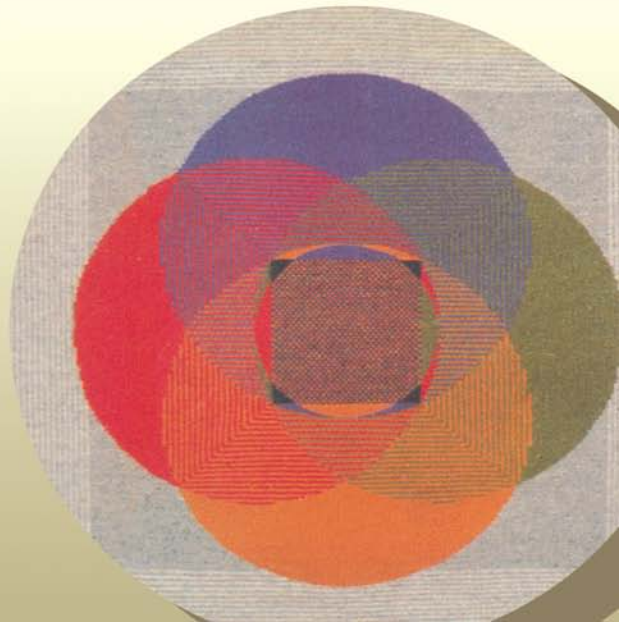


*adults,
motivation
and higher
education*

beyond fragments

*a biographical
analysis by
Linden West*



Taylor & Francis
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Beyond Fragments

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**Adults, Motivation
and Higher Education**

A Biographical Analysis

Linden West



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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

To my parents, for mixed motives, including love
and an increasing understanding

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Preface

Life can only be understood backwards. In the meantime it has to be lived forwards. (Kierkegaard)

This is a book about motivation in education, specifically about why adults want to enter and continue in higher education at particular stages in their lives and what participation represents to them in the context of past, present and desired futures. The book uses biographical, longitudinal and reflexive methods and incorporates an interdisciplinary frame of reference to chronicle, analyse and theorize the personal and sociocultural dialectics of motivation in the biographies of adult learners. The research into learners' motives, on which the book is based, was conducted in the School of Continuing Education at the University of Kent from 1992 to 1995, and funded by the Universities' Funding Council (subsequently the Higher Education Funding Council).

There are good reasons to write about motivation at this time. Adults now constitute a majority of students in higher education: what drives them, what they bring to, want and need from universities are important questions in the development of a more responsive and culturally diverse system of higher education. Those responsible for higher education need a better understanding of adults' experiences of teaching, learning, programmes and institutions as a whole and to consider the implications of these experiences for the development of a more supportive, learning culture. Education is too easily represented as a simple linear progression towards a surer self-image, greater confidence, psychological and material security and personal agency. Many learners appear to experience fragmentary, even fragmenting processes in which the self becomes divided, to greater or lesser degrees, between private lives (as a parent or partner) and public spheres (as a student in higher education); and between experiential ways of knowing (personal, subjective, emotional) and academic knowledge (objective and abstract). Moreover, adults' experience of certain institutions, as this book painfully demonstrates, is often unsatisfactory. The development and expansion of access to higher education has not been accompanied by commensurate resourcing; inadequate facilities and unhappy teachers are often the result; and there is evidence of insensitivity towards learners which can easily undermine the

impetus to learn. Yet it is also the case, as these stories reveal, that education can offer a supportive space during periods of profound change and uncertainty. With the help and encouragement of significant others, education can be used to create more meaning, authenticity and agency within a life. It can be a resource, emotionally and intellectually, to help participants move beyond the fragments.

But progression happens sometimes in spite of rather than because of the system. The narratives at the heart of this book pose the most fundamental questions about the purpose and nature of higher, further, adult and continuing education. There may be increased opportunities for adults in higher education, and arguably for greater self-definition, but the stories raise the crucial question of access to what, in the sense of whether the higher education curriculum and its pedagogy should remain more or less the same as that delivered to eighteen-year-olds who come straight from school; or whether it needs to be created more in dialogue with learners, and shaped by their needs, wants, experiences and stories. The biographies are located in cultures in flux in which nothing in certain localities, including future employment and the welfare of entire communities, is to be taken for granted. How can higher education assist people, in such contexts, to manage change and uncertainty, individually and collectively, and exploit the opportunities of present times? It is time to begin the serious debate about the role of higher education in addressing social alongside individual needs; in facilitating a process of democratic and cultural renewal as well as economic regeneration. Such a debate must encompass the needs of a culturally diverse society in which many and varied contributions are valued in a spirit of dialogue and a sense of interdependence. This perspective flows inexorably from the learners' narratives and the insights developed in the book.

The relationship between motives, educational participation, biographies and present situations was explored by talking to thirty adult learners, in depth and at length, over a period of three years and more. The idea was to reflect on reasons for returning to education within present contexts as well as across entire life histories; and to explore dynamically—using interactive methods – how motives, feelings towards self and others, as well as biographical understandings, were affected by higher education. Stories, it is suggested, are products of the present: the narrative of the diffident beginner in higher education can be quite different from a story of self, others and one's place in the world four years later. Like the self itself, the narrative develops slowly – often painfully – but perhaps increasingly towards an authentic composure.

The students had enrolled on Access and Foundation programmes (designed to offer alternative entry routes into university for older learners) in different parts of Kent: in Canterbury, in the Medway Towns and in Thanet. The book primarily focuses on fifteen learners from the Medway and Thanet, although material from all thirty case studies informs the analysis. The Medway and Thanet are localities in crisis, experiencing major economic and

social dislocations: in the collapse or precariousness of main and traditional sources of employment; in patterns of social deprivation, and the resultant sense of exclusion and personal despair. We went there to guarantee a diversity of students in the group, working as well as middle class, white and black, young and old, men and women. The aim was to listen to voices from the margins, to record the stories of people who are rarely heard.

The research, as indicated, used biographical methods to facilitate a series of reflexive conversations about intimate as well as wider experiences; about how history and dominant contemporary economic and political imperatives might have shaped people to think, feel and talk about themselves and possibilities in highly prescribed ways. But it was also concerned to understand how people can find some means and strength to challenge these scripts, to take risks and become active agents in reconstituting lives and composing new stories in experientially more authentic ways. The central purpose of the research became that of documenting evolving narratives of self, motive, life history and education. The research developed a psychoanalytical/sociological/feminist frame of reference – a kind of cultural psychology in Jerome Bruner’s words (Bruner, 1990) – to consider the interplay of personal and public worlds, intimate and wider social experience, past, present and future. The outcome was a much fuller picture of why adults learn but the conversations and interpretations might have continued indefinitely. These are stories and speculations without endings.

The case studies are of a highly personal and, on occasions, intimate kind. It is important to emphasize from the outset that specific agreement was obtained from the students to use interview transcripts and other material such as journals (although in some instances they made specific requests to exclude particular details and their wishes have been fully respected). In certain cases the learners had no objection to their names being used. However, given the nature of some of the material, all the case studies have been made anonymous and in certain instances specific aspects of a story, including its location, have been altered to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. This has been done without jeopardizing the richness of the material or the potential significance of the lessons it contains for those prepared to listen.

Acknowledgments

This project has taken five years from its inception to finishing this book. The task would never have been completed without the help and support of countless people. Like the very best learning, the book is the outcome of challenging yet supportive conversations with many people and I want to express my thanks to them all. In particular to Mary Lea whose contribution to the research was considerable. To Fenia Alexopoulou and many colleagues at the University of Kent, especially Alec Barbrook, Claudine Nuttley, Judith Hattaway, Gaie Davidson, Frank Burnet, Ann Harrison, Anthony Ward, Dorothy Goldman, Richard Norman, Simon Thompson, Chris Taylor, Pat Ainley and Elizabeth Edwards. A particular thank you to Nick Riding for conversations about research methods as well as the nature of psychoanalysis during lunchtime training runs; to countless continuing education students whose contributions to seminars and tutorials enabled me to weave some intelligible patterns from many fragments; to colleagues working in various colleges in Kent, especially Leon Jenkins, Peter Marden, David Gittins, Mary Dawkins and Margaret Barbrook. And to the Access tutors who allowed us to visit their programmes and talk to their students about why adults learn.

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adviser, colleague and lover who has helped me move beyond many fragments.

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Chapter 1

Thinking of Fragments

On Margate Sand
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.
(T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*)

Of late I have been increasingly unable to catch the sound of the sobs . . . which broke out only when I found myself alone with Mamma. Actually their echo has never ceased: it is only because life is growing more and more quiet around me that I hear them afresh, like those convent bells which are so effectively drowned during the day by the noises of the streets that one would suppose them to have been stopped for ever, until they sound out again through the silent evening air. (Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*)

Understanding motivation

A key premise of this book is that our understanding of student motivation is limited because learners themselves have rarely been encouraged to reflect, in a flexible and longitudinal way, on their reasons for educational participation and learning in the context of past as well as present lives. Many studies of adult motivation, particularly those using survey and quantitative methods, have barely scratched the surface of the personal and social dialectics which may be involved. While researchers using survey methods can ask large and diverse samples of people why they participate in education, they are unable to explore, in all their complexity, the reasons and meanings people themselves give for and to their actions, and how these might change over time: they are unable to ask, for example, what university or a particular career might represent at a personal and emotional level in the present context as well as across a life.

The framing of questions is important in research: respondents have

often been asked, via questionnaires, to choose between personal or vocational motives, for instance. No opportunity or encouragement is normally given to reflect on whether the question makes sense: a box has to be ticked, an answer given in a predetermined way beyond the scope of the respondent (itself a revealing word) to alter. The potential insights of the learners are often ignored and those, especially, who lack confidence in themselves and their understandings can be silenced. The result may be that distinctions drawn between, for example, personal and occupational motives often have more to do with ideological debates about the purpose of education, and/or relationships of power in the interview, than the complexities of individual aspiration. Not surprisingly, if asked to make a choice between vocational or personal motives, most people will tend to give vocational justifications for their actions rather than anything more 'personal'. It is more respectable and acceptable to talk in such terms. These 'findings' are then used to reinforce the ideologically driven notion that higher education should serve primarily vocational and instrumentalist ends (in contrast to non-accredited, 'liberal adult education' where personal or social motives are said to be stronger). The argument proceeds that adults in higher education, as career-conscious people, look (or should do) to the academy for more applied, job-related studies rather than towards more liberal programmes. The either/or approach to the classification of motive is translated into an either/or approach to policy-making and educational provision.

Superficially, some of the thinking makes sense: if you are poor and unemployed, or in an alienating, frustrating job, then the idea of higher education as a means to obtaining better employment, or a new job, as speedily as possible, is likely to be a paramount consideration. In a world in which the economic restructuring and casualization of the workforce have provoked deep insecurities among the middle as well as working class, and where employment and progression, even in professional occupations, are no longer guaranteed, learners' perceptions of the purpose of higher and continuing education may reflect an overriding economic instrumentality. It is a matter of holding on to or creating some security in fragile situations. This may produce a profound tautology: students themselves mirroring, in their responses, the rationalizations for educational participation most dominant and respectable in the wider culture, and in the process excluding, even repressing, the more personal parts of a story. Therefore, the most important issue is in danger of being lost: what a new career or return to education represents at a particular juncture in a person's life and why it may be crucial to change direction.

Access and higher education

All of the students interviewed for the book had begun an Access or Foundation programme before their first interview, studying in the humanities, social

or natural sciences. Some of these programmes gave automatic progression rights into particular degrees in institutions of higher education (or into degrees provided in local colleges under franchizing arrangements with universities), assuming students met specified academic requirements. Many of the learners subsequently progressed to degree-level study or, as in the case of Foundation course students (technically this means such a course was equivalent to the first year of a four-year degree), on to the second year of a four-year degree programme, studying both full and part-time. Conversations with the students continued over this later period and we were able to document the impact of higher education on motives and personal narratives over three years and more.

Access programmes were a product, like the learners, of changing times. They emerged, as part of the move from the late 1970s onwards, to expand opportunities in higher education to wider constituencies of learners. The reasons for expansion were varied, from the economics of the new right and their love affair with American meritocracy to the egalitarianism of the left; from the survival imperatives of particular institutions to bursts of radical zeal in specific departments, or combinations of these factors. Whatever the motives, English higher education, over a relatively short period, moved from an élitist to more of a mass access model (Trow, 1993). Participation rates among eighteen-year-olds increased from under 10 per cent to 30 per cent in a short period of time, while adults, defined as students over the age of twenty-one, became a majority in the system as a whole (Ainley, 1994; McNair, 1995).

The development of Access courses became central to the cause of increased adult participation in higher education. Prior to the late 1970s, adult learners without conventional qualifications had to depend either on informal arrangements (relying on the sympathy and understanding of particular admissions officers, for example), or on obtaining the required number and quality of A levels. It was widely acknowledged that these mechanisms were often inefficient and unfair; gaining entry to higher education could be a matter of luck, of being in the right place at the right time. Moreover, A levels were regarded by many educators as unsuitable preparation for adults because too little attention is paid to study skills or the more general problems of people returning to formal learning after what might have been a long absence.

Access was an idea whose time had come: for the left the issue was equity, and the continuing underrepresentation of women, the working class and the minorities in higher and continuing education. For the right there was concern about the low skills base of the workforce and a fear of the potential for civil unrest among minority populations in the inner cities. (Social control might be added to the list of factors underlying the Access movement.) For these varied reasons, a small number of experimental Access programmes was developed in selected localities in the late 1970s (with a pronounced metropolitan bias) for people who possessed 'valuable experience but lacked the

qualifications required' for entry to higher education. Many of these initial courses were targeted at minority populations (Brennan, 1989). By 1994, the number of 'kite-marked' i.e. formally validated Access programmes had grown dramatically to 900 in England and Wales (Davies, 1995; McNair, 1995). Access programmes had become a major pathway to higher education for adult learners.

Approaches to research

Human motives in choosing education or career pathways are more complex than is often suggested in findings based on survey research. It is interesting that many surveys, when examined more closely, reveal that people also give personal reasons for their actions, although these remain largely unexplored (Woodley *et al.*, 1987). It is interesting too that, despite hard times, many adult learners, including significant numbers from deprived communities and marginal groups, choose courses in the humanities and social sciences which cannot be regarded as the most obvious or surest route to employment or a better job; factors beyond pure economic rationality seem to be at play.

Such evidence fits uneasily with hegemonic new right ideological assumptions about human motive and the neoclassical model of rational economic man (sic) primarily pursuing material self-interest. As Hutton (1995) has illustrated, market economics offers a robust and uncluttered account of human motive. Every action has a price tag in the market and every human act can be reduced to some kind of rational economic calculus of cost and benefit. Men and women are in a state of nature, selfishly consuming and indulging their pleasures once the benefits are deemed to outweigh the costs. Authenticity, integrity, mutuality, vulnerability, spirituality, love, interdependence and a greater communal good have little space in this rationalistic, individualistic environment. Participation in higher education is the product of a considered calculation of material self-interest; the rest is superfluous.

The people in the present study had space and encouragement to reflect on motives – vocational and personal, material and situational, rational and emotional – at a deeper level, encompassing factors in current circumstances as well as in childhood, schooling, early and later relationships, at work and in their communities. In fact, as the book reveals, concepts of economic rationality seem crude in the light of these reflections. Conventional distinctions between vocational and personal motives, public and private aspirations, as well as between social and psychological interpretation, begin to unravel as time is spent talking to mature students in a flexible and empathic way. An introduction to the story of Kathy, one working-class woman in her mid-thirties, indicates the direction of the book while her story as a whole provides the basis of Chapter 3.

Kathy mentioned, in an early interview, her wish to become a solicitor.

When asked for her reasons for wanting to enter higher education she talked, conventionally, about the importance of a career and the fact of having more time now that her children had begun school. Yet when she considered, in later interviews, what becoming a solicitor meant to her, these career ambitions became entangled in a story of powerlessness, marginalization and fragmentation throughout her life. Understanding the imprints of class, gender and the effects of a broken and vulnerable family became central to understanding her psychology, her life history and the roots of her present motives.

She talked of her childhood, her parents and their fragile marriage. She recalled wanting to be a solicitor at the age of fourteen, after her parents separated for the second and final time. Kathy was thus at a crucial stage in her schooling and adolescence when her world, ambition and promising academic career crumbled among the debris of a shattered home. Twenty years later, in the middle of coping with a tragic death and difficulties in a current relationship, she described feeling powerless and inadequate as a child and as an adult, and wondered about what had made her feel this way. Wanting to be a solicitor expressed a wish, however ill-judged the ambition, to be a socially confident, assertive and acknowledged person. Even a cursory examination of Kathy's story suggests that her vocational and educational ambitions are rooted in the most intimate experience, in this instance, crises of self and, as will emerge, the debilitating influence of class and gender in British society.

Such stories pose numerous questions about why adults turn to higher education, about the relationship between a particular career aspiration and a personal history; about what the choice of a specific subject, and attending university more generally, might represent at an emotional and biographical level. These subjective and personal meanings, and the reflexive, empathic methods required to explore them, have been neglected in motivational studies. The meanings people themselves give to their actions and how these may change have been considered, like subjectivity itself, to be beyond the scope of psychological research with its emphasis on observational and experimental methods. As Stephen Frosh (1989) has observed, it is as if we attempted to explain the movement of a car without reference to the driver.

On the other hand, individuals may not know why they act as they do. The forces at work may be cultural: class, gender or ethnic factors shaping the way people think, feel and talk about themselves. We are all to an extent scripted by culture. The reasons for educational participation may be at the edge of consciousness, or at an unconscious rather than conscious level. Some influences may be repressed, not easily articulated, since they may be threatening to the conscious mind and the precarious ego, or simply dismissed as of little or no interest to anyone else. Understanding the historical and current bases of motivation is no simple straightforward matter. The habit of reflexive introspection – exploring the roots and patterns of personal as well as collec-

tive behaviours – is an imperfect art without final conclusion. Most people for most of the time simply struggle to get through the day.

Motivational studies: self and society

There are basic disagreements about motivation in the literature: the tendency is to conceptualize motives (and perhaps people) as either social (including economic) or psychological phenomena, reflecting, perhaps, the wider tendency of sociologists and psychologists to turn their backs on each other (Thompson, 1981). The dominant tradition in the United States, where most research into adult motivation has been conducted, has been psychological to the neglect or exclusion of social and cultural perspectives. History and society have been pushed to the conceptual margins.

Yet despite the ahistoric stance of much psychological research, I want to suggest that culture nonetheless intrudes, albeit unintentionally. Some of the most influential motivational research, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, privileges autonomy and self-actualization above dependence and relationship. There are similar influences at work in dominant conceptions of adult learning and psychological development in which autonomy and objectivity are considered superior states to relatedness and subjectivity. But such interpretations, and the values implicit within them, may reflect what is most influential in the culture as a whole including the hegemony of white, male, middle-class experience and discourse within the literature of learning and development (Fraser, 1995).

There are four main psychologically based approaches to adult motivation: first, lifecycle theory which emphasizes chronological stages in human development and the emergence of predominant needs in relation to each of these. A classic formulation, derived from Jungian ideas, is of creative, more artistic and 'feminine' aspects of the self being released in middle age. Once the competitive career struggle has abated there is time to cultivate neglected artistic and spiritual sides of the personality: prompted, perhaps, by a desire to find meaning and/or increased satisfaction in life. The repressed parts of the self can find expression in a drive towards wholeness, integration and individuation (Levinson, 1978). The problem with many of these models is, as suggested, that they are universalized on the basis of mainly North American, male lifestyles and biographical trajectories.

The second approach derives from the idea of a hierarchy of need (Maslow, 1968). The highest levels of need can be triggered once other, lower order ones are met. At the lower level are physiological requirements such as hunger and thirst; then safety in terms of a predictable and orderly world; and then on towards love and belongingness, seeking, for instance, warm, empathic relationships; thence to the need for self-esteem, for strength, achievement and confidence in the world; and finally, to self-actualization, independence and autonomy in which people can adjust to society without

losing integrity. It is interesting that the need for love, support and relationship is relegated to a lower level, serving as a staging post to more important ends. But the preference for separation above connectedness, objectivity above subjectivity, individuality above communality also appears to reflect what is culturally most esteemed (Seidler, 1994). Some stories matter more than others.

A third research strand focuses on motivational orientations, derived from differences in personality traits, temperament, etc. Different people, it is suggested, engage in learning for different ends. Some individuals are driven by social needs: a desire for contact perhaps because of loneliness and isolation, while others, the 'learning orientated', are primarily motivated by the love of a subject itself which becomes a central feature of a life (Houle, 1961). But on close reading many individuals in these studies reported various reasons for educational participation: a desire for contact with others, for instance, often co-existed with a learning orientation. It was a matter of emphasis rather than clear distinction and motives were not exclusive or for that matter hierarchical. A fourth and final research strand uses decision-making theory to interpret the sequence and manner of decisions. The aim is to develop a body of predictive theory derived from empirical observation. A problem with the approach is its focus on immediate actions rather than the origins and causes of behaviours. And little or no space has been given for learners to articulate the meanings, historic as well as contemporary, which may underlie their decisions (Courtney, 1992).

The same criticism can be applied to psychological research into educational motivation as a whole. Most of this has focused on schooling and what motivates teachers and learners to improve their performance. The research tends to be dominated by either needs-based analysis, influenced by Maslow; or highly behaviourist approaches which focus on what can be observed and measured as well as the impact of external reward systems; input/output equity theory, for example, involves individuals rationally calculating the fairness of rewards. Expectancy theory combines these approaches in a mathematical model in which expectancy, (the belief that efforts will result in performance), instrumentality, (the idea that performance will be rewarded), and valence (the value of the reward) are aggregated for predictive purposes (Fox, 1993). Subjectivity, and the meaning of actions for the people concerned, are once again banished to the margins.

Coincidentally, those who emphasize the historical and social roots of human subjectivity and action can be vague about how cultural forces are translated into specific subjective states and actions. If we are culturally conditioned to think, feel and act in certain ways, these externally derived imprints and their impact vary from person to person. Some individuals appear more able than others to transcend even the worst oppression and become more active agents in their own lives despite the constraints surrounding them. Equally some people seem psychologically better equipped to learn from new experience, to transcend crises, however potentially overwhelming, and to

take greater risks with self and identity, however difficult or uncertain the circumstances. Subjective differences are crucial to understanding motivation, whatever general patterns or cultural imperatives there might be. We need a theory of subjectivity and micro-level behaviour to complement cultural and macro-level analysis.

The work of sociologists like Hopper and Osborn (1975) on marginality provides some indications of what such a theory might encompass. They analysed the social situation of mature students in accredited forms of continuing and higher education and suggested that learners were often torn between competing groups and affiliations, not really belonging anywhere, unsure and uncertain of who and what they were. They were frequently people who had known some success at school and in early post-initial education, but progress had been disrupted, even aborted, often for non-educational reasons. Such individuals might be unconfident but not entirely dismissive of their abilities and potential, dissatisfied at work or in the home, and feeling they had more to offer than existing roles, relationships or employment allowed. In such conditions, continuing or higher education expressed a desire to break free.

Sean Courtney's (1992) sociological perspectives on adult learning similarly offer glimpses into the more intimate dynamics of learners' lives. Adult education, as Courtney perceives it, is a means of managing change, particularly at times of major crisis. Questions about self and identity are strongest when the normal business of getting through the day, at home or work, collapses or becomes unacceptable. Courtney defines learning in social terms, stressing the important role of significant others, as well as a supportive culture, in learning and educational participation. Crucially, he introduces the condition of the self and inner states into the motivational equation (see also Brandenburg, 1974; King, 1994). Courtney suggests that individuals are engaged in a struggle, no less, to reconstitute a self, to build a new identity through work and/or education and that others are essential to the success of the project. He describes (but does not explain) learners as 'life spacers', more likely to take risks and attempt something new on the basis of supportive relationships. The question remains, however, as to how such support translates into stronger selves willing and able to take risks.

Cultural fragmentation and the paradox of present times

Sociologists such as Giddens, and psychologists such as Frosh, locate such personal struggles in a wider but paradoxical context by suggesting that the culture of late modernity constantly precipitates crises of, as well as opportunities for, self. As tradition loses hold, as global economic forces deskill whole communities; as male linear biographical certainties – of school, work and retirement – disintegrate; and as the metanarratives of modernity – the belief in progress, science or consumption – lose their efficacy, individuals have to

make more of their own choices and construct more of their own meanings and biographies in conditions of uncertainty. Giddens describes the 'reflexive project of the self', which consists of sustaining a coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narrative, as a survival imperative (Giddens, 1991). Stephen Frosh suggests that modern states of mind are forged in cultural instability of a potentially 'cataclysmic kind' (Frosh, 1991). There are two possible responses: a fluid and generative creativity as tradition breaks down or a pathological defensiveness against change and uncertainty of whatever kind. The one 'chosen' depends on the strength of self: whether or not this self is sufficiently secure and cohesive to cope with perpetual uncertainty and remain open to new experience. The paradox of the present lies in the combination of opportunities for men and women to experiment with who and what they are but in a context of fracture and desperate uncertainty.

The book employs some psychoanalytic theory to explain how certain people rather than others may become life spacers and more able to take biographical risks. Psychoanalysis, unlike mainstream psychology, places the study of individual meanings and actions and their subjective origins at its core. Traditionally, such theories derived from biological or essentialist views of human nature in which the structure of personality was largely innate and motives were a product of the conflict between instinctual drives and social imperatives. More recently, in the work of relational theory (defining this broadly to include object relationists such as Winnicott and Klein, self psychologists such as Kohut and some feminist psychoanalytic perspectives), stress is placed on the role of 'good enough' relationships and a supportive environment in the creation of confident inner states. The cultural and social are brought directly into the psychology of motive by making the development and expression of self intimately dependent on others and, by extension, on wider patterns of relationship and power.

It is the quality of relationships and the environment which enable children to transcend inner emotional conflict and progress towards a securer sense of self. If the quality of relationships is poor, the care deficient, if others need to be constantly appeased to secure attention, a compliant or coping self may emerge, or a false self, which in adult life may be experienced as empty, meaningless and inauthentic. But damage, even of a basic, primitive kind can be repaired through good enough relationships in later life. Some people turn to therapy but reparation might also be possible in educational settings through contact with people who respect, care and empathize with us. Building a self may be secured through the support and encouragement of those who themselves successfully struggle against inauthenticity and oppression. They may reveal aspects of personality which are admired and can be psychologically appropriated by others. Examples of such intersubjective processes might be found in the women's and black consciousness movements (Frosh, 1991). Self psychologists such as Wolf (1988) also emphasize the importance of maintaining and strengthening a self over an entire life. Even those with

relatively secure and supportive beginnings require others, and/or uplifting experiences, to survive in conditions of pervasive uncertainty.

The concept of self which I am using is constructivist rather than essentialist, developmentally created in processes connecting culture and intimate relationships with the emergence of an internal life. The existence of self becomes developmentally contingent on the quality of relationships in childhood and beyond, and the extent to which these facilitate or frustrate spontaneity, self-expression and experiment. As Frosh (1991) suggests, if an environment is abusive, alienating and persecutory, internal structures may also become persecutory. Conversely, if an environment is supportive, if people are felt to value us and we value ourselves, internal mental life can become more self-affirmatory. The basic idea of this book is that higher education is potentially a space in which to manage and transcend feelings of marginalization, meaninglessness and inauthenticity in interaction with others; in which it is possible, given their support and encouragement, to compose a new life, a different story and a more cohesive self.

Biographical methods and narrative

The research explored motivation and biographies primarily through individual interviews but also through personal journals. The interviews were initially semi-structured but became, over time, largely unstructured, open-ended, diverse and intensely reflexive. All the interviews (as explained in the next chapter) were fully transcribed and copies given to interviewees on a regular basis for comment and analysis in the proceeding session. Such methods, as Thompson has argued (Thompson, 1981, 1988), can be a powerful tool in a dynamic testing and retesting of hypotheses within and across case studies.

Stories evolve over time. What people have to tell of their motives and their lives more generally is never complete. Individuals who lack confidence or a sense of their own legitimacy may often reflect the stories powerful others tell about them. There may be a minimal sense of personal agency and of authorship. People may repress and exclude aspects of lived experience, because this is either threatening or considered inconsequential and of little interest to others. This, in turn, may compound feelings of unhappiness and inauthenticity. The condition of a story may, in this sense, be important to understanding the condition of the self. Harold Rosen has written that 'it is a feature of our humanness that we can not only represent experience directly but work on the representation and thus deal with experience obliquely' (Rosen, 1993).

Medium and message, narrative and experience, reality and representation, self and story, are not easily prized apart. Story itself is a vehicle for experiment in self-composure: the more a story convinces others, whether teachers, students or researchers, the more it may constitute a new, emerging

reality. Narrative structures, in other words, may themselves organize and give meaning to experience rather than being simply reflective of it (Lea, 1995). At a first interview, in the early stages of an Access programme, a student account may be deferential, even self-demeaning, with significant details omitted in the desire to impress others or because they are considered inconsequential. By the end of four years of study, a more distinct voice and inclusive story might be articulated. There is a real sense, as Rosen suggests, in which we are our stories.

Al Thomson, in developing a theory of memory within oral history, suggests that experience never ends and is open to constant recreation in the light of the present (Thomson, 1994). Thomson interviewed a number of Anzac veterans about their private experiences of war, comparing the material to the powerful tribal mythologies of Anzac legend. The interviews led to a recovery of lost, even repressed memories which could, on occasions, be at odds with public memories (of, for example, a classless, egalitarian army in comparison to the British). The process of retelling could be painful because the public myths served, in part at least, to legitimize a whole way of life (via Veteran's Organizations, for example). Thomson used psychoanalytic ideas about repression to develop his theory of selective memory; an individual may feel too vulnerable to integrate certain experiences within a story at a particular time and survives by denying or repressing them. Brown and Pedder (1991), in exploring the psychodynamic mechanisms of defence and repression, use the example of a soldier wandering back from the front line in a fugue state and obliterating the memory of comrades blown apart because his conscious mind simply could not cope with the experience. Stories are necessarily partial: the key question is what enables more authentic and comprehensive narratives to emerge. The gradual, incremental revision of story as part of managing change is an important theme of the book.

Judy Giles has written of how she was unable to confront some of the contradictions and pain of her life as an undergraduate and working-class woman, or to reclaim her working-class roots, until she had gained her Doctorate and established herself (the language is revealing) in a new career (Giles, 1990). Liz Heron (1985) has observed that 'I believed for many years that I could move towards the future and leave the past behind, that there was no need for me to return home. But the past has to be claimed.' Claiming it is a function of the present and is dictated by the condition of self and the context in which a story is narrated. A capacity to tell new stories requires a strengthening subjectivity in which others listen empathically and responsively as well as provide support, encouragement and ideas for the experiment.

The researcher's self and story

Power exists, as Foucault has observed, in all social relations, as do more unconscious processes. The more the project evolved, the more I felt it

necessary to understand and document my impact on others, and theirs on me, in story-telling. The starting point was not between equals but between university researchers and adults from disadvantaged backgrounds who were relatively new and unconfident in higher education. There was the danger, consciously or unconsciously, of imposing a script on others as a result. There may initially be undue reverence towards academics, a mystique in their status as experts, which inhibits people from finding their own voice. The researcher is, for instance, more experienced at interpretation and in theorizing and using the language of research. Unconsciously, a researcher may represent, at some level, a significant other, maybe a parent. Past emotional traces can be triggered in new situations particularly by powerful others, which hinders more open and equal forms of communication (Shaw, 1995). Research, whatever may be claimed for it, can continue to reflect, consciously or not, what learners feel other people want to hear.

Part of the answer is to reflect constantly on the process as well as the content of research, at every stage, in every interview and this was a crucial part of the work. However, this was a difficult undertaking because there is relatively little in the literature about the practice of reflexive research although there is abundant writing on its importance (Armstrong, 1995). Similarly, it seemed essential to include aspects of my own story in the book. The more the research developed and the more we searched to understand a life, the more I shared experiences of my own and drew on these to interpret others' stories. But writing the self of the researcher into research, and acknowledging its influence in shaping the text, stands conventional research wisdom about objectivity and detachment on its head.

On many occasions, themes in the lives of the learners resonated deeply with those in my own. I was moved by much of the material and shared similar experiences with the students: partly in an attempt to illuminate their stories, partly as our relationships and the sense of research as dialogue developed. At times people were baring their souls and I owed it to them to offer in return something of me and my story. Researchers frequently write about a project as if their interest, engagement and the process were purely theoretical and cerebral. In fact, I came to realize that in asking questions of others, I was asking questions of myself; and in wanting to understand the conditions for effective learning in other's lives, I wanted to understand more about these in my own. All research crosses boundaries between self and others, professional and personal lives. The problem is that most of the story of the researcher's self has hitherto been omitted, repressed or denied.

Validity in research

I worked with the students in seven interviews lasting for upwards of two hours each, over, in most cases, a period of three-and-a-half years. These were no brief, one-off conversations but intense and mutual searches for meaning over

a long period of time. Such methods, as indicated, raise questions about the validity of such a project, at least in conventional terms. It is important to stress that there is no final, definitive or easily generalizable 'truth' based on the 'facts' of these interviews. The autobiographies represent stories told in particular encounters at specific times to particular people, however detailed and revealing the material. The texts are open to further interpretation and the story is never complete. The book tells a tale of neglected dimensions of motivation – its psychic as well as cultural roots – but the interpretation could be continuously refined and developed. However, I do claim that the application of relational psychoanalysis and a biographical methodology to the study of adult motives and learning provides a far more complex picture of individual experience and its meaning than in most existing research. And its validity primarily lies in the meaningfulness of the analysis to other sense-making practitioners wrestling with similar questions, as well as the extent to which the interpretations illuminate the struggles of learners elsewhere, in analogous situations.

Furthermore, while these particular learners were from diverse backgrounds, there is no claim to conventional representivity with regard to Access students or mature students more generally in higher and continuing education. Ellen (1984) has noted that inference, even in more conventional quantitative research, often derives as much from the cogency of the theoretical arguments connecting the particular to the general rather than statistical principles alone. What matters is the quality of case studies and the extent to which these clarify previously obscure relationships and patterns and on the resonance, plausibility, moral persuasiveness and explanatory power of the analysis to those addressing similar questions (Amos Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995); in this instance, about why people learn and what enables them to do so across a life. This book should be judged on these grounds rather than conventional positivist criteria of validity, reliability and generalizability.

The structure of the book

Paul Thompson (1988) has suggested that there are three ways in which life history/biographical material can be used effectively in recording and interpreting histories. First, by focusing on a single life story which, because of the richness of the material, illuminates a number of complex themes. Second, by grouping a collection of stories around common themes. Third, life stories are a potential quarry from which to construct an argument to be judged on the quality of the overall analysis and not simply on the basis of the material alone. This book combines all three approaches: at its core is a series of individual case studies used to identify and explore responses to change. Some stories are linked around common themes: of how women and men manage change, for instance. The narratives are also quarried to identify good, bad and indiffer-

ent experiences of learning and to reflect on their implications for the development of a more diverse and responsive higher education while strands are connected across all the case studies to explore the overarching theme of the book: the paradox of self in late capitalist modernity.

Chapter 2 on self and method identifies, sometimes painfully, the autobiographical roots of the study. The chapter was written towards the end of the project, as the students' impact on me, and me on them, became clearer. Writing this particular chapter was analogous to the learners telling their stories: there was pain and uncertainty in revealing intimate details and in deciding what to include and what to omit. But there was also a sense of excitement in weaving patterns from fragments of experience. The chapter explains the research methods: their reflexive, biographical and longitudinal design; how 'data' collection was combined with analysis; and the concern to understand whole stories rather than simply linguistic fragments.

Chapter 3, on wanting to be a solicitor, examines the problem of stated reasons and the arbitrariness of separating career and personal motivation in the context of particular stories. It reveals the intense fragility of one student's emotions as well the unpredictability and dangers of biographical methods. Chapter 4 uses two 'telling' case studies, of Brenda and Paul, to illuminate many of the central themes of the research overall: marginality, change and breakdown in individual lives. It examines the role of significant others in strengthening self and risk-taking and how present problems are often rooted in earliest relationships and are necessarily revisited in struggles for authenticity in the present. It examines how people are scripted by history, gender and class but how narratives can change and personal history can be revised to constitute as well as represent a more vibrant self.

Chapter 5 focuses on men, motives and lifestyles in the context of a community – the Medway Towns – in distress. The stories reveal the contradictory nature of work: as a source of status and identity but also of alienation. The collapse of employment prospects provides new opportunities for men and redefinitions of masculinity, as well as experiences of loss. Chapter 6 focuses on Jim and the role of 'self-objects' in the language of self psychology, people and experiences which can uplift, strengthen and maintain a self in difficult, transitional times. The chapter describes the potential calamity of unemployment in a locality like Thanet, where occupational instability and personal insecurity are the norm. But it also describes how Jim was able, through higher education, fishing and a renegotiation of relationships, to progress towards a more feminized and balanced lifestyle and, in consequence, a more integrated self.

Chapter 7 identifies differing responses to dislocation in the lives of two women and their male partners from the Medway. Women, it seems, are often emotionally more able to manage change and crisis as part of a learned adaptability. The chapter illustrates how economic and ideological impera-