation and alienation conveyed by these students.

Key finding 3 also reiterates how much students who are parents have to do alongside their studies. To alleviate some pressure from parenting and studying, the university could simplify their access to information and support.

Recommendation 5: Providing academic, informational and welfare services that meet the specific needs of students who are parents. They may benefit from having a single point of contact with one person in the university who could be responsible for directing them to sources of information, for example, where to find help and support with wellbeing.

Recognition that they have different needs than a traditional group that recently left school, opens the possibility of offering specific support on entry to university. This could include study skills, personal tutor meetings and help with university technology.

7:6 Conclusions

Since the students who are parents left formal education, they have forged and sometimes lost relationships, they have coped with victories and failures, travelled, and had children. They have become independent adults, their attitudes and their outlook toward education have changed. Teaching methods and technology change even more rapidly, most of the students who are parents have not shared the same kind of schooling as younger students. The longer the gap between school and university, the further away from modern teaching the students who are parents have become, and when school is recalled as a gloomy, authoritative nightmare, university feels open and undisciplined in comparison. Most of all, this gap is reflected in the gulf of experience between the students who are parents and the younger, traditional students (Lin, 2016). When adult carers become students who are parents, they perceive university through identities shaped by their caring roles, which impact and direct

every decision they make. There was no option of disconnecting from physical and emotional priorities for the participants. Their roles as carers intersected with and influenced their roles as students, and they made extraordinary allowances and considerations for students they seemed to regard essentially as younger people who were just starting their lives. Maintaining their caring role and persona in university appears to be a natural reaction, and the participants who react to being among younger people by conducting themselves as universal parents are creating their own niche in HE. However, the younger and less experienced students who were parents seemed much more uncertain of how to reconcile being a parent with being a student.

Like many parents who are successfully managing multiple roles, the students who are parents were confident of their own self-efficacy, through having navigated difficult, sometimes fast-changing circumstances in their lives they had increased their resilience and self-confidence. Students who are parents also bring with them skills and strategies they have acquired as independent and self-reliant adults, along with the resourcefulness and resilience they have employed to navigate their journey back to education. Achieving a sense of belonging in a pre-1992 research university as a student who is a parent among traditional students is a challenging process because of the barriers and obstacles that must be overcome, and without support not every parent can succeed in meeting those challenges. The participants related more to teaching and administrative staff than they could the traditional students, regarding them as friends and mentors. They appreciated staff who remembered their names and interests, who could share a sense of humour with them and who would discuss problems with them that it takes another adult, and sometimes another parent to understand. The affiliations students who are parents formed with their lecturers and other members of staff as a result of these conversations seemed to provide a foundation on which

a sense of belonging to university could be built around. Becoming an undergraduate for students who are parents means investing heavily in terms of time and debt. Underpinning these physical investments is a series of personal and emotional events, traumas, and triumphs on which their commitment to achieving their educational goals is founded. Looking more closely at the story of their lives before they return allows some insight to why they are different to other students and offers a holistic overview of the physical and emotional investments behind what makes them become students now, instead of being students when they were younger. In this instance, participation in HE was not only about a lack of belonging but ultimately, a desire to belong.

Reflections

I was drawn to researching the lives of students who are parents from a deep-rooted sense of empathy which I feel is essential to understanding this group, yet could be regarded as a prejudice in their favour. As an undergraduate, I talked with a parent who explained how before studying humanities, she had spent a term on a popular science course. This was a woman who had a partner, several children, a part-time job, and she was an intelligent and articulate communicator. She gave up the idea of a science degree and changed subjects, saying of her experience in the science class “I have never been so lonely in my life”. I wanted to know why, in a vibrant university setting, she felt like this, because the other undergraduate students who are parents in the group then continued to express how they too found it difficult to make meaningful connections with other students. I employ the theoretical methodology of IPA as a foundation for the thematic analysis. This is because I believe the hermeneutic process of sifting through the layers of the personal narrative of the interviewees is essential to understanding how their experiences are interlinked through past and present events.

Part of my own story is that I was raised in a conservative, middle-class suburb of mostly white people in the South-East England. At the time, behind the façade of pretty houses and gardens, careless discrimination, popular prejudice and unthinking contempt for social groups who failed to fit the acceptable norm was commonplace. For example, physically and intellectually disabled children and adults were housed safely out of sight of the community. The language used to describe them was demeaning, and their parents were regarded as though disability was a result of something they should have had control over. Mental health was not a recognised concept, but families coping with mental illness were stigmatised by

association. People of colour were often contemptuously defined by derogatory terms relating to their racial or ethnic origin. I spent much of my early adult life picking apart the strands of callous, sometimes media-driven attitudes like these, only to realise later that there were other elements of discrimination, more insidious and persistent, of which I was not only a witness but inevitably a victim. Inherited biases such as these differ a little from generation to generation but are always present in some form. Confronting and challenging personal preconceptions and the expectations of people such attitudes engender has been a long and sometimes painful process in my life. I have to accept that being completely objective is not possible, I can consciously bracket off my personal biases, I can refrain from allowing personal experience to colour my interpretations, but I cannot be dispassionate toward my participants. To conduct the interviews without genuine empathy and authenticity would leave the conversations stilted, lacking the depth and breadth of information they recorded. Staying uninvolved and non-judgemental is easier once the interviewees names are anonymised and they become a step removed from the real speakers, I am then working with effectively imaginary people and have no personal identification with them, so I can take a much more detached stance as I continue.

As I began this project, I had a chance meeting with a woman who was retiring from teaching Welsh studies. Unasked, through our conversation she gave me her observations of students. The school leavers who make the grade to be accepted into university, she told me, generally come from families who support everything their child does. I can give a first-hand example here. As an undergraduate I talked to a sports scholarship student, who had competed in races all across the country. Her parents took her everywhere she needed to be, provided all the transport and equipment she required, and watched every race she ran. She loved running, and her parents supported everything she wanted to do. This level of interest and investment,

the Welsh teacher reckoned, was normal for her students. Whatever she had wanted to do or become, she had their parents' support. At school, she was the brightest and the best. When she reached university, the ultimate prize of a school pupil, she had rarely had to communicate with anyone outside the social circle in which she had excelled. Such students live in a bubble, surrounding themselves with others who match their accomplishments and social status, especially other young people who share their tastes, interests, and aspirations. The younger students in these privileged social groups see life from inside a goldfish bowl, everyone else can see them but can never come into direct contact. It cannot be assumed that every traditional student has had the same privileged start in life, and it sounds like a somewhat stretched analogy, but for some of the students who are parents in my study, the goldfish bowl is a reality. There really seems to be no way of reaching past the glass to communicate with or relate to a class of students who live in an exclusive space and timeframe. Students who are parents, born and schooled in different decades, are strange foreigners to the microcosm that is traditional student life.

Students who are parents are already committed to spending most of their time with family concerns, looking after their children and working. Organising childcare is a constant burden for parents at the best of times, and parents who are students are documented to lean heavily on other family members to meet the gaps between school and nursery hours (González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Relying on other people, however close they are to the family, to fill in the gaps in childcare when the mothers need to be in university is akin to building a house of cards. If one person changes their plans, a school club is oversubscribed or a child has a temperature, the house will fall, and the child's mother is always the person who has to pick up the pieces. All of this before they think about studying. Study groups meeting after school hours, societies and clubs gathering on evenings

and weekends, are out of reach to most students who are parents, even spending time in the gym is time lost for study. They are at risk of being marginalised in higher education because university students are represented in terms of the young, free, independent and essentially masculine ethos promoted in the national policy, media presentation and practice of higher education. University students are not commonly depicted or treated of as part of a reproductive, emotionally committed society (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Among post adolescent students with little experience of relationships, downplaying the importance of affective, empathic behaviour risks fostering attitudes that heighten the potential for the toleration of sexual discrimination. Student carers in such an atmosphere of detachment from emotional consequence are effectively marginalised. Higher education therefore tends to be seen by female parents who are students as a masculine space in which they have no given right to intrude (Burke & Crozier, 2014). In an environment designed and attuned to traditional students who have no conflicts of priority, student mothers are an anomaly. They cannot immediately fit the intrinsically masculine profile of the young, independent student in an environment that is gendered by default (Moreau 2016).

Then we see the time, and effort, the students who are parents take to make themselves accessible to other students and try to fit in and belong with them. They get annoyed with them, they get frustrated, but they don't pass judgements and they don't assign blame. I have seen only empathy and kindness from the participants when they talk about the traditional students, about how hard it must be for them, how their parents must worry. When Danielle Estes (2011) wanted to know how students who are parents managed the dilemma of having the role of both student and parent, she drew on the widely recognised motivation of parents to become good role models for their children. Balancing the social values of motherhood as they intersect with their student identities, her participants reinvented themselves as student-

parents in terms of combining parenting with studying for the children's eventual benefit (Estes, 2011). Although my participants believe they are good students, their student identity is not necessarily qualified exclusively in relation to their children. What I believe I see is parents who as students, still identify primarily as parents. They not only practice all the skills of timekeeping, stress management and organisation they have developed as parents but share those skills with whoever they mix with. And they will take time to reach out to another student who they see or think needs a little parental or motherly support, without questioning if doing so might be detrimental to them personally.

Looking through the university website I can find online videos and write-ups advertising the "university experience" which I now know to be beyond the reach of students who are parents. Being involved in an exciting social life, having access to sports, activities and networking opportunities is advertised as being equally important to new students as the available courses, they are all part of the student package that their long-term loans are paying for (Moreau Marie pierre, 2016). Since students who are parents shoulder a greater financial burden but have less time to enjoy the non-academic benefits, the question arises; what they are paying for if there are no allowances made for them? Why is there no physical space in which students who are parents can meet? Is there an option to rent family accommodation? Are there any arrangements by which a student who is a parent who finds themselves unable to physically get into university can participate in a lecture or seminar online? As an undergraduate working alongside several parents, I joined in efforts to create a group or platform for students who are parents to meet across the university with the help of the Student Union. While their representatives tried to be helpful, there seemed to be no real understanding of what we needed to achieve. They appeared to have a "one size fits all" approach built to cater for traditional students, whenever we did make any progress the Union

volunteer managing the project would leave, or the interminable Union elections would take priority and we would find ourselves back at the start. Our plans and proposals outlined the need for a level of elasticity to accommodate the time constraints students who are parents face, but no one in the Student Union seemed to understand how to make such allowances or why we needed them. Eventually, we gave up, not knowing if we were asking too much, not explaining ourselves or if they were just not interested. Throughout the testimonials promoting the university to new students, there is nothing to suggest parents cannot be students, but neither is there anything to say they can. There is discrimination against students who are parents, but it seems to occur by careless default rather than any deliberation (Kasworm, 2014). For example, having explained how I see students who are parents as being separated from the mainstream peer groups, there is no accessible provision for them to create links and form peer relationships with other students who are parents unless they are in the same department.

Missing out on the social life of university happens not because they are excluded or barred, but because they have prior demands on their time. When someone else has been kind enough to take on some of the childcare so you can be in university in the daytime, asking for time away from the family to go to a society or a function in the evening is too much to expect. Parents lives, especially the lives of mothers, are directed and controlled by the rhythm of their own and other people's timetables. Among the multiple demands on their attention, personal time is at a premium and tends to be last on the list of priorities (Sweet & Moen, 2007). Yet despite the pressure on them to live up to multiple expectations I have found students who are parents to be remarkably optimistic and tolerant. There is a sense of pride in their achievements, that perhaps in successfully negotiating the non-normative path they have taken they are making sense of much more than just their university experience. Their study

is related to their past, their present and their future, where they have been and what they want to become.

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Appendix 1:1 Studies Specific to Student Parents

Authors	Date	Title	Journal
Adams	2018	Understanding the Experiences of Women Community College Transfers Over the Age of 25 at UCLA	UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations
Brooks	2011	Student-parents and higher education: A cross-national comparison	Journal of Education Policy
Brooks	2011	Negotiating Time and Space for Study: Student-parents and Familial Relationships	Sociology
Brooks	2011	Social and spatial disparities in emotional responses to education: Feelings of 'guilt' among student-parents	British Educational Research Journal
Deutsch	2011	Starting from ground zero: Constraints and experiences of adult women returning to college	Review of Higher Education
Estes	2011	Managing the Student-Parent Dilemma: Mothers and Fathers in Higher Education	Symbolic Interaction
Gonzales-Arnal	2009	Contextualizing rationality: Mature student carers and higher education in England	Feminist Economics
Kensinger	2018	The Invisible Village: An Exploration of Undergraduate Student Mothers' Experiences	Journal of Family and Economic Issues
Lyonette	2015	Tracking Student Mothers ' Higher Education Participation and Early Career Outcomes Over Time: Initial Choices And Aspirations, HE Experiences And Career Destinations	Nuffield_final.pdf
Marandet and Wainwright	2009	Discourses of Integration and Exclusion Equal Opportunities for University Students with Dependent Children	Space and Policy

Marandet and Wainwright	2009	Parents in higher education: Impacts of university learning on the self and the family	Educational Review
Moreau and Kerner	2015	Care in academia: an exploration of student parents' experiences	British Journal of Sociology of Education
Moreau and Kerner	2012	Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A Policy Analysis	Nuffield Foundation
Moreau	2016	Regulating the student bod/ies: University policies and student parents	British Educational Research Journal
O'Shea	2015	I generally say I am a mum first...but I'm studying at uni": The narratives of first-in-family, female caregivers transitioning into an Australian university	Journal of Diversity in Higher Education
Smith and Wayman	2009	Meet the Parents	NUS
Van Rhijn	2016	Why Go Back to School? Investigating the Motivations of Student Parents to Pursue Post-Secondary Education	New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development
Wainwright and Marandet	2009	Parents in higher education: Impacts of university learning on the self and the family	British Educational Research Journal
Wilsey	2013	Comparisons of adult and traditional college-age student mothers: Reasons for college enrolment and views of how enrolment affects children	Journal of College Student Development

Appendix 1:2 Advertisement for Participants

For the Attention of U/G Parents and Carers

Are you an undergraduate student who is also parenting?

I am a mature student and parent, conducting postgraduate research about how parents who are studying full time at university interact with other undergraduates.

If you are a full-time undergraduate, in any discipline, who has children, or who is responsible for the care of another person at home, I would appreciate talking to you. If you believe that you are eligible and would like to take part, then I would like to hear your story.

The research requires a single interview of 30-60 minutes, in private within regular university hours. The time and place are flexible and can be arranged to suit you as a participant.

To learn more about this project, please email me, Marion Longshadow, on mrl3@aber.ac.uk. My research proposal has received ethical approval from the Psychology Department

Ydych chi'n fyfyrwr israddedig sydd hefyd yn rhiant?

Rwy'n fyfyrwr aeddfed ac yn rhiant, sy'n cynnal ymchwil uwchraddedig i'r modd y mae rhieni sy'n astudio amser-llawn yn y brifysgol yn rhyngweithio ag israddedigion eraill.

Os ydych chi'n fyfyrwr israddedig amser-llawn, mewn unrhyw ddisgyblaeth, sydd â phlant, neu sy'n gyfrifol am ofalu am unigolyn arall adref, byddwn yn gwerthfawrogi siarad â chi. Os ydych chi'n meddwl eich bod yn gymwys ac yr hoffech gymryd rhan, hoffwn glywed eich stori.

Bydd yr ymchwil yn golygu cyfweiliad o rhwng 30 a 60 munud, yn breifat o fewn oriau rheolaidd y brifysgol. Mae'r amser a'r lle yn hyblyg a gellir trefnu beth bynnag sy'n addas i chi.

I ddysgu mwy am y prosiect, e-bostiwch fi, Marion Longshadow, ar mrl3@aber.ac.uk. Mae fy nghynnig ymchwil wedi cael cymeradwyaeth foesebol gan yr Adran Seicoleg.

Appendix 1:3 Question Schedule

These questions will be used to provide a framework for the discussion. In line with the principles of the semi structured interview, if the material is covered by the student in the natural course of conversation some questions may be omitted.

- 1 Can you tell me what circumstances brought you to university?
- 2 What impressions do you recall from your first week as a fresher?
- 3 How did you feel when you first entered a lecture?
- 4 Can you tell me about your feelings about the other students in your first weeks as a student?
- 5 How have those feelings changed or developed as your course continued?
- 6 Have you been able to make friends with other students?
- 7 Are you able to socialise with other students?
- 8 Are you a member of any of the student societies?
- 9 How do you find group work with younger students?
- 10 Are you able to arrange meetings with groups around your university and home timetables?
- 11 How do you feel other students on your course respond to the extra commitments you have as a parent?
- 12 Is there anything you feel you bring to university as a parent, that you could not have contributed as a school-leaver?

Marion Longshadow

mrl3@aber.ac.uk

Appendix 1:4 Participant information sheet

Marion Longshadow

mrl3@aber.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in a study about student experiences and friendships at undergraduate level in university. It is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve before you decide to continue. Please read the following information carefully and ask me if there is anything you do not understand, or if you would like further information.

Why have I been invited?

For this qualitative research project, I am interested in your experiences as a student. To be eligible for the study you must be primarily responsible as a parent or carer, examples of what I mean here are having children who are under school age, in school or in higher education but living at home or having responsibility for a dependent adult with a disability. This includes single parents and those who have a partner or spouse, also parents whose children spend time with an absent parent or have other family support. Mature students with older children who still have care needs, or who are responsible for fostered children or grandchildren can also join the study.

The interviews will be used for the purposes of my project, which will be written up as a postgraduate thesis and may be published or presented, for example at an academic conference.

Do I have to take part?

It is your decision to take part as a volunteer. This information sheet is given to you to read to help make that decision. Should you decide to take part, you will be requested to sign a consent form agreeing to my conducting an interview and making an audio recording. You have the right to change your mind and withdraw your contribution from the study at any time up until 4 weeks after the interview or until the 31st May 2019, without giving or being asked a reason.

What will I have to do if I take part?

The interview will last up to an hour, in a time and place which is convenient to you. This may be a quiet publicly accessible place within the university, for example, a comfortable room in the psychology department. Interviews can be conducted through an app such as Zoom if you prefer. The interview will be recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed to a written form. Your interview will be recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed to a written form. The written transcriptions will be anonymised, who gave the interview is known only to myself. Any material recorded that could lead to the speaker being identified will be left out of the transcript.

Some verbatim quotes will be used in the final written report, meaning I will write exactly what someone has said to me. If there is a question you would prefer not to answer, you do not have to

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

Confidentiality will be protected, any personal information relating to you (such as email address, mobile phone number) will be kept in a protected place, such as a password protected computer account. Transcripts will be anonymised so anyone reading the research will not be able to identify you. Anything said in the interview that may lead to your being identified, for example, the name of your child or their school, will be removed from the transcript. Immediately after the interview the audio recording will be transferred to a file in a password protected computer, to be deleted when the project has been passed.

The interviews will be analysed, and the final analysis written up as a postgraduate thesis which may be published or presented, for example at an academic conference. All information written into the final thesis will be anonymous and the original speaker untraceable.

What are the possible risks and disadvantages of taking part?

There are anticipated to be minimal risks associated with this study. It is possible that some of the issues may be upsetting to you. If you know that you may be vulnerable when talking about your experiences of being a student, you are kindly asked to evaluate whether you should participate. You are free to stop the interview. You have the right to change your mind and withdraw your contribution from the study at any time up until 4 weeks after the interview or until the 31st May 2019, whichever is closest to the time of the interview, without giving or being asked a reason. The reason a time limit is given is because it will be difficult to withdraw information from the project once it is incorporated into the analysis.

After the interview there will be an opportunity to ask further questions. If you would like some support, it can be arranged through student support services, student-support@aber.ac.uk, or at (the student support service for a partner university will be included when the arrangement and permission is confirmed). Other support services are included in the participant debrief form.

Who has reviewed the project?

The project has been reviewed in accordance with the British Psychological Society's Ethical Code. Ethical approval has been gained via Aberystwyth University Psychology Department.

Contact for further information on the project; you can contact myself Marion Longshadow on mrl3@aber.ac.uk

If you believe you have a complaint, please contact my research supervisors, Saffron Passam sap49@aber.ac.uk or Dr Martine Robson mtr1@aber.ac.uk.

What happens after the interview?

You will be given a debrief document and are welcome to ask further questions about the study if you wish.

The project is being overseen by my supervisors Saffron Passam and Dr Martine Robson, it has been reviewed in accordance with the British Psychological Society's Ethical Code. To contact Saffron, email sap49@aber.ac.uk.

The data controller for this project will be Aberystwyth University (AU). The AU Data Protection Manager provides oversight of AU activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at infocompliance@aber.ac.uk. Your personal data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this notice. The legal basis that would be used to process your personal data will be 'a task in the public interest'. If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact AU in the first instance at infocompliance@aber.ac.uk.

If you remain dissatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at:

<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protectionreform/overview-of-the-gdpr/individuals-rights/>

Contact for further information on the project mrl3@aber.ac.u.

Appendix 1:5 Consent Form



Department of Psychology Informed Consent Form

Principle Investigator: Ms M R Longshadow

Interview study on How actively parenting full-time undergraduate students manage, and are affected by, their relationships with younger, independent students.

	Initial Showing Consent
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the project in which I have been asked to take part and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the interview without giving any reason.	
I understand that that I am free to withdraw my data without giving any reason before the assignment is submitted up to 4 weeks after the interview or before the 31 st of May 2019	
I understand that the interview will be recorded and that the audio file will be stored securely and only listened to by the Investigator signed below.	
I understand that anonymised quotes from the transcripts will be used in the final write-up of the study	
I understand that my responses will be anonymised in the interview transcript, which will be eventually deposited in the university data sharing facility under public license.	
I understand that all personal data about me will be kept confidential.	
I understand that the interviewer must adhere to the Ethical Code of Practice set down by The British Psychological Society.	
I agree to take part in the above research project.	

I (**Participant's full name**)
hereby volunteer to participate in interview as a participant.

Signed (participant) **Date**.....

I am aware that the researcher may conduct further projects and I agree to being contacted again regarding future research, with no obligation to participate.

Signed (participant) **Date**.....

Appendix 1:6 Participant Debrief Form

Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of the study is to gain an insight into how student parents feel they fit in with their groups and classes, it is not intended as a review of any of the services provided by the university. Students with parenting responsibilities are usually older than most other students and have a wider life experience than students who enter university as school-leavers. Their responsibilities to a family mean they are often unable to participate in many of the experiences of university, such as living on campus among other students, joining clubs and societies, or socialising after teaching hours. Consequently, the demands of their different lifestyles limit their opportunities to interact and make relationships with other students (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Researchers into parenting student' experiences, such as Moreau & Kerner, (2012) and Reay, Crozier, & Clayton (2010), indicate that the relationships between parents and their fellow students have an impact on the parent's success as an undergraduate. This study is intended to explore how student parents engage standard-entry students, and how these relationships affect the parent's sense of belonging and involvement while at university.

Your experiences will help to enlighten researchers who have an interest in how students like yourself perceive life as an undergraduate when you are responsible for a family. Research shows that students with family responsibilities have a different perspective on university life than younger, more traditional students, your point of view is a valid contribution to this research. Thank you for your time and sharing your experience.

In the event that you feel you need support with issues raised in the process of the interviews you can contact student support services at student-support@aber.ac.uk, or (the student support service for a partner university will be included when the arrangement and permission is confirmed) Other services are available at:

Mind Aberystwyth
The Cambria
Marine Terrace
Aberystwyth
Ceredigion
SY23 2AZ
Email: info@mindaberystwyth.org
Monday-Friday 9am-5pm
Tel: 01970 626 225

North East Wales Mind
The Wellbeing Centre
23b Chester Street
Mold
CH7 1EG
01352 974430

Samaritans of Aberystwyth and Mid Wales
Maengwyn

5 Trinity Road
Aberystwyth
Ceredigion
SY23 1LU
(01970) 624535 (local call charges apply)

National telephone:
116 123 (this number is free to call)

Samaritans in Wales
116 123 (this number is FREE to call)
Welsh Language Line: 0808 164 0123 - this number is free to call (from 7pm - 11pm 7 days a week)

They will treat your enquiries in strict confidentiality. If you have any enquiries about this study, please contact:

Marion Ruth Longshadow: mrl3@aber.ac.uk

Saffron Passam: sap49@aber.ac.uk

References:

- Marandet, E., & Wainwright, E. (2010). Invisible experiences: Understanding the choices and needs of university students with dependent children. *British Educational Research Journal*,
- Moreau, Marie-Pierre; Kerner, C. (2012). Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A Policy Analysis. *Nuffield Foundation*, (October).
- Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2010). “Fitting in” or “standing out”: Workingclass students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), 107–124.

(Appendix 2-4 are not included here, please contact supervisor Dr Saffron Passam sap49@aber.ac.uk for details).