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LEARNING WORKING LIVES: A WORKING PAPER

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See www.tlrp.org



The Learning Lives Research Project

The Learning Lives research project began in June 2004, and runs until the end of January 2008. The project is a collaboration between the University of Exeter, the University of Brighton, the University of Leeds and the University of Stirling, all in the UK. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The award number is RES-139-25-0111.

The focus of the research is on the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in people's lives. There are two strands to the data collection, involving the integration of three different methodologies. The first strand is a qualitative study of around 120 people, drawn from different walks of life, living in different parts of the country, and of different ages, gender and ethnicities. Each of the university partners has its own sub-sample, with different core interests. The Exeter team (Gert Biesta and Mike Tedder) are focused on learning, identity and agency in relation to family and the local community. The Brighton team (Ivor Goodson and Norma Adair) are focused on issues of migration, including within country migration. The Leeds team (Phil Hodgkinson, Heather Hodgkinson, Geoff Ford and Ruth Hawthorn) are focused on people engaged in adult learning and/or guidance, and on older adults. The Stirling team (John Field and originally Irene Malcolm, now Heather Lynch) are focused on work and unemployment. Of course, these issues overlap. On the qualitative strand, we are combining two normally separate methodologies: life history research and longitudinal qualitative research. Though we will have a shorter engagement with some of the sample, we are following most subjects for over 3 years, involving about six sweeps of interviewing.

The second strand of our work is quantitative. A second Exeter team (Flora Macleod and Paul Lambe) is using the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) – a data set of 10,000+ adults from across the UK who have been interviewed annually since 1991 – to develop robust measures of formal and informal learning, identity and agency in their different dimensions and to test the validity of these measures against a range of outcome variables. Once these theoretically informed instruments have been developed using BHPS variables, longitudinal data analysis techniques (multilevel models of individual change and hazard/survival models of event occurrence in both discrete and continuous time) will be applied to explore the significance of learners' identities and agency for their learning, dispositions, practices and achievements and how transformations in a given individual's dispositions, practices and achievements impact upon their sense of identity and agency and their ability to exert control over their lives.

To establish an iterative relationship between the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data we are mapping the case study participants' learning trajectories onto wider trends and processes in the UK as revealed through analysis of the BHPS.

Working Papers

This paper is one of a series of working papers being produced as part of the Learning Lives research. These papers are of very different types, and their prime purpose is to help the team with its on-going analysis and synthesis of findings. Consequently, they represent work in progress. A second purpose is to share some of our preliminary findings and thinking with a wider audience. We hope that you will find this paper, and others in the series, of interest and value. If you have constructive critical comments to offer we would love to hear from you. Please send any comments to the contact author, identified on the front cover.

LEARNING WORKING LIVES: A WORKING PAPER

Within the wider Learning Lives project, the Stirling research focuses on learning, agency, identity and change in respect of employment. We are taking a broad definition of employment, and our interviewees include people who have retired, who are formally registered as unemployed, or who are excluded temporarily or otherwise from the labour market (eg people on incapacity benefit). A small number are engaged in unrecorded waged work on the fringes of the labour market. While there are risks in defining employment too widely, the adoption of a broad definition has allowed us to examine a range of the formal and informal, intentional and unintentional learning that people undertake in and around their working lives. We distinguish this from research which focuses solely on learning within the workplace; our focus is rather on the place of employment within the individual's wider learning life.

A range of material, social, economic and cultural processes shape individuals' biographies, and in turn people's identities and agency act upon and influence these external contexts. Employment relationships have a complex and changing place in these reflexive processes. The nature and extent of change in patterns of employment in recent decades is hotly contested territory, but it is widely agreed that employment relations for both men and women have tended to become more heterogeneous with the decline of large conglomerations primarily involving mass, routinised work and the increased integration of women into waged employment for much of the adult life course. It is also generally accepted that the new forms of employment are often associated with requirements for workers to develop broad competences and contextual knowledge rather than deep job-specific skills, alongside an increasing tendency for workers to assume at least partial responsibility for ensuring their continuing employability (Field 2006). These changes in turn are combined with shifts in the boundaries between work and other areas of life; while there is a long term decline in the amount of time that men in particular spend at work, and a long term growth in the time spent by women in waged work, there are also tendencies for the long arm of the job to reach beyond the borders of the workplace. Arguably, though, wider cultural and social changes are also making themselves felt within work.

What do these changes mean for people's learning lives? And how does people's broad learning life act upon their working biographies? This paper focuses on the ways in which people's work, identities and agency are interwoven, and on the ways in which this then shapes their orientations towards learning, as well as the ways in which learning helps to form identities, agency and employment-related capabilities.

Work and social change

Transformations in employment are often seen as paradigmatic of more general contemporary changes in people's lives. This perspective can be found across the writings of a range of sociologists interested in employment such as Ray Pahl (1988), Paul Thompson (1989) and Kai Erikson (Erikson and Vallas 1990). It appears in a range of journalistic comment, such as the influential analyses of Charles Leadbeater (2000). Work is also a leitmotif of recent 'high theory' in the social sciences and plays a central role in Ulrich Beck's portrait of Second Modernity (Beck 1992), as well as in Giddens' notion of Late Modernity (Giddens 1991).

Richard Sennett (1999) and Claude Dubar (2000) both view changes in work as central to the loosening of contemporary identities. For Sennett, this is a highly undesirable process, leading to the 'corrosion of character' as people lose hold of the secure co-ordinates that once guided their sense of self, and shaped their obligations to others. In particular, according to Bauman (1998), contemporary employment arrangements reflect a lasting shift away from the labour market conditions of industrial capitalism whereas the capitalist labour market was characterised by a fluctuating fringe of the marginalised, who constituted a 'reserve army of labour', the post-modern labour market places no value on the marginalised, who instead form a new group of unwanted individuals, surplus to the requirements of liquid modernity. Bauman's take may be somewhat journalistic, when we consider the complexity displayed in the data, but it reflects a wider belief that the labour market in a 'risk society' poses very different challenges to workers from those found under the conditions of industrial capitalism.

Of particular significance is the set of changes associated with the decline of employment in the male-dominated areas of manufacturing and extractive industries and the growth of employment in the service sector. There is, in fact, some room for debate over the precise nature and extent of this shift. Service sector employment was numerically dominant even in the high point of manufacturing: the 'workshop of the world' was full of clerks, shop assistants and above all female domestic workers, and not just miners, weavers and engineers. And if the dominance of manufacturing employment has been exaggerated, so has its decline. Official statistics tend to help accentuate tendencies to inflate the degree of change, by treating employment units as homogeneous; thus factory cleaners, once categorised as unskilled manufacturing employees, become unskilled service employees if their work is contracted out. Nevertheless, there has been a marked shift towards the services, particularly since the 1970s.

These shifts have a strong generational dimension. In particular, scholars interested in youth transitions have explored the way in which the life course of young people is increasingly

individualised, and, particularly for the middle classes, characterised by extended transitions from full time education into full time employment. Karen Evans (2002) and John Bynner (2003) have both recently contributed important papers to debates over the impact of changing youth transitions and young people's sense of identity and agency. Significantly, these debates are international in character. Similarly important work has also taken place in respect of older adults, though when compared with the debates over youth transitions, relatively few studies of adult workers have combined theoretical exploration of agency, identity and life course with a systematic approach to the collection and analysis of empirical evidence (but see Dubar 2000).

These changes also have strong gender and generational dimensions. It is sometimes suggested that there is excessive concentration on men's experience of employment in the dominant accounts, as well as a tendency to neglect some important continuities in employment for both women and men. There is abundant research which demonstrates that men are still more likely to have traditional, secure, long terms jobs than women, as well as some research which suggests that gender and other structural aspects are also interwoven with age and generation. Thus it is noticeable that the most insecure and precarious forms of employment are disproportionately held by younger workers (Dubar 2000). A number of writers, including Fuller et al (2005), point to persistent gendering in VET; generational aspects have formed an important element in the enormous literature on youth transitions and the growing literature on transitions into retirement, but have rarely been examined among adult workers.

Symbolically as well numerically, service sector employment is now dominant, helping to fuel debates about what it means to be a worker in the 'new economy'. This has had very important consequences for the concerns of sociologists, whose discipline has been profoundly shaped by theories of social stratification that gave primacy to work and employment relationships. This has often rested on huge assumptions about gender; thus traditionally the male role in work has been taken by social scientists as the primary signifier for women's social stratification. Marxism is the most obvious example of a tradition that gave primacy to employment, but British sociology in particular is populated by a wide range of theories of stratification (notably the work of John Goldthorpe) that have been accused of 'privileging employment'. Stephen Ball's solution to the problem of class has been to develop a Weberian approach that is rooted in patterns of consumption as much as relations of production (Ball 2003). From a broader sociological perspective, Mike Savage, Fiona Devine, and Beverley Skeggs are also developing, and debating, theories of class which are set against a background of interest in culture, identity and life style.

Much of this debate about stratification acknowledges that there are shifts in the way in which social class can form a co-ordinate for processes of identification. These are processes of formation of an identity which is collective, and it is therefore easily assumed that the

processes are therefore collective, but Ulrich Beck has argued that one key shift is that even the processes of collective identification are increasingly highly individualised. Fiona Devine's work shows moreover that class identification can often be negative ("what I not") rather than positive ("what I am"), and varies considerably over place and time (Devine 2004). Savage's recent studies examine class as an embodied identity, as does Skeggs' earlier study of young working class women (Savage 2000). There is an internal location of class, as indicated in Skeggs's (1997) work among others, that can make its links to women's identities subtle and complex. Valerie Hey asks if the male "post-traditional" position, posited on a restricted male tradition of living and imagining is one that makes us overlook the intimate forms of classed life. She goes on to make a case for a more embodied reading of class and underlines the positional nature of our social interactions (Hey, 2003).

As well as continuing discussions of class and stratification, debate has also considered the nature of work itself. One point of departure is the labour process debate of the 1970s, which explored the extent to which workers were able to deploy their collective and individual resources to assert their autonomy at work. This debate is now largely forgotten, but it has important implications for worker agency, and is therefore of interest to the project. Moreover, its focus concerned what is now sometimes referred to as the workforce's possession of 'untapped knowledge', including a wide range of tacit knowledge and oppositional knowledge. The relevance of the labour process debate is not generally explicitly acknowledged, but can be seen most directly in contemporary German discussions of *Arbeitsprozesswissen*, or 'work process knowledge' (Boreham, Samurçay and Fischer 2002).

Also significant is the continuing influence of the 1970s feminist debate over the nature of housework. While there is substantial debate among contemporary scholars and equal opportunities researchers over the extent to which the balance of domestic responsibilities has shifted since the 1970s, it is broadly agreed that in most multi-adult households, primary responsibility most frequently lies with adult women, particularly in families with significant caring obligations (Hansen, Joshi and Verropoulou 2006; Women and Work Commission 2006, 27-8). In the dominant literature, the effect of this organising role on women's employment and identity in the life course is under explored. The 'double day' must have an impact on women's sense of themselves as workers, and also on women's broader identity formation. More generally, the analysis of cohort data for working mothers seems to confirm that while fathers have taken increased responsibility for childcare over the last three decades, the proportion of children cared for by grandparents and older siblings has increased substantially (Hansen, Joshi and Verropoulou 2006). Again, then, generation and gender intertwine with employment in complex ways.

Some feminist sociologists have sought to consider the relevance of work-based analytical categories in the light of the significance of various forms of unpaid work, and they have

particularly emphasised caring activity as a central – female and largely ignored – form of labour. However, the “caring character” of women is not regarded as something that is natural to them, rather, as Hochschild puts it “something of their own making “ (Hochschild 1983). It is seen as something that derives from their low status in relation to men, as in the view of Hochschild, or as an aspect of their class and gender positioning that they have internalised and view as part of themselves (Skeggs 1997, Colley 2006). What women’s characters really are and what they have been is therefore an important area for research (Hey, 2003). These debates have had an important influence on the more recent academic debate over emotional labour. On the basis of the critique of unequal responsibilities for housework, some feminist sociologists developed theories of emotional labour as a distinctive and largely female aspect of work. Hochschild’s original account of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) has been widely applied to discussions of employment in the new economy; her work has also been extended by Nickson et al (2004) in their discussion of aesthetic labour in the service sector.

Work and employment are, then, central to recent debates about identity and change for both women and men in contemporary western society. We would argue that they can be found not only in the rather peculiar world of academic debate, but are also suffused throughout contemporary public discussions and concerns about social and economic change. We now present some of the individual lives from our study, with a view to exploring some of the ways in which some of these themes surface in our interviewees’ narratives of their learning lives.

Learning lives: individuals’ stories

The interview sample was purposeful but not stratified. It includes people working in the ‘new economy’ (particularly call centres), workers in long-established service occupations (including local government), workers in manufacturing, people involved in creative or artistic work (some of whom are self-employed), and people who are retired or on benefits. This section presents a small number of the life stories, in order to provide a context for the thematic analysis that follows.

Sue Martin

Sue is twenty-seven, and works in the Human Resources department as an HR officer in an outsourced company that is a call centre for a major US-owned manufacturer. She was brought up in her grandmother’s house by her mother and grandmother. Sue says she was an “accident”, having been born when her mum was seventeen. The company for which she works is involved in electronic commerce and runs e-auctions for the industry. Sue is part of a department of 5 or 6 people who look after staff in two major UK cities, dealing with absence, sickness, disciplinaries, grievances and the recruitment of new project staff. At the time of the first interview, Sue had 175 staff in the UK to “look after” and by the fourth interview this had risen to over 200.

Sue has changed jobs several times in the ten years since she started work. She is relatively young, then, but has undergone a number of significant workplace transitions. At the age of 17 she started work for one of the world's largest tea manufacturers as an office junior in their head office. By 18 she was secretary to one of the directors and one of the first women to visit the company's plantations in Sri Lanka; soon she was managing a staff of 7 and had her own secretary,

I mean at seventeen it was... – the next youngest secretary was in her forties, so ah was this young thing ah could use a computer – there was no, ah mean, there was no Microsoft...

While in this post Sue started to work on recruitment and training staff which was later to become her career. Sue left the company after 2 or 3 years because she felt she had gone as far as a woman could in terms of career progression in such a traditional male hierarchy.

Sue's next step was to take up employment in a recruitment agency because she had developed an interest in HR, but she hated it and only lasted a few months: she referred to it as "too salesy". While employed in the recruitment agency Sue was approached by a firm in the games industry and asked to work with them. Sue developed management and HR procedures to "structure the business" and she gained a lot of experience, for example, dealing with disciplinary issues for the first time. After two years of rapid growth in the firm, Sue "landed with a bump" when the company started to go downhill and she resigned.

At this point, Sue spent two months in the States with her father's brother, working in his bar. On returning to Scotland, she took up a temping job in a call centre and ended up staying for a year, dealing with workforce planning. She was offered a permanent job, but this would have meant a drop in salary which Sue was not prepared to accept. Instead she moved to an estate agent to manage a branch for six months, dealing with staff and selling the odd house when they were busy. When she realised that this job did not offer her the challenge or experience that she was looking for and when she became tired of commuting, she sought a position in a computer company as an HR assistant. Later she was promoted to HR officer and worked for the company for 3 years in total. On her promotion the directors suggested that Sue take an HR qualification and paid for her to go to a local university. She left this post when her job was moved to Leeds without any consultation and she also left her part-time degree course at this point. In the time that we have been interviewing Sue she had embarked on a post-graduate qualification in HR which necessitated her taking a year's bridging course at an FE college. She thought that the FE course was a waste of time and not relevant to her career but did it in order to access the post graduate diploma which she has just started.

Sue says that knowledge has been very important to her – it seems to be important to her confidence and her sense of agency, her sense of being in control of her life. She likes to feel she knows things that are significant and relevant to the job, that she can get things right.

She has detailed knowledge of employment legislation, and particularly of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations, which she developed in her last post. In this context, she commented that “Knowledge is a very powerful thing”; she was, and is, sent to other parts of the UK to deal with TUPE. However, Sue appears uncomfortable when she thinks she doesn’t know things and when she perceives technology to have moved on a lot since her previous job in a particular sector. In her third interview she talked about how her knowledge is tied to the practices of the employer in the way that statutory requirements are interpreted and implemented. This seems to force her to seek higher levels of experiential learning (in supporting a new employee, interview 4) to consolidate her career position.

Being brought up by grandmother and mother (who always worked), going to a rough school, working in a meteoric games company (“...*it was a surreal time*”) and working with patriarchal bosses in traditional hierarchies have been influential in Sue’s identity formation. In the time that we have been interviewing her, there seem to have been identity changes: Sue has become more established in her job, taking on more responsibility and she has also got married. She has changed from the informal person who says,

They invited me back for a second interview and ah said no like ah it just wasn’t me and it was you must wear a white shirt and either a navy or a black suit every day and ah’m like oh god ah can’t do that ah can’t do that I’ve got lots of nice coloured t-shirts...

Sue’s transitions are often bound up with gender issues, but they play out in a range of ways. In one of her jobs, Sue felt that she had gone as far as she could as a woman, and she decided to move on. At the start of the interviewing she was not prepared to have any company dictate what she wears, yet she has recently opted to observe the informal dress code in order to reflect her developing role and status within the company. The male directors suggest she take up formal learning in one company and the “guys” fight to keep her after the take-over. For the early part of her career she was a young and able women in an environment where all of the power figures were men; in her present job the HR director is also a man. Sue engaged in conflict with a relatively junior man who, she suspects, is motivated by misogyny, and she still glories in her victory. However, there may be complex cultural issues here since Sue says that the employee is Muslim,

ah believe he was Muslim ah’m not quite sure, gentleman who didn’t have much respect for women didn’t like dealing with female members of staff and could potentially be quite difficult with me so ah was, that was fine ah had been pre-warned...(Sue, Interview 1).

Sue described her employers in the computer games company as ‘geeks’; she takes care of them and indeed specifically describes herself as mothering them. At home, she has the domestic responsibility “to make smelly boy’s tea that ah live with...” By the fourth interview Sue has married and describes an expanded domestic role.

Jeannie Taylor

Jeannie's mother is of Irish Catholic origin and her father's family is from the Highlands and Islands. In her mid 30s, she is the eldest of three children. Her father was a primary school teacher and her mother worked in the factory of a well-known publisher. Her mother returned to learning and was in the year above Jeannie at secondary school. They went to the same university where her mother was also a year ahead of her; her mother then went on to become a secondary school teacher.

School days were uneventful and happy. Jeannie took up dancing which later became an important part of her life. One thing that cast a shadow over an otherwise happy family was her younger brother's illness. Six years her junior, he was born with a heart defect and had major operations at the age of five and then at the age of fourteen. Jeannie did not have a rebellious phase and even in her teens, she was well-behaved and studious. By the time she reached 6th year she already had two unconditional offers from universities. Jeannie went straight to a local university and studied French to honours with marketing.

Before taking her year abroad as part of her university course, Jeannie had a job in a shop and when she finished university the job was still available, so she worked there for two years. At the time Jeannie says she "couldn't really find anything" she wanted to do. When she was about 25 she started working in telephone banking. She stayed with the bank for about 5 years, becoming a supervisor in the call centre and getting involved in training. While at the bank Jeannie met her present partner and his daughter. She has been living with this partner for over five years now and helps him to look after his daughter, while also taking on the main responsibility for work in the home. At the fourth interview Jeannie talks about relationship problems connected with the uneven share: she and her partner had decided to have time away on their own and she has plans to employ a cleaner.

Jeannie is very matter of fact, but she also uses a lot of irony and humour in her story. There seems something scripted and organised about the way she tells it: some customers are "screamers"; when it gets too much Jeannie knows she herself is a "weeper". The fact that work affects your emotions is dealt with in a way that is very clear cut and not to be dwelt on or seemingly analysed too much. She describes her mum as "organised" in the way she planned her family and brought them up and she says that she is very like her mum in appearance, but also in character. In dealing with her partner's daughter she is aware of saying the things her mum said and using the same approach of encouragement and discipline. Although her mother had planned to be a "stay at home" mum, she ran a playgroup before returning to learning. Her father was not very "practical" so when her mother was studying at school and university, she was also running a home and this was quite a challenging time. Children were organised to take responsibility for a domestic duty and contribute to the household.

Jeannie has been in her present job in a customer contact centre for over five years. Her job is to monitor all the calls to the company and give feedback on quality. She also gets involved in some coaching of the agents who take the calls. She has to use her people skills when giving agents feedback on their calls and in encouraging them to improve,

...most of the calls get recorded so we can play that back to the agent and say "What did you think of your performance, what would you have done differently, what did you do well" and we can coach them on their performances.

Jeannie describes the work in the telephone banking centre as highly routine:

you have to keep your own motivation up, you have to not sound robotic but when you've got a hundred calls in the queue it's kind of hard to do

The work is highly scripted, there is an interest in NLP (Neurolinguistic Programming) and work on the person to improve the quality of the emotional labour that the firm requires,

It varies from person to person and day to day, some guys sometimes it's the straw that breaks the camel's back and it can be the simplest wee thing and I've got other guys who can be very resilient but we have to be very careful with them because sometimes they'll go on being assertive and being confident and that'll move into being curt and being aggressive with the customer, so those are the kind of things that we would listen out for on the calls to say "correct information, wrong delivery" or "delivery could be improved" would be a more diplomatic way to put it (Jeannie, Interview 3, our emphasis).

At one stage when the organisation Jeannie worked for was trying to merge two different banking systems there were a lot of complaints and Jeannie and other supervisors were dealing with irate customers for the whole of a six hour shift. She talks about how this can affect you emotionally and the need for (female) employees to leave their workstation and cry somewhere or to go to a manager to tell her/him that they are not coping. She also talks about the need for good people skills and is critical of some managers she has met who have poor skills; she praises the manager she worked for in the bank, regarding herself as lucky to have encountered a boss who was so good. She sees the lack of such skills on the part of managers as a major problem in a lot of workplaces.

As well as the workplace, family is an important context for Jeannie's life and she talks a lot about family members, each of whom has a specific place – "oldest", "middle", and so on. One important influence was her parents' and her family's commitment to Socialism. Both parents were activists and brought their children up to have Socialist values which involved looking after the "underdog". Throughout the eighties Jeannie remembers protests against the Conservative government. At university, she was a member of the Labour Party and CND. Her parents have now left the Party and Jeannie seems to have become almost a-political. The Socialist identity has not been continued into adulthood:

It's the background's there but the activism really isn't it just doesn't seem to be as many issues to get as passionate about now and it's, I mean the conversation we

have now, the lines are more blurred now it's different, it's very difficult to tell from a policy which party that comes from now because it's all kind a much of a muchness...(Jeannie, Interview 1)

Andy O Donnell

Andy, who is 73 years of age, was born as the eldest of five children in a cottage on the outskirts of a market town in Scotland. His father was a manual labourer who worked as a miner, then in a council rubbish dump and later in a stamp work. Andy worked as a bricklayer all his life and he was also very involved in politics, as a councillor and committee convener, as well as a JP. Andy's home life has been important to him and his wife is mentioned on the first page of the transcript; he has one son.

Andy was not the best pupil at school, but neither was he the worst. He says he was "about eighth in the class". He seemed to enjoy his school days although he doesn't feel he learnt a lot. When he left school at fourteen Andy found a job down the pit, starting immediately on the following Monday. However, his father said that there was no way he was working down the pit; he was going to learn a trade, and so Andy started work as an apprentice bricklayer. This involved making tea and taking lines to the bookies for the qualified bricklayers, but Andy also learnt a lot from them in the course of the five years that he was apprenticed:

"you're a bound apprentice and when your times oot you get a certificate tae say that you're a fully qualified bricklayer..."(Andy, 1)

The armed forces feature frequently in Andy's story. His grandfather died in the First World War and his father fought in the Second. Andy himself did National Service and was due to be sent to Korea, but ended up in Egypt instead. Andy's father, who was well-read, had a strong influence on him, particularly on his interest in geography, history and politics.

When he was qualified he immediately became a foreman which was unusual and not what he wanted, because he could earn more money laying bricks than walking around reading drawings. Andy worked in various places and for various companies, "chasing money" and working for whichever company was paying the best rates. He always came home at night, even when he travelled to building sites outwith the area. For a while he worked down the pit where a bricklayer was paid the same rate as a qualified engineer. Andy did "gripwork" which meant that you were paid by the number of bricks that you laid – if you were a fast bricklayer you could make a lot of money as Andy did. This method of employing bricklayers, based not only on piece-work but also on sub-contracting with individuals, did not survive, partly due to Union pressure and an easing off in the housing market. Although it had suited Andy, he agreed with the Union view and was chair of the Union branch at the time. In the "gripwork" regime, money in hand was good, but workers were responsible for their own tax and NI contributions and according to Andy some of them drank or bet all of their money. Andy himself became a lifelong socialist as well as a union man. An important development was becoming a Councillor and later Convenor of various committees from 1970 onwards, until his

wife's illness. It was, in fact, his wife who encouraged Andy to do this. He had always been interested in politics, although the catalyst for his joining the Party was the Labour Social Club which opened next door to where he was living.

Andy's descriptions of the workplace demonstrate how apprentices learned from those around them and the capacity for hard work is emphasised as important. Physical prowess determined wages, but it also However, here too, Andy is critical, in his usual humorous way! People who say that hard work never killed you don't know anything about hard work, because it killed his father - is a serious point in the social history of work. Andy's expertise at his job and his pride in his work is important and contributes to his sense of identity.

Money is important and Andy emphasises the need to earn money to provide for his family which seems to be a driving force in the development of his working life and the sense of agency. Fun is also important and, despite the satisfaction of being a bricklayer, dancing and playing football are necessary escapes from "the hum drum of work". Gender issues are suggested in the fact that Andy mentions his wife and family more than some other interviewees of generation. Andy also talks about the fact that it is mainly women who come to his Council surgeries and although he is typical in many ways of men of his generation (he calls the interviewer "hen") he is aware that women may have a different perspective: he said, in introducing an anecdote, "You're a woman, you'll appreciate this..."

Andy comments a number of times on what a good life he has had and on how lucky he has been. He emphasises the huge increase in affluence that his generation has experienced and what this has meant for him – for example, the opportunity to travel. When he was a child it was only "millionaires" that owned cars: now he owns one.

John Black

John was born in 1963 and went to school in the region of Scotland where he still lives and works in a large engineering company. He is married with two daughters, both born in the early 1990s. He was academically successful at school, and initially went into white collar work, but eventually opted for a skilled craft trade.

The area has seen vast social and economic changes, such as the closure of the coal mines where his father worked as a skilled blacksmith welder. Later, his father moved from the coal board to a building company where he could still apply his trade. John's mother worked in the dinner school. He has one brother and both experienced a happy family and school life; John's brother is a school teacher. John was mostly in the top classes for his subjects; he did well in O-levels and took engineering drawing and English Highers. Initially, he wanted to do an office job and managed to get a position with British Rail for the summer after he left school. One of the things that he didn't like about working in BR was commuting to a large city from the country area where he lived and having to be there for 8.30am. He applied for other

jobs and had the offer of the engineering apprenticeship or a job with the Department of Health and Social Security. He felt that his parents wanted him to do a trade because this would “stand him in good stead”, so he took the opportunity of a four year apprenticeship in a large and well-regarded engineering manufacturing company where he still works (or, rather, is outsourced).

John describes some of the differences between apprenticeship then and now. He went to college one day a week and worked on the shop floor, moving around different departments for the rest of the week. At the end of four years, in 1984, he passed his exams with a sense of achievement. When he started work as a qualified fitter he was aware that you are always trying to improve what you do and make your work better; however, this has changed as a result of mechanisation.

One aspect of the apprenticeship that John mentions is the power dynamics that operate among a largish group of young men of 17/19 years. This is described as it was when John was an apprentice and how it is now when he is responsible for groups of trainees. He has had to learn how to deal with apprentices who may bring a complaint (as one did) and how to handle “litigation culture” by always having a colleague with him and making notes of everything if there is an issue to discuss with an apprentice. He has to watch out for bullying and intervene. Although there is a lot of competition for the apprenticeships – in a recent recruitment round 48 took the initial aptitude test and only five were selected – John is critical of the attitude of today’s apprentices, but he also feels sorry for them.

The manufacturing process has changed a great deal and instead of producing an entire product as was the case when John was an apprentice, only a part of the product is produced. The work is more atomised and the final product is not seen by the engineers who have contributed. The work is more repetitive and routineised and there is less variety; apprentices do not move so frequently between departments, of which there are fewer, but spend around a year in each area. A point John makes is that there is almost no need to look at drawings regularly, although this remains an important feature of the work procedure which is subject to quality checks.

John was ambitious and two years after completing his apprenticeship started to apply for internal posts away from the production line. Although he was unsuccessful for some time and also unhappy about this, one of the posts he applied for was in the training department and they later contacted him to ask if he would be interested in training other fitters in a new product that was being introduced. He agreed and, although the post was initially for just a year, plans changed, he undertook other training work and ended up staying with the training department from 1992 onwards. Engineers who have been out of their posts for longer than three months cannot be reintegrated:

I got ta'en on a contract for a year and there's a lot of union issues involved at the time right and if you're away from the shop floor for more than three months you can't go back.

There followed a period of formal and informal learning. John took an instructional training course, from which he feels he learnt a great deal: how to put things across and hints about presenting information which he still relies on today. John then took D32, 33 and more recently he has completed his ECDL in his own time and at his own instigation. He has to update his knowledge regularly - on health and safety, developments in vocational training, modern apprenticeship schemes and company procedures, for example.

John talks about changes in the work culture that he has experienced. It is clear that he is disappointed in his employer:

From mid nineties I would say from about '94 onwards the place has probably changed from, shall we say, a happy go lucky place with a lot of characters in the building a product into shall we say, just a business machine now, you know, the kind of, I don't want to use the word family, I suppose it was like a family, the kind of family atmosphere has gone from the place, you know, there's not the amount of characters... Whether it's because the work's all been split up and it's different work packages, whether that kind of family kind of atmosphere has been ta'en away or whatever or whether it's the type of management that's in here now (John Interview 1).

John is quite critical of the way things have changed. He plays down his own on-going learning in the company and describes the employer's attitude as very instrumental: seemingly different from the learning organisation described by call centre worker, Stephanie Bennett. The end of a boom time in his industry heralded the outsourcing of his department in 2001; he no longer works for an engineering company, but for a separate service provider which has a contract with the manufacturer to deal with a wide range of HR and training issues. Although much has stayed the same since this transition there are subtle differences in the experience of work that John describes. One aspect that has remained the same is the male domination of the engineering workforce, since there is only one woman fitter in a workforce of some 400.

Family plays an important part in John's story. He talks a lot about his daughters and plays an active role in looking after them because his wife works some distance away in a large city. His place of work is near their home and the primary school. When John talks about his daughters and how he supports them, it seems that there is a form of learning here for him when, for example, he takes up learning golf when his younger daughter takes up the sport. Interestingly, as we have seen, John laments the passing of a working environment that he

compares with a family: the 'family atmosphere' of highly skilled craft and technical labour has been displaced by a set of discrete processes, with different components being manufactured in distributed centres, before finally being assembled into the finished product. This is also a process of change in learning, but the story at work is one of deskilling brought about by the decomposition of a community of practice.

Stephanie Bennett

Stephanie is 23 years of age and works as a call centre agent. She was born in Scotland and moved to Wales at the age of two, initially to a Welsh-speaking primary school in the north and later to the south. Her family is wealthy and middle class; her father, a company director, has a university degree. Her mother's qualifications are not mentioned, but Stephanie says that she stayed at home to bring up her family and that the family moved with her father's job. Stephanie is the middle of three daughters: her elder sister did well at university and has a job as an actuary in the financial markets; her younger sister is finishing school and is hoping to enter teacher-training. The family moved back from Wales to Scotland when Stephanie was 13.

Stephanie did very well educationally, had obtained 8 Highers by the age of 17 and had the pick of university places throughout Scotland. Her choice was to move from the rural setting of her family home to a major city to study psychology. She now feels that she was too young to make such a big move. After spending some time in student accommodation, Stephanie's parents bought her a new three-bedroom flat in the city centre.

As to her studies, Stephanie always found it difficult to decide what she wanted to do; she never had to try too hard. As a child she wanted to study archaeology and she recounts a discussion she had with her father which she presents as a turning point. Stephanie says she has always been a "girlie girl" and her father pointed out to her that as a student of archaeology she wouldn't be investigating the pyramids but,

"No you'll be in the Highlands of Scotland and it's pouring down with rain and it'll not be warm and you'll be cold and you'll not be able to do your nails all nice" so that kind of changed my mind with that...

Friends have been very important to Stephanie, and she talks about the fact that in every place she has worked she has made a friend with whom she has kept in contact.

Stephanie also talks about her identity and her sense of place in her family:

I was always the one with my head in the clouds and always kind of wanting to be an actress or wanting to be, I suppose just like any child, but I was always kind of, was not really happy kind of in the situation I am at the moment, always wanting to kind of do more.

When referring to the difficulty she has had in deciding on a direction in life she ascribes this to middle child syndrome: "It's middle child syndrome, I think. I was reading this in a magazine once...".

Her family life and upbringing had been happy. When talking about the difficulty of trusting people and the transience of modern love relations she compares this with her parents' happy relationship:

...they're always like that, "Is my dad the most handsome man on the planet" and I'm "right, whatever." I suppose in a way you kind of expect that from a relationship yourself as well, but you expect it to be like that, but I'm sure they've had, they've just been really good parents in the way ...

Stephanie enjoyed her time at university and managed to pass her exams in first and second year without too much effort. She changed from psychology to history and geography at the end of the first year, but she now thinks she should have given the psychology more time, because she is interested in people. Tensions arose with Stephanie's parents when they visited her frequently at week-ends:

...my mum and dad were just completely and utterly scared for me to be fair because, it wasn't, I was still passing everything at uni and I never actually failed anything, but they think that I was obviously kind of going out too much and having too much of a good time, so they started clamping down a little bit.

In her third year, as the exams approached, pressure was mounting on Stephanie and she left Scotland for Magaluf just weeks before she was due to take her finals. She did not tell her parents, worked for six months and broke off contact with her family.

Stephanie talks in more detail about the kind of pressure that led up to her departure,

...even up until just before, you know, my third year, they (her parents) were asking "What do your lecturers think you're going to be getting, what do your tutors, for your Honours" and you know that puts a lot of pressure on you especially if you're not too sure if it's exactly where you want to be and then someone is planning like so many years ahead. I mean you don't want to let people down...

During third year of university Stephanie found a job in Top Shop and was put on to the fast track management scheme, even although she was a student and part-time.

At this point she was fed up studying and had friends who were working and having a good social life:

I started to decide well maybe I can pursue something other than studying all the time persuading yourself out of it. I regret it now...

Stephanie didn't actually make the decision to abandon her studies: more shifts were offered her at work and she could not keep up with the studying, so leaving university seems to have been the result of drift:

No, not really, no, no it was just I didn't really want to tell them because I knew how disappointed they would ...and to this day we've still not properly talked about it.

Contact with her family was interrupted for between one and a half and two years, "two Christmases".

Stephanie describes her work in Magaluf which involved approaching tourists in the street and inviting them to come to the bar where she was working. She acknowledges that this was quite dangerous at times. She worked seven days a week and partied every night,

...you had to walk up to strangers and you know form a bond with them and get them to laugh and get them to like you and get them to come in.

The kind of work that Stephanie was doing has some similarity with the call centre work, because she now has to "form a bond" with the customer in the course of a telephone call.

On returning from Magaluf, Stephanie had to find her own flat, and there followed a period of two years during which she worked in bars which was very hard, involved seven-days-a-week commitment and work during Christmas and other public holidays. Her present post was her first office job; she describes the on-going assessment of her call handling by clients. At the first interview she had worked in the call centre for six months having initially taken the job "to get ... out of bars" and to save up to finish her final year of her studies in history and geography. However, at this point Stephanie wasn't sure that this was what she wanted to study. Subsequently, initial thoughts about returning to university were more or less abandoned since she would have to pay for herself and at this stage she found it very difficult to save money, because of the pressure to keep up her social life. She also talked about saving up to go travelling and said that she would do this at the end of 2005 if nothing developed with her present job. She talked about feeling that she had changed, become a lot calmer and more determined.

Travel had been important in Stephanie's sense of her life and her self. As she saw it, the experience in Spain involved growing up and being her own person: learning to make decisions and take responsibility because there would be no one to fall back on. This had the effect of increasing her confidence. She is aware of a change in how others are likely to perceive her because she is not a graduate as she had expected to be:

I did this (attend university) but it's been so long now you can't really rely on that as a kind of status any more and you know I work full-time in an office and that's not really kind of something ... somewhere where I thought I would be and that kind of brings my confidence down a little bit in myself or maybe the way others kind of perceive me

In her present position, the company has regular meetings with its employees to set goals and talk about their development and learning. By the third interview Stephanie was taking an SVQ and by the fourth interview she was pursuing a proposal to the company to send her on a college course. She has been promoted to "learning champion" and is very pleased about

this because she says that she did not want to continue “working on the phones all the time”. She helps in tutoring and coaching colleagues; she feeds information to the training department from the “floor” and is being trained as a trainer in new technical and operating systems. She also works as the team manager when her manager is absent. In the future, she would like to join the training department as a training consultant; she still has the idea of returning to university, sponsored by the company and she still has an interest in psychology which she is now relating to how people can be trained and which approaches work best.

Stephanie confirms some features of learning in her call centre. The work goals in the call centre are mentioned in detail; two are measured: 1) through-put rate of calls 2) customer satisfaction rate. The initial 2 weeks’ training as a call agent were difficult to transfer when you “went live” on the floor. The environment is very dynamic and one feature of this company is the positive relations that they have been able to generate among employees. Formal learning is an on-going process and the workplace involves constant change. Some of the staff are given a lot of encouragement: Stephanie has completed and passed an SVQ since taking up employment and is now attending a college course to take a CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personal Development), paid for by the company.

Stephanie talked about her role as a learning champion, which she was thoroughly enjoying. She found it a challenge at the start, when initially she felt like an impostor – as though she did not really have the background to be training her colleagues. However, she has now settled into the role (which has involved continuous feedback through observation). She is very pleased about this and feels that she has changed a lot since we first met. She is feeling much more settled, keen to pursue her career and plans to buy her own flat by the end of the year. (Her father has offered to help with the deposit and this is also a change because she had initially said she did not want to take such help again.) The college course was suggested by Stephanie herself and she asked for a meeting with the director of training, discussed it with her and got her agreement.

Lucinda Argyll

Lucinda who is in her early forties, having spent her childhood in a “nice Council scheme”. This was, she says, “a very working class background”. Even so, Lucinda was aware that she was privileged compared to others. In Primary Three, when a child came to school in winter with no socks and wearing only plastic sandals, Lucinda took some of her own socks to school for the child.

Lucinda recalls her early years with considerable pleasure. There are delightful memories of putting on concerts in the street and more fond recollections of the beautiful garden that her father tended. Her father was a skilled engineer in a large company and her mother went to work when Lucinda was two-and-a-half. The transition to school left Lucinda feeling overwhelmed and interested, but out of her depth. She was then belted three times for

making a mistake while the class was chanting out times-tables. After this she decided to mime the tables only and at this point Lucinda feels that she develops a fear of failure; the belt became a regular experience. Lucinda also gets picked on by her older sister, who is very well-behaved and well-liked by teachers at Secondary.

Art and music were her favourite subjects, even at the Primary stage and Lucinda attended out-of-school dance classes and was given piano lessons. In first year at Secondary while the teacher is out of the room Lucinda goes to the piano, plays something funky and has the whole class singing along. On the teacher's return, Lucinda was hauled "by the hair" and locked in a cupboard where she spent every music lesson for the next two years. Lucinda went on to study piano up to Grade 8. When a drama group perform at the school, Lucinda was impressed, but felt that this was not for her: she could never aspire to studying drama or acting. Later in Secondary, L became heavily involved in amateur dramatics, taking the lead role in a number of performances.

Despite the conflicts, Lucinda did well academically, and achieved four good Highers. But university was not even discussed. Instead, with her parents' encouragement, Lucinda enrolled for a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in retail distribution at a college while spending most of her spare time on Am Dram. Subsequently, she moved to London as a nanny for a couple involved in the media. This was an exciting time and a great learning experience. Lucinda takes pleasure in debunking the pretension of some of the people she meets at social gatherings and the experience seems very significant for her own identity formation:

...it was the first time I'd experienced this, people would come up and would look at your badge to see if you were worth talking to and then they would move on and at this particular do.... I was chatting to this man all the way along the buffet, realised with my accent that I was Scottish, so we started chatting... and when he got up and left all these people who previously looked at my badge, all appeared round me, because and I thought "Mm" and(name of employer) said "You were talking to the editor, no the president of Magazine, it was one of the Magazine launches we were at, at the Ritz and I thought "How shallow, they'd looked at my badge before, I've not been worth talking about, talking to but this man finds me interesting so they're all around me", so she loved the fact that I found all that so shallow ... (Lucinda, Interview 1)

A friend encouraged Lucinda to apply for the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and after an audition she was offered a conditional place in the face of stiff competition. One of her Highers (Food and Nutrition) did not carry the same weighting as the others, and the admissions panel recommended that she take more Highers and enter a year hence. While working for the gas board, Lucinda attended evening classes four nights a week and passed a Higher in Economics and one in Modern Studies. One year later, setting off to take the

audition again, Lucinda underwent a crisis of confidence, and got off the train at the next stop, overwhelmed by a fear of failure.

Lucinda then found a job at an airport which allowed her to “wear a nice uniform”. Influenced by a boyfriend, she then joined the police force. She worked her “socks off” during the police training and was posted to another part of the country. At twenty-three she thought of herself as experienced, having been in London and done different jobs – but this self perception changes. In 1986 the police force was strongly male dominated and Lucinda was “a bit overwhelmed by society’s ills”. “There’s nothing a police officer doesn’t see, nothing.” She was involved in what might be regarded as the feminised areas of public service: child protection, counselling in rape cases, in child abuse and in incest cases. Lucinda’s father died suddenly while she is working as a police officer, and shortly afterwards she served in the aftermath of the Lockerbie disaster. During her time in the police force Lucinda retained her spiritual faith, but stopped going to Church and lost her contact with the Arts.

While still in the police force a friend from Am Dram encouraged Lucinda to do an Open University Arts Foundation Course: “I loved it, I absolutely drank it all in”. While doing a really difficult job as a police officer she feels that the OU kept her sane. She met her husband during the last year of her degree, graduated, had her picture in the paper with the Chief Constable and meanwhile was getting “overloaded”...“cot deaths and all that...harrowing stuff”. Shortly after getting married and graduating, Lucinda left the police force to take a year out. During this year she went back to the school that she had attended as a child and took music Higher. She also completed an M. Sc in IT and taught piano.

After her marriage her first child was born in 1999 and she was offered a PT post in FE. She then completed a teaching qualification and had a full time post by the time her second son was born three years later. But she clashed with an older teacher and decided to leave, by September 2003, Lucinda was already working at the college where we met for the subsequent interviews. By the fourth interview, Lucinda had found a new job, having become disillusioned with the college course she has been teaching for excluded youngsters and disadvantaged adults: she feels that the college is not investing enough to move learners on to the next stage. In 2003 Lucinda had also started an MA in Education at the OU and at the time of our interviews she was taking a year out. Lucinda takes on most of the work in the home; while her husband is helpful, she feels that women are generally better at such work.

Lucinda’s parents were not ambitious for their children and she says that her father in particular was aware of his place in society. Both parents were happy for her to take a “wee job as a typist down the road”. Yet, although Lucinda is now critical of her father’s class allegiance and sees class loyalty as backward, her social positioning has been influential in her identity formation.

L/earning themes

This section of the paper examines seven themes taken from the interviewees' accounts of their lives; they are selected as an initial point of entry into the data, and we present them here as a basis for discussion and further development as the research progresses. We start by discussing the move into employment, which is widely viewed as probably the most important single transition that most working people experience. We then briefly discuss the views of learning that people carry into and develop within the workplace, before turning to other work-related transitions such as changes of job or changes in role, which involve people in new and often intense learning episodes. We then look at the importance of employer support in persuading people to enter and remain in organised education and training activities. Next, we consider aspects of gender in shaping people's working learning lives; this can be seen as an important aspect of employment in the new economy, which is drawing in a much larger number of women workers than previous capitalist regimes. After looking at the ways in which people's sense of the future and commitment or loyalty to job and employer are bound up with one another, we finally present some ways in which collective senses of self and agency are still to be seen in today's working lives.

Entry to working life

The interviews are compatible with other accounts that portray a general shift away from direct entry into work from school, towards more protracted and complex patterns of transition. There is a class aspect with those from poorer families tending to enter the workforce sooner:

I left at sixteen and I suppose one of my biggest learning experiences was my first job I was desperate to get away from home and things weren't great between my mother and I, she'd got a drink problem by this point (laugh) so I was just desperate to get out of the house (Naomi Smith, Interview 1)

Similarly, Andy left school for a job at fourteen, while Lucinda was channeled by her family into the familiar world of a vocational course in a further education college.

For Jeannie, a university graduate now working as a call centre supervisor, the transition from full-time education into work was a protracted one:

once I graduated I just kind of bummed about for two years. I couldn't really find anything that I wanted to do. I had a job in a shop at that point and then eventually round about twenty five I started working for telephone banking. . . . I had worked in the same shop since I was fifteen and then when I went to go and live in France I had left all that behind but when I came back there was a vacancy.

Jeannie had in effect continued to depend on parental support for her university career and for two years afterwards, before experimenting with a number of occupational choices.

The older workers among our interviewees had experienced a much sharper transition than younger, and more middle class interviewees. Family expectations were relatively modest for working class school leavers, but whereas Andy's father intervened directly, the process was rather different for John Black, whose father bowed out when his son's school career went beyond his own experience. Nevertheless, John did what his father had done before him – went and got himself a trade:

John: I felt as though my father wanted me to do it, but never to say 'I would like you to do your apprenticeship' I just felt that was what they wanted me to do and that's what I did because I was kind of brought up always, you know, not just my family, you know, the kind of families roundabout us, and the kind of attitude was 'Get a trade behind you, you know you can always go back to it' routine, probably true but, you know, there are times I sit and say 'I wish I had never done it' and there are other times when I say 'I'm glad I done it'

Interviewer: I mean the DHSS job that would have been an office job, so do you think maybe that didn't count as highly in a way as a proper trade?

John: Possibly, I never discussed it with them, never discussed it with them, as I say I felt it was, you know, I had this offer of this apprenticeship because my dad had done it I think that's what I should do and I'm probably the same as a lot of people my age. (John Black, Interview 2)

For Frank Hagger, another of our interviewees going out to work was an economic necessity for the family income,

...but my grandmother had got me a job in a, she didn't get me a job, eh I had already been working in a grocery shop as, you know, packing shelves and things, and through that and a kind of combination of my grandmother's influence in, in people that she knew, I got a job, it was supposed to be in a, in a baker business, it turned out to be I started as an apprentice butcher. (Frank Hagger, Interview 1)

Lucinda's experience would seem to be typical for working class girls of her generation, born in the mid sixties. She seemed at seventeen to be entering what for her family and school advisers was uncharted territory:

I stayed on for fifth year and most of my friends left, but one friend and I stayed on together and I left school with four good Highers, which I was stunned at and they said "Well are you going to go on to university" and nobody at any point had even slightly hinted that I was university material so I did not know what to do with these Highers when I got them, it was a total surprise to me which is dreadfully sad, dreadfully sad but it was a total surprise to me. I loved children, I always loved children so I'd already signed up to do a nursery nurse course, then when my Higher results came through my mum and dad said "Well there's another course, it's an HNC course and you need Highers to get into it so maybe you should go and do that" so I left the nursery nurse training after a few days, and I went toCollege of

Commerce and did an HNC in distribution studies, right, a completely nutty HNC (laugh) nutty, totally nutty HNC...(Lucinda, Interview 1)

How people think of learning

The second theme concerns understandings and perceptions of learning. This is a complex area, and there has been substantial debate over the ways in which people understand and value different terms such as 'learning', 'education' and 'training' (see Felstead et al 2005). There is also the related, and complex, issue of whether or not people see themselves as learners – or at least are willing to present themselves as learners during interviews.

John Black appears to have drawn a distinction between workplace training and learning. In formal learning, he denied any real interest:

To go back and do something at a college, oh no, I don't think I could do that now (laugh), you know, a day release type thing or a night school, I don't think I could do it now. I'm just too old, too busy doing children's homework as well, keeping them in the straight and narrow (laugh).

Yet as well as encouraging his daughter to take up golf and learning to play the game himself, he has completed a number of taught programmes, including a qualification in training and development and the ECDL; when interviewed initially he was "doing something on health and safety". Employer support had led to his undertaking courses, but it appears to have made no difference to his self-presentation as a non-participant.

Orientations towards learning in adult life are often thought to derive from learning at school where there is evidence of complexity in the way adults relate to these experiences. For some interviewees, though, adult attitudes were shaped by earlier experiences of education as an adult. When first interviewed Sue Martin, a non-graduate, was taking a college course in management in order to be able to join a university postgraduate course in human resource management. The course, she felt, simply wasn't relevant to her professional needs, "it was more marketing and other things in it that really weren't appropriate . . . every single person who was there thought 'Why are we doing this?'" And indeed she had earlier dropped out of a university course in human resource management: "Some of it was very interesting, some of it I found a complete waste of time because sometimes you're standing in front of a lecturer who's been in HR ten years ago and you're, like your theory's great but that doesn't work in an office environment" : "because sometimes you're standing in front of a lecturer who's been in HR 10 years ago and you're like yea, yea your theory's great but that doesn't work in an office environment . . ." (Sue Martin, Interview 1).

By contrast, Sue was enjoying the university course, even though it was mainly concerned with theoretical and strategic matters, rather than the practical business skills that she had previously said she preferred. Sue mentioned that the lecturer had told the class at the outset that the course would not be concerned with 'handy tips', and that was fine by her. She also

liked the modular structure, which meant that “it’s kind of in these little easy compartments and you finish one and move on to the next”.

Sue Martin, nevertheless, is a multiple participant who has joined a number of organised courses, completing some and leaving others, and is currently studying for a qualification in HRM. Sue repeatedly refers to an important – for her – contrast between academic education and workplace experience, and made clear her strong preference for experience and relevance as against abstract knowledge. Her main source of occupational knowledge, her own varied experience aside, was her mother and friends working in other firms. However, this was by no means a static view. Sue stressed her practical expertise: “I suppose I’m qualified by experience more than anything else”.

Sue’s valuing of experience was, and is, important to her sense of self-worth. She had picked up the rudiments of HRM by a mixture of trial and error and talking to her mother, who was an HR manager in another company. She also described herself as “part qualified academically as well”, having taken several modules of a university course that led to CIPD membership, but never having completed it; at the time of the first interview she was planning to take a graduate diploma. Her mother, who is also working in HR, had taken a part time degree by distance learning. Sue had found herself building up a network of contacts through her course, as well as by moving around: “ah’ve got about 4 or 5 other people in HR in other businesses . . . that ah can phone and say what would you do with this”. By the time of the fourth interview, Sue was enjoying the university course despite the fact that it quite explicitly addressed theoretical and strategic issues, and openly disavowed any direct occupational relevance. (I think it has got occupational relevance. She needs it to progress her career plan. It is theoretical, but it is an HR qualification. It is interesting how she accepts this theoretical learning) Sue appears to have welcomed this as an opportunity to widen her horizons and pursue her career. Kathleen too values her experience; for both her and Sue it is linked closely to a sense of self which, in Kathleen’s case is illuminated through formal learning.

Finally, orientations towards learning are not as strongly marked by perceptions of the provider as we might think. Providers tend to view their own image as central to ‘learner demand’, and devote considerable attention and resources to marketing their brand. But some people didn’t know all that much about the education provider, who appears not to have impinged much on their consciousness. Stephanie for example thought her ‘college course’ was run by the CIPD, and not by her local further education college; the precise nature of the relationship between the CIPD and the college was irrelevant from the learner’s perspective. This is consistent with Boshier’s finding that many adult students were rather vague about who was responsible for their course (Boshier 2006).

However, this is not to say that providers have no impact on learners at all. Kathleen Donnelly, another interviewee, entered the workplace directly from school, finding

employment in the post office, one of the traditionally respectable places for young working class women for whom actual apprenticeships were/ are not an option (Fuller et al 2005).

A broken marriage and single parenthood led her to turn to her own learning and development. Kathleen and her young daughter witnessed a drug-related murder in her high rise flat. She talks here about the aftermath of this incident and of her formal learning,

Kathleen: Christmas I had 'phoned back ... College and explained tae them whit had happened and they were really, really nice about it and they said "Oh by the way there's a social sciences course starting, it's an NC you can do it over six months it starts in January". By this time ...(young daughter) wiz better and wanting tae get back tae her nursery, she wiz needing her social contact 'cause we'd been stuck in a flat aw day ourselves.

Interviewer: What floor were you on?

Kathleen: Fourteen (laugh) I kept thinking "New York, this is New York" trying tae kid myself on (laugh) I went and done social sciences and it changed my life, totally changed my life because it gave me reasons why I felt like that, it gave me theories on aw my life on low self esteem, peer pressure, explained capitalism, I hadnae even heard aye that afore, explained geography, sociology, psychology and I wiz like a sponge, real sponge, I needed mair and mair and mair and I done really well in the NC I got brilliant marks and they asked me tae come back and dae an HND and I did and I went and done it and it wiz brilliant, it's the best thing I've ever, ever done in my life, so when I left that I decided I wiz gonnae dae, I got such good marks in the HND that I got intae the last year aye the degree (Kathleen Donnelly, Interview 1).

Learning and transitions

Third, significant learning often appears to be associated for our interviewees with the challenges arising from change at work. This is exemplified in our data, in the new role that John Black found himself in, as someone training apprentices in an area that he saw as having been steadily deskilled. It is also evident in the work biographies of two other interviewees, Ed McGee and Colin Brown, who, as a result of changes in engineering manufacturing processes faced the challenge of redundancy or retraining as "mature apprentices".

This type of change is well established in the literature, and for our interviewees new roles and positions invariably brought leaps in learning. Sue described the tea company as an extremely old-fashioned and patriarchal environment, where she initially thrived because she could use a PC, having come straight from school; she then acquired additional responsibilities on a very ad hoc and informal basis. Reflecting on this process of incremental but rapid career development, Sue was very conscious of the fact that "I never, ever thought about the fact that I was doing it. It just happened while I was there and I just kind of grew with it". The support and skilful management of senior colleagues, albeit in a patriarchal hierarchy had given her the confidence to try new roles, though again in retrospect she

reflected that “I couldn’t do it now (laugh) because I’d probably cause chaos, but then it was fine because, you know, it was giving me the opportunity to learn so much, em, and get involved with so many things”. She left because things “had gotten to the point where, as a female in the business, I couldn’t go any further”. Of her other earlier roles, the job in computer games in particular had been “a real eye opener”. After the tea company and recruitment agency, this was “a totally different working environment . . . jeans and trainers every day and all these geeky games guys who worked bizarre hours and very, very much a laid-back working environment” (Sue Martin Interview 1).

Yet it is important again to note the evidence of worker agency: change was not just something that happens to people, but it is something that they can also initiate. Sue’s constant job changing earlier on in her career had certainly been at least partly as a result of her own decisions; even the difficult decision to leave the games company had been partly her own. Stephanie had volunteered for her new role, partly because dealing with calls all day had become very boring; she says herself that she wanted to get away from the calls “floor”. Stephanie had to apply for the position of learning champion and was interviewed for the position, which then allowed her to develop new skills. At first, she had felt uncomfortable and challenged: “the initial reaction I had was obviously kind of fish out of water a little bit, I felt that I was kidding on”. She found herself “kind of masquerading as something that maybe I didn’t necessarily feel that I was” (Stephanie Bennet 4). Stephanie’s confidence, we think, is partly connected to her inherited cultural capital – she comes from a very advantaged family background. But her willingness to experiment was creating new contexts for significant learning, which in turn seem to be strengthening her sense of agency.

This also raises questions of identity. Dubar suggests that the nomadism of contemporary labour markets is diluting workers’ sense of identity, and Sennett similarly points to flexibility and mobility as eroding workers’ loyalty and commitment to one another and to their jobs. Of course, companies develop their own regimes aimed at fostering loyalty and commitment. All of those interviewed in one of the call centres in this project talk about the sense of teamwork and the commitment to being a good team in the scores (Stephanie is one of these). The techniques used by companies in the “new economy” should not be underestimated – cakes on a worker’s birthday, staff all go out for a drink after work (Lui’s transcript gives examples). So employer strategies should not be underestimated. But for some workers in the new economy, change and flexibility are welcome phenomena, which can be worked on and through in building and rebuilding one’s sense of self.

In the early interviews, Sue seemed very much at home with change. She was the archetypal post-Fordist, flexible worker, who left a job when it offered too few challenges. However, she had started to question her ability constantly to find new positions. At one stage, she said she had asked herself : “it was like oh my god, ah need to look for another job, what if ah can’t do it, what if ah don’t know as much as ah think I know?” She had felt particularly nervous on

returning to the call centre industry after four years in other jobs, since “the technology and the way things were done had moved on in leaps and bounds”. She was also aware that much of her specialist knowledge was potentially limited, bounded as it was to a single employer. A similar point is highlighted in the life story of Jackson Baird who has to take a self critical view of his own career when reapplying for jobs in the finance industry after a period out of waged employment.

By Interview 4, Sue was learning through her work as a mentor to a newer HR colleague based in England. As a mentor, “it was my job to basically train her, to mentor her and help her through, take her through policies and procedures, train her on how to train that to managers, and we just every now probably once a month I go down for two or three days and spend a couple of days with her just through her probation”. For Sue, this experience was a revelation: “You don’t know how much you know in your own head until someone starts asking you and you’re just on autopilot, you just do things, you don’t really tend to think about it and it’s been good” (Sue Martin 4). In this case, the mentoring is part of Sue’s expanding role which she must be prepared to adapt to as the company grows if she wishes to gain career advancement.

Sue, like Jackson, had also learned from new practical problems, such as those posed when her company acquired another business in London. Unlike the existing centres, the new acquisition had recognised a trade union, and she was required to negotiate with a union official. This appeared to cause her considerable difficulty, not least over matters of courtesy and respect. Sue had approached her own director of HR, in the knowledge that he “will back us one hundred per cent”, which “I think gives you the confidence” needed to challenge the union official (Sue Martin 4).

Sue also shows the mixed reaction of flexible employees to the nomadism of contemporary labour markets. Her decision to leave the games company led to considerable pain, not least because her former employers were so upset when she decided to leave:

I think I’d kind of treated it like an extended family....it’s almost like a relationship where, you know, you split up from a relationship and you miss something, you might not, you miss the familiarity, you miss the [pause] ... I learned not to be so attached and to try and distance myself from it a bit, and remain professional, and don’t get me wrong, I love working here and I’ve got a real attachment to the business, but I switch it off at night when I go home and if, you know, I was made redundant tomorrow, I’d miss the people but I’d cope (Sue Martin, Interview 2)

Discussing the work she did to resettle new workers in the games company, Sue returned to this theme again:

I got really, really emotionally attached to it as a business and I think I learned that that was a bad thing, you know, don’t get emotionally attached to a business. . . . Yea it’s almost like I don’t know. It’s almost like a relationship where, you know, you split

up from a relationship and you miss something, you might not, you miss the familiarity, you miss the (pause) (Sue, Interview 2)

Sue appears to be proud of her resilience and detachment, yet unhappy about the 'divorce'. The nature of loyalty and attachment to one's employer is a complex area and Sue is investing a great deal in her work at present – travelling away from home and working long hours. There may be some element of emotional attachment in going the extra mile as Sue does.

Employer support

The fourth theme concerns employer support for formal education and training; however, this should not be seen as suggesting that worker agency has no role. The importance of employer financial support for training is widely recognised in the literature. So while it was important that Sue Martin's company paid part of her course fees, Sue's agency had also come into play in order to align the company's goals with her own. As well as fighting to attend the university course rather than a cheaper programme at a college, Sue had successfully appealed against an initial decision of the training department on the level of the firm's contribution (Sue Martin, Interview 4). Stephanie Bennett, who had just started a 'college course' at the time of her fourth interview, was also having fees paid by her employer. Stephanie's company had a formal tuition reimbursement scheme, which she had used. In further education, Lucinda's employer paid for her to take a course which supported her teaching.

But as well as funding, personal intervention played a part. Direct managerial personal support has been rarely recognised in the literature (the only exceptions I can find are Eraut 1999 and the Learning at Work Survey conducted by Felstead et al with NIACE). Jackson Baird, another interviewee, noted that his employer not only supported him through financial services exams, but also at one point emphasised to him how well he had done. In manufacturing engineering Colin was on the point of turning down the opportunity to take a mature apprenticeship when a senior colleague insisted that he enrol. Towards the end of her college course, after missing a number of sessions through work commitments, Sue had decided to drop out when "eventually my boss sat me down and said 'You will finish it, you need to finish it, you know you can do it', and she kind of dragged me through by the hair to make me finish" (Sue Martin, 4). Stephanie had approached her training director to discuss her future, after finding that she enjoyed serving as a Learning Champion, helping to train and mentor other workers. The feedback that she received led Stephanie to claim that "my confidence has been built up", and she went on. With encouragement, Stephanie then started a course leading to a CIPD qualification (Stephanie Bennet 4). So these two interviews suggest that management support can influence participation both in respect of decisions to learn, but also in respect of decisions to continue rather than to drop out. Interestingly, for those who were not already in work, the data also provide examples of the impact of community learning programmes in bringing people to work and work-related learning.

Conversely there are examples where employer support has been inconsistent or lacking, with negative consequences for participation. This was the case for John Black, Lui, and Jeannie. In Lucinda's case, the employer's support was inadequate, particularly in helping police officers come to terms with their experiences in Lockerbie.

Finally, symbolism also had an impact. In the call centre industry, Sue had noticed that her company had won Investors in People recognition. Stephanie noticed that her firm described itself as a 'learning organisation'; it "was classed as a learning organisation anyway so I'd already kind of looked into college courses". Asked what the term 'learning organisation' meant, she replied that "you continually develop your staff, it's not just a case of like an initial induction, any kind of new processes are constantly fed back" (Stephanie Bennet 4).

Aspects of gender

Issues of gender have come to the fore in recent discussions of work and identity. Feminist perspectives have been an important aspects of the debate; by shifting the focus of sociological concern to gender, they have helped generate new questions and insights into a variety of aspects of work and identity, agency and learning. Feminists have challenged easy assumptions about gender and flexibility, arguing for example that workplace hierarchies are still dominated by patriarchal structures, so that the 'glass ceiling' remains shatterproof; they have also examined relations between domestic and waged labour, in an economy that calls women increasingly into the paid labour force. While much debate has understandably concentrated on the status and position of women, male employment and masculine identities are also increasingly the focus of scholarly attention. Related concerns have also promoted an understanding of the relationship between work, identity and the body, for example in notions of embodied skills or class and body weight (Skeggs 1997; Savage 2005). Gender has also been an important dimension of the debate over the new economy (e.g. in debates over gender and call centre employment), as well as over the apparently increasing importance of emotional labour as a key capacity in the service economy (Hochschild 1983).

The interviews with women in our sample raise issues that are relevant to these scholarly concerns. Broadly, interviews with women are consistent with one of the feminist perspectives: namely, that while some social constraints on women have loosened markedly in recent years, patriarchal structures are still highly significant. To take the question of domestic labour (or housework), several of our female interviewees represent their male partners as taking some domestic tasks; however, some of these women claim that men are inherently less competent in caring tasks than women. This is a complex perspective which is exemplified in our data, for example, in Lucinda's view that she chooses to take responsibility for organising domestic tasks because she is better at it than her partner, or Sue's belief that her approach to cooking is healthier than her partner's. Interpreting these views is not straightforward: do they represent a pragmatic acceptance of patriarchy in the home, or do

they express a sense of female superiority where some knowledge and skills are concerned? Given the contexts of Sue's and Lucinda's working and learning lives – these are both highly agentic women – the second interpretation seems initially the more plausible of the two. However, it may be that neither of these applies and that women are responding to the social expectations that others have of them: such an interpretation would relate to the findings of Skeggs and Colley in their data from women interviewees. There is an obvious tension between established patriarchal structures and the opening up of the social space, and women workers – particularly service professional workers – must negotiate their way through this complex labyrinth.

This tension can be seen in Sue's career progression, her continued formal learning, and her early identity as a wife. To restate, Sue is an experienced HR professional who is now studying at a postgraduate level, and is a competent experiential learner. At the same time she is consolidating an identity as a wife who assumes responsibility for all the domestic tasks, after a period of living with her boy friend. As she said in the fourth interview,

...if you say to him "You need to do this" he will go and do it for you, he wouldn't think to do it, but if I say to him, and like we take turns about doing the weekly food shop, we do it week about so it's not down to one of us. When I go it's nice healthy food, when he goes it's a lot of rubbish comes back, (laugh) but it doesn't matter at least he goes and as long as he gets the core items on his list, he can buy whatever else he likes...(Sue Martin, Interview 4)

In this extract, Sue represents herself as the dominant voice in domestic decisions; and at the same time, as a wife who runs the home and whose purchasing decisions are responsible ones, in contrast to those of her husband.

A number of our female interviewees describe the ways in which family responsibility and domestic responsibilities can shape agency, employment and learning (Mary, Susan, Lucinda). But men also describe their domestic and family lives as significant for their work, learning and sense of self. Among the interviewees who represent their male identity as also connected to their domestic and private lives are Willie, Jackson, Billy, Andy, John Black and Colin. These men also see home and family as related to work roles they have had, but the nature of the domestic involvement and how that relates to identity formation differs from that of the women, not least because domestic work and caring for children typically takes up less of their time. When they are involved, it is often in ways that bridge family and traditionally male spheres of the outside world, for example sport; thus one takes his boys to football (Ed), while John Black is involved in his girls' golf (John Black). Those men who have not been involved significantly in their children's upbringing are sometimes troubled by what this has meant for their children (Billy). But none of the men involved in a relationship appears to have taken primary responsibility for childcare and other domestic tasks.

These stories raise complex questions about power and identity. From one, probably mainstream feminist perspective, they seem to present a narrative about patriarchal authority. But the story two of these women are telling is one of male incompetence (founded on reluctance) and female competence, about female responsibility and authority within the domestic domain. This is also therefore part of the narrative of agency and identity, in which the apparent mismatch between status at work and status in the home is not quite to clear cut. The 'spillover' effects of women's occupational position and domestic position upon one another are neither simplistic nor unilinear. There is scope for further exploration of women's experience of work, employment, class and identity formation in their life course. There is also evidence in the data of resistance and active engagement around these issues (see Lucinda, Kathleen Donnelly below) and there is evidence of women working on these aspects of their identity. The interview data are also rich in evidence about the significance of emotional labour, an issue that we have explored initially elsewhere.

Commitment and the future

The sixth theme concerns the ways in which people's sense of job and self is tied up with orientations towards the future. Beck and Giddens both suggest that late modernity requires people to undertake an active and reflexive approach to their lives. Alheit (1999) has argued that there is a strong learning dimension to what he calls 'biographicity', suggesting that pluralisation of the life course and the erosion of fixed life co-ordinates places new demands on people's capacity for shaping their own destiny, and making sense of their life plans.

We have already seen that an active and flexible approach to life planning and also a willingness to experiment marked Stephanie's story. She reflected on her role as a company Learning Champion, which involved her in training others:

Well, it's something that I've always really been interested in doing and when I got the opportunity to do it I was like, 'Well, great', but because it's seconded, it's a seconded position, so it's not as if it's going to be everlasting, that I kind of felt the necessity to try and push for something, something more formal . . . I need to kind of in my head I need to show that I'm in it for the long term (Stephanie Bennett 4).

Interestingly, Stephanie's narrative suggested a growing commitment to the company, despite the flexibility and uncertainty associated with the call centre sector.

Sue's occupational trajectory is almost the epitome of the contemporary flexible worker. She has moved from job to job, and indeed from one country to another, and at times she appears to welcome the challenges – which, of course, are centrally concerned with learning - of tackling a new position. Nevertheless, her ambitions at the time of the fourth interview were dominated by her job: "What I want, my degree and I want my promotion. Nothing else, my whole life's wonderful, I don't know of anything else I can possibly ask for realistically" (Sue

Martin 4). So again this tells us something about commitment, though in this case the commitment is not to her job or company in themselves, but rather to advancing her career.

Sue and Stephanie, incidentally, had both changed in the period of our fieldwork. Sue in particular had shifted. As noted above, at the time of the first and second interviews, work and lifestyle issues were not separated in any clear cut way; Sue enjoyed change, she relished the process of learning how to survive in a fresh environment, and she painted herself as something of a free spirit. She now appears to be more settled, in her job and in her personal relationship. The shift is nicely illustrated by her approach to clothing, which moves from t-shirt to suit, from the slightly bohemian and heterodox to the smart, professional style of the HR specialist. Changes in identity and future orientations are marked in visible ways, and not simply in words.

Collective affiliations

The seventh theme concerns the wider contexts in which employment, identity and agency intertwine. We are not yet clear on the importance this has for learning, but the stories make it clear that learning working lives are deeply embedded in further contexts. The interviewee's lifeworld encompasses not only their own work and that of their immediate colleagues, but also work in the wider community, including work done by family members (which in turn interacts with generational influences and the gendered nature of experience).

First, as we have already seen, some of the older interviewees described the direct influence of the family on initial occupational choice:

I felt as though my father wanted me to do it, but never to say 'I would like you to do your apprenticeship' I just felt that was what they wanted me to do and that's what I did because I was kind of brought up always, you know, not just my family, you know, the kind of families roundabout us, and the kind of attitude was 'Get a trade behind you, you know you can always go back to it' routine, probably true but, you know, there are times I sit and say 'I wish I had never done it' and there are other times when I say 'I'm glad I done it' (John Black, Interview 1, 2)

Whereas Andy's initial career choice had been firmly rejected by his father:

I come in and he said, when I left the school, and he says "Have you been and seen about a job", I says "Ay, I'm starting on Monday", he said "Where?", I said "At [name] Pit", he said "No yer no, ye're getting a trade", he says (Andy, Interview 1).

Some younger interviewees discussed their intentions with their family, but still chose their own next steps. These younger interviewees tended to view their parents' views as one important factor in their choices, but were not likely to conclude that their parents' view was authoritative. So Sue Martin had decided to find work and leave school after sitting her preliminary Higher examinations, very much against the advice of her mother:

I sat my mother down and said that I really wanted to leave school and she said no and I said yes and what she agreed with me was that if I found a job I could leave school at Christmas ... It was my choice, that was what I wanted to do (Sue Martin, 1).

This was not, though, a simple dismissal of the mother's expertise: on the contrary, Sue respected her mother's experience and competence, while feeling free to make her own choices about her own future. Later on, Sue sought her mother's advice as her own career moved more definitively into human resources work. Now a well respected professional, with some formal training behind her, Sue had picked up much of her knowledge of HRM by a mixture of trial and error and talking to her mother

So far, this section has examined agency and identity through the eyes of individual workers. Our discussion of wider aspects has so far been confined to the family and to a lesser extent to women's sense of a shared social world. But what about collective agency and group identity? Much contemporary social theory tends to focus on the decline of collective senses of the collective self, and rather to focus on increasing tendencies towards pluralized, shifting identities combined with at least an implicit belief in the individualisation of identity. It is certainly true that some forms of collective agency and identity appear to be in decline; falling trade union membership and the virtual disappearance of workerist political movements are the most obvious examples among the working class. Yet it is too simple to view this as a straightforward linear process, in which collective identities simply vanish. In important evidence based studies, Mike Savage and Fiona Devine have examined the continuing presence of class, both in terms of people's self-definition and in terms of their socio-economic positioning (Devine 2004, Savage 2000). Our work has also identified some wider associations between work, identity and agency, including what might be described as the after-effects of class-based political movements.

The most obvious and most frequent (in our group) example is the collective identity associated with the coal mining industry. This can be seen in the lives of five of our Scottish interviewees: Andy, Archie, John, Suzie, Daisy. We have already seen that Andy was brought up in a mining area, but was prevented by his father from taking a job in a local pit. His socialist views were developed in the context of a West of Scotland mining community. Suzie mentioned that her father had been a lifelong communist who became secretary of the mineworkers' union branch in her own locality of origin, which she first described as "a mining village" – this long after the last local pit had closed. However, while Suzie identified with this locale and spoke warmly of the security she enjoyed as a child, she also spoke of a certain

complexity in her shared identification with the mining community, not least because her father had been working in an office:

It wasn't like a mining family as such, although we were very much connected with the mines because he was the miners' union secretary, you know, he didn't go out with his pit piece and come back with, you know, coal black face, but it was very much a mining community (Suzie Smith Interview 1).

Looking back at the village from her current life situation, living in the same area but in a different town, Suzie thought life had gone dramatically downhill since the closure of the local pits; this view is shared by Daisy and Archie.

European socialist movements have tended to present their views as emancipatory, and usually place a high value on education as a means to liberation. Again, traces of these ideas can be found among some of our interviewees, but not always in simple ways. For Lucinda, parental beliefs and values appear to have blocked her aspirations:

"Are you Valerie ...'s. sister" you know she was the apple to the teacher type, so she left at the end of fourth year and went to Secretarial College, I can't remember if she completed it or not, but she ended up being a Secretary in like a local wee, a local small business. My father was very working class, very socialist probably in his view, so therefore possibly very aware of his place and what our place would be. It was before the days of the sort of moving up and down now that the people do, and I used to, I wanted to be an actress and dancer and things (Lucinda, 1, 3)

Her secondary school advisers were similarly limited (the school had a very small Highers cohort), and Lucinda went to a local further education college to take an HNC. For Lucinda's father, socialist values meant staying within your own social milieu; education as a vehicle for upward mobility threatened the solidarity of the working class.

Class is certainly visibly present in some of the learning working lives in our study. Nor is it confined to the older workers, who were formed in a different period. Our study includes a group of young interviewees who are training to be community workers; the members of this group also show an awareness of class as both socio-economic position and as a sense of collective self that seems to relate closely to their life course transitions and their identities; it is also an important aspect of their learning. However, it is less clear that this group sees class allegiance as a basis for future action and collective advance.

Conclusions

Work is changing, though it is doing so in ways that are complex and uneven. Our data has provided examples of the ways in which people experience structural change in the economy, as well as of the continuing legacy of inherited structures, such as class and patriarchy, and of the ways in which people actively negotiate their way through the structural constraints that

they encounter. Our interviewees also describe the ways in which they actively make many of the micro-structures that help to shape their lives – the immediate contexts of family, intimate relations, workplace and neighbourhood. The interviews suggest that these contexts are closely interrelated, and overlap one another. They also suggest that the ‘death of employee commitment’ has been both oversimplified and exaggerated. Work retains a central place in people’s sense of self identity, but once more it is often bound up in subtle and shifting ways with the wider context of their lives, as well as in their more or less reflexive engagement with the values and attitudes that they have inherited from their families or through previous experience (including earlier jobs, as the lasting impact of Lockerbie in Lucinda demonstrates rather starkly).

The interviews also confirm the importance of understanding the heterogeneity of people’s working lives. While socio-economic structures remain an important aspect of employment experiences, the ways in which people encounter and engage with structures are increasingly differentiated. Gender plays a part in this process. Glass ceiling or no glass ceiling, growing numbers of women are occupying management roles, and this shapes their sense of self and how they (re)present their public selves. Thus Sue’s decision to adopt a smart and professional style of dress is part of a change in the ways in which she sees herself and her agency, as well as how she clothes her public body. Significantly, the wearing of a suit cuts across gender but clearly marks off bodies by class. Similarly, growing numbers of men in mixed workforces are experiencing being managed by a woman. Sue’s story indicates some of the pressures that this can pose, albeit in a way that is mediated by faith and ethnicity (and may therefore be more complex than she seems to suggest).

In engaging with working life through learning, we have shown that our interviewees are certainly influenced by their previous experiences of school and other formal educational experiences including adult training. This is not surprising; much of the adult education research literature stresses the important formative influence of previous educational experiences. However, our data suggest that attitudes towards learning are shaped subtly not only by previous educational experiences, but also by family (in often complex ways) and by orientations towards the future (an important but neglected aspect of what Bourdieu defined as ‘disposition’).

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