

THE LIMINALITY OF TRAINING SPACES – PLACES OF PRIVATE/PUBLIC
TRANSITIONS

Buckingham, S., Marandet, E., Smith, F. and **Wainwright, E.** (2006) The
Liminality of Training Spaces: places of private/public transitions, *Geoforum* 37,
895-905

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Abstract

This paper draws upon research, conducted for the London West Learning and Skills Council, on the training experiences of women with dependent children. One of the striking revelations of the research, we suggest, is the way in which training spaces are used and perceived by women, which are often at odds with government intentions. To help make sense of women's use of and motivation for training we utilise the concept of 'liminality' and the private/public imbrication to explain the ways in which women use, or are discouraged from using, training spaces. Further, how the varied and multiple uses women in our research have put training to in their own lives has encouraged us to rethink the relationship between the private and the public more generally. In the light of this, we suggest that training and the places in which training take place, have been neglected processes and spaces within feminist geography and might usefully be explored further to add to an extensive literature on women's caring and domestic roles and their role in the paid workplace.

Key words

Women; training; liminality; public/private spaces



THE LIMINALITY OF TRAINING SPACES – PLACES OF PRIVATE/PUBLIC TRANSITIONS

Introduction

Researching the training needs, barriers to training and progression through training for women with dependent children has given us the opportunity to reflect upon the differences and disconnections between the government's approach to, and women's attitudes towards, training. More widely, it has also caused us to reflect on the relationship between private and public spaces, and the spaces 'in between'. Debates about this spatial relationship have recurrently surfaced in feminist geography since the 1970s as a means of conceptualising women's activity spheres, understanding women's partial incorporation into paid work, (as well as citizenship and political activity), and their frequent consignment to the domestic sphere (for an early example see Hayford, 1974). Whilst the original concept of the public/private binary can be valuable as an 'illustrative analytical construct', Deborah Martin (2002) argues that this division of the private and public atomises lives into discrete components, which do not adequately reflect lives as they are lived. Linda McDowell also authoritatively argues for the private and public sites of reproduction and production to be seen as 'fundamentally interconnected' (2004:147). In allocating particular *spaces* to particular activities, both activities and spaces tend to be simplified so that they are stripped of their wider resonances.

Concerns about the UK's skills profile is illustrated by its performance relative to other developed economies, with 64 per cent of the UK adult population being



educated to skill level 2, compared with 77 per cent of the French adult population and 85 per cent of the German adult population (Foster, 2005). This, and the accompanying skills gap (HM Treasury, 2005) reinforces current UK government strategies such as the 'New Deal for Lone Parents', 'Success for All' and 'Job Centre Plus', which have been designed to encourage women with dependent children to consider entering or returning to paid work as a normal expectation after childbirth (respectively: Thomas and Griffiths, 2002; Department for Education and Skills, 2002; Job Centre Plus, 2002; see also McDowell, *et al*, 2005a and b). However, the main impetus behind various workfare programmes such as the New Deal for Lone Parents appears to be concerns about employability and a national skills gap (particularly noticeable in West London, the location of research underpinning this paper), rather than a recognition that women have long been poorly paid, relative to men (Kingsmill, 2001) and generally less secure in the labour market.

None of the recent UK government reports concerning skills and further education dwell on the gendered character of the skills gap or of training, although the Foster Report notes that, whilst the number of women in further education has consistently exceeded men since 1995 (women now represent around 60 per cent of students in FE), women over 45 are considerably less qualified than their male counterparts. While younger women between 25 and 34, with Level 4 training and higher are now beginning to outnumber men, the same age group are also more likely than men of the same age to have qualifications below Level 2 – the threshold of our research sample (Foster, 2005). In fact, the national situation regarding women's skills appears to be polarising with younger women



dominating both the high and low skill categories. Indeed, and with reference to recent work by McDowell *et al* (2004, 2005a and b), it could be suggested that one of the key motivations for the government encouraging women with low educational achievement into training and work after they have had children is to support (particularly through childcare courses) women in professional and managerial jobs who may be inhibited from returning to paid work because of a lack of viable childcare provision. That some training providers are reinforcing this divide and stereotyping jobs for non professional women is illustrated by the frustration felt by a woman who spoke in one of our focus groups:

“The target job is childminder, with the lone parents advisor. As soon as you get in they're like: I've got the perfect job for you and it's childminding.' And I'm like: 'Hello! I've been with children for 10 years.' And it's like: 'but that'd really suit you' and then they say I think it's 6% tax relief.' And I'm: 'I don't care'. And they say: 'yes but it's money' and that's [it at] the end of the day...it's to improve the figures isn't it, get them out there working but give them childminding that suits them.”

(Focus Group, Harrow)

That the Government intends there to be 'much stronger links between jobs, adult training, regional and economic development, all with a strong employer lead' (DfES, 2006: 11) suggests that other forms of training activity will be marginalised, even though it attempts to reassure us that 'a clear focus on employability does not mean we will stop all other activity. Alongside our core economic mission, we remain strongly committed to learning for personal fulfilment, civic participation



and community development...’ (p22). This focus on the economic, and the polarisation of women’s training, and consequently earning capacity can lead to a stereotyping of women’s training, which the above quote from the Harrow focus has suggested.

This paper is particularly concerned with the training experiences of women with dependent children who have previously low educational attainment. Such women are a target for government training schemes falling within the broad panoply of ‘workfare’ programmes referred to above. While it is problematic to equate women’s skill level with class, the issues that focus group participants and interviewees cited as barriers to undertaking training, which will be explored later in the paper, suggest that class – or at least low income levels – are important elements which structure women with dependent children’s relationship with training. However, as the evidence will also demonstrate, other factors are less income related and, although we did not use a control group of professional women, we might expect that gender is a defining feature of some experiences. Research the authors undertook between 2003 and 2005 for the London West Learning and Skills Council¹ has examined these women’s attitudes towards training. One of the striking revelations of the research has been the ways in which training is used and perceived by our respondents, which are often at odds with the government’s intentions.

¹ Two grant funded projects were awarded to the research team by London West Learning and Skills Council, the first was through the European Social Fund, the second commissioned directly from the LWLSC. Both reports are available at www.brunel.ac.uk/ges/ and www.lsc.gov.org We gratefully acknowledge the support of both the ESF and the LWLSC and confirm that the views expressed in this article are those of the research team rather than the research funders.



What we intend to do in this paper is to explore the role of the training spaces in several different ways, but most particularly as places of transition and escape for women. This complicates the training spaces as something much more than an intermediary space between the private and the public – it is variously private, communal and public depending on the motivations of the women using it at any one particular time. The various ways in which women use these spaces depends on how they are conceptualised in relation to the home and to paid work, and in this, training spaces form an important bridge between the private space of the home and the public spaces of economic and political encounter. However, the majority of the women we interviewed used training in non-linear and unpredictable ways, which had as much to do with the places of training, by which we mean the space in which the training was offered together with the social networks it represented, as the courses on offer. This would seem to have significant importance for training providers and particularly for a government policy which is increasingly tailoring its training offering in more formal places and on accredited courses. Notwithstanding programmes such as Sure Start, which are designed to provide parenting support, and other family learning programmes geared to empower parents to help their children with school work, as well as build their learning confidence, government policy tends to see training as preparation for work, counter to the more varied uses to which women put training.

We suggest that the wide and stimulating literature in feminist geography, which analyses spaces of employment and the home extensively, has yet to turn its attention to spaces of training (although for a different but related analysis, see



Philo *et al's* recent paper in *Geoforum* which explores the social dimensions and 'in-betweenness' of training spaces for adults with mental health problems, 2005). In this context, then, and through an analysis of how the private intersects with the public, we explore the importance of training places for transition and escape. One of the ways in which we seek to do this will be through the utilisation of the concept of 'liminality'. In order to support this exploration, we will first give some background to the research before explaining the relevance of liminality and the private/public imbrication to ways in which women use, or are discouraged from using, training spaces. Finally, and by way of conclusion, we show how the varied and multiple uses to which training has been put in our research participants' lives, has encouraged us to rethink the relationship between the private and the public more generally.

The Research

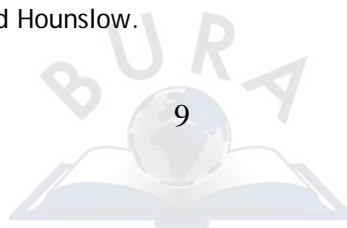
Women's training needs have generally been seen through the Government's wider concerns, which include measures referred to above, and through the European context. With the entry into force of the Amsterdam Treaty (CEC, 1997 agreed/1999 in force), the promotion of paid employment is now a matter of common European concern (Article 2). The new objective consists of reaching a 'high level of employment'. Moreover, the Treaty also requires member states to integrate people excluded from the workforce and to ensure equality between men and women with regard to labour market opportunities and treatment at work. These concerns, and the skills gap that the Foster Report has recently identified (Foster, 2005), are driving the government towards an emphasis on accredited training, although there is also some significant support for non-accredited



learning opportunities emanating from the government itself (DfEE, 1999; Blunkett, 2000; DfES, 2002) as well as academics (Giddens, 1998; Kennedy, 1997; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999; Merton and Grief, 2000; Schuller *et al*, 2000).

The research also needs to be set in the context of a global economy in which London plays a pivotal part. West London² has a strong role in sustaining the UK's and London's global importance as it is dominated by Heathrow Airport in the West and by the media industry characterised by the headquarters of the BBC in the East (see Smith *et al*'s paper on the role of West London in women's training experiences, forthcoming). This juxtaposition neatly captures the polarisation of work in the sub-region which the London West LSC has noted forms "two economies extant in the area: a highly skilled, highly paid sector and a low skilled, low wage sector" (London West LSC, 2003:7). Indeed, London West LSC has estimated that almost 20 per cent of the sub-region's adult population lacks adequate literacy and numeracy skills (10). The occupations of female residents in the sub-region are overwhelmingly concentrated in 'administrative and secretarial', 'personal services' and 'sales and customer services'. They are less likely than men to be employed as 'managers and senior officials' or in 'professional occupations' (Buckingham *et al*, 2004). Whilst the priority sectors for the London West economy have been identified as logistics, hospitality, media (audiovisual), construction, retail, IT, health and social care, only the last three employ a workforce in which women are well represented.

² The sub-region defined as West London for the research comprises the six London boroughs which fall within the LondonWest LSC remit: Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon and Hounslow.



The London West Learning and Skills Council funded two consecutive projects to investigate, respectively: women's perceived motivations for and barriers to training, and their views towards progression within training. The first project investigated the experience of women with children under five. Responding to some of the feedback from these participants, the second project expanded the target group of women to include those with dependent children up to 16, recognising the restrictions that caring for older children can also place on their mothers. In particular the research focused on women whose educational experience had led them to achieve a maximum qualification equivalent to NVO Level 2, considered the 'threshold of employability' by government (DfES, 2006:22). The research comprised statistical analysis of local socio-economic data and learner progression, content analysis of information material on training opportunities, in depth interviews with training co-ordinators and providers and focus groups comprising women with dependent children.³ Fourteen focus groups were run across the six boroughs of the London West sub-region, six of which were identified by borough location, six of which were identified by training venue, and two of which cross cut the sub-region and were specifically designed to identify the concerns of women from the two largest ethnic minority groups (self defined as Black/Black British and Indian/British Indian). Altogether 89 tape recorded interviews with training professionals were conducted, and 113 women attended focus groups, recruited through a variety of training venues and

³ In the first study only women with children under 5 were invited to focus groups as they had been identified by the project funders, the European Social Fund, as the target group, whereas women with dependent children up to 16 were invited to focus groups run on the progression project. Focus groups in the first project were held by borough and by ethnicity and are designated as thus (e.g. 'FG Brent' or 'FG Asian Woman'). Given that we were researching women in training for the second project, we held focus groups by training venue and so focus groups are defined thus (e.g. 'FG Community Accredited')

community based organisations such as parent and toddler groups and women's support groups.

So that the researched group can be put into context, a brief demographic profile of the London West sub-region is drawn here. The 2001 census (Office for National Statistics, 2003) reported 1.4 million residents for the six west London boroughs. Across the six case study boroughs, the median age varied between 32 and 36 and 49 per cent of the population described themselves as non-white, making this one of the most ethnically diverse areas of the UK. Approximately 5 per cent of the population of the sub-region is comprised of refugees and asylum seekers (London West LSC, 2002:64), a function of the area's proximity to Heathrow Airport. With the exception of Hammersmith and Fulham (with 21.6 per cent), the proportion of households with dependent children was between 30 and 31.4 per cent. A high proportion of these were lone parent households, which were the second most common living arrangement in the boroughs: between 16.7 per cent of households with dependent children in Harrow and 30.2 per cent in Hammersmith and Fulham. In all six boroughs, more than 90 per cent of these households were headed by women.

Employment in the sub-region is high, with more than 61.5 per cent of all adults being employed in each of the boroughs except Brent (56.9 per cent). More women were likely to be employed (varying between boroughs from 55.8 to 58 per cent) than the proportion in London as a whole (54.1 per cent). Between 34.6 and 42.3 per cent of each boroughs' women were employed full time, and women (11.2 to 12.7 per cent) were less likely than those in London as a whole (12.95 per



cent) to declare themselves as 'looking after the home/family full time'. While the largest employers were in 'real estate/renting and business activities' and 'wholesale/retail', and the fastest growing areas are 'air transport', 'recreational services' and 'hotels and restaurants' (LWLSC, 2003:12), women tend to be concentrated in 'health and social work', 'real estate/renting and business activities' and 'wholesale/retail'. (For a more detailed analysis see Buckingham *et al*, 2004 and Smith *et al*, forthcoming.)

Public, Private and Liminal Spaces

There is a subtle balance to be achieved in recognising, valuing and politicising women's activities in the private sphere and in also recognising, securing and promoting the role women can play in the public realm. There have been different conceptions of a space midway between the public and the private, variously described as a 'community public sphere' (Martin, 2002), a 'third sphere' or 'neighbourhood sphere' (Milroy and Wismer, 1994) and an 'intermediate sphere' (Horelli, 1995). This occupies both a physical and a conceptual activity space which grows out of the private but is not fully public and in which women are predominantly active. In many ways the training space lends itself to be considered as one of these intermediate, third or neighbourhood spheres, particularly when the motivations of women entering some forms of training are taken into consideration. In the Education literature, this has been illustrated by Pahl and Kelly (2005) in their discussion of the relationship between family literacy projects and spatiality, and by Quinn (2003) in her analysis of the experience of women in higher education. Pahl and Kelly argue that such school based programmes create a third space in which the family experience is brought into



the school setting creating an independent discursive space. We discuss below how women can create their own discursive space in training settings in which, for example, the training venue can be seen as a place in which to socialise and develop self confidence rather than, initially, as a place to train for paid work, thereby challenging government's motivation for training provision. However, this intermediate space, and the ways in which it is populated and used, can itself be an active agent of change, which justifies the advantage of appealing to the concept of liminality.

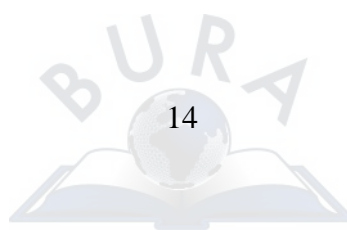
Liminality is characterised by its quality of being a threshold and draws on the concept of transition (for an early interpretation of this in anthropology, see Turner, 1973). Shields (1991) has used liminality to describe a transition from one life station or stage in the life cycle to another, whilst Pratt has considered the locations in which Filipina women make their transitions when migrating into Canada to work in family care, as 'boundary space' (Pratt, 2004). O'Connor and Madge (2005) have also used the concept of liminality to help explain the power of cyberspace – specifically parenting websites – to explore the ways in which women with new born babies transform themselves into mothers. In their report of research into the use of training spaces by those with mental health problems, Philo *et al*/stress the importance of these spaces' 'in-betweenness' and the social and therapeutic functions they play in helping participants to overcome, or deal with, their mental health problems (2005).

In addition to describing transitions due to life experience, liminality has also been ascribed to places which enable users to move beyond their previously



circumscribed horizons or ways of behaviour. (See Shields on Brighton, 1991; Fiske *et al*/on the beach, 1987; Azaryahou on Eilat, 2005, O'Connor and Madge on cyberspace, 2005) With regard to children, both Matthews and Moje consider the liminality of the street, play centres and youth clubs as they all 'lie between more settled material entities such as home and school' (summarised by Pahl and Kelly, 2005:92). More fluidly, Bain (2005) defines liminal space as any space in which its users are empowered to transform themselves and consequently defined in different ways by different users.

Turner, using the concept of liminality in his analyses of the relationship between the free individual and the social structures in which they function, envisaged a time/space he termed 'communitas' to represent a moment in which human capacities are 'liberated from the normative constraints of social structures. This liminal interval is when 'the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality, when everything as it were, trembles in the balance'. Here, *communitas* is defined by human interrelatedness, more spontaneous, freer of social roles and expectations found elsewhere in society', although he recognises that this freedom and spontaneity quickly reifies into another structure. (Turner, 1982:44) Some of the evidence we consider later in this paper, collected from interviews and focus groups with mothers with dependent children, suggests, albeit less eloquently, that training places can have that capacity to enable women to suspend their identity as mothers and wives and to tap into their creativity. One training provider valued:



the ways in which first step courses helped women develop their creativity, their thinking, really learning for the pleasure of learning and broadening the individual.

And as two focus group participants expressed their feelings towards the training space/time:...

It's the only time during the week I don't think about them [my children].
And I don't, not once. I mean, it's great.

It's actually therapy, isn't it?

Focus Group (Community – accredited)

In the light of these analyses, it is interesting to examine spaces of training for their capacity to enable women to make a transition from the private to the public, from unpaid to paid work, from one identity to another, or towards some other self defined preferred state. This community public sphere as liminal/transitional space is especially interesting when considering training as it is, arguably, a mechanism designed to enable women to move between the private and public. While the government may consider training to be a public activity, and is increasingly seeking to define it as such by concentrating resources on accredited and vocational training, women to whom training is being targeted often see it as an extension of their private sphere where they wish to take their first training step in a non-competitive environment which is likely to provide them with social capital, rather than the direct skills, to take up paid work. Additionally, many of the



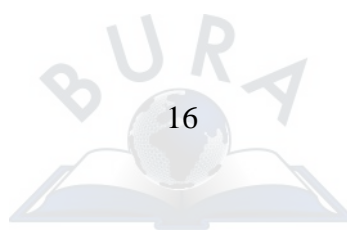
courses identified by our respondents as desirable are chosen because of their usefulness in the home:

I wanted to do this course [sewing] for skills in using the sewing machine, helping my kids with the clothing, being able to create special clothes and upholstery. (FG Community, non-accredited 2)

Through charting the experience of one focus group participant, Figure 1 below exemplifies how women moved between courses – both advancing particular skills in the case of computing and accounting, and moving sideways to accumulate what may seem to be a disconnected portfolio (sewing), but which enable women to combine activities in the home and paid work. Figure 1 also indicates the barriers and motivations for women's training trajectories, which we will address later.

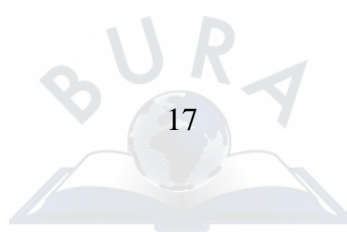
INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

This paper now turns to consider the qualities and values with which women infuse training and the spaces of training and by so doing offer much broader meanings than are normatively ascribed to them. We have come to recognise these conceptual spaces as both mapped onto, and distinct from, the physical training space. We will argue that these conceptual spaces all have particular functions in encouraging women to move out of the homespace, which is seen as both a secure and a restricting environment, into wider social and economic spaces. It is, however, worth bearing in mind that the transitions



enabled by these spaces may sometimes be seen more as an interval than a permanent shift, as Quinn suggests in her discussion of the spaces of higher education which provide “havens from the outside world and from various forms of threat...in what [women] perceive as still a ‘man’s world’”, (2003:451). This dynamic, however, is not linear in that the different spaces of training can be returned to or skipped over as well as passed through consecutively (as Figure 1 has shown, and see also McGiveney, 1999; Munn, Tett and Arney, 1993; Nashashibi and Watters, 2003; Turner, 2001). McGiveney (1998) argues that this more cyclic or lateral form of learning characterises women learners more than men (see also Merton and Greenwood, 2001; Harre, Hindmarsh and Davies, 1995 and Maxwell, 1997). As one training provider we interviewed argued, it is possible to distinguish between two types of progression: “There’s progression laterally as well as vertically”. Another recognised the complexity of progression: “It’s not a conveyor belt...it’s more of a spider network than a pathway through.”

In the following sections we examine the ways in which these spaces are used, both physically and conceptually, and the values they embody for the women in our research. We conclude by arguing that more informal and unaccredited training performs a valuable function for women with previously low educational attainment in making transitions from the domestic to the public, including those transitions favoured by government, and that any erosion of this form and place of training is likely to have negative impacts on these women, particularly those who lack confidence, or who have had previous negative formal education experiences, as extracts from focus group discussions and interviews in the following sections confirm.

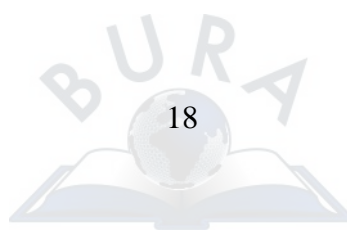


Training motivations

Many women themselves, unsurprisingly, see training in different terms to the government and its agencies. As our research will show, women's need for training may emanate as much from a desire for adult company and a need to boost confidence as much as to skill up for a particular job. The use of training for 'personal development' represents a shift from earlier, post war expectations when women were expected to 'seek personal development by the direct care of others'. (McDowell, 2004:19) Interviews with training providers revealed women students' need for personal development: "I think they want opportunities to be with other women and stimulation" and illustrated the potential benefits of this:

"Sometimes training is just for personal development but that might help you in your life to make life better for you and your children which I think is really important. That might give you the confidence to go accessing other things that you might need." (Local Training Provider)

Women's choices of training are heavily circumscribed by what trainers consider to be local economic needs, or preconceived and frequently stereotyped images of what women want to learn, whilst women's own personal lives (involving childcare and other family responsibilities, or limited resources which determine mobility) may call for different training opportunities. Women may elect for training in 'personal services' which they can then apply back in the 'private' sphere of family and friends. We found that 'personal services' courses in, for example, massage and nail art were popular as they potentially provided skills which could

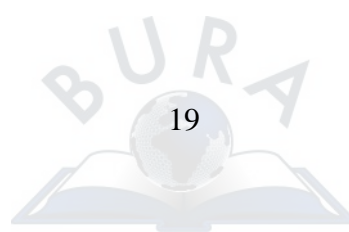


be assembled into tradable services in the non-monetary economies of the home and community. They were also skills that could more easily be provided from the home, where paid work could conveniently be scheduled in with childcare and other domestic arrangements. The whole area of 'homeworking' which clearly deserves as thorough an examination as workplace based work, is beyond the remit of this paper, and is well documented elsewhere (see, for example, Adam and Green, 1998; Herod. 1991). Other motivations for training included helping their children with school work, as Figure 1 has illustrated.

Spaces of training

Welcoming spaces

The spaces of training can be conceptualised along a continuum of private/public space, bearing in mind the proviso made above that women tend not to traverse these spaces in a linear route (see Figure 2, below). Accreditation tends to be more commonplace in home/distance based learning and in colleges and universities. Many training providers consider that non-accredited courses have the potential to attract non-traditional learners into adult education by providing a comfortable, safe and pressure free environment, where fun, leisure-based activity that suit learners can be taught. Non-accredited courses are also more flexible and can be tailored to the needs of learners, therefore enabling them to progress at their own pace. In addition, they are usually available at a local and familiar venue as many training providers aim to run non-accredited and taster courses in outreach centres. Figure 2 illustrates the range of courses and venues from which the focus groups forming part of this research were drawn.



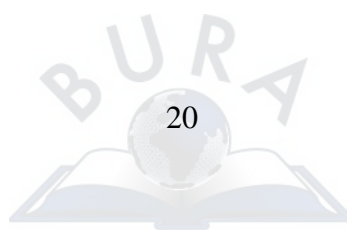
INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

The spaces in which training (potentially) takes place can have a profound influence on women's take up of the provision: either positively encouraging women to take advantage of what it has to offer, or discouraging women from using these spaces. Women who lack self confidence welcome the flexibility and support offered by community based projects:

They can seem much more welcoming...for somebody...[with] confidence problems or you know, whatever, may not be so willing to go to a bigger place like a college. (Focus Group, Hillingdon)

Some places you go in they tend to speak down to you because you're young you don't know what you're on about. But like at the Women's Project they're really friendly towards you. (Focus Group, Hillingdon)

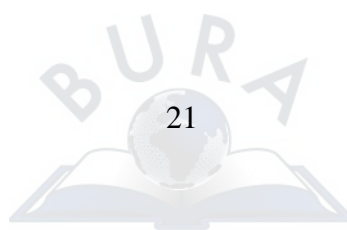
Another advantage of the community centre is its focus on students with similar backgrounds and experiences; women in our focus groups felt more comfortable mixing with women in similar situations rather than also having to negotiate a wider range of learners including those arriving straight from school. As one training provider suggested, in areas where education is not traditionally held in



high regard, women with young children 'probably think that going back to college is beyond them' (Interviewees with Surestart and Connexions).

Women are almost always anxious about starting a new course, both with regards to their fellow students and tutor as well as with their ability to undertake the course and feeling out of their depth. This anxiety is intensified for women for whom English is not their first language. The only group in which this anxiety did not surface was that enrolling on 'Taster' courses. This may be linked to the fact that these courses are held in a known setting, for example, the primary school where women's children are enrolled. Progression from one course to another was often hampered by fear of the unknown as was pointed out by one focus group participant on a non-accredited community course. One way in which women could be encouraged to move between courses at different venues is for courses to be offered in partnerships whereby schools, further and higher education can work together. Local strategic partnerships and Lifelong Learning Partnerships have been set up to enable greater coherence (McGivney, 2003).

Colleges in particular can be daunting due to their size, formal structure and number of younger students. Attending a college based course can be a difficult step for many women to take, especially those who have had a previously bad experience at school or with teachers. Nevertheless, colleges were deemed more 'academic' than other learning environments and could empower women with a greater sense of self-worth and achievement:



I feel good when I'm at college because I know I'm learning something there. (Focus Group, Hounslow)

Having a positive experience at the first attempt at trying a training course is very important as it is the entry point for future training and work and can encourage future take up of training.

Escape and transformation

Interestingly, when women participating in the focus groups were invited to define progression in terms of training, they made reference to making friends, getting to know themselves as individuals and getting out of the house. Within the context of higher education, Quinn writes about how her research participants constructed the spaces of higher education as “havens from the outside world and from various forms of threat.” (Quinn, 2003:451) Her respondents cite the value of the educational space as an escape from the demands of heavy caring commitments and, occasionally, domestic violence. Contrary to popular conceptions of home as refuge from the outside world, education or training spaces can also be seen as sites of escape from which women can get away from their domestic environment. Whilst home study through distance learning can be thought of as a flexible option for women tied to the home through domestic commitments, the external training space offers a space for socialising which was seen by many women as an important benefit derived from learning:



There's a large number of people who don't want to stay at home and do housework, and who would like to do something.

(Information/Support Provider)

I'm tired of staying at home. (Focus Group, Ealing)

It's just at the moment when I'm a housewife, looking after those small kids; really to get out of the house...[rather than] to stay in house...just to go and meet people or try to educate yourself. (Focus Group, Hounslow)

Indeed, 'getting out of the house' was seen as the primary motivation for all women with children under 5, in the first round of focus groups, who had taken up a course, illustrating that desire for training is not necessarily determined by medium or long term employment plans.

I was stuck at home for nearly two years until I found that place. And you don't meet anybody, you don't know anybody, you're not getting out of the house, it just drives you mad. (Focus Group, Asian Women)

For many mothers, attending a course is also a way of breaking isolation, and possibly improving their physical and mental wellbeing, sometimes in a dramatic way:

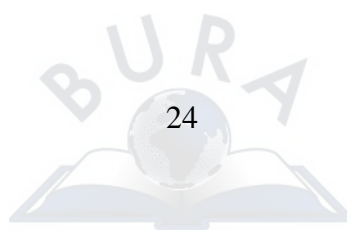


My favourite example was a woman who came to do salsa dancing, who was sent by her doctor, simply because, unfortunately, she's been looking after, been caring for a sick relative and the relative had died and so she was suddenly out there with no social life of her own and her doctor actually sent her to go salsa dancing and in four weeks I have never seen such a transformation.... There is a huge social and emotional benefit. (Interview with training provider)

This suggests the capacity for transformation which a number of women in the focus groups suggested was an important component of taking up training opportunities. Whilst the home was a place in which women felt they were defined entirely in relation to other family members: "So instead of being the mum and the wife...", training spaces were seen as places in which: "...you can be yourself...you need time for yourself anyway." (Focus Group Hounslow). This resonates with Quinn's research which conceptualises the university as a space which nurtures and in which women students with dependents can "literally and symbolically stop disappearing." (2003: 457) Women we interviewed clearly valued the scope the training space gave them to focus on themselves:

So that's the only reason I went there; it's not about working or anything. It's about me because I've got time and energy and just do it for myself. (Focus Group Ealing)

One training provider confirmed the value of 'first step' courses in which women "often learn an awful lot more about [themselves]...it's about confidence – gaining



and self esteem making". Another believed that "Sometimes you need something else there to change people's mindset before even going to education." Such qualities enable women to become more effective in the longer term in a range of settings, from helping their children with school work to meaningful paid employment, as many of the training providers were at pains to point out. It is important to note, however, that even the softest entry to training is not always sufficient to encourage women with dependent children to enrol.

Disincentives to training

Although this paper has concentrated on the importance of the training space as places of escape and transition, it is important to note factors which actively discourage women from taking up training in the first place. It is in examining the disincentives to training that low income and ethnicity are most sharply brought to the fore in ways not evident in the discussions around the experience of training.

Location

One of the disincentives for mothers taking up training courses is their lack of proximity to home and/or childcare. Many women are reluctant to travel far from home, and the prohibitive cost of transport, inefficient transfers and design problems which make transporting children difficult, all contribute to women preferring training venues to which they can walk. The provision of training venues (for example, Surestart) is geographically uneven, and even though individual boroughs may have similar provision in terms of quantity, their distribution may not serve women who live longer distances from them. Other locational factors



include the quality and use of the training places which can discourage women from using them:

You've got groups of young kids who have left school and been forced to go to college and they're all hanging around outside smoking weed.

(Interview, Training Provider)

For some women, the familiarity of home is seen as a place of security and habit, in which they are well defined:

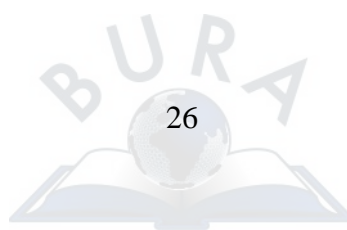
People tend to know their place on an estate – they know the role that they've got and to actually look above that, look over that and want to carry on and do something else educationally is something that can be quite scary.

(Interview -Local Training Provider)

For some Asian women, cultural expectations for them to remain at home were admitted as a barrier to training:

I think family can be [a barrier]. I mean when I was married...it was just not the time to go out. It was 'look after your children, if you want to go out you shouldn't have had the children'. (Focus Group, Asian)

For other women, their own residential situation was sufficiently fragile to make embarking on training a difficult prospect. Finding space to study at home can be particularly difficult for women living in temporary accommodation:



I'm in temporary [accommodation] for two years now. I don't feel at home. It's like I'm living at a friend's. There's no space for the children to play, it's so small. (Focus Group, community non-accredited)

Non-locational barriers to training

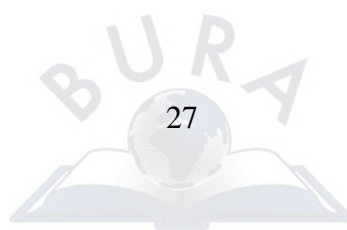
Lack of confidence or a self perception that she is not capable of training prevents some women from accessing training, and this appeared to be particularly visible amongst ethnic minority women and older women:

I keep seeing a lot of Asian women who are frightened to go on a course because you know: 'what if I don't know that, who am I going to ask, can I ask another person...and will I look stupid if I do?' (Focus Group, Asian women)

It can be a barrier if, as I say, you're over a certain age and you have to go and study, confidence could be a barrier. (Focus Group, Harrow)

Unsurprisingly, childcare availability and accessibility is a major problem for women for a number of reasons. For low income women the cost may be prohibitive:

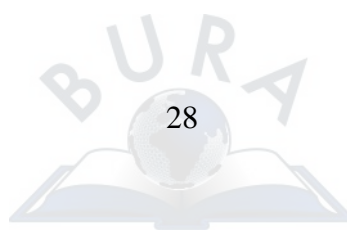
Yeah, I think even with the child tax credit, you only get a certain percentage of it, so...And if you're on income support, you can't get anything. (Focus Group, Harrow)



Yet, low income is not the only barrier, some ethnic minority women complained that they were reluctant to leave their child(ren) with childcare workers of a different cultural or religious background. One Adult Education Officer noted that "In some cultures it's not considered acceptable to leave your children with a stranger. It should be a family or a friend." A Black/Black British focus group participant argued that "The problem's childcare for people like us...childcare is always a problem", suggesting ethnicity rather than income as a deciding factor. Still other mothers commented on the difficulty in leaving their children with child minders who they did not know or yet trust, suggesting that whilst low income may be one factor in explaining low take up of training because of childcare issues, other factors cut through class and ethnicity and are, therefore, specific to gender.

Other perceived restrictions on women taking up training were a lack of information and support, the nature of the courses on offer, the timing of courses, the costs of learning such as buying textbooks and paying examination fees, and the expectations of employability. One Muslim woman thought it was

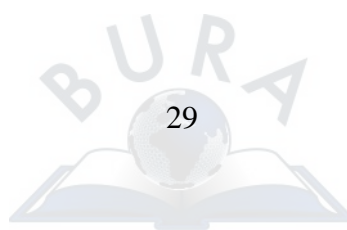
..very difficult to get a job in BA [British Airways] now for Muslim people...Everything happened after 11 September and now its very difficult. (Focus Group, Ealing)



Conclusions

Much work done by feminist scholars over the years has disrupted the notion of the home as a private or secure space for women; from the ways in which women are tied to the home as unpaid carers and domestic workers to work on domestic violence. Contemporary work practices in which developments in ICT and the recognition that 'flexible working' through hot desking and home working can save employers considerable sums of money have further contributed to disrupting the 'home' as private, particularly for women (see, for example, Adam and Green, 1998; Herod, 1991, Roberts, 2006). The latter in particular affects women in more professional jobs (it is hard to be a secretary at home), although, as we have seen, the relatively low paid work of 'personal services' and childcare is sought after by other women also hoping to combine paid employment with their caring roles. Though, on the one hand, such enabling technologies and practices can be seen as liberating – what they often appear to be doing is 'liberating' women to continue to perform the social roles long ascribed them. This 'liberation' can also serve to isolate women and erode their self confidence so that places for which one particular use has been envisioned (such as training) become places which women turn to for other uses.

A number of unresolved relationships have been identified as a result of our research. Whilst this conclusion is not able to offer answers, we articulate them here as a way of marking the extent to which this paper has been able to address them and to signal the need for further consideration. They are the relationships between:

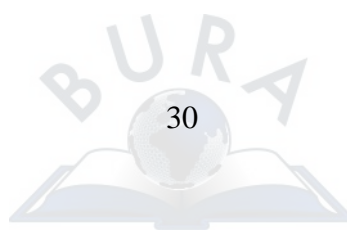


- 1) Gender, class, age and ethnicity;
- 2) Women's and Government's expectations of training;
- 3) Private and public space;

Finally, we address the need for a feminist (and other) geography to extend its consideration of actual and conceptual space to the realm of training.

Gender, Class, Age and Ethnicity

This research reported here has focused on non-professional women, and whilst clearly issues of cost are important determinants in whether a women takes up training opportunities, there are other issues which are clearly determined by gender, notably childcare difficulties, which are not exclusively determined by income. When gender is combined with ethnicity, refugee status, age as well as income, there are some powerful disincentives to entering training – or indeed, in terms of confidence, to putting themselves in a position of transition where prevailing cultural norms are challenged. Since the research cohort was determined by educational level, rather than explicitly by income or class, it is difficult to draw conclusions as to the extent to which the experience of mothers with dependent children can be attributed to gender as opposed to class. However, whilst, income, age or ethnicity seemed to have a muted impact on our respondents' experiences once engaged in training, this is not the case for women considering training. Here we have presented evidence which suggests that income, age and ethnicity can impact on women's take up of training opportunities. Clearly there is more nuanced research to be undertaken involving women and men with low level qualifications.



Women's and Government's expectations of training

The Government, as was demonstrated in the earlier part of this paper, has tended to see training as an adjunct to the economic, the productive and the public. The emphasis on skills training, particularly for areas of skills shortages (from childcare to construction) emphasises the 'economic' value of training at the risk of neglecting a whole raft of non-economic values which, perhaps, women can more readily see, although Philo *et al*/also validate training for those with mental health problems as "[TAGs] cannot avoid being constituted as spaces whose social content [is] probably at least as [important]...as the more obviously economic." (2005: XX)

Moreover, skills and employment training has been modelled on the needs of particular users (for example, course times that don't easily coincide with childcare). Training progression also tends to be predicated on the fit, acculturated male, expecting a linear rather than lateral progression and non-repetition of courses. Our research shows this may be inappropriate to women with dependent children (as Philo *et al*, 2005, finds with those with mental health problems). Our research indicates that the women taking up training opportunities do so as much for reasons of personal development, confidence building and adult company as for explicit entry into the economically productive sphere.

The uses to which women put their training influences the role this space plays in their lives. The evidence gathered from training providers shows that such motivations may well lead to women with greater confidence becoming more



effective parents, and able to make resource and material differences to their lives without entering conventional paid work. Arguably this is equally important as filling skills gaps that government agencies and companies have defined as important. Furthermore, such confidence building and other transitions made through liminal spaces are likely to have a more durable impact on women's career choices made at a point in their lives when they feel their domestic circumstances enable them to move into paid employment, as the interviews with training providers indicate.

The Private and the Public

The research reported here has helped us to identify how the women we interviewed engaged with the spaces and places of training in a discursive way. Material to this is its potential to be liminal, transformative and interstitial, as women clearly use this to perform different identities, try out different roles, and develop networks and portfolios. It is also clear from our interviews and focus groups that the training space is used as a place of escape and transformation and, as such, the space is both a container for these experiences, and an active agent in provoking change. Conceptually, we argue that private, public and spaces in between be considered much more discursively inasmuch as they are each what we make of them. One woman's private place is another's public and, in considering what the Government unproblematically see as a training venue, we need to be aware that this can mean different things to different users.

A feminist geography of training



The experience of doing, and thinking about, this research encourages us to call for Geographers to engage with training as both a physical and conceptual space. In addition to arguing the practical value of training spaces to women's personal development and transition to more public roles beyond the home, we make a case for Geography to open up an analytical space to engage with the geographies of training and learning, particularly with reference to marginalized groups. To date this has largely been omitted by Geographers and we suggest that there is a productive dialogue to be held with academics working in Education who are beginning to engage with the different ways in which space impacts on learners, as our earlier discussion demonstrates.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the support of the London West Learning and Skills Council for commissioning this research, particularly Martin Freedman for his enthusiasm and interest in the findings. We would also like to thank the referees for their extremely constructive and pertinent suggestions.

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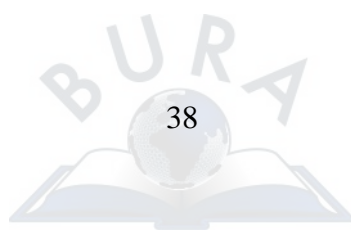


Figure 1: Family Learning Diagram

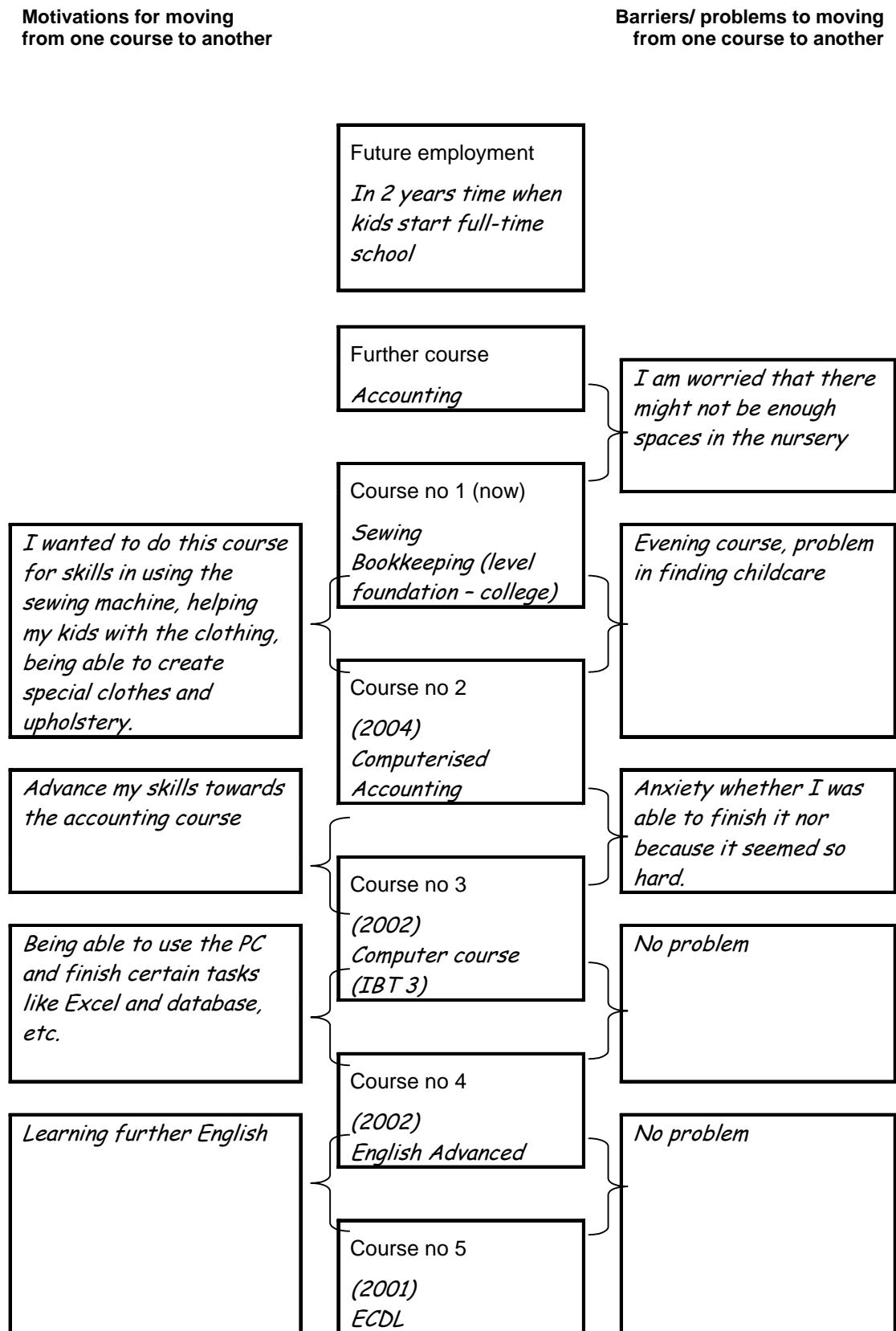


Table 2: Spaces of Learning on a Private Public Continuum

Home based/ distance learning	Family	Estate based/Community	College/HEI
(e.g. Open University).	e.g. School based family learning numeracy class; basic literacy course;	e.g. Craft courses: soft furnishings; dressmaking; Classroom assistant courses; Sure Start	e.g. ESOL destination ICT and Ticketing and Tourism courses
Accredited	Non-accredited	Accredited and non- accredited	Accredited