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TRANSITIONS IN LIFELONG LEARNING: PUBLIC ISSUES, PRIVATE TROUBLES, LIMINAL IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to reconceptualise the significance of transitions in adult learning. It combines reflection on existing research with an analysis of original data on adults' experiences of significant educational transitions. The paper starts by considering how lifelong learning and mobilities of various kinds have become absorbed into, and expressed in, the policy mainstream. It then discusses the ways in which researchers are addressing this topic. While researchers are pursuing many lines of inquiry into transitions, and using a wide range of methods (including new statistical techniques), the analysis in this paper is primarily concerned with questions of identity, and particularly the idea of learner identity. I then briefly illustrate the analysis with cases from a research project that is designed to explore aspects of a very specific pair of transitions: movement into, and then through, the higher education system among a group of people who can be defined as non-traditional students. The paper concludes by proposing the idea of a liminal identity, understood as shaped through social and cultural processes which are formed and re-formed in dynamic relationships with others. This perspective has implications for practice as well as for research.

Keywords: lifelong learning, educational transitions, liminal identities

INTRODUCTION

Transitions are an important focus for adult education research (Field, Gallacher and Ingram 2010; Ec-

clestone, Biesta and Hughes 2010). This in turn reflects the way in which discourses of change and development have become a pervasive feature of late modern society. It is commonplace for policymakers to point at the increasing insecurity and uncertainty of economic life as a result of technological and scientific change, organisational innovation, global competition and the rising expectations of the population at large. Such changes not only increase the likelihood of an individual experiencing more and more transitions in their lives, but they also raise questions about the extent to which people understand transitions as imposed from outside, or as something over which they exercise choice. At the same time, we witness a tendency for many transitions to become less and less coupled to fixed points in the life cycle. Men and women may retire at 50 or at 80, young couples may delay childbirth or decide against it altogether, and entry to a new job is no longer the preserve of youth. And of course, individual experiences become social experiences.

From a policy perspective, it is commonplace to note that modernity demands a constant capacity for handling change. Yet as Richard Edwards notes, while adaptability and flexibility appear as core values in this discourse of change, they are presented primarily as issues of implementation, suggesting that they are themselves inevitable (Edwards 1997, 30). In turn, these ideas often serve to legitimate a range of policies and measures, whether over the deregulation of social protection or the lifelong development of competencies. They can also be understood as imperatives that are directed towards individuals, who

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increasingly are expected to take step to pre-empt change, by investing in their own life planning and demonstrating to others that they are willing to cast off the old and ready to adapt to the new (Nicoll 2006, 88-106).

This new normative orientation has placed education and training under the spotlight. In a keynote address in Wrocław in 2004, Zygmunt Bauman compared the challenges of late modernity with 'learning to walk in quicksands'. According to Bauman, even the processes of personal formation known in German as *Bildung* and as *formation* in French become 'unthinkable in any other fashion but that of an ongoing and perpetually unfinished re-formation' (Bauman 2005, 19). The new attention to the significance of transitions thus focuses not solely on the skills and knowledge required for each new role, which can be understood as part of the economic function of adult education, but also on the education system's ability to develop the general capabilities required to manage transition successfully. Glastra, Hake and Schedler proposed for this reason that all lifelong learning be understood as transitional learning (Hake and Schedler 2004).

Given the widespread interest in transitions, identity and learning, the present paper seeks to take stock of current research, and indicate a way forward. First, the paper considers the way in which lifelong learning and mobilities of various kinds have become absorbed into, and expressed in, the policy mainstream. I then turn to reflect on some of the ways in which researchers are addressing this topic. While researchers are pursuing many lines of inquiry into transitions, and using a wide range of methods (including new statistical techniques), I focus here on the question of identity, and particularly the idea of learner identity. Here, I define identity in broad terms as having to do with one's sense of self. I follow an approach developed in another study, where we theorised learner identity more specifically in Bourdieusian terms, as the clusters of dispositions people have towards themselves, learning, and change across the life course (Biesta et al 2011). This way of understanding transitions is largely associated with research in the interpretive tradition, which seeks to explore the subjective meanings and explanations that actors themselves attach to their situations and actions. I then briefly introduce a research project that is designed to explore aspects of a very specific pair of transitions: movement into, and then through, the higher education system. This particular study focused on transitions among a group whom we defined as non-traditional students. I then conclude with some comments on transitions and identity understood as social and cultural processes, which are formed and re-formed in dynamic relationships with others. This will have implications for practice as well as for research.

LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE POLICY MAINSTREAM

In 1972 UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, published a landmark report on lifelong education. *Learning to Be* made a strong case for lifelong education and the development of a learning society. The authors of the report argued that in the world of today 'studies can no longer constitute a definitive "whole", handed out to and received by the student before he embarks on adult life' since all that has to be learned 'must be continually re-invented and renewed' (Faure 1972, p.xxxiii). If learning involves 'all of one's life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society' then, so the authors of the report argued, we must go further than an overhaul of educational systems 'until we reach the stage of a learning society' (ibid.).

These are ambitious claims. But *Learning to be* is also a remarkable document because its views stand in such sharp contrast to the policies and practices that appear to dominate the 'new educational order' (Field 2006) of lifelong learning today. Exactly twenty-five years after the publication of *Learning to be*, the OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, issued its own report on lifelong learning, *Lifelong learning for all* (OECD 1997). Unlike *Learning to be*, the OECD emphasised the economic rationale for lifelong learning. It presented the idea of 'lifelong learning for all' as the guiding principle for policy strategies 'that will respond directly to the need to improve the capacity of individuals, families, workplaces and communities to continuously adapt and renew, (ibid., p.13). Adaptation and renewal are seen as necessary in the face of changes in the global economy and the world of work, including the 'large and continuing shift in employment from manufacturing industry to services, the gathering momentum of globalisation, the wide diffusion of information and communications technologies, and the increasing importance of knowledge and skills in production and services' (ibid., p.13). In short, the policy focus has shifted from lifelong learning as a means for personal development and social progress to lifelong learning as a means for economic growth and global competitiveness.

Of course, such tendencies are uneven, with different patterns emerging in different economies. For example, one feature of the new economy is said to be the increasing use of non-standard employment (temporary contracts, part-time work, and solo self-employment outside agriculture) as a way of increasing flexibility and reducing labour costs. A European comparison of non-standard employment rates in 1998 and 2005 showed that while there had been an overall rise in non-standard employment, there was relatively little change in the comparative positions of

individual nations (Schmid 2008). The Netherlands came way ahead of all the other European nations, followed by an Anglo-Nordic cluster (Sweden, Denmark and the UK), a central European core (France, Austria, Ireland, Portugal) and then the new European member states. The lowest levels of non-standard employment were in Estonia, Slovakia, Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania). While it is likely that other forms of flexibility also vary by country – variety of real retirement age, likelihood of marital breakdown, different family forms and so on – the broad trends appear to be the same across most of Europe. So the policy imperative broadly corresponds with people's lived experiences.

At the same time, responsibility for continued learning and upskilling has shifted from the public sector to employers and individuals. For governments, this means that exhortation and 'empowerment' become major policy instruments: citizens, above all those who are or wish to be members of the workforce, must be mobilised to assume responsibility for planning their own learning and occupational careers, in a context of uncertainty and risk (Nicoll 2006, 88-106). In turn, though, the direct provision of education and training for adults becomes less significant as a policy instrument. This process can be understood as part of a wider set of processes of political deregulation and socio-cultural individualisation. While governments continue to pursue policy interventions designed to manage and simplify processes of transition, these interventions also are increasingly individualised and often therapeutic in nature. Kathryn Ecclestone sees these policy trends as closely inter-related: because transitions are predominantly conceived of as linear and uni-directional, support must be targeted at those who 'fail' to comply with these normative expectations, and who are therefore treated as vulnerable and disengaged (Ecclestone 2010).

Yet at the same time, the ubiquity of lifelong learning means that educational transitions are more and more detached from specific ages and life stages. The outcome of these processes is that learning careers become pluralistic and highly individualised. Three Dutch researchers described a few years ago the way in which the standard biography is being replaced in late modern societies by the 'elective biography', in which individuals are increasingly required to find their own way to allocate life tasks to life stages, and in which social coordination of increasingly fragmented individual decision-making becomes ever more problematic (Glastra, Hake and Schedler 2004, 295). Hence the development of a service industry supporting individuals through life transitions through counselling, coaching, mentoring and guidance; however, this industry is often characterised by a plethora of private or semi-private micro-enterprises, depending on public institutions for their legitimacy and often

their contracts, but organised largely through the market, and therefore often required to trade off quality considerations against tight profit margins.

RESEARCHING TRANSITIONS

In these circumstances it should come as no surprise that transitions have become a popular focus for research. Much of this research has continued the traditional focus on transitions as a feature of youth, and in particular of the period in which young people are moving towards adulthood, and from school into work. For a long time, the dominant approaches in this field were informed by rational choice theory, while the main challenges came from Marxists who emphasised the social structures of reproduction and inequality that influenced young people's choices. More recently, researchers have begun to emphasise young people's subjective understandings as a critical but neglected dimension of research on transitions. One influential group of Dutch and German researchers has gone further, arguing that the de-standardisation of youth transitions has in itself made young people's subjectivities increasingly important for their social integration, as it shapes the ways in which they take individual choices about their futures (see for example Du Bois-Reymond et al 1993; Stauber 2004; Walther 2006).

Such accounts of youth transitions tend to use predominantly qualitative and ethnographic approaches. Historically, these are usually rooted in the symbolic interactionist tradition, which itself can be traced back to the pioneering work of Florian Znaniecki (particularly his influential study of Polish peasant migration in the USA) and George Herbert Mead's emphasis on the 'self' as an important foundation in understanding social values and behaviour. This approach has informed an empirical focus on understanding young people's 'definitions of the situation' in which they find themselves, as well as an insistence that young people themselves are agents who actively shape the transition processes in which they are engaged (Stauber 2004, 24-6). Nevertheless, young people are agents within a bounded environment, in which they encounter persistent inequalities in aspirations, education and employment.

Much of the evidence on persistent inequalities is drawn from quantitative and mixed methods research. Ingrid Schoon, for example, has built on the British tradition of cohort surveys to demonstrate that, for samples born in 1958 and 1970 and surveyed at repeated intervals since, socio-economic inequalities for people in their twenties were relatively unchanged (Schoon 2006, 40-55). The advantage of cohort survey data, of course, is that it allows for a dynamic overview of change and continuity among relatively

large populations, as well as for controlled analysis of the importance of different factors in shaping the outcomes of life transitions. Of course, findings from such statistical techniques as regression analysis are probabilistic in nature, and cannot be used in a mechanistic manner to predict outcomes for any given individual (Field 2011). Nevertheless, they can identify the probabilities of outcomes for members of different socio-economic, cultural and ethnic groups, and these findings suggest that we should understand young people's transitions as shaped by structural inequalities as well as their own subjective values and aspirations.

What about the transitions and life chances of adults? Here, the dominant methodological paradigm for the last two decades has been decidedly interpretative and qualitative in nature. In particular, there has been a marked rise in the field of adult education research of the use of biographical and life history approaches. This pronounced 'turn to biographical methods' (Bron *et al.*, 2007, p.12) can be understood in part as reflecting contemporary interest in working with biography as a way of constructing 'meaning and authenticity' from people's experiences of a rapidly changing modern world; but it is also a means of articulating the stories of people who may be marginalized in traditional forms of research yet whose stories may enable us to develop a more nuanced understanding of learning and educational processes. The 'biographical turn' also allows us to engage with a broad conception of learning, one which does not restrict the meaning of learning to institutional definitions, but which includes the cognitive and reflexive dimensions of learning as much as the emotional, embodied, pre-reflexive and non-cognitive aspects of everyday learning processes and practices.

One important feature of the rise of biographical and life history approaches is an interest in *biographical learning* (e.g., Alheit 1995; Alheit & Dausien 2002; Dominicé 2000; Biesta *et al* 2011) which encompasses an interest in both the influence of biography on learning processes and practices, and an interest in biography as itself 'a field of learning' (Alheit 1995, p. 59). Alheit and Dausien (2002, p.15) have argued that lifelong and lifewide learning are 'tied at all times to the contexts of a specific biography,' which implies that '(w)ithout biography there can be no learning, without learning, no biography.' The relationship between life, self, story and learning is, however, a complicated one. It is not that the story is just a description of life and self, a kind of picture we can look at in order to learn from it. In a very real sense the story *constitutes* the life and the self. Life and self are thus at the same time 'object' and 'outcome' of the story.

What complicates the matter further is that the self is also the author of the story. This has important meth-

odological consequences, which are widely debated in the field of life history and biographical research. There is controversy over the distinctions between life history and biographical research; and also over the role of the researcher-self in the process, which some researchers understand to be so important as to justify the use of the term auto/biographical research (Merrill and West 2009, 31, 180). So this is a conceptually fraught domain, characterised by disagreement over terminology and philosophy, and often over underlying values and philosophies. And it is often association with attempts to disparage and exclude research that uses mixed or quantitative methods, which is often rejected as inherently 'positivist' in nature (see for example Merrill and West 2009, 27).

As with the study of youth transitions, though, recent mixed methods and quantitative research has tended to demonstrate the enduring influence of structures on transitions during the adult life course. British longitudinal research using cohort or panel surveys has flourished in recent years, with particularly strong interest in studying the outcomes – economic, social and personal – of learning in adult life. While this work has demonstrated the importance of adult learning in influencing earnings, well-being and social engagement, it has also shown that these outcomes are uncertain, with a major part of the variations remaining unexplained by learning; and they are also contingent, in that the outcomes vary considerably for different parts of the population (see Evans, Schoon and Weale 2010; Field 2011). In particular, they demonstrate that for adults as for youth, socio-economic and socio-cultural inequalities can be remarkably persistent.

NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

What does all of this mean for non-traditional learners in higher education? This section of the paper draws on data collected during the RANLHE project, a European study of retention and access in higher education which focuses on the experiences of non-traditional learners in seven countries (see <http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/index.html> for further details). One of the project's key objectives is to illuminate and theorize, using in-depth life history interviews, the interplay of structural, cultural and personal dimensions of learning and agency in the lives of non-traditional students. We were particularly concerned with how non-traditional students in higher education experience the processes of learning, how they perceive themselves as learners and how their identities as learners develop. Our definition of 'non-traditional students' is a pragmatic one, and includes both young and mature adult students who do not conform to established normative understandings of higher education's customary

audience. It includes, for example, students who are the first in their family to enter higher education, low income families, members of minority ethnic groups, mature age students, and people with disabilities.

The data in this paper come from Scotland, a small country that is part of the federal political entity known as the United Kingdom; responsibility for higher education lies at national level, and the Scottish system is characterised by institutional diversity (there are currently 20 university-type institutions, but higher education is also provided by 43 local colleges) and high levels of participation, estimated at just over 40% of the age cohort in 2008-9 (Scottish Government 2010, 9). The aim of the study was to illuminate and theorise, using in-depth biographical interviews, the structural, cultural and personal interplay of learning and agency in non-traditional students' lives. Methodologically, then, we approached the study in a broadly interpretive manner, with a primary focus on the ways in which non-traditional learners themselves defined and understood their situation. Participants were recruited by a variety of means, including appeals in student and university newsletters, by recommendations from existing contacts, and references from the early participants. While we did not attempt to achieve statistical significance, we did try to recruit a sample that included different types of non-traditional student; while we were reasonably successful in most cases, we failed to attract more than a handful of participants from minority ethnic communities, reflecting the relative ethnic homogeneity of Scotland's population (minority ethnic groups accounted for just 2% of those counted in the 2001 census - Scottish Government 2004).

Theoretically, the study is informed by a small number of mid-level concepts. These were selected partly because they could be explored in a range of different national contexts by a team of researchers who shared some perspectives but did not share others. We have already seen that the use of life history and biographical methods is surrounded by controversy and debate, and this is even more the case when it comes to the study of identity and agency. The first of these central 'sensitising concepts' is the idea of higher education as a 'transitional space'. This notion is developed from work by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott on childhood development, and more specifically on the anxieties arising from the infant's separation from its primary caregiver, usually the mother (Winnicott 1953). We have gone on to apply this idea to separation and negotiation of the self in adult life, in a specific physical context – the university – where others are going through similar processes of renegotiation of the self. In this sense, experiencing higher education can be seen as a form of liminality, where actors are granted a certain bounded freedom to explore and

experiment with new identities (Field and Morgan-Klein 2010).

The second and third sensitising concepts are the ideas of 'disposition' and 'habitus', drawn from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. By disposition, we mean the variety of enduring orientations and forms of 'know-how' that people pick up from their social experiences and everyday lives; by habitus we mean the properties of a social environment that tend to engender particular dispositions (Biesta et al 2011, 90-92). Bourdieu was concerned with explaining the persistence of structural inequalities, and both concepts play a central role in his understanding of how we are socialised into particular identities and cultures. From our perspective, these ideas are particularly helpful in understanding interested in *the ways in which people understand themselves as a 'learning self', the ways in which they experience and interact with the social milieu of the university, and also the significance of these subjective identities and social milieu for their learning.*

I will try to illustrate these points briefly through some of the life stories that we collected in Scotland. The first case is Anna, a first year student in education, who entered university when aged around thirty. At the start of the course, she described her sense of self and her sense of the environment as being out of balance. She was pleased to have entered the course she wanted at a university that she respected, but felt like an imposter, and worried that she might be caught out: 'You're always waiting on someone to kind of say you don't belong here, and I'm hoping that's something that'll go'. Suzie, a first generation student in her first year of a degree in design, expressed her sense of distance from her fellow students: 'When I came in here, they all looked like stockbrokers. I mean, the girls are so cute and the boys are so smart, I mean it's just so funny'. Some others felt themselves distanced by language. Several referred to their reluctance to change their way of speaking in order to accommodate to a new social milieu. One saw this as part of his national identity, and therefore viewed it as non-negotiable. Anna reflected that perhaps she did need to make some changes: 'I didn't realise how much I swear. Aye, I do swear a lot, and everybody seems pretty middle class'. Even deciding to swear less often was seen as a loss of class identity, even a form of betrayal.

Anna told herself 'I think well done, although I know it's happening, it's surreal, it's as if it's not happening'. We can see the interplay of her dispositions as a highly motivated learner, and the new habitus into which she had moved and felt herself an outsider. We can also see how this 'surreal' experience is connected to the discrepancy between her status as an outsider, who had not pursued the normative route taken by most students: 'I don't think younger, you know, students

coming through from school, would be – ‘cos it would just be next step for them’. At the same time, we can see that Anna understands university as a community, and she clearly aspires to membership. By the end of her first year, she felt more at ease with her new milieu:

We had our culture shock last year ... we had this big building, with thousands of students, and, you know, the library, to find your way about, and how everything worked ... we've done that now.

This description of the physical space as bewildering, as something to be mastered, assumed similar totemic status in other narratives.

A number of students mentioned the physical and mental challenges of navigating a university campus. In two of our three case study universities, students specifically mentioned the library as an especially complex site. Suzie used the metaphor of walking into a party to convey her sense that people saw her as an outsider:

Once you kind of know where things are, you don't feel so conspicuous, and I mean that's what happens if you walk into somebody's party or, you know, it's the same sense of 'Oh, goodness, everyone's looking at me'. No, they're not – get on with it, you know.

For these students, a sense of being physically lost became a metaphor for their student identity more generally. The third university had invested heavily in redesigning its library facilities, integrating them with social spaces and online spaces, so that it borrowed explicitly from Scotland's thriving 'café culture'. Students seemed at ease in the space despite its size, and indeed several chose to meet me there for interviews.

For many of the students from all three case study universities, the transitional nature of higher education represented a form of emancipation. At the same time, some non-traditional students found themselves constrained or challenged by the expectations – often imagined rather than real – of their peers. This was particularly present in the stories of mature students, whose age made them visibly non-normative, or so they felt. Robert, another mature student in his fourth year in an environmental science degree, looked back on his younger self with a mixture of amusement over what he now saw as naivety and pride that he had thrived:

You felt that you know you had to do well and kind of prove to everybody – which is probably just in my own head, you know – but I felt like everybody – and I think that's just something, again, it's being older – I think everybody expects you to get fed up with it.

Again, several students spoke of feeling that they had to 'prove' that they had a right to be in this transitional space.

So how did this sense of belonging change? The life stories reveal a number of ways in which people came to see themselves as members of the imagined community of the university (see Quinn 2010). Some of these had to do with membership of a particular disciplinary or professional sub-community, which served to build a wider identity. Suzie told us how she initially found her glasswork class 'surprisingly scary', whereas she was more comfortable working with textiles or clay. Her ability to connect textiles with her experience of knitting, and pottery with modelling in other media, led her to persist with glass. In the interview, she reflected that

I think you have to draw on what you've got in your own background to where you're kind of going, but equally you know you can push yourself, and I mean with glass I began to feel comfortable when I discovered you could paint it and you could melt it and you could do other things with it.

So for Suzie this is a form of learning through experimenting, which is at the same time a process of biographical learning.

The same was true for Maggie, a mature student who had finished her first year as a nursing student, and was about to start her second year. She had thought hard about dropping out, finding that she simply did not enjoy the academic demands of university study. In interview, she attributed this to her primarily professional sense of self: 'I suppose when I thought about applying to do nursing, I was thinking about being a nurse, I wasn't thinking about being a student really'. University study was something she endured, being a student was 'just something I have to bear with'. By contrast, she enjoyed her clinical placements, describing them as 'great fun'. Some other, younger nursing students told us that they found the clinical placements challenging, physically and emotionally, but for Maggie, they confirmed her identity as a nurse, and enabled her to endure her transitional status as a student.

This is simply a brief sketch of how the concepts can help us understand student experiences, based on a very small number of examples. Nevertheless, they illuminate the ways in which students can and do bring their own dispositions, formed in and through their earlier habitus, to the new experiences of the transitional space that is higher education. Non-traditional students may see themselves as outsiders in this academic milieu, but of course they are in university for a reason: they are pursuing an ambition, an imagined future, in which they and their possibilities are different from what they had been before entering higher education. They develop their own ways of handling the social distance between themselves and the normative students, for example through humour, by

regarding them as ‘stockbrokers’ who are ‘just so funny’ or – as among the mature students – through a certain disdain, as youngsters who are more interested in partying than studying. At the same time, the non-traditional students are themselves in a liminal state, which endows them with a certain equality of status, as students alongside other students, all of whom are in the process of moving towards relatively privileged socio-economic positions. Yet this liminal status in many cases will not result in the secure and well-defined positions presented in classical anthropological accounts of *rites de passage*, such as Turner’s description of liminality as an ‘interstructural position’ (Turner 1987, 4). Rather, studenthood offers a protracted experience of liminality which is then followed by further experiences of risk, uncertainty and continuing transition.

CONCLUSIONS: TROUBLING IDENTITIES

Studenthood is not merely a transitional process, but can also be understood as a transitional identity. Much recent research on adult learning has emphasised that this must also be understood as a process of biographical learning, leading Peter Alheit to speak of biographicity, as the capacity to design and redesign our lives, as individual trajectories lose their clarity and shape. Alheit is, though, at risk of overstating the case when he suggests that ‘Collective biographical patterns are being pushed aside by individual risk situations’ (1995, 58). While it is true that biographical research can help us understand the way in which traditional collective milieus have lost much of their subjective meaning for individuals, other evidence suggests that the structural conditions underpinning those milieus continue to constrain and also to empower actors in an enduring manner. Transitions, then, must be understood as being both biographical and social, and as having a variety of biographical and social dimensions.

Of course, we need to understand university study as a very particular and distinctive type of transitional process. We have tried to explore this partly through the notion of universities as a kind of ‘transitional space’, drawing on Winnicott’s work. In his seminal study, Winnicott (1953) noted that young children could take comfort from a physical object when left alone by their mother; this object thus helped the child make the transition from complete dependence to partial autonomy. While there are obviously no direct parallels, this concept can also help us understand the university, as a space (physical, social and cultural) that is explicitly designed to provide support for transitions. University students similarly hold on to things that remind them of their past lives, such as old friends or socio-cultural allegiances or musical tastes, while continually developing new capacities,

including new identity resources. The ‘private troubles’ of university students are often connected with the painful difficulties of balancing old and new in this way, particularly when experience of university life leads people to question older allegiances and loyalties. We may suppose that the greater the social and cultural distance between milieu of origin and milieu of destination, the greater and the more painful the tensions.

As noted above, we seek to understand university studenthood as a liminal process, in which newcomers may legitimately explore and experiment with their identities, including their cultural and social allegiances, without serious risk. Yet the notion of liminality, in classical anthropology, presumes a given end-point, marking the stage at which the novice must stop experimenting with new identities, and get to grips with the identity position that corresponds to their new, adult role. Given that such linear and unidirectional transitions are less and less the norm, there are important questions for practice arising from the normative assumptions that are embedded in many institutional practices and structures – and arguably in the underlying cultural ethos that characterises many educational institutions.

This brings us finally to the question of social networks (or social capital) and transitions. Identity is itself a process that is constantly shaped in dynamic relationships; but, as Ulrich Beck has observed, ‘Under those conditions of a reflexive biography, “society” must be individually manipulated as a “variable”’ (Beck 1992, 135; emphasis in original). Beck also is guilty of exaggeration; the word ‘manipulate’ implies a conscious and deliberate process of design and investment in a particular form of social capital, and in specific social relationships, and again he underplays the enduring influence of socio-economic structures on the opportunity patterns that individuals may be able to exploit. Nevertheless, Beck’s assertion serves to remind us that identity and transition are relational, and that the relational dimension can change as a result of people’s decisions and actions. In this process of dynamic change, unfamiliar experiences – such as non-normative participation in higher education – can prompt reflection on acquired habits and understandings, leading to profound existential questioning of the existing self and the significant relationships in which selfhood is embedded and lived.

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