Mature Women and Higher Education: Reconstructing Identity and Family Relationships

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of HE participation on identity change for mature women students and their families. It reports on an aspect of my doctorate research with a small group of Early Years Foundation degree mature students and their husbands[1] focusing on identity change for the women, effects on long term relationships and consequential effects on families. The main findings demonstrated that HE changed the women's identity, as their early years knowledge base increased, their confidence grew and they became more analytical and reflective. This had consequential effects on the family for 2 reasons:

1. The woman's changing identity and early years knowledge acquisition affected her parenting – this enhanced the child/children's all round development (including education).

2. Role changes in the family, due to the mother's study taking up a large proportion of her time, meant that most of the husbands took on a more active role with childcare and household tasks – this enhanced their relationships with their children.

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[1] The term 'husband' or 'wife' is used to encompass all long term intimate relationships this includes spouse and long term partner (over 2 years). 9 out of the 10 long term relationships were husband and wife relationships with the 10th being an engaged couple.

However, these findings on their own only add more recent research findings to the debates on mature women students already highlighted by Edwards (1993a), Green Lister (2003), Merrill (1999), Pascall and Cox (1993) and Schuller et al. (2004). Nevertheless, my research contributes to the field as it offers insights into identity changes using a theoretical framework of strands of identity, positioning and transformation. As a result of this research, a model of family capital was developed. This paper will introduce the concepts of identity change and effects on families but the theory of family capital will be explored in a subsequent paper.

An overview of previous research on mature women students and the effects on family relationships

Identity changes and consequential effects on the family were highlighted as important in earlier studies in the 1990's. This was against a backdrop of expansion in HE, with local provision providing opportunities for women to enter HE (Pascall and Cox, 1993). From the 1990's and continuing into the next decade there were several focused studies on mature students, particularly women, accessing HE (see Edwards, 1993a; Merrill, 1999; Parr, 2000; Pascall and Cox , 1993). Although the majority of these texts are dated they were selected for their significant contribution to the themes of my research and help to develop my understanding of how HE creates a changed identity for mature women.

Identity transformation as a result of HE, is a key theme for both my participants and those featured in previous studies (Biesta et al.2011; Edwards 1993a; Merrill 1999; Parr 2000; Pascall and Cox 1993 and Schuller et al. 2004). For the women in these selected studies, gender and motherhood were key strands of identity. Women were portrayed as being positioned and constrained by their gender in terms of previous

educational opportunities and socially constructed ideals of career opportunities for women (Pascall and Cox 1993; Merrill 1999). Education has also changed since these studies and opportunities to progress to college have opened up with 46% of males entering FE and 54% of females. Entrance to HE also shows a predominance of 8% more females to males in full time study and 20% more females to males in part time study (ONS 2013); therefore more women are taking up the opportunity to progress into HE.

HE study can have significant transformative changes to a woman's identity (Pascall and Cox 1993, Edwards 1993a; Merrill 1999; Parr 2000; Schuller et al. 2004 and Biesta et al. 2011). Changes to identity included: gaining self-confidence, having more authority, raised status, a sense of fulfilment, independence and agency over one's life, positive self- image and a greater sense of purpose. These transformative changes affected how they perceived themselves, or situated themselves, as mothers and as wives. This was attributed to a transformation in values, attitudes and behaviours and a new awareness of themselves (Merrill 1999), as well as an ability to be more analytical (Edwards 1993a).

The women's shifting knowledge base and subsequent increased self confidence levels seemed to permeate into different spheres of life such as their children's education, family relationships and work situations (Edwards 1993b; Schuller et al. 2004). They felt better placed to influence their child's education, have a greater involvement and voice because of their developing knowledge base and subsequent transformation to their identity. Merrill (1999) discussed positive effects to the children such as children developing independence and an openness to their mother studying.

There are limited accounts of how HE studies impact on husbands as in the

majority of studies this is only mentioned tentatively. Pascall and Cox (1993) and Edwards (1993a) discuss the importance of support from husbands. Schuller at al. (2004) discussed conflict with others as a result of a change in personal identity and Biesta et al.'s (2011) more recent study highlighted that personal transformations through lifelong learning can have consequential effects on relationships and positions in the family.

Children were portrayed as more supportive, helpful, resilient and open to change than the husbands (Edwards 1993a). The majority of the women in Edwards' (1993a) study did not mention an increase in practical support with household tasks by their husbands, as they primarily cited that the division of domestic labour did not shift in the household, despite them being busier with HE study. Balancing HE study alongside normal family responsibilities and roles puts more pressure on the women and is deemed as gender specific in these studies (Edwards 1993a; Merrill 1999; Parr 2000; Pascall and Cox 1993).

Although these studies highlight women's identity before HE, there are many new aspects, concerning identity, which can be developed through my research. These studies highlight the experiences of many different women rather than a small focused group, therefore individual voices and stories could be diluted. The focus is also predominately on the women's perspectives; the viewpoints of their husbands are not sought regarding the division of labour in the household, this is an area that would be of interest. My study will develop the key theme of identity transformation and consider how it is rooted in gender and family positioning. What is not clear is whether HE learning continues to have consequential effects on family relationships or whether these identified gender related issues are still a concern in current everyday life.

Methods

Qualitative methods were adopted using a narrative inquiry methodology of focused interviews, mind mapping and a student led mosaic approach to gather the data. My application of the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss 2011) was to encourage the women to have some ownership of the research process, particularly as they were discussing the sensitive issues of their family relationships and changing identity. This approach enabled the women participants to select their own methods (for phase 2), which were in tune with themselves and their preferences, to encourage individuality and co-construction of meanings.

Research Overview

My research was set out in three phases:

- *Phase one – Initial mind mapping and focused interview:* The aim of the initial interview was to introduce the topic to the women, through the use of a mind mapping technique to focus on the family context and positioning in the family.

- *Phase two – Second interview, participant led :* Participants were encouraged to bring artefacts (for example: photographs, reflective journal entries) or discussion themes to the second interview to elaborate their points and illuminate their experiences and reflections.

- *Phase three – Interviews with husbands:* To illuminate the topic from the husbands' perspectives.

In this approach, multiple forms of media (Creswell 2009; Etherington 2004), could be used to collect data (e.g. reflective journals, mind mapping, emails etc) to create a detailed picture. The data was collected over a period of eight weeks, with a two week gap between phase one and two to enable women to collect their own data.

Participants

Women with families were selected from one Foundation degree in Early Years in a College Higher Education (CHE) environment (see Table1). The views of their husbands were also gathered through interviews.

Table 1: Participants details

This group was selected for two reasons. There is limited research with small groups of women students therefore I selected one HE programme to maximise rich data through illuminating a few detailed stories. Secondly, through tutoring mature women in a CHE environment, I am in a privileged position to listen firsthand to the women's stories regarding identity change and family relationships and wanted to illuminate and document these experiences. These students were selected on the basis of meeting the criteria of having a husband and children aged under 18. Two students did not fit these criteria exactly as one participant's marriage broke down at the start of the course, so she was no longer in a relationship when the research commenced. As a contrast at the end of the period of data collection, I also included one single parent as a deviant case They were selected from a college within the South West. Eleven female participants were interviewed, with three husbands included in this research. All of these men and women had very traditional roles within the home and the mothers were largely responsible for childcare and household tasks prior to HE. The term husband has been used to encompass all marital or long term relationships (over two years) and all names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Although it is recognised that a small sample size can be limiting and restraining, the aim was to highlight and illuminate in-depth stories in order to achieve a contextual picture or snapshot in time. Although this is a small sample size it is large enough to

generate a valid amount of data (Waller 2012). This enabled me to delve deeper with each participant using multiple methods to construct an in depth qualitative study.

Data analysis

Using a thematic framework analysis approach enabled me to be systematic, comprehensive and transparent within my data analysis through familiarisation, constructing the initial thematic framework, reviewing and connecting the data and summarising the data (Spencer et al. 2014). Although this was time consuming it allowed me to develop an in depth knowledge of the variety of data I had constructed. This enabled a thematic mind map of the main codes to be constructed; these were defined and redefined (Saldana 2013), in order to develop a theoretical model of analysis.

Theoretical Lens – Identity, positioning and transformation theory

Identity

The concept of identity will be used to account for how students construct and make sense of the changes and transformations that they undergo when embarking on a programme of study such as the Foundation degree in Early Years. This section will conceptualise a working model of identity that will be used to make sense of the transformations that occur to women when they engage with HE.

Like Burr (2003), I favour the term identity rather than personality and use this as a tool to discuss how women perceive themselves. I steer away from the psychological perspective of personality which alludes to traits and the fixed inherent nature of a person (Smith, Cowie and Blades 2011). Taking a sociological approach, identity can be seen as a 'collective approach', created alongside of others, rather than as an individualistic process (Lawler 2014:3).

Burr (2003) describes identity in terms of strands woven together, Brown (2006)

elaborates on this further and portrays identity as a patchwork quilt, evolving and borrowing narratives from different social episodes that when woven together create the person. Hence, the formation of these strands are based on social encounters, perceiving similarities and differences to others and assigning a label or identification to themselves e.g. mother, woman, wife, or early years professional. For a women student, these strands might be as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Example of strands of identity for a woman

Consequently, these strands will be constructed differently for each individual based on their perspective of the important aspects of their roles and how they describe themselves. The concept of identity strands is useful in this research as it enables me to visualise how the women perceive their identity and the strands that are of importance to them. The main strands of identity that I have observed change or develop when a mature woman enters HE are being a 'mother' and constructing what it is to be a 'HE student'. I believe that all students would be negotiating different stands of their identity but mothers are worthy of particular attention as the role of mother affects every aspect of their student life, such as when they can study and the hours they can attend university.

Positioning theory

The concept of positioning aligns with my construction of identity as it is a key component in identity formation viewing the individual as a constantly evolving being, which can be reactive and adaptive to the social environment (Davies and Harré 1999). It enables identity to be considered beyond identification labels (Lawler 2012). Identity is shaped by positioning and 'is understood in relation to the different types of position we hold in life', (Biesta et al. 2011:94). A person would feel that they have certain

rights, duties and obligations to fulfil depending on the position they have assigned themselves or understand from their social encounters as to what is the expected behaviour (Harré and van Lagenhove 1999). For example, a mother would have constructed how she believes a mother would behave, according to the acceptance of, or rejection, of a subject position, and will then aim to conduct herself accordingly. This will also be influenced by her own emotions and personal history of what it is to be a mother (Davies and Harré 1999).

This capacity to position themselves and others will differ from person to person in terms of capability to take up different positions, willingness to reposition themselves or others and the difference in their power to achieve this (Harré and van Lagenhove 1999). For these reasons, positions can be claimed or rejected. This could have consequential effects on identity construction as this constant positioning helps to shape how a person perceives themselves based on interactions with others, for example: being a 'loving' mother, being a 'professional' practitioner or a 'working' wife contributing to the family finances. Through their educational experiences and the possible development of agency, they may feel in a better position to challenge previous positions, this could then cause change in family relationships.

Identity changes and transformation theory

Identity changes can occur when an identity position or strand is challenged or in conflict with another (Woodward 2004). A woman may feel torn between wanting to construct an identity as a hardworking and diligent student, yet may find this incompatible with being a mother who is readily available to her children; this could cause a crisis or a change in identity. Therefore the concept of identity crisis or change is useful in my research as it could explain why students struggle with their emotions, when on the course, as they reconstruct or challenge what makes a good mother, wife or

professional. Emotions of guilt can be varied and could be because of spending less time with the family or guilt over previous parenting choices based on their new educational knowledge gained from their lectures or reading. This is as a consequence of wrestling with the academic demands, theoretical reflecting and changing individual professional perceptions. As education can be seen as an autonomous, independent, safe and enabling space to reconstruct identity (Parr 2001) then change is to be expected.

Transformation theory is helpful because through transformation of their perspectives, the socially constructed positions the women have held previously, can be challenged and re-examined (Harré and van Lagenhove 1999). This change in positions can be described as tacit or intentional if a woman decides to challenge a previously help position based on her developing knowledge base. Transformation theory, according to Mezirow (1991), involves re-examining childhood values, beliefs and assumptions in light of new knowledge and experiences. Newer perspectives in adulthood, particularly through education and engagement with academic reading and discussion, can cause these assumptions to be challenged (Cherrington and Thornton, 2013).

Mezirow (1995 cited by Kitchenham 2008) considered three types of reflection (content, process and premise) in transformation theory with transformation being categorised as straightforward or profound. Straightforward transformation occurs through content and process reflection of a previous meaning scheme. For example a woman might consider previous parenting decisions and reflect on where her actions and behaviours originated from, this may cause straightforward transformation. However, if a mother then examines her assumptions and premises to those behaviours, this may cause profound transformation to her future parenting practices through complex reflections and a transformation of meaning schemes (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Cycle of transformation for women in HE

Mezirow presents transformation theory as an insular and introspective experience and although there is recognition for the sharing of transformational experiences (Mezirow 1991), there is no consideration to the wider context or family (Taylor, 2009). It is an approach that focuses on the individual, and overlooks positionality when considering transformative learning which fails to recognise if one's person's transformation can affect transformation for another (Taylor 2009). There is reference to how personal change due to family crisis or a disorientating dilemma can instigate personal critical reflection and transformation (Mezirow 1991), but there is no appreciation of the effect of this on the family from a positive or negative perspective. Therefore can transformative learning have consequential influences or effect on those associated with the students or is it only perceived as ensuing individual learning and consequences only? This is something that will be explored through my research.

Discussion and findings

Two main themes emerged from these findings demonstrating how the course changed mature women students' identity and behaviours and the transformative effect of this to their husband's parenting practices.

The course has absolutely, fundamentally changed me!

This section explores the transformative effect of HE and considers how participation reconstructs women's identity and changes their belief systems, perspectives and behaviours.

Motherhood was the strand of identity that featured most heavily in all of their accounts of changing identity and the effects of HE on their family relationships. It became apparent through the process of the interviews that the women's identification

as a mother changed during the HE experience, a transformation occurred. Although the strand of mother was important for them it was not fixed and was a fluid and evolving part of who they were. For all of the women, as their constructions of themselves changed so did their understanding of motherhood.

Although the women spoke of being happy in the role of mother they also did not feel content with their identity and wanted something more:

> I think being at home all the time is lovely, but I think sometimes you need something else in your life. (Heidi)

The participants selected the Foundation degree programme as they were actively seeking transformations and a change in their lives. Identity change occurred as their perceptions about themselves were redefined and transformed.

HE can transform ways of thinking and ways of behaving for women (Edwards 1993a; Merrill 1999; Parr 2000; Pascall and Cox 1993). This is reflected in changes to their personal beliefs, parenting practices, reflective abilities and self-confidence levels, which my findings support. Identity changes and transformations were due to an increase in knowledge which brought about a change in perspective (Cherrington and Thornton 2013).

All of the women experienced a change of perspective through gaining additional knowledge and through the process of reflection (Lehrer 2013; Thompson and Thompson 2008). A change in perspective could be attributed to reflective practice being a key part of the Early Years Foundation degree and the early years profession as a whole. Through education, reflection is generated (Osgood 2006) and this is something that is facilitated through the early years module content and through class discussions and assessment opportunities. This change in perspective transformed their identity in a number of ways:

> I look at the bigger picture now … I look at things differently now …my perceptions are broader than before. (Esme)

> It has given me more of a presence now, I always over simplified things before, now I don't need to. (Maggie)

Parenting

Increased knowledge and a change in perspective brought about fundamental changes to their parenting. As part of their early years studies, the women found themselves analysing their own parenting practices as their knowledge of child development increased. This led to a greater awareness of their children's needs but also enabled them to change how they parented. For nine participants this gave them a sense of pride:

> Doing the course has made me more in-depth, I can now look at it from a more theoretical point of view … I think that has helped me so I can analyse, you know, if my daughter is feeling down or whatever and I can think how can I handle this, so I can talk to her better and actually understand this is the stage she is going through. So I am meeting her needs better because I am more knowledgeable. (Esme)

Transformation through knowledge acquisition also brought about a change in Marie's parenting and revolutionised her whole identity as a mother. Through reflecting on her past parenting style, formulating a new position; she gained greater control over her life, through the transformation of previously held beliefs (Mezirow 1991). Prior to HE, Marie was fearful for her children's safety and was overly protective of them. This resulted in reducing their opportunities, for example to experience risk and challenge inside of the safe context of play. Marie's identity, prior to HE, was tied in to feelings of low self-worth and lack of self-belief. Marie believed that this restricted the opportunities she gave her children such as horse riding and climbing trees as she was fearful of the risks. Marie's self-transformation changed her perspectives on parenting:

> The course has completely changed me as a parent … My children have a completely different childhood now.

Through increased knowledge and changing parenting practices the women felt that

they had also become better role models for their children:

> This will make me a good strong positive role model for them …. I want them to grow up confident … the best way to teach your children is by doing it yourself. (Doris)

An increase in knowledge and a change in perspective as a consequence of their HE

studies developed an increase in self-confidence.

Increased self confidence

The gaining of 'self-confidence' is a term used in several studies on mature students

(see Mercer 2007; Christie et al. 2008) and can be manifested in social situations and on

a personal level. The HE environment is seen as a 'protected staging area' where self-

confidence can be developed through a safe and supportive space (Mezirow 1978:102).

The women attributed their growing self-confidence with their success and

achievement in their studies. Mature students can find assessments harder to grasp as

they have been out of education for a period of time. Growing self-confidence, through

assignment success, can initiate identity change and self-belief. As women develop a

sense of confidence in their ability and learn to trust their instincts, they begin to

perceive themselves differently:

> I have become more confident in my own capabilities once I did those first two assignments … after repeatedly getting passes, you then think, well actually what I am putting in I know, it's just having faith in yourself and what has happened as the years have gone on, my identity is thinking well, actually I do know what I am talking about … It is just having that confidence in yourself and I think each time you get a grade … you feel better about yourself. (Christina)

Having an increased sense of self confidence was an important factor that impacted on a

change in identity. It gave the women a sense of self belief in their own abilities and

increased self confidence in social situations with others. It enabled Doris to reposition

herself in her relationship with her husband, but also the wider family. She felt more

confident to have discussions with her father in law, whereas before she felt intimidated

by his professional status as a doctor. Through an increase in self-confidence, Doris felt more able to play an equal part in conversation exchanges as she realised she was more knowledgeable and able than previously considered. This was replicated in nine of the stories shared by the participants. As their perceptions of themselves and their levels of self-confidence were raised, so were their aspirations.

Impact on the family

This section explores the effects of a woman's participation in HE on the rest of the family[2]. The women's HE experience had a profound effect on their identity, this then impacted on their family too. Through the practical implications of studying, changes to the family routines and structures ensued as a consequence of the mature women engaging in HE study.

Husbands

Higher Education caused fundamental change in relationships between wives and their husbands[3] this was due to a transformation in the woman's identity as well as change in roles in the family. A set of themes emerged which can be categorised into three areas of change in the marital relationship. Firstly, the women's identity change had an impact on the husband. Secondly, this resulted in changes in the relationship which (thirdly) caused a change in position in the relationship.

These changes had both positive and negative consequences on their relationship:

> Actually the biggest change is in my relationship, that's the impact. (Esme)
>
> It's changed both our lives; it's changed everyone's life, even the kids! (Alan)

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[2] The remarks here about the family are made by the women unless otherwise indicated.

[3] 8 out of 10 couples

A change in the woman's identity caused greater self-confidence, a more self-reflective

approach and an ability to see things from multiple perspectives. This was noticed by

their husbands (as reported by the three men in the interviews):

> The educational side has given her the belief in herself perhaps a bit more. (Bradley)

These identity changes then had a resultant effect on their relationship with their

husband as some women became calmer, more analytical, more confident and more

content. The women saw this as positive and enhancing of their relationships with their

husband as communication was aided. However, Angelina believed that her husband

needed to be accepting of these changes:

> I think it is the fact that he's [husband] accepted that this [analytical approach] is now part of me. (Angelina)

Yet this acceptance did not happen straight away for Angelina, there was a period of

unrest as positions were challenged:

> This caused quite a lot of conflict between me and my husband in the first year because something would happen and I would say, 'Hold on a minute, let's have a think about this, why is he [son's behaviour] doing this?'….That kind of analytical approach really wound him husband] up…. I think he adapted to what I was becoming and things I was saying and I think I probably toned it down a bit…a lot of the conflict we had in year one has gone. (Angelina)

As HE transformed the women's identity it also transformed how some husbands saw

the women:

> It makes her go up in my estimations a little bit because it's hard and you know I am all for further education and stuff. (Alan)

This consequently changed how the women were positioned in the relationship. Four of

the women, before HE, discussed not feeling equal to their husbands. This could be as a

result of their previous identity, as many of the women had negative early educational

experiences which left them with a lack of self confidence in their own abilities. The

women felt that their increased knowledge gave them an ability to be more informed

and analytical in discussions and also felt that their possible career routes, as a result of

HE, gave them more standing and status with their husband. This enriched Kim's

relationship and made her discussions with her husband more interesting:

> I think doing the course has actually enriched our relationship because maybe its brought me up to the same sort of I don't know if it's the same level but you know we have lots of discussions and things and I think that makes it more interesting. (Kim)

There was also a physical positional change in the relationship brought about by a

change in division of labour in the household as nine of the husbands took on a greater

share of childcare or household tasks. Childcare support was in two ways, either to

enable them to attend college (e.g. helping with before or after nursery or school care)

or by looking after the children at the weekends to facilitate additional study time for

the women:

> My husband does have to do slightly more … when they [children] are sick and I have a college day, I have made him do it. (Jennifer)

Eight of the women also relied on their husband to take a greater share in housework

this was normally with cooking or cleaning thus freeing them up time to devote to their

studies:

> Ross [husband] has definitely helped on a practical level … His role has changed at home … he's changed to adapt to the changing needs of the household. (Maggie)

> There has been a bit of a role change, I do a bit more around the house than I did, although I did do a bit, I probably find myself doing more now. (Alan)

Children

Being a mum was the most important part of the women's identity, therefore how their

HE study affected their children was a predominate concern for them. The women tried

to compensate for the guilt they experienced through justifying how they felt their HE

study had benefitted their children and family. When considering the impact of HE

study on the children there were three main themes that were consistent in the

interviews. A change in parenting style due to the women's increased knowledge and

change of perspective was one impact on the children. A second impact of the effects of

HE study on children was that it had could influence the children's education. Finally,

children's relationships with their fathers were changed as the fathers increased time

spent with their children.

As a result of their HE experiences, the women all viewed education differently

and transferred their belief in the value of education to their children. Kim, Doris,

Jennifer, Maggie and Angelina believed that through their HE studies they have been

effective educational role models for their children and they had raised their own and

their children's educational aspirations. Although they felt time poor (Edwards 1993a),

through being effective managers of their daily routines, they were able to prioritise the

aspects of being a 'good mother' that they deemed as most important. This resulted in

them engaging and supporting their children's education more thoroughly as they raised

the status of parental involvement and educational support at home. Strategies included

emphasising the importance of reading, offering more focused support with homework

and asking the children challenging questions:

> I'm far more aware of every single thing …. reading with them, and everything
> really, just little things I am far more aware of things. (Heidi)

> I think homework wise it has had an impact on her [daughter] ... it's positive,
> they can see that actually you have got to sit down and work. (Jennifer)

The children in eight families developed more independence and autonomy and less

reliance on their mothers. Although the women tried to minimise the amount of time

they studied in front of the children there were still times when they had to do this

because of the high workload. For these families, sibling relationships improved, as the

older children assisted the younger ones, they developed problem solving skills to

resolve sibling disputes and take more responsibility for themselves:

> I think their coping strategies were they learnt to cook [laughs], you know they
> became very independent. (Christina)

Changing relationship between children and their fathers

During the course of the women's HE studies, children's relationships with their fathers

in eight families were transformed and changed. This stemmed from an increase in the

amount of time fathers spent with their children, changed interactions and transformed

parenting styles for the men. These changes were brought about by the women relying

on their husbands for additional support with childcare in order to give them additional

time to study at home or attend college.

Prior to HE, the women were positioned as the main carers for their children and

saw themselves as being emotionally available and accessible to their children. The

women did not believe that parenting was an equally weighted and shared role between

themselves and their husbands. During the course of the HE programme, roles in

childcare altered:

> They [children] all know that I am busy now and not available all of the time
> and not expected to be there for everybody all of the time, whereas it was always
> mum, whatever time, and they know now that it's not always me but its dad and
> that's got to be equally acceptable because he is perfectly capable and willing.
> (Maggie)

This shows a complete shift in how Maggie viewed her role as a mother, when

compared to her comments about being a mother prior to HE study:

> It's kind of like I do whatever is needed for my kids. (Maggie)

The end result was that eight husbands, the children's fathers, provided more practical

and also emotional support to the children, initially this caused friction for some

families. The change in roles had to be negotiated between the women and their

husbands:

> In year one there was a lot of friction definitely and we were both tussling over
> who gets time and who has to have the children. (Angelina)

Knowing that the children were receiving emotional and practical support from the

fathers gave the women guilt of not being fully focused on the family:

> I do feel guilty as although I am in the house I am not really there … I feel guilty
> when I know that they [children and husband] are either sat at home not doing
> anything fun because I am working or they've gone out to do something fun and
> I'm not with them. (Kim)

Although the women felt guilty that they were not there, they also experienced jealousy

as their identity strand of being a mother could be construed as being threatened or

taken over by their husbands. Previously the women had been responsible for

organising the children's activities; stepping back from this role gave them mixed

emotions. As identified by Parrott (2003), emotions can play a key part in positioning,

particularly as they are linked to the duties and obligations played out in social life. This

is a conflict of identity, as on the one hand they wanted to be a mother and on the other

hand they wanted to achieve well in their HE studies therefore a contradiction in the

duties and obligations of being both a mother and a HE student. This then caused a

tension in identity and conflict between competing strands and demands of being a

mother and HE student as their previous assumptions of identity were challenged. To

resolve this conflict and minimise these feelings, some students took HE work with

them so that they could attend children's sporting events with their children and study

(thus blurring the edges between mother and student identity strand), some worked less

hours (in their part time job) to spend more time with their children and some just

accepted it:

> At the weekend with the children, yes, he [husband] will take them out, I feel terrible because I can't go, but the kids seem to have a great time and they don't seem to worry… I think I have just learned that's how it is sometimes … (Heidi)

Transformations to the husbands' parenting practices as a result of their wives' HE studies

As well as an increase in time that the children spent with their fathers, the women also noticed a change in how their husbands parented as a direct impact of transformations to their own parenting style:

> So it is wearing off on him [husband], what I have learnt … for example how he would respond to them ... if I am calmer then it would have influenced him, and then he is calmer about things. (Heidi)

This was reflected in the comments made by the husbands:

> Because if she's studied something and she sees the benefits of doing something in a particular way that gets better results, she'd probably talk that through with me … and then I'd look at that and either agree or disagree and then we'd come to, 'Right, this is our stance on this now together'. (Bradley)

Kim's husband changed his parenting style as a result of proof reading Kim's work. He attended a parenting course to support his child's behaviour which reaffirmed his change in perspective and increased childcare knowledge.

> He [husband] did a parenting course … and he was able to understand what they were saying, he was relating it to theories and things he had read in my work, so he was star pupil! (Kim)

A transformation in parenting practices for the husband was also influenced by how supportive the men were of the women's studies. There was a link between having a supportive husband in terms of receiving emotional or practical support and a willingness to embrace news ideas or change their parenting practices as a result of the women's increased knowledge. Hence all of the women that received emotional or practical support from their husband reported on a change in his parenting practices.

> The two women who did not receive any form of support from their husband

also did not observe any transformations in their husband's parenting practices. This could be linked to power dynamics in the relationship. Prior to HE, Doris' husband was positioned as the dominant and confident partner in the relationship, whereas Doris described herself as a 'mouse'. Whether her husband's resentment and resistance to her HE studies came because of Doris trying to change the routines in the family to fit around her study or whether it came as she became more confident is unclear. It may have begun whilst she was considering HE study and actively looking for change this could have caused unbalance and unrest in the relationship.

Conclusion

Although this paper does not attempt to generalise all women's experiences it does allow a consideration of how HE effects identity change and consequentially effect relationships for mature women students. There are two points of interest here.

Identity transformation and effects on the family

Firstly, through HE, women reconstructed their identity and positioning as a mother and adapted this when exposed to the early years' course content along with a developing ability to reflect. They developed confidence and self-esteem, facilitating reflective and analytical thinking and acquiring a changed perspective.

Husbands and children adapted to the time constraints imposed by the women's studies and rallied round to share out household tasks. Women were no longer constrained by gender in terms of educational choices and were willing to pursue educational opportunities that changed family dynamics and routines. This was embraced and supported by the majority of the husbands and all of the children in this study demonstrating roles in the family were flexible to accommodate changes.

Marital relationships were predominately able to accommodate and adapt to the

changing identity of the women students. For some families there was initial tension and friction, as the women and their husbands learnt to adjust to the transformations enacted through HE. Relationships that were already strong and stable prior to HE, were able to adjust to the additional pressure and strain. Marital relationships were enhanced through the women's identity transformation as discussions between husbands and wives became richer and mutual respect grew stronger. Husbands that were open to identity change in their wives were likely to be more receptive to transformations impacting on the home. Mutually supportive and stable relationships facilitated resilience, this allowed for changes to be buffered.

Children adapted well to their mother studying, particularly when the women put strategies in place to minimise detrimental effects. The women became educational role models for their children and supported their child's educational development through increased awareness of early years education and its importance. Children's relationships with their fathers were enhanced through spending more time with them. These changes to family life demonstrated to the women that there was value in the adaptations that had been introduced to the household, changing their conception of HE study as a selfish act, to one that benefitted the family. Families that are adaptive, responsive and flexible, demonstrates a different perspective to family life than offered by early studies into mature women students (Edwards 1993a; Merrill 1999, Parr 2000).

Transformation and effects on husbands

Secondly, transformation is not just an insular process; this study has demonstrated that an individual's identity transformation can alter the views, perspectives and actions of others. Previous studies (Biesta et al. 2011; Edwards 1993a; Merrill 1999; Parr 2000; Pascall and Cox 1993 and Schuller et al. 2004) have focused on transformations to mature women students as a result of HE and recognised that this

can have positive implications directly for children but have failed to acknowledge how these changes can positively affect the husbands. In this paper, transformations to the husbands parenting approaches were confirmed by both the women and their husbands. Therefore the cycle of transformation (Figure 2) can also effect change for their husbands (Figure 3) through transformation of the mature women students. This challenges Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformation being an insular and introspective experience and recognises that, through identity change in the women, meaning schemes can be reformed for the husbands.

Figure 3: Cycle of transformation for the husbands

Mezirow (1978; 1991) argues that learners need to critically examine their values base in order for transformation to take place. It is difficult to state whether the husbands had rationalised and analysed for themselves or whether they had observed and copied changed behaviours from their wives. For the husbands, this could be categorised as straightforward transformation (Mezirow 1995, cited by Kitchenham 2008) of parenting practices and values based on their observations and discussions with their wives. The educational environment plays a part in transformative learning through facilitating opportunities for reflective activities that can challenge previous assumptions (Mezirow 1978; Taylor 2009). This transformation is on a lesser scale for the men than the women; as they have not be through the educational experience themselves, it is more likely to be a transformation of behaviours rather than transformed thinking and ways of being.

In closing, education can cause profound change to a woman's identity but effects on the family cannot be ignored, thus showing that identity change and transformation is not an insular process but can be experienced by others within the family home.

Notes on contributor

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