

**WOMEN, MOTHERHOOD AND RETURN
TO STUDY EXPERIENCES**

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ABSTRACT

At a time when women are being encouraged to return to education because of changing demographic trends, this study explores the experiences of a group of women who are students on a variety of courses in further and adult education. Much research has already been conducted on women students in higher education and the 'problems' they encounter in taking on the student role, much less is known about the not so prestigious post sixteen sector.

The study is grounded in a feminist perspective and utilises a qualitative methodology. A series of in-depth interviews were conducted during one academic year and adopted a life history format. The women were given the opportunity to tell their own stories in their own way and the importance of utilising this approach in reaching the 'private' accounts is highlighted.

The first five chapters of the thesis are therefore concerned with presenting the background to the study; locating it within the literature; identifying the characteristics of a feminist perspective and the utilisation of in-depth interviews as the method of research. The following three chapters are concerned with a presentation of the data and emphasise the crucial importance of women's lives in the private sphere in the shaping of the return to study experience. Many of the problems they experience when they take on the student role are associated with fitting it in with the

wife and mother roles. In addition a number of the women were studying at an institution which gave very little recognition to the needs of mature students.

Two chapters are concerned with identifying the key aspects of the women's experiences and deconstruct the concepts of 'support' and 'fitting in' derived from the data. Based upon this, the ways in which the women negotiated the intersection between the public and private spheres is explored. In accordance with the underlying assumption of the thesis, that it should not just describe but prescribe action in the promotion of 'equal opportunities', the implications for policy and practice in women's education are outlined.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: WOMEN'S EDUCATION: THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

'Education is not only a children's issue, it also sets the limits of what is possible for women'.

(Rogers, quoted by Acker, 1986, p63)

1.1 Beginnings

The origins of this research into women's return to study experiences lie in my attempt to make sense of my own experience as a mature student and the experiences of women students I have come into contact with in my role as a lecturer in a college of further education.

Initially I considered it both self-indulgent and academically unsound to integrate personal experience into the research process; my conception of research was based on a scientific model with its inherent notions of objectivity and quantification (see Chapter 3) until I discovered feminism. With feminism came a new way of seeing and interpreting, a new intellectual journey of which this study is the product. Stanley and Wise (1983a) suggest that,

'Feminist social science research should begin with the recognition of the personal, direct experience which underlies all behaviours and actions' (p165).

In the light of this I begin by recounting aspects of my own experience which would corroborate a point made by Oakley (1979)

'... that academic research projects bear an intimate relationship to the researcher's life... Personal dramas provoke ideas that generate books and research projects' (p4).

Some ten years ago whilst flicking through a university prospectus I discovered a masters degree course to which I was instantly attracted. It was part-time and therefore possible to fit in with my teaching job. My excitement was however dampened by the prospect of broaching the subject with my partner who already resented the amount of time I spent working at home. Eventually I plucked up courage to mention it and after he had raged for a while he gave me an ultimatum. I must choose between doing the course or our relationship. He could not understand why I should 'want to have my nose in books all the time' and 'why don't you do a course in something useful like cookery or flower arranging' and I was told that I was not 'a proper woman'. (As I write this I wonder whether my memory plays tricks, could anyone really have said those things? It does seem incredible but is regrettably true).

After much agonising I decided to go ahead and apply for a place on the course; if I was accepted I would then confront the consequences. I felt quite fearful, half hoping I would be turned down and therefore not required to make a decision, but I was accepted and to my surprise and relief my partner also relented and 'allowed' me to do the course. I felt happy that I seemed to have got the best of both worlds but it was not long before the

complaints began about my efforts to manage my newly acquired student role along with everything else. In order not to antagonise my partner I would try to work when he was out, but I was constantly being told that I was not putting enough effort into the domestic work which he saw as my responsibility. He gave me no support at all and I carried on with increasing feelings of failure and little self-confidence but at least I was surviving, that was until the violence began. He would hit me when he got angry, usually after he had been drinking and eventually he also managed to convince me that I deserved it. I was advised to leave him before something 'serious' happened and eventually, at the start of the second year of the M.A. course, I did leave him although I did not know how I would cope without him. In retrospect, I seemed to be suffering from what Colette Dowling (1982) called 'The Cinderella Complex', such was the extent of my dependency. My return to study was not the only reason the relationship broke up but clearly it was an added irritant to something which was inherently unstable. Perhaps had I not embarked upon the M.A. I might have been able to hold it together but now I can say quite dispassionately that the break up of the relationship was a price worth paying.

At the time I made sense of the experience in terms of it being the unfortunate consequence of living with a 'difficult' man. I had been unlucky, this was not normal, in fact I felt that my experience was definitely aberrant. Other women did not have these problems so

perhaps what happened was a function of my own inadequacy. These feelings stayed with me for two years until I changed jobs and began to teach mature students. It was then that I realised that some of them were experiencing similar problems to those I had experienced. Their problems were compounded however, by the fact that they had children (I did not) and needed also to organise childcare whilst they came to college as there were no creche facilities. Gradually I began to think that these 'problems' were not just confined to individual lives but part of a collective experience. Something was clearly wrong but it seemed to be, to borrow a phrase from Betty Friedan (1963), 'the problem without a name'.

1.2 Connecting experience with theory

As mentioned previously, feminism provided for me a new way of seeing and interpreting, it enabled me to see,

'The essential validity of personal experience'
(Stanley and Wise, 1983a, p53).

Stanley and Wise argue that there must be a relationship between theory, experience and research and that all research must be concerned with the experiences and consciousness of the researcher as an integral part of the research process. To utilise experience to inform the research process is not self-indulgent but a,

'...disciplined, scholarly and rigorous explication'
(1983b, p197).

My experience generated a number of questions about why it should be so difficult for women to return to study; what was it that created the barriers and the obstacles? It was in seeking answers that the research topic became 'visible' to me (see Haggis, 1990, p67) and it was from radical feminist theory that a possible explanation lay which could be 'tested' empirically. The theory is premised on the notion that women are oppressed and that this oppression is based on patriarchal relations of power between women as a group and men as a group. Patriarchy has been defined by Rich (1977) as,

'... the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law... education and the division of labour determine what part women shall and shall not play... (p57).

By unpacking some of the guises in which patriarchy operates in both the public sphere of education and the private sphere of the family and by encouraging women to share their experiences, a point might be reached where,

'... what was once seen as a personal problem is a product of oppression as shared with other women' (Middleton, 1987, p82).

It appeared that a key aspect of the return to study experience was women's lives in the private sphere and as Delmar (1972) has said,

'The operation of the family is pivotal to an analysis of women's oppression' (quoted by Stanley & Wise, 1983a, p41).

Literature already exists (see Chapter 2) on the issues surrounding the integration of family and education in women's lives and there is a recognition that marriage and family have different educational implications for women than they do for men.

'They (marriage and family) act as a powerful inhibition to women's career development and at the same time act as a powerful support to men's (Hughes and Kennedy, 1985, p46).

This recognition has however been presented as a kind of 'fait accompli'; it is a problem women must accommodate, it is essentially their problem and it is this which feminism seeks to challenge. This study therefore, as a piece of feminist research, endeavours to uncover and challenge the patriarchal assumptions which circumscribe women's return to study experiences. Its aim is not just to describe but to impact at the level of policy in terms of making recommendations which would give women a qualitatively different (and hopefully improved) return to study experience. In so doing it seeks to make a contribution to sociology 'for' women (see Ch. 3) and as Acker (1981) has suggested.

'At the very least a feminist perspective challenges assumptions and stereotypes about women: at most, it provides a new creative edge with which to revitalize the sociology of education' (p77).

1.3 Researching Women Students in Further and Adult Education

Whilst attempts to improve the provision for a group who have hitherto been on the margins of the education system is important at any time, it would seem that in the sphere of further and adult

education there is now an impetus for change that did not exist before. This change is occurring at a structural level and has been created by two factors; changing demographic trends and recent education legislation. I would argue that these factors provide a unique opportunity to secure some qualitative changes in the content and delivery of women's education.

Taking firstly the demographic issue; between 1983 and 1993 the number of 16-19 year olds in the population will have fallen by over one million and this will have an impact upon the number of school leavers going on to college. It is estimated that upwards of one million new adult enrolments is needed if current capacity in FE is to be maintained and utilised (NATFHE 1990). Women constitute the biggest group in further and adult education (54% in FE and over 80% in AE) and this is projected to increase as outlined in the following table.

Table 1: Projected Numbers of Students in Maintained Colleges Studying on Non-Advance Courses: England 1986-2000

Projections (000's)	Total Students (women)	Total Students (men)
1989 High	1,010	793
Low	989	778
1994 High	1,047	787
Low	972	736
2000 High	1,199	895
Low	1,045	790

Source: DES 1988 (quoted by NATFHE, 1990, p17)

In addition, under current legislation college funding is linked to student numbers and therefore with the introduction of market forces into education, the 'providers' are going to be seeking new 'clients'. This trend will intensify in the FE sector with incorporation after April 1993 when student numbers will increasingly become the economic life-blood of colleges. At the same time as more women are being encouraged to return to education, there is a growing body of literature (see Chapter 2) which suggests that,

'In many institutions neither policy nor practice reflects an awareness of the needs of women' (FEU, 1989, p1)

This issue is explored in the thesis and takes up a theme from the sociology of women's education which has been encapsulated by Thompson (1983).

'The key issues in education are ... about securing our positions in an education system which takes our concerns, our questions... as women completely seriously. This will mean... a very different kind of system (p4).

Following on from Thompson, questions arise as to what exactly are women's concerns and needs? What problems do women face when they return to study and what can be done to alleviate them? What implications does this have for policy issues of provision? These questions must be addressed if a qualitative change in women's education is to be secured.

A body of literature already exists on the 'problems' that women face when they return to study (see Chapter 2) but much of it is

focused upon women in higher education. Less seems to be written about women in further and adult education and this point has in fact been made by Hughes and Kennedy (1985).

'This is a lack of research at present on the... identity of the mature women student in adult as distinct from higher education' (p11).

The lack of research into this sector of education could be related to its 'cinderella status' (Byrne 1978) compared with higher education.

Thompson (1980) in her discussion of adult education suggests that,

'It is undoubtedly the case that the kind of education for adults usually referred to as higher education is where the influence and power lie... Its low position is in direct relation to its minimal contribution to... confirming the status of significant social elites... Its relationship to the institution of higher education seems analogous to the secondary modern's relationship to the grammar schools in terms of resources, prestige and influence' (pp. 21/22).

Despite its relatively low status, it has however been argued that this sector of education has the potential to play a unique role in improving opportunities for women (see for example, Sand, 1987) and this is an issue addressed in the thesis.

Much of the existing research utilises postal questionnaires and structured interviews (see chapter 2); this study however, will explore the ways in which the adoption of a qualitative methodology (see chapters 3 and 4) has generated data which provide different

insights into the 'problems' of returning to study. This methodology facilitates the identification of the 'problems' which I contend are not just personal but a manifestation of women's shared oppression.

1.4 Girls'/Women's Education: Producing Equality or Reproducing Subordination?

'The essence of education is not a neutral, narrowly instrumental, separate from life activity... but a powerful political weapon which serves either to reinforce and bolster the logic of the present system, or helps us to engage in the pursuit of freedom' (Thompson, 1983, p4).

The above quotation encapsulates another theme within the sociology of women's education which will be explored in this section, namely the potential power ascribed to education to bring about change in women's lives and provide equality between the sexes. This theme can be conceptualised within a feminist theoretical framework and provides a means by which the notion of 'equality of opportunity' can be deconstructed. Acker (1986) has argued that,

'Feminist educational reforms start from an assumption that the education system is less favourable to girls and women than to boys and men. Some see the system as in need of only minor adjustments to improve equal opportunities' (p63).

Her latter point can be linked theoretically to liberal feminism with its focus upon formal (legal) equality and,

'A more equitable distribution of the sexes in the current social formation as an end in itself' (Middleton, 1987, p78).

Notions of equitable distribution relate to issues of access and in this context, equality of opportunity implies giving women the same rights as men and increasing their numbers within the public domain. Tong (1989) in fact suggests that equality of opportunity is the political goal of liberal feminism, thus equality of opportunity is equated with improving access which requires only the 'minor adjustments' mentioned by Acker (1986). She goes on to say that from a liberal feminist perspective,

'.. liberation can be fully achieved without major alteration to the economic and political structures of contemporary capitalist democracies' (p65).

From this perspective it could therefore be argued that the current drive to promote access to education for women (as discussed in the previous section) is providing them with equality of opportunity. A number of writers have focused upon the issue of improving access, Byrne (1978) for example argues that access to the same education as men is the key to women's freedom of status, career and personal fulfilment.

The concept of equality of opportunity was first given official recognition in the 1944 Education Act which made secondary education compulsory and free. (Weiner, 1985). Given that the women in this study were educated under the system which was established as a result of the Act, some discussion of its provisions and implications is pertinent. The underlying

premise of the Act was that ability alone should determine the type of education a child received and that,

'... pupils were to be given the opportunity to realise their full potential as predicted by psychological tests of attainment and intelligence' (Weiner, 1986, p266).

It was assumed that educational opportunities for the working class would be extended by the provision of universal free education. Young and Whitty (1977) argue that education was seen as 'good' in itself and as a means towards that other unquestioned 'good', social mobility. There was however, a recognition in the 1950s and 1960s that the number of upwardly mobile working class children remained small and that educational success rates of working class children was not rising significantly. Banks (1968) for example pointed to,

'... the persistence of social class inequalities in educational performance in spite of the democratization of educational provision' (p61).

The extent to which provision was 'democratized' can be questioned given the well documented problem of the inferiority of secondary modern schools to which the vast majority of working class pupils were sent. Young and Whitty (1977) make this point and suggest that this perpetuated inequality rather than reducing it.

Overlooked by the 'old' sociology of education with its focus upon class and particularly the impact of family background on attainment (e.g. Douglas, 1964), was the issue of gender. In terms of issues of

access this is significant in terms of producing equal opportunities given that,

'Boys were admitted to grammar schools on the basis of poorer academic performance in the 11+ exam than was required of girls. If selection were accurately tied to ability then 30 per cent more girls than boys would have gone to grammar schools' (Abbott and Wallace, 1990, p54).

For those girls deemed to be 'less able', official reports (e.g. Newsom, 1963) emphasised education for domesticity and motherhood. Scott (1980), in her discussion of the assumptions underlying the ideology of domesticity summarises them as follows,

'That the main priority in girls' lives - especially 'low ability girls' is to marry and raise a family, that paid work will play a non-essential part in their adult lives, that they will enter paid work only in limited fields, that the work they perform in the labour force is not important to society...' (p101).

As a consequence of this ideology, girls are channelled into subjects which fit in with their assumed future role as wife and mother. Girls therefore study domestic science instead of physics, languages instead of technical subjects and demonstrate a tendency to under achieve in mathematics (Walden and Walkerdine, 1982).

The lack of opportunity for girls to study non-traditional subjects was particularly evident for those in single-sex schools. Facilities for science were often poor or non-existent (Shaw, 1987) thus further disqualifying girls from any form of further education or training

which required even a basic level of scientific or technical knowledge and skills. Sand (1987) argues that this is both circular and discriminatory;

'... an education system which excludes girls from certain basic forms of knowledge because they are female and then refuses them entry to training... on the grounds that they lack the necessary knowledge can hardly be said to provide equality of opportunity' (p48).

In the light of the issues presented it can be concluded that the 1944 Education Act promoted access to a system which was both unequal and inadequate thus reproducing the subordination of girls. This was particularly so for working class girls deemed to be 'less able' and is a theme which will be addressed in the thesis through the women recounting their experiences of schooling in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The view that education merely reproduces the subordination of girls and women is in fact a central tenet of radical feminism with its focus upon the education system as one mechanism through which patriarchy is sustained. Thompson (1983) for example, argues that,

'Education is one of the many social systems created and constructed by men to sustain male power and the notion that women might be permitted equality of opportunity within a system which men control is seen as ludicrous, given the concerns of patriarchy to present the sexual division of labour as somehow neutral and inevitable' (p30).

Weiner (1986) makes a very useful theoretical distinction between what she calls 'egalitarians' (those advocating equal opportunities)

and 'radicals' and suggests that,

'Whereas the former fail to address the relationship between patriarchy, power and women's subordination, the latter place it at the centre of their thinking' (p269).

The essence of a 'radical' critique of the 'egalitarians' can be found in the work of Arnot (1987), who argues that,

'The philosophy underlying equal opportunities policies has hardly challenged social policies which support the maintenance of traditional patriarchal family structures and the role of the housewife mother' (p327).

It is clear that in the debate regarding the potential for education to bring about equality, the 'egalitarians' and 'radicals' present opposing views. The former argue that equality can be achieved from within the existing system whilst the latter argue that education cannot bring about change in a patriarchal society. This view has been summed up succinctly in a point made by Weiner (1985).

'To liberalise access to an inadequate system might be acceptable in the short term but for more permanent change a major restructuring of all social institutions is needed (p10).

By exploring women's educational and familial experiences, this study seeks to evaluate empirically the assumptions underlying the 'egalitarian' and 'radical' ideologies; and determine what 'major restructuring' might be required if women are to have an equal opportunity not just to **compete** but to **succeed** in the education system.

CHAPTER TWO
EDUCATION, FAMILY AND THEIR DISCONTENTS
IN THE LIVES OF WOMEN STUDENTS

2.1 Introduction

If women are to be provided with an equal opportunity to succeed in the education system it is necessary to identify the barriers that exist to mitigate against their success. The literature on this subject is limited, much of what does exist relates to research into women studying in higher education focusing upon specific courses in specific institutions but is included because I would argue, the issues are similar whatever the level of course.

Arising from the existing research a number of barriers/problems can be identified and these will be explored in the next section. In order to provide context to this discussion however, it is useful firstly to determine the characteristics and motivations of women students which have been identified in the literature. A profile emerges which is best exemplified in the study by Stoney and Reid (1980) of women on 'bridging courses' (see appendix 4). The main characteristics of these women were that 54% were in their thirties, 60% were married, 78% had children and 66% left school at 15 or 16. Kirk (1977), in her discussion of Open University students says that they are,

'Generally over 30 and come to their studies already having acquired considerable 'baggage': family responsibilities, mortgages... commitments to employers, friends, neighbours...' (p23).

This point is corroborated by NIACE (1991) which emphasises the multiple roles and commitments of mature students who may have to fit study with full or part-time employment and domestic responsibilities. The under-representation of women from working class backgrounds and ethnic minorities is also raised.

Motivations identified revolve around the need for stimulation and to escape from the social isolation of being confined to the home (Oglesby, 1976; Kirk, 1977) and Keen (1990) suggests that women return to education for an outlet,

'... somewhere they can go where they are not someone's mother' (p14).

For women in higher education particularly, studying was seen as a way of enhancing career prospects (Osborne et al, 1984) and for those in adult education as a stepping stone to take up further skill training courses and to remedy and alleviate a sense of school failure (Oglesby, 1976). Studies by Cleugh (1972), Challis (1976) and Hutchinson (1978) make the point that the decision to return to study can be prompted by a change in personal circumstances such as divorce or children growing up which causes an appraisal of the individual's life. Dissatisfaction with marriage was, argues Hutchinson (1978) a contributory reason for a number of women joining a 'Fresh Horizons' course at the City Literary Institute (see appendix 4).

2.2 The Barriers/Problems

i) Confidence

Keen (1990) has argued that confidence or rather the lack of it is the biggest and most important obstacle, amongst women returners. This issue is mentioned by a number of authors e.g. Stoney and Reid (1980); Cleugh (1972); Oglesby (1976); Challis (1976) and Crowcroft (1983). Memories of unsuccessful schooling and years spent at home with children cause women to doubt their ability to develop study skills in writing essays, note taking and retaining information. Fears have been expressed about being able to organise study time and assumptions made that everyone will be more knowledgeable, intelligent and confident. In their review of the literature on mature students, Osborne et al (1984) say that,

‘These comments occur and recur in the various reports we have read’ (p84).

In her article on her experiences of being a mature student Giles (1990) recounts her self doubt as an undergraduate.

‘It could take me days to pluck up courage to ask a tutor or lecturer the simplest question. I still recall the churning stomach, the clammy hands and the desire to run like a frightened rabbit if the recipient of my anxiety was anything less than totally welcoming’ (p359).

The problem of the lack of confidence of many women students has led to calls to provide study skills and tutorial support as an integral part of course (Coats, 1989; NIACE, 1991; Cousins, 1984) and this provision is in fact a feature of many return to study programmes (see appendix 4).

ii) Finance

The issue of finance has been highlighted as a major barrier to returning to education, particularly for working class women (Coats, 1989; NIACE, 1991; Kirk, 1982). Not only is the cost of course fees a prohibitive factor, but also the finance required for childcare fees, transport, books and equipment. Oglesby (1976) makes the point that buying equipment 'meant a real sacrifice on the family budget'. (p14). Unwaged women have no access to money of their own and those with low paid partners are often in difficulty and do not qualify for concessions. NIACE (1991) also make the point that some women may also be dependent on a partner who does not support their wish to re-enter education. I would suggest that this could also apply to middle class women who are reliant upon husbands for financial support. Most part-time courses are not eligible for mandatory grants but as Coats (1989) points out,

'Those who qualify for grants are not exempt from problems - grants may be delayed or inadequate. Some authorities require a husband to sign a form giving permission for his wife to study before a grant is given' (p105).

If this archaic practice does still exist it raises the question of whether this is actually legal under the Sex Discrimination Act, 1975.

iii) Childcare

The problem of the lack of childcare provision is a recurrent theme in the literature, (Cousins, 1984; Stoney and Reid, 1980; Oglesby, 1976; Coats, 1989; NIACE, 1991; Kirk, 1977; Keen, 1990;

Sheridan, 1992). In fact every single study mentions this issue, given that women in our society are assigned the major responsibility for childcare. The lack of childcare facilities in the community or in educational institutions can easily present an insurmountable barrier to returning to study. Related to this is the need for courses to be organised during school hours so that women have time to take and collect children, along with some sensitivity by course providers to the fact that women may need to miss classes due to children's illness and other domestic crises. Hutchinson (1986) in her critique of provision suggests that women who return to study are likely to be part of an establishment organised by men for men and,

'There is little to suggest that many institutions seeking mature students and devising courses for them have shifted in their in-built male stance' (p107).

iv) Combining the wife/mother and student roles

'The competing demands of studying and maintaining family commitments is clearly a significant part of the mature student experience' (Woodley, 1987, p131).

As the quotation from Woodley (1987) shows, there is a recognition within the literature that adult students must manage the demands of family and education but very little analysis has been undertaken as to what exactly this means for women. The following discussion will address what we do know about this issue.

One piece of research which provides some useful insights was conducted on a group of women studying at a university in Australia (Martin et al, 1981). It suggests that,

'There is little evidence from any of those students that husbands/partners increased their involvement in household duties to help the women cope with their added roles as students. Rather it seems in many cases that the women needed to prove that they could still maintain their traditionally assigned female tasks in addition to attempting to become successful students' (p122, their emphasis).

Martin et al (1981) document the ways in which women 'coped' and these related to the ways in which they would reduce the amount of housework they undertook (mentioned also by Hutchinson, 1986) or by occasionally working late at night. But there is very little detailed information on how, in practical terms, women students manage. What is well documented, however, is the guilt that women felt at their perceived neglect of their families whilst they were studying.

An American study by Katz (1976), for example, says that,

'Some interviewees felt uncomfortable over the time spent on school and homework, time that seemed to be taken away from family and domestic tasks' (p98).

This point is made very clearly by Giles (1990) as she recounts her own experiences,

'Throughout my two years at college I struggled to accommodate new visions to old habits. I rushed from lectures to cooker, determined that my new life would not cause the family to suffer from my neglect. Irrationally I believed that if I did not cook, clean and wash to certain standards I would lose or have taken away from me, the wonderful opportunities I was beginning to glimpse' (p360).

An issue that is raised in the literature is the importance attached by women students to their roles as wives and mothers. Swarbrick (1978) says that the women in her study valued their maternal role and saw childrearing as 'intrinsically important' (P.179). The importance attached to the maternal role is also highlighted by Lovell (1980) who says that many of the housewives in her study were keen to continue their education but did not do so because they felt that their children were still too young.

What emerges from the literature is a picture of women struggling to combine education and family with little 'help' and acute feelings of guilt about neglecting their domestic and childcare responsibilities in their pursuit of education.

v) Family support

This issue clearly links with the previous discussion about the management of roles and its implications can be glimpsed in the quotation cited previously from Martin et al (1981). If support means husbands/partners becoming more involved in domestic tasks then this was lacking, thus compounding the problems in combining family and education. Interestingly, the findings from this study seem to contradict much of the research which has addressed this issue and the variation seems to be linked with the methodology employed; some analysis of this is undertaken within this section in

addition to attempting to determine what exactly is meant in the literature by 'support'.

As a starting point Oglesby (1976) says that,

'Support of the husband is crucial to survival let alone success' (p14).

and more generally Kirk (1977) has suggested that,

'Domestic pressures are more likely to be more harmful to study than any other factor' (p19).

The studies which have demonstrated that husbands are supportive tend to be based upon quantitative techniques, particularly self-completion questionnaires. The word 'support' is not used explicitly, instead questions are asked about 'encouragement' or 'approval' from family members. Woodley's (1987) study of five thousand mature students for example, includes one question in the whole questionnaire which can be linked to the issue of support.

How do the following people feel about you taking this course? Are they a source of encouragement or discouragement?

	Generally Encouraging	Neutral/ No effect	Generally Discouraging	Not applicable
Spouse/Partner	1	2	3	4
Parent(s)	1	2	3	4
Children	1	2	3	4
Other Relatives	1	2	3	4
Neighbours	1	2	3	4

(Source: Woodley, 1987, p189)

From this data 16% reported that their spouse/partner was 'neutral' and 3% reported they were 'generally discouraging'. It would be interesting to know how many of these were women but he does not give any breakdown of the data by sex, equally there is no explanation of what 'neutral' or 'generally discouraging' actually means. He concludes that,

'The great majority of people have positive or at most neutral attitudes towards the idea of older men and women going back to study, so discouragement is rarely met by a person who decides to become a mature student' (p141).

Similarly, the research by Burwood and Brady (1980) of women studying on two courses in one college details the findings that 80% of the women on one of the courses (GCE) and 60% on the other (TOPS) said that their husbands gave 'unconditional approval' and none said that they 'unconditionally disapproved'. A small percentage on each said their husbands gave 'conditional approval', but there is no analysis of what this meant and the only comment the authors make is that the results from the two courses were 'remarkably similar' which seems rather obvious and not very enlightening.

A study which has explicitly used the word 'support' is the work of Katz (1976) referred to in the previous section. Using both questionnaires and interviews he explored the issue of the support given by men to the educational and occupational aspirations of their

wives. He found that 62% were 'very supportive', 20% 'somewhat', 10% 'neutral' and 5% 'not', from this he concludes that 'husbands were overwhelmingly supportive' (p95) yet from his statistics there were 35% of women who experienced lack of support to varying degrees. This, however, is not explored and significantly there is no analysis of what exactly is meant by 'support'. He does mention the existence of traditional attitudes amongst the men, evidenced by such phrases as 'I will let her' , or 'I will not let her' in the replies he received. He reports also that nearly half the men said they had taken on more chores around the house and one is left with the impression from this study and the others previously mentioned that women who return to study receive a lot of help and encouragement from their husbands/partners. There is perhaps a minority who do not but their experiences are not regarded as statistically significant.

In fairness to Katz (1976) he does raise a point which begins to take us further into an analysis of the issue of support,

'Sometimes one got the impression that the husband was saying that his wife's activities were fine as long as they did not interfere with his life' (p98).

A quote from a businessman in Edwards' (1975) study seems to reiterate this theme,

'When a man works hard all day he shouldn't have to help out at home too. As long as my wife wants to study she'll have to do it as well as the housework and looking after the children. After all I bring the income into this house, so her job is to look after the home' (p40).

Studies by Kirk (1977) into women studying at the Open University and Lovell (1980) into women in adult education confirm the theme of husbands' support being conditional on not having their lives disrupted. Kirk (1977) found that,

'So long as family routine was undisturbed she ('Meg') received encouragement but as soon as some adjustment was required it was expected that studies would be sacrificed' (p22).

and Lovell (1980) that,

'Married women were "allowed" to continue academic work but not at the expense of their household duties' (p98).

It is interesting that both of the above studies utilised a qualitative methodology (Lovell did also use questionnaires) and seem to provide rather different insights into the notion of 'support'. Swarbrick (1978) for example, also used interviews in her study of women Open University students and found a discrepancy between the general claim of family support and enthusiasm, particularly from husbands, and the actual range of support provided. She says that,

'For some this meant a passive acceptance, a mere lack of opposition for others it could mean a generally approving reassuring attitude with any practical help as a bonus' (p177).

From the studies documented thus far it would seem that support means 'help' that women receive either unconditionally or on the basis that it is given provided mens' lives remain undisturbed. This gives a rather wide definition of support as anything other than active discouragement and there is little or no analysis of what this

actually means for women in practical terms. Support is presented as an unproblematic notion and in fact seems to refer to an attitude in many of the studies rather than any form of behaviour. Clearly, this has very significant implications for the ways in which women manage family and education in their lives yet in many of the studies, particularly those which are quantitative, this issue has not been addressed at all.

There are, however, a few studies which provide rather different insights into the notion of support. From these emerge data revealing men's lack of support and the form this takes. Sheridan (1990) who used both questionnaires and interviews in her research on women who had undertaken an information technology course found that the most common factors hindering their return to work were child care arrangements and lack of co-operation from partners. Child care and domestic work were regarded as the women's responsibility and Sheridan raises the issue of,

'The anticipated impact of a husband's unwillingness to support and share household burdens' (p222).

Garner's (1990) qualitative study of women in higher education also provides some important insights, she says that,

'Support is a term which most women associate with "giving" rather than "receiving". Nevertheless it still comes as a shock to many women when even in the most crucial moments when support is needed her family visibly withdraw support and concentrate on her perceived neglect of them' (p218).

Evidence of this 'shock' can be found in Kirk's (1977) study where she cites one of her respondents who had embarked upon an Open University Course,

'I started... last year with an intelligent... kind, loving husband who seemed to change overnight into a boorish Philistine who threatened to leave our children alone at night if I went out to tutorials, left me to find the money for books and fees... I got no grant as I am "supported" (p21).

She concludes from her data that,

'Domestic problems for married students are an important cause of student withdrawal and academic difficulty' (p9).

but seems to be quite apologetic about her findings and almost as if to cover herself and state her position she says that,

'My comments are in no way specifically feminist' (p19) and

'One needs of course to keep such comments in perspective, they are expressed by only a small number of students' (p20).

She proceeds to emphasise that men have problems as well and in her discussion of student withdrawal from courses she quotes from a paper by Kennedy and Powell (1976) which seems to negate any problems associated with the family completely. I quote this in full as the implications seem serious.

'There is a basic problem with the validity of information given. Students quite naturally will tend to ascribe reasons for their action (withdrawal) to outside forces, rather than to such personal factors as lack of motivation preparation or ability. Another difficulty derives from the problem of translating what are often a complex of reasons... into a schematic form amenable to quantitative analysis' (p20).

I would argue that there appear to be two rather arrogant assumptions underlying the above; firstly that students do not tell the truth about their reasons for withdrawal from courses and that problems lie not with circumstances but with personal inadequacies and secondly that only data which can be quantified is valid. Such attitudes seem to effectively keep hidden many of the problems experienced by women because after all, if they cannot be quantified they do not exist, and if they can be quantified the female respondents are probably lying anyway.

A piece of work which does not attempt to negate women's experiences and highlights the lack of support women students receive, has been produced by the 'Taking Liberties Collective'. It is based upon the experiences of women on a 'Second Chance' (see appendix 4) course in Southampton and is grounded within feminism.

They argue that,

'The reality of most women's lives under the present system handicaps us before we start. We have to bear the main responsibility of domestic and childcare labour, regardless of whether we are studying or not. We can't automatically rely on the kind of... support for our own studies that we would expect if we were men' (p68).

The accounts of the women's experiences document systematic opposition and abuse and specific examples are given of cases where women were physically restrained from leaving the house and had their essays ripped up. On a similar theme Swarbrick (1978)

mentions the friend of one of her respondents whose husband resorted to smashing up her equipment and 'intercepting the post to mutilate the units' (p178). She also mentions other more subtle forms of what she calls 'sabotage' such as husbands coming home too late to permit study centre attendance and pleading incapacity to cope with the practical side of childcare. Lovell (1980) also refers to sabotage in her study and this took the form of failure by men to do the necessary household chores to release women's time for studying.

Clearly the lack of support documented in these few studies has serious implications for women returners and it must be acknowledged that not all marriages survive women's return to study; this can be seen particularly in the work of the 'Taking Liberties Collective' (1989) and is a theme in the work of Edwards (1991). The 'Educating Rita' scenario does exist and as Pye (1991) suggests, education does break marriages but curiously there seems to be a silence on this issue in the majority of the literature. The review by Osborne et al (1984) which appears to be the most comprehensive work on mature students, does not mention this issue at all.

From the literature on family support a rather inconsistent picture emerges which seems to be linked to the methodology that has been

utilised and the kinds of questions that have been asked. This raises some important issues which need to be addressed. These are explored in the next section.

2.3 Concluding Remarks

In terms of the barriers/obstacles that women face when they return to study a consensus emerges from the literature on the issues of confidence, finance and childcare. With regard to the last there seems also to be an underlying assumption that this is women's responsibility, that this role is in fact immutable and provision is needed to help them to cope with this. We learn also that many women experience feelings of guilt about 'neglecting' their families and have to cope with competing demands upon their time. On the issue of support however, there are very differing findings and this raises the question as to why this should be.

The studies which highlight support as something women positively receive tend to be quantitative although within this data there is evidence which points to lack of support but this is not explored. In addition there is no analysis of what actually constitutes support, it is presented as an unproblematic notion and there appears to be an implicit assumption that this is something that men do give to women. Very little insight is gained into women's lives in the private sphere, in fact this issue is almost dismissed, at most meriting a

couple of cursory items on a questionnaire. In contrast the few studies which have utilised a qualitative methodology and particularly those grounded within feminism reveal a very different picture of support, or more accurately, the lack of it. From these studies some insights can be gained about what support actually means and the forms that it takes, i.e. it appears to refer more to an attitude rather than to practical help. This information is important for an understanding of women returners' experiences.

These differing findings raise questions about the research methods employed and also about the epistemological assumptions upon which the research is founded. An important question that must be addressed for example, is why the lack of support which evidently exists in the data is not explored in the quantitative studies. The qualitative studies reveal something of the structures/processes of patriarchy, quantitative studies do not. It is interesting however that there appears to be no dialogue in the literature on this issue.

If women are to have a realistic opportunity to succeed in the education system we need to know more about the obstacles and problems they experience as they seek to meet the demands of family and education. The issue of support needs to be explored further, along with the epistemological and methodological questions raised by the literature. These questions are taken up in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY, METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

3.1 Introduction

Some answers to the questions raised in the previous chapter can be found in the feminist critiques of 'mainstream social science' and what counts as 'authoritative knowledge' (Walby, 1990). Adopting Harding's (1987) differentiation between theory, logic of inquiry and technique for gathering evidence, previous research can be evaluated and a way forward presented.

3.2 Epistemology

'The essence of feminism is for us, its ideas about the personal, its insistence on the validity of women's experiences and its argument that an understanding of women's experience can be gained only through understanding and analysing everyday life, where oppression as well as everything else is grounded' (Stanley and Wise, 1983a, p135).

The above quotation provides some useful insights into what is distinctive about a feminist epistemology and the implications for a methodology which enables accurate documentation of women's lives and the uncovering of their experiences.

The basic propositions of a feminist epistemology are stated by Eichler (1985),

- All knowledge is socially constructed.
- There is no such thing as value-free science and the social sciences so far have served and reflected men's interests.

- The dominant ideology is that of the ruling group.

These propositions encapsulate the major themes of feminist critiques of mainstream social science and can be clearly seen in the following quotation,

'Traditionally, knowledge truth and reality have been constructed as if mens' experiences were normative, as if being human meant being male... What has been presented as an objective view of the world was selectively the dominant white, male view' (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p3).

Implied within this quotation is the theme of the invisibility and distortion of female experience and this could certainly be applied to the quantitative research into support presented in the previous chapter. Perhaps it would not serve men's interests to explore this issue; perhaps it challenges and questions the dominant ideology concerning gender relations or perhaps it is regarded as too trivial to merit serious academic endeavour. Whatever the reason, the theme of invisibility and distortion features strongly in feminist critiques (Acker, 1983; Anderson, 1990; Duelli-Klein, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983a; Oakley, 1985; Cook and Fonow, 1990; Westkott, 1990). Oakley (1985) for example says,

'In much sociology women as a social group are invisible or inadequately represented; they take the insubstantial form of ghosts, shadows or stereotyped characters' (p1).

She suggests three reasons for the bias against women in sociology; firstly the nature of its origins, reflecting the sexist interests of the

'founding fathers'; secondly that sociology has been a male profession and therefore reflects male interests and views of reality; and thirdly that the ideology of gender roles underpins the structure of sociology as much as it does the structure of social life. Oakley's ideas could perhaps be summed up quite succinctly by Stanley and Wise (1983) when they argue that the social sciences are,

'... sexist, biased and rotten with patriarchal values' (p2).

Oakley's second point has been echoed by a number of other writers and constitutes a major theme of feminist critiques. Ramazanoglu (1992) makes this point very strongly in her comment that,

'All schools of sociology prior to feminism systematically privilege male knowledge, experience and interests but without acknowledging that is what they do' (p209).

The emergence of a feminist epistemology, argues Maynard (1990), has been an important means through which sociology itself is being re-shaped. It has transformed a sociology which has previously been concerned with 'public' issues such as class and employment to one which recognises the existence of 'private' issues. This point is made clearly by Crowley and Himmelweit (1992), when they document the,

'... recognition that women's lives were centred around different issues from men's and that these needed to be studied if we were to gain an understanding of the way gender was structured in society. Women were to be studied not just in the masculine public domain but also in their own domain of the private' (p2).

This focus upon the 'private' is seen by some writers (Nielsen, 1990; Stanley and Wise, 1983a; Duelli-Klein, 1983) as a 'paradigm shift' because it has generated the study of phenomena previously not considered extensively by social science, i.e. rape, wife-abuse, childbirth, housework and sexual harassment. Nielsen (1990) comments that,

'... what was previously invisible has become visible' (p20).

She suggests that to adopt a new perspective means to see things one did not see before and also to see the familiar differently. The exploration of women's distinctive experiences is therefore,

'... an essential step in restoring the multitude of female realities and interests to social theory and research' (Anderson et al, 1990, p96).

Anderson's use of the word 'restoring' is perhaps misplaced as it does suggest adding back something that had existed previously. If however, one accepts the context of the argument presented by feminist scholars, female realities and interests have never informed mainstream social theory and research. A feminist epistemology therefore opens up the possibility of exploring the experiences of one half of humanity that hitherto have been,

'... hidden, inaccessible, suppressed, distorted, misunderstood, ignored' (DuBois, 1983, p109).

In addition it would, argues Acker,

'provide women with the understandings of how their everyday worlds, their trials and troubles, were generated by the larger social structure' (Acker, 1983, p424).

Whilst both the exploration of experience and the provision of explanations for that experience are laudable and important in themselves, a number of writers argue that a feminist epistemology must also contribute to ways of changing women's position. (Duelli-Klein, 1983; Smith, 1987; Westkott, 1990; Cook and Fonow, 1990; Weiler, 1988). They argue for a politically involved sociology, a sociology 'for' women rather than merely 'on' women. Westkott (1983) for example, suggests that a social science 'for' women is,

'not simply a doleful catalogue of the facts of patriarchy but an opposition to the very facts that it discovers' (p64).

A sociology 'for' women therefore challenges both politically and intellectually and provides a way forward in making public what Ettore (1991) calls,

'Women's experience of patriarchal pain' (p60).

Exemplified within the discussion thus far are some of the founding principles of western contemporary feminism, i.e. the commonality of 'sisterhood', which Barrett and Phillips (1992) argue have been challenged in dramatic ways by concepts of difference. They suggest that these challenges 'have been in the order of a "paradigm shift" (p2) and given this assertion it is clearly pertinent that they are considered in this discussion of feminist epistemology.

A major challenge relates to the underlying assumption that women share a common experience of oppression and that the cause of this oppression lies at the level of social structure. This structure 'might be posited as patriarchy, or an exploitative economic system' (Barrett and Phillips, 1992, p2). Picking up this theme, Crowley and Himmelweit (1992) argue that,

'... women's position would be fundamentally improved by a radical transformation of society in which divisions between... public and private were transformed' (p3).

Since the 1980s however, they suggest that feminist theory has moved onto a different course and the 'consensus' (Barrett and Phillips, 1992, p4) has broken up. This they argue, has been aided by two forces; firstly the political impact of the critique by Black feminists of the 'racist and ethnocentric assumptions of white feminists' (p4) and the development of post-structuralist and post-modernist ideas. The critique by Black feminists focussed on the issue of the priority given to the concerns of white, western, middle-class women and highlighted the differences between the experience of Black women and white women (McDowell and Pringle, 1992; Crowley and Himmelweit, 1992). The critique also drew attention to the presumptions behind speaking for all women. This recognition of the differences between women challenged the notion of a politics based upon a single identity and placed the issue of the heterogeneity of women firmly on the feminist theoretical and political agenda. This point is exemplified by McDowell and Pringle (1992) where they suggest that,

'At the political level, the notion of a "politics of identity" rather than a politics based on gender and class gained credence. Thus the idea that there is a clear homogeneity of... interests is challenged, and difference rather than commonality is placed at the centre' (p92).

They argue that the recognition that women are differentiated and divided by class, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age and sexual preference became,

'... an essential part of the post modern discourse that swept the social sciences' (p92).

This focus upon difference and the diversity of women's positions logically means that different groups of women experience oppression in different ways and this, argues Ramazanoglu (1989), poses problems for any universalistic theory of women's common oppression. On a similar theme, Crowley and Himmelweit (1992) pose a poignant question when they ask,

'Must we reject the project of "knowing women" at any level of generality as the post-modernist critique of overarching theory would indicate. If so, what remains of the political or theoretical project of feminism?' (p5).

Another question is posed by Barrett and Phillips (1992) in their discussion of the way in which feminists have moved from,

'... grand theory to local studies, from cross-cultural analyses of patriarchy to the complex and historical interplay of sex, race and class, from notions of a female identity... towards the instability of female identity... Do such developments then leave feminists with nothing general to say? (p6/7).



Clearly these issues of difference and universality are crucial not only for feminist theory, but also have wider implications for the sociological enterprise.

However, not all feminist writers (or all sociologists) fully accept the theoretical premises from which such questions are generated. Walby (1992) for example, whilst recognising the value of the points made by post-modern critics about the dangers of theorising gender inequality at a general level says,

‘However, they go too far in their dispersal of identity and power and consequently there are many limitations to their accounts of gender relations’ (p35).

She challenges for example, the idea that the number of divisions between women and men is too great for the concept of patriarchy to be utilised and asserts that patriarchy (and racism) ‘remain potent social forces’ (p32).

Such debates will clearly continue to characterise feminism in the 1990s and Barrett and Phillips (1992) in their exposition of the debates suggest that,

‘The strategic questions that face contemporary feminism are now informed by a much richer understanding of heterogeneity and diversity; but they continue to revolve around the alliances and commonalities that give meaning to the idea of feminism’ (p9).

Given the centrality of the notions of heterogeneity and diversity in feminist epistemology, a key question arises as to how women's experience can be explored. It would appear that small-scale qualitative studies of specific instances of micro-politics could illuminate issues of difference and commonality.

3.3 Methodology and Method

'New wine must not be poured into old bottles'
(Mies, 1983, p117).

It is evident that a methodological framework is required which is quite different from established male dominated methodologies.

Westkott (1990) suggests that,

'We need to consider what methods are best suited to our quest for feminist knowledge in which women's concerns are central to inspire our questions' (p64).

The feminist critiques of 'traditional' social science research have much in common with the phenomenological critiques which seek to expose,

'the distorted model of science and the social world embedded within positivism' (Graham, 1983, p133).

One aspect of the phenomenological critiques relevant to this discussion, relates to the positivist assertion that the observer and observational categories in research can be neutral and value free. This can result in data which Reason and Rowen (1981) suggest are 'statistically significant but humanly insignificant'.

On a similar theme, Cook and Fonow (1990) suggest that critiques of quantitative research techniques have pointed to the potential for distortion inherent in this approach. They argue that,

'Emphasis on statistical methods means variables are often conceptualised according to what is most easily quantifiable rather than what is most theoretically important' (p77).

They give the example of Pagelow's (1979) analysis of research on battered women in which she suggests that,

'... women battering is typically defined as referring only to physical violence, excluding psychological and verbal abuse because it is too difficult to measure quantitatively' (p77).

The issue of focusing upon what is most easily quantifiable could provide further explanation for the lack of exploration of support in previous research. Given that the term has been inadequately conceptualised it therefore cannot be measured. In addition Harding (1987) argues that traditional social science has begun its analysis only in men's experiences and has asked only those questions about social life which men want answered. This leads to,

'... partial and even perverse understandings of social life' (p6).

In the light of the data from qualitative studies on women students (see chapter 2), the findings based upon quantitative techniques do seem both partial and perverse, even contradictory.

Positivist notions of 'objectivity' have also been criticised by feminist writers and the essence of these critiques can for example be found

in the work of DuBois (1983). She suggests that the polarisation of the subjective and objective falsifies experience and reality and the possibility of knowing them. She comments that they are not independent of each other, nor should they be, since both are modes of knowing, analysis, interpretation and understanding.

'The challenge for feminist science will be to see, name, describe and explain without recreating these dichotomies, without falling into the old pattern of objectifying experience... by withdrawing from it ourselves to a position of assumed neutrality' (p112).

Related to the issue of objectivity are the assumptions made in positivist research about the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. The positivist approach sees people as 'objects' existing 'out there' and the researchers' role is to conduct research 'on' them. This approach has been criticised from a feminist perspective with calls for a rejection of this type of hierarchal relationship. Stanley and Wise (1983a) argue that traditional relationships which involve,

'Treating people as objects - sex objects or research objects is morally unjustifiable (p170).

Positivism has been further criticised for its lack of focus on the subjective feelings of the researcher and has led to calls for the rejection of what Stanley and Wise call the ideology of 'hygienic research' where,

'no problems occur, no emotions are involved. It is research as it is described not research as it is experienced' (p153).

This point is also made in the earlier work of Oakley (1981), she argues for,

'... the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias - it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives' (p58).

Oakley makes the above point in relation to her discussion of her use of interviews as a research method and this theme is taken up in the next section. It is, however, necessary at this point to raise the question of what are the characteristics of a feminist methodology which will,

'minimise the tendency to transform those researched into objects of scrutiny and manipulation' (Acker, 1983, p425).

It has been suggested by Rheinharz (1983) that a 'participatory model' is fundamental to producing a sociology 'for' women. This model aims to produce non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationships, it

'Allows for women studying women in an interactive process without the artificial subject/object split between researcher and researched' (Duelli-Klein, 1983, p95).

In terms of how this relates to method, Roberts (1981) suggests that feminists must emphasise the importance of listening to, recording and understanding women's own descriptions and accounts of their lives, arguing that from such a vantage point it is possible to see

how women's world is organised and the extent to which this differs from the world of men.

Extrapolating from the view of Roberts, it could be argued that feminist research should adopt qualitative methods and indeed this position has been advocated by Finch (1984) and Scott (1985). A more recent article by Gelsthorpe (1992) argues that,

'... quantitative methods cannot convey in-depth understanding of or feeling for those being researched and that they often ignore sex and gender differences' (p214).

The quantitative research on mature students would certainly seem to substantiate Gelsthorpe's point. However the question must be raised as to whether it is valid to equate feminist research with qualitative methods. Graham (1983) warns of building a 'methodological ghetto' for women and suggests that,

'We need to design research strategies that take account of the complex and overlapping inter-relationships within the public and private domains. Wholesale adoption of qualitative research by and for women may thus reinforce the very divisions that feminists are seeking to destroy' (p136).

Being prescriptive about 'appropriate' research methods may lead feminist research into the same trap as traditional (male) research. It leads to a limit being imposed upon what can be studied if the choice of research problem is determined by the method rather than the other way around.

In the debate about 'appropriate' research methods, Harding's (1987) distinction between 'method' and 'methodology' is important. (Her ideas have also been used in the work of more recent contributors to the debate, e.g. Walby, 1990 and Stanley, 1990). These terms are often used inter-changeably and Stanley (1990) in her discussion of whether a feminist methodology exists suggest that,

'Such startlingly divergent views on the existence and acceptability of 'feminist methodology' should alert us to a semantic problem, the possibility that those commentators are referring to rather different things whilst using the same technical term, 'methodology' (p26).

This clarification of the terms is extremely useful and provides a way forward for identifying the distinctive features of a feminist methodology. Harding (1987) argues that,

'It is not by looking at research methods that we will be able to identify the distinctive features of feminist research' (p3).

She proceeds to identify these features of research and asserts that,

'... it generates its problematics from the perspective of women's experiences. It also uses these experiences as a significant indicator of the reality against which hypotheses are tested' (p7).

Harding stresses the importance of using women's experience to produce a sociology 'for' women,

'If one begins with what appears problematic from the perspective of women's experiences, one is led to design research for women. That is, the goal of this inquiry is to provide for women's explanation of social phenomena that they want and need' (p8).

and in doing so aligns herself with Duelli-Klein (1983); Smith (1987); Westkott (1990); Cook and Fonow (1990) and Weiler (1988). Following Harding, it can therefore be argued that the distinctive feature of feminist research becomes the kind of questions feminists ask, producing a sociology 'for' women, rather than the method (i.e. the techniques) which they employ. Walby (1990) in fact suggests that,

'The strength of Harding's work is her demonstration of the greater significance of the questions to be asked and how this has been patriarchally organised, rather than the narrower question of whether specific methods of investigation are more feminist than others' (p18).

The questions that need to be asked relate to the exploration of the personal in understanding women's lives and their experience of oppression under patriarchal power structures in the public and private spheres. These questions must generate methodologies which will produce knowledge that can be used to transform patriarchy, or more optimistically, lead to its elimination. Ramazanoglu (1992) argues that feminist methodologies are,

'... new ways of knowing and of seeking 'truths' but they are also forms of political commitment to the empowerment of women' (p210).

3.4 Adopting a Qualitative Method

Having argued the case that there is not necessarily one feminist research method, there is however a great deal of support in the literature for the idea that qualitative methods are possibly more

appropriate in the conduct of feminist research. Certainly if one accepts the following description of qualitative research by Sherman and Webb (1988) that,

'Qualitative implies a direct concern with experience as it is 'lived' or 'felt' or 'undergone'... Qualitative research then, has the aim of understanding experience as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it' (p7).

Abbott (1990) also makes a case for the adoption of qualitative methods when she says that,

'Feminists have tended to espouse qualitative methods as the better means for carrying out feminist research because they imply more equality between the researcher and the researched... they do not turn the researched into fragmented objects' (Abbott and Wallace, 1990, p212).

The work of Roberts (1981) also presents a rationale for the use of in-depth interviews and this can be substantiated by the later work of Anderson et al (1990),

'When women speak for themselves they reveal hidden realities, new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the 'truths' of official accounts and cast doubt on established theories. Interviews with women can explore private realms to tell us what women actually did instead of what experts thought they did or should have done' (p96).

I have presented a case for the use of in-depth interviews being an appropriate method for feminist research as a rationale for my adoption of this method. (A discussion of the interviews undertaken and the ways in which a feminist perspective informed this process can be found in the next chapter). Given that quantitative methods

tend to be dominant in research on mature students (see Chapter 2) and in the light of the critiques of these methods that have been presented, a method must be used which facilitates the exploration of women's private worlds. In the context of the questions to be addressed in this study (see chapter 1), that method must be qualitative.

3.5 'A Feminist Paradigm for Interviewing'

(Cook and Fonow, 1990, p.76)

A starting point for a feminist approach to the use of interviews, according to Nielsen (1990), can be found in Oakley's (1981) study of the transition to motherhood. She compares textbook 'recipes' for interviewing (p30) with her experience of interviewing women and suggests that in the light of her experience these 'recipes' are 'morally indefensible' (p41). Within these 'recipes' much emphasis is placed upon the 'researcher-researched' relationship and the importance of objectivity and detachment on the part of the researcher. The image projected is that of a hierarchical relationship where the researcher has the power to control the conduct of the interview with a respondent who is essentially passive. Moser and Kalton's (1971) definition of interviewing would seem to exemplify this.

'A conversation between the interviewer and respondent with the purpose of eliciting certain information from the respondent' (p271).

The interview therefore becomes a specialised form of conversation, a one-way process, in which one person asks the questions and the

other gives the answers. This one-way process, where one gives and the other takes can also be seen in Bogdan and Biklen's (1982) definition of interviewing as,

'a purposeful conversation... that is directed by one in order to get information' (quoted by Ely, 1991, p135).

The power in this type of interview lies firmly with the interviewer who must remain detached from those providing the answers. The call for detachment is made strongly and I would argue sometimes rather worryingly as in the following,

'But the interview is still more than a tool and object of study. It is the art of sociological sociability, the game we play for the pleasure of savouring its subtleties. It is our flirtation with life, our eternal affair, played hard to win, but played with that detachment and amusement which gives us, win or lose, the spirit to rise up and interview again and again' (Benney and Hughes, 1977, p234).

This account (which could only have been written by men!) portrays the interview almost as if it were some fleeting non-involved sexual encounter where the interviewer (male) exploits the respondent in order to satisfy an almost voyeuristic desire for information. There also seems to be the implication of a lack of care or concern, the interview is a game not to be taken too seriously, good for the ego of the interviewer who takes but gives nothing. I personally find this approach repugnant and ethically suspect. Oakley (1981) sums up the textbook approach succinctly when she says,

'The paradigm of the "proper" interview appeals to such values as objectivity, hierarchy and science' (p38).

Oakley (1981) found that advice about maintaining distance between interviewer and interviewee limited her ability to communicate with her respondents in a way that would generate meaningful information. One of the key aspects she identifies is answering the questions of her respondents and giving advice. She highlights the vital role that the interviewer has to play as she is a,

'... tool for making possible the articulated and recorded commentary of women on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal society' (p48).

It is precisely this type of knowledge which is required in the production of a sociology 'for' women and thus exemplifies the contribution that a feminist paradigm for interviewing can make to the exploration of new ways of knowing and seeking "truths" (Ramazanoglu, 1992).

3.6 Conclusion

In the light of the previous discussion, I would argue that to produce a sociology 'for' women it is vital that research methods are adopted which enable women to give their own accounts of their experiences and allow them to 'talk back' to the researcher. In essence what is advocated is a very different kind of research relationship, a relationship which is non-hierarchical and,

'When the interviewer is prepared to invest her own personal identity in the relationship' (Oakley, 1981, p41).

The intrinsic features of a feminist epistemology, methodology and method seem to be captured in the following quotation from Smith (1975).

'Our means of knowing and speaking of ourselves and our world are written for us by men who occupy a special place in it. In learning to speak our experience and situation we insist upon the right to begin where we are, to stand as subjects of our sentences and to hear one another as authoritative speakers of our experience' (p2).

A major role of feminist research must be to provide the conduit for women to become authoritative speakers.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTERVIEWING WOMEN - THE RESEARCH PROCESS

4.1 Introduction

Having established my commitment to a feminist approach and to the use of interviews in the conduct of my research, I then began the empirical work. The following discussion documents my experience of the research process because as Stanley and Wise (1983a) argue,

'Our experiences of the research process should become explicitly present within research reports as these are central to the research process' (p50).

A number of the issues which arose during the conduct of the interviews are documented namely, rapport, emotion and power.

4.2 The Research Process

i) Selecting the sample

The women who participated in this research were studying in two educational institutions, one a further education college, the other a women's residential adult education college (see appendix 2). My previous contact with the latter had given me an idea that it offered a qualitatively different experience for women returners and I wanted to 'test' this empirically. I selected a range of courses, community nursing, social work, teaching, 'Wider Horizons' and 'Fresh Start' (see appendix 2), all of them comprised mainly of women. After gaining agreement from the course tutors I spoke to each group in

turn about the project and requested biographical information on a form which I assured them would be confidential. I stressed that this was purely voluntary and received sixty-one completed forms from a total population of eighty-five women.

The details provided then enabled me to select a sample of women who met the criteria of being married or living with a partner and having children under the age of sixteen.

From the information provided there were twenty-one women who fulfilled the criteria, (I was quite surprised by the low number, many were either single, divorced or older with grown up children). I then sent them a letter inviting them to take part in the project. Approximately one week later I contacted each of the women to confirm whether they would be willing to take part, giving further information about what the interviews would involve and reassurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity. During this phase the only black woman in the sample declined to take part and I felt it inappropriate to press her for her reasons. My sample therefore consisted of twenty women aged between thirty-four and fifty-two, twelve from the FE college and eight from the women's college (biographical information on each respondent can be found in appendix 1). Owing to the small sample size I make no claims regarding the generalisability of the research findings but this is an issue which will be addressed in the concluding chapter.

ii) Issues of 'Race' and Class in the sample

a) Race

From the previous discussion it is evident that the sample is limited in terms of its size but it is also limited in terms of the fact that it includes only white women, although this was not by design on my part. The study is open to the potential criticism from Black feminists for 'its incipient racism and lack of relevance to black women's lives' (Carby, 1987, p72); therefore some explanation for the absence of Black women is necessary.

The two colleges from which the sample was drawn are situated in a predominantly white, middle-class area in the south-east and the composition of women on the courses reflected this. It would certainly seem to corroborate a point made by Edwards (1990) that,

'... educational institutions are white middle-class places and people who are part of them are white and middle-class' (p484).

As mentioned above the sample did originally contain one black women who, when approached to confirm her participation in the study declined and I felt it to be inappropriate to press her for her reasons. The unwillingness of Black women to participate in research conducted by white women has been documented by Edwards (1990). She makes the point that in her research she was perceived as white and middle-class and,

'For those of us wishing to contact Black women, it would seem that we need to think more carefully about how we make this contact

and not make the assumption that institutions which give us status and credibility in the eyes of white women will necessarily do so in the eyes of Black women' (p485).

The absence of Black women from the sample has precluded my entering into some of the methodological debates around the issue of whether in fact white researchers should study and interview Black people, (see for example, Carby, 1987; Edwards, 1990; Walton, 1986). Neither did I have to face the ethical dilemmas discussed by Edwards (1990) relating to whether to exclude Black women; the student population at the two colleges was predominantly white.

However, the absence of Black women from both the potential and actual sample might also be explained by 'racial' differences in returning to study, i.e. that Black women are less likely than white women to return to study where married and looking after school age children. Breugel's (1989) work for example, suggests that Black women are much more likely to be working full time.

Clearly therefore, this study will reflect the experiences only of white women and I acknowledge that this is an important limitation (see also chapter 11), particularly given the point made by Edwards (1990) that,

'Black women are part of the population of mature mother/students and therefore should be in any research concerned with them' (p483).

b) Class

In determining the class position of the women who took part in the study, I adopted the conventional system of categorisation by using the occupations of their fathers and husbands/partners. Given the criticisms that feminists have made of this approach and in the light of the debates on the issue of women and class over the last twenty years, (Acker, 1973; Delphy, 1981; Stanworth, 1984; Dale et al, 1985; Abbot and Sapsford, 1987; Abbot, 1987) and because this study purports to be feminist, some justification for my approach is clearly necessary.

From the issues raised in the literature, a more appropriate strategy would be to classify the women on the basis of their own occupations (Stanworth, 1984; Abbot and Sapsford, 1987) and to utilise both their mothers' and fathers' occupations in determining their class of origin. It was however, here that I encountered the 'technical problems' raised by Abbot and Sapsford (1987) who say,

'Measuring a woman's class independently of her husband's or other male head of households is desirable if it can be achieved in practice... (p17 - my emphasis).

In the interviews I asked the women to discuss their family backgrounds and asked specifically about the occupations of their parents. It was immediately apparent that their family backgrounds accorded with the conventional pattern of families in the 1950s with the male as breadwinner and the female as housewife. A comment from one of the women was typical of many I received,

'My mother was a housewife... I mean it wasn't sort of accepted in those days, you know, nobody's mum had a job'. (Pat).

Of the twenty women, fourteen had mothers who had never worked outside the home during marriage and six had mothers who took up part-time paid employment when their children went to school. In this latter group four did office work, one shop work and one nursing. I was therefore faced with the problem of how to determine the class position of the "economically inactive" women and as Abbot and Sapsford (1987) have highlighted, this problem, along with incorporating those who have a transitory participation in the labour market (p33), presents considerable difficulties. Abbot (1987) says that,

'Generally the solution has been to continue to place these women by reference to their husband's social class...' (p93).

and this, despite its evident limitations, was the strategy I adopted.

My approach is defensible also, I would suggest, on the grounds that I was seeking to compare my data on the women's experiences of schooling with other research into girls' education in the 1950s and 1960s (see chapter 5), which had utilised conventional categorisations of class.

The reasons for determining the women's current class position in terms of their husband's/partner's occupation relate again to the fact

that seventeen of them were "economically inactive", the other three had part-time clerical jobs. The fact that they were students and mothers precluded them from obtaining full-time paid employment and resulted in them being dependent on their husband's/partner's financial resources. Also, the husband's/partner's occupation was important for my exploration of the impact of middle class versus working class men's occupations on potential availability of time for domestic labour and of resources for financial support (see chapters 8 and 9).

Therefore, whatever its limitations from the point of view of feminist critiques, it is important to explore the salience of the social class position of the male breadwinner for their wives' experiences of returning to study while economically dependent.

iii) Format of the Interviews

Each of the women was interviewed twice during the course of one academic year. The first interview utilised a life-history format (see appendix 3) and its purpose was exploratory to enable the,

'Telling of experiences in the biographical context in which they occur' (Graham, 1984, p110).

The interviews lasted from one to four hours with two hours as the average. The second interview (see appendix 3) was conducted three to six months later and focused primarily upon the experience of being a student. Those interviews were shorter and lasted on

average one hour. All interviews were tape recorded (regarded by Lofland (1971) as imperative if full attention is to be given to the interviewee) and later transcribed.

iv) Conducting the interviews - place and time

I discussed with the women where they would like the interviews to take place as I was aware of the demands upon their time. Ely (1991) suggests in fact that a vital characteristic of qualitative research is the researcher being responsive to participants' schedules. A key issue was that they were able to talk to me without being interrupted by children or partner. This resulted in the majority of the interviews being conducted in the women's homes, either during the day when children were at school or in the evening when they were dispatched either to bed or to another room with instructions not to interrupt. It was interesting, but perhaps not surprising, that none of the women wanted their partners present. I suspect that the outcome of this study would have been very different had they been present.

v) Establishing rapport

An issue well documented in the literature (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984b; Corbin 1971) is the warmth and hospitality shown by women respondents. My experience was no exception, I was made to feel welcome, introduced to other members of their families and

invited to share meals with them. Some were a little nervous initially but I sensed a commitment to the goals of the project and a willingness to take part. The connection between showing hospitality and a commitment to the research relationship as documented by Oakley (1981) has however been criticised by Ribbens (1989) who says,

'... I find this evidence singularly unconvincing as there is a strong norm that you offer refreshment to anyone visiting your house for any period of time, including workmen (p583).

This point is certainly valid but I would argue that the warmth with which I was received extended beyond what could be described as polite or customary. Like both Oakley (1981) and Finch (1984b), I was expecting to have to work at 'something called rapport' and was both surprised and pleased to find this was not the case. Finch (1984b) suggests a reason for this which is based upon the idea of a shared identity and understanding.

'When the interviewer is also a women, both parties share a subordinate structural position by virtue of their gender. This creates the possibility that a particular kind of identification will develop' (p76).

In addition to this crucial point I would add another dimension which facilitated rapport and which could be termed the 'perceived relevance' of the study to the women's lives. During my initial discussions in the sampling phase I had attempted to explain in detail the purpose of the project and to answer any questions of which there were many. It became clear that the women wanted

assurances about what I was going to do with the information they provided. Was I just another 'academic' who wanted to encroach upon their lives, take all that I could and use it to further my career? Did not PhD theses sit on library shelves gathering dust never to see the light of day? This scepticism is understandable and whilst I could give no assurances that this work would change the course of women's education, I did stress my intention that it should be used in the promotion of 'equal opportunities'.

Whilst I was prepared to answer any questions, I was not prepared for the response I got as I was about to leave which touched me considerably. A number of the women said that they thought that this was a worthwhile project making comments like,

'It's probably too late for us but it might help women in the future' (Comment from field notes).

Another factor which I think helped to establish rapport is what Finch (1984) and Edwards (1990) refer to as 'placing the interviewer'. During the discussions I have just described I talked about my background and that the origins of the project lay in my own experience of being a mature student and also a teacher of mature students. Whilst I did not try to set myself up as an expert I felt I needed to establish my credibility as a researcher if the work was to be taken seriously. This does raise an interesting question regarding 'power' within the research relationship and this issue is addressed in the following section.

I would argue therefore, that the 'perceived relevance' of the research to the women and the fact that I was also a woman who had experienced and understood some of the problems they faced as students helped to establish rapport. Borrowing a phrase from phenomenology which seems to encapsulate this point we had a 'shared universe of meaning'.

4.3 Issues of power in the research relationship

A key issue within the feminist methodological debate is the importance of dismantling the power relationship between researcher and researched. (See chapter 3). There is an assumption that when women are interviewing women it is possible for this to happen by virtue of the fact that interviewer and interviewee share the same gender oppression. Whilst the reality of a shared oppression may facilitate the development of rapport (as discussed in the previous section), the question must be raised as to whether this mitigates against the dynamics of power. Ribbens (1989) poses an interesting question on this issue,

'Are research relationships like other public relationships, which entail structured elements of power and manipulation? (p588).

I would argue that as feminist researchers it is incumbent upon us whilst documenting the process of research to reflect both honestly and critically upon the social encounters we ourselves have established.

As Stanley and Wise (1983), suggest,

'We must acknowledge power where it exists and learn to deal with it wisely as feminists' (p84).

The concept of power seems inappropriate when we are talking about a collaborative endeavour by women with women to unravel the complexities of their oppressions and where there is a basic commitment to sisterhood but,

'... when does a denial of power become a denial of responsibility' (Wise, quoted by Ribbens, 1989, p580).

I would argue therefore that as researchers we must be aware of the potential we possess to exploit those we research for our own ends and to acknowledge dimensions of power where they exist. With this in mind I shall now seek to unravel the complexities of the power dynamics in the interviews I conducted and suggest that they constituted more than two women chatting together over a cup of tea and a tape-recorder, however much I might have wanted them to be so.

In the previous section I raised the issue of the 'perceived relevance' of the research and that the women had 'placed' me as someone who understood the problems they faced as students because of my own experience. I did not feel however, that portraying myself as someone who merely had empathy with them and wanted to do 'good works' to further the promotion of 'equal opportunities' was sufficient. I felt I needed to establish my credibility as a researcher

if the work was to be taken seriously by the women. Whilst not wanting to necessarily set myself up as 'expert', I wanted to convince them of my proficiency for the task and this necessitated I felt, my giving them some details of my academic background. This could be construed as an attempt to assert power over them by virtue of the fact that I had more qualifications than they did but curiously enough it was I who felt powerless. As this initial stage it was they who held the power, it was they who would decide whether this research happened at all. They could make the decision whether to participate or not; if they refused I had no powers beyond those of persuasion to make them change their minds. During those initial approaches I did experience great anxiety that no-one would be interested, that my goal would crumble before my eyes through their non-participation (This fear was also expressed by Riddell, 1989). Although in no sense did I attempt to be manipulative during the discussions it certainly felt that way.

My fears of non-participation were fortunately unfounded and as documented earlier sixty-one out of eighty-five women I contacted expressed their interest by providing biographical details. At this point I felt much encouraged and whilst I would not say I felt more 'powerful' I certainly felt more confident about my endeavours.

Having selected those women who met the criteria discussed earlier, I contacted them to arrange interviews. Whilst I may have been in

a position to assert 'power' over them because they had volunteered, I had no wish to do so and indeed felt the importance of demonstrating my willingness to meet them on their own terms. This approach was underpinned by my view that they were doing me a favour by giving up their time to talk to me rather than the other way around. I wanted to be as accommodating as possible in terms of time and place saying that I would fit in with their schedules rather than they with mine. As documented in the section on time and place this resulted in some of the interviews being conducted during the day, often between my full-time teaching or in the evening after a day at work. Clearly this is one of the hazards of attempting to do research part-time and is unavoidable but I think it is relevant for two reasons. Firstly to illustrate my wish to give my respondents 'power' in terms of their choice of time and place and secondly to suggest that possibly the quality of my data was impoverished through my fatigue at times. Another factor which relates to the previous point and may have had an impact upon my effectiveness as a researcher was the death of a member of my family as I was conducting the first round of interviews. I recount this not to be self-indulgent or to seek sympathy from the reader, but to state overtly what I was bringing to the research relationship. Whether these factors affected my competence I cannot determine but J's death had a curious impact on the rapport that developed in the interviews I conducted immediately afterwards. Although I did not

make my problem explicit they immediately picked up that I was not 'at my best' and when asked I did explain. I was aware of making myself vulnerable by sharing something of myself, perhaps appearing 'powerless' at the outset of the interviews; before the tape-recorder was switched on it was me who was talking and they who were listening. Whether it is coincidence I cannot tell but these interviews yielded some of the 'richest' data I received and rapport was established easily. This would seem to corroborate Finch's (1984b) point regarding the richness of data that can be obtained when,

'A female researcher interviewing another woman abandons the mystified role of researcher and instead presents herself as an ordinary woman with many of the same concerns as the women she is interviewing' (quoted by Riddell, 1989, p84).

Equally Measor (1985) highlights the situation of when she revealed information about herself she initiated talk from her respondents that would have been difficult to obtain by direct questions.

The issue of direct questions also raises the point that the power dynamics of the research relationship can be affected by the method used to collect the data. The use of quantitative methods such as questionnaires gives the researcher the power to predetermine what is important by the setting of specific questions. It enables the researcher to construct another's social reality. Unstructured interviews on the other hand, enable the respondent to control the flow of information, to tell their own stories.

In the first interviews I conducted I adopted a life-history format and prompting where necessary, I acted as a facilitator for the women in the telling of their own stories. In her discussion of this method Graham (1983) says,

'Stories, in providing a self-structured format for the interview can counteract the exploitative tendencies of social research. The story marks the boundaries of what the individual is prepared to tell. In a situation of inequality, stories are resources by which informants can redress the balance of power. It is (or should be) a sine qua non of social research that informants have a story to tell' (p119/120).

She compares this method with the use of surveys and suggests that the latter tend to 'fracture' women's experiences, whilst stories,

'... provide a vehicle through which individuals can build up and communicate the complexity of their lives' (p.119).

I would argue that by using this life-history approach I essentially relinquished control of the flow of information, they decided what they were going to tell me and in this context the balance of power lay with them.

During the second interview however, the power dynamics seemed to change although this was not by design on my part. This interview was concerned mainly with experiences of returning to study and tended to be more structured. The women at this point began to respond more to my agenda than I to theirs as I did have a number of specific issues that I wanted to cover. It was also in

this area that I was perceived as 'expert' and I was asked a number of questions to which I supplied answers because I, like Oakley (1981), felt that to avoid their questions would ultimately be 'unhelpful'. (This issue is discussed more fully in Chapter 10).

I would argue that as feminist researchers we must acknowledge the power dynamics of the research relationship and face up to the fact that however much we might wish to establish a non-hierarchical relationship it is inevitable that we will exert some power over the research process. As researchers there is the power which is vested within this occupational role and one must ask whether it is,

'actually possible to ignore the socially legitimated public power and status of a professional middle class occupation' (Gamarnikow, 1991).

I have no answers to this question so must leave it as one of the imponderables raised by the research. I would argue however, that in the development of a sociology 'for' women it is incumbent upon us as feminist researchers, to document the reality of women's lives revealed by our research and to recognise the power vested in us in shaping that reality. Ribbens (1989) in fact suggests that,

'... this is the greatest power sociologists may have - to define other people's realities for them and for others' (p589).

4.4 Issues of emotion in the research relationship

One aspect of the interviews which I found particularly distressing and for which I was totally unprepared, was the tears that were shed

as the women told their stories. This issue has been raised by Cotterill (1992) and like her, I felt guilty that our discussions had engendered such emotion and that in some way the women had been damaged by the interviews. I felt helpless to know what to do in these situations and was unable to find any advice in the literature. Oakley (1981) raises the issue of the neglect by sociologists of emotions and suggests the reason,

'... may be the discipline's attempt to be recognised as a "real science" and the consequent need to focus on the most objective and measurable features of social life' (p40).

The only strategy I felt I could adopt was to turn off the tape recorder and offer the option of terminating the interview. As it transpired none of them wanted to end the interview (for which I was very grateful) and after they had regained their composure were prepared to continue, often apologising for the 'outburst'. Cotterill (1992) in her discussion of the interviewer's role in these situations concludes that,

'It seems to me that it can only be that of a sympathetic listener, for it is highly unlikely that she can actually share the women's experience' (p598).

She also argues that the interviewer is not a counsellor and this point does have resonance with my experience. There were a number of times when I recorded in my fieldnotes that I felt as if I had been placed in the role of counsellor and my uncertainty in how to deal with this. As I was committed to the notion of the women telling me

their own stories in the way they wanted to, I felt it inappropriate to attempt to direct the discussion onto other topics as a way of alleviating either my distress or theirs. This view seems to concur with Cotterill (1992) when she says,

'If a woman wants to use the interview as a means of "talk therapy" to work through her feelings, it is indefensible for the researcher to try to direct her to other, less painful topics' (p598).

One topic which did generate much emotion was the women's relationship with their husband/partner because what they gave me was the 'private' rather than the 'public' account (Cornwell, 1984). In fact had they decided to give me the 'public' account this research would have had very different outcomes. (A fuller discussion of this issue can be found in chapter 10).

4.5 Conclusion

By making explicit my experience of the research process I have been able to connect the issues raised with other feminist research which has utilised in-depth interviews (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984; Ribbens, 1989; Edwards, 1990; Cotterill, 1992). Reflecting on the issues of power and emotion which arose during the interviews has highlighted the complexities of the role and responsibilities of the interviewer in the research process. In addition it has also disclosed the problem of creating a sociology for women which is founded on the pain and distress of individual women and whether this is

ethically justifiable. Perhaps this is one of the outcomes of rejecting the ideology of 'hygienic' research (Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1983a); it is certainly an issue which requires more attention in feminist methodological discourse.

In relation to my own research, I much regret the distress that was caused and whilst this is in no way an ethical justification, the fact that the women chose to continue with the interviews was for me, a very clear statement of their commitment to the aims of the research. Without their commitment this research would not have been possible and it is to their 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1975), that I am greatly indebted.

CHAPTER FIVE

EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOLING AND WORKING LIVES

5.1 Introduction

Whilst this study is concerned primarily with the experiences of women returning to education, the factors that have shaped these experiences cannot be ignored. The life history interviews I conducted (see Chapter 4) have yielded data relating to the relationship between class background, gender and education and I shall seek to demonstrate empirically that these factors have had a profound effect upon the life chances of the women in the study. I would suggest also that the data corroborates the issues arising from the literature on gender and schooling (see Chapter 1); the grim reality of girls education is repeated here.

5.2 Experiences of Schooling

The class background of the women in the study, determined by their father's occupation, divided into nine women who were working class and eleven who were middle class; all attended secondary school during the 1950's and 1960's, therefore experiencing the tripartite system of education established following the 1944 Act.

All took the eleven-plus exam and apart from two, all followed the traditional pattern (see Chapter 1) of those from working class

backgrounds failing and attending secondary modern schools and those from middle class backgrounds passing and attending grammar schools.

Table 2 - Relationship between class and type of school attended

	<u>Middle Class</u>	<u>Working Class</u>
Secondary Modern	1	8
Grammar	10	1
Total	11	9

The implications of these figures are that the sample is 'skewed' towards middle class experience given that 55% of the sample attended grammar schools whereas nationally the figure was approximately 20%. This does raise issues regarding the representativeness of the sample which will be addressed in the concluding chapter.

Amongst the women who were sent to secondary modern schools feelings of failure were particularly evident, for example Julie commented that,

'... the eleven plus was very much make or break... If you passed then that said something about your family and your abilities and if you failed you were second rate to those who went to grammar schools.'

Two of the women who attended secondary modern schools also experienced the effects of comprehensive re-organisation during the latter part of their school careers. The philosophy behind comprehensive education is unquestionably more egalitarian yet in practice the data would suggest it actually disadvantaged girls by diminishing the opportunity to take certain examinations.

'I got into the grammar stream of the secondary modern school and I seemed to come on in leaps and bounds. I was all lined up to do 'O' levels and when it changed we were deemed sort of thickies and we did CSE's. The boys from the school which amalgamated with us automatically did 'O' level...' (Pat).

Perhaps it could be argued that Pat's experience was a problem of re-organisation rather than an inherent flaw in the comprehensive system.

Type of school therefore is clearly a factor affecting educational attainment but, as discussed in Chapter 1, much of the early sociology of education focuses upon the impact of family background upon educational attainment. One aspect of this is parental attitudes and I explored this in the interviews particularly in relation to 'suitable' subjects and career options. The women from middle class backgrounds tended to have parents or more specifically mothers, who took an interest in their daughter's education but they were divided in their attitudes towards suitable careers for girls. Some displayed traditional views,

'My mother thought a secretarial course was the best thing. I would get married anyway and that was a natural progression to get married and have children' (Katherine).

whilst others encouraged their daughters to get a 'good' education,

'My mother encouraged me to stay on at school to achieve as well as I could. She'd say you never know what's going to happen in life. You may be glad one day that you did these things' (Linda).

The experiences of the women from working class backgrounds were quite different in terms of parental attitudes. They were much more traditional in outlook and tended not to give support and encouragement.

'I said to my mother I don't know what to do, which direction to go. She said why don't you take catering, you like cookery and that was really all I got from my mother' (Julie).

'They (parents) never bothered about it really. We were never encouraged to stay on at school or read extra books or do extra homework or anything like that. Absolutely, it wasn't discussed' (Jo).

One of the two women interviewed who had broken out of the traditional mould (i.e. working class background to grammar school), still experienced lack of encouragement from her parents.

'I didn't have any encouragement from my parents at all, they were both out of touch completely with anything I did. My education... well I think my mother, it was beyond anything she had thought of that I should be an academic sort of child... she sort of tolerated me going to grammar school. (Mary).

In addition to the effects of class and class-related attitudes to education, the other major factor shaping educational experiences

was the curriculum offered, particularly in relation to the opportunity to study non-traditional subjects, i.e. science. The experiences of the women fit very closely with the trends identified in the literature (see Chapter 1), and there is nothing in the data which contradicts the theme of girls' underachievement and the channelling into traditional 'female' subjects. Key factors relate to provision and the prevalent attitudes regarding 'suitable' education for girls. Underpinning the issue of provision is the dominant ideology of preparing girls for the traditional roles of marriage, family and domestic labour (education for domesticity). The data indicate that in this respect those who went to grammar schools fared little better than their counterparts in the secondary modern schools.

Provision in the grammar schools for studying science was poor but perhaps not surprising given that all these schools were single sex. The debates about the advantages to girls of single-sex education, particularly in relation to their performance in science and maths are based upon the assumption of equal provision for boys and girls. As equal provision did not appear on the legislative agenda until many years later with the advent of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the women in the study were clearly disadvantaged in this respect.

The data are rich in examples of the lack of science education and the channelling of girls towards arts subjects and away from sciences in the grammar schools. The following quotes provide evidence of this trend.

'It was significant that you couldn't do physics and chemistry separately. They only offered you physics and chemistry combined as an 'O' level. Biology certainly was treated as a girls science and quite a lot of girls did that at 'A' level. (Mary).

'The science department was poor. It was a new grammar school but yes, I remember that not many did sciences'. (Penny)

'My memory of science teaching is very minimal ... we all had two years chemistry and physics but it certainly wasn't emphasised. (Elizabeth)

'We did no chemistry, no physics, we did biology but none of us got good grades because we hadn't done the whole syllabus, but then the nuns weren't really geared up for science. I should think with the education authorities now it probably wouldn't get through'. (Judith)

The way in which subjects are timetabled clearly affects the choices made and subsequent opportunities. Linda, whilst discussing her change of 'A' level subjects said,

'I wanted to do maths and biology but I couldn't do that combination as they clashed on the timetable'.

Perhaps predictably the pattern is repeated for those who attended secondary modern schools.

'I had to drop chemistry and physics because we lost the teacher early on so we lost the option. You were knocking out some of your options because you could only go in one direction or another. The options were channelled, you would do needlework, housecraft and those associated subjects'. (Shirley)

'Biology was the only science we did, physics and chemistry weren't available'. (Emma)

Whilst those who went to the grammar schools were channelled into traditional 'female' academic subjects, those who went to the secondary moderns were channelled towards traditional 'female' vocational areas, usually catering or office work.

'It was a mixed school but 'A' stream girls had to do shorthand and typing. It wasn't 'O' level in those days, that was the way of getting a job I suppose'. (Bell)

'They were keen to push you into shorthand and typing y'know, it was that sort of school, that you worked in an office or you'd be a shorthand typist'. (Pat)

Careers guidance seemed to be almost non-existent in all schools.

Those in grammar schools were steered towards nursing, teaching or secretarial work.

'There was very little careers guidance, it was either teaching or nursing and if you were really top stream it was university'. (Penny)

'There was absolutely no careers guidance at all. Most of us achieved five 'O' levels and went for nursing or secretarial work'. (Judith)

'In school there was no careers guidance. Girls were teachers, nurses, secretaries and boys did all the exciting jobs. The school had a careers teacher but he was there as a reference rather than give any guidance or help and I don't think anyone at school asked me what I was going to do which in those days was strange for an academic school;. (Helen)

For those who attended the secondary modern schools, the options tended to be office, catering, shop or factory work.

'Where I went you just knew you were going to be a shorthand typist or an office worker or you were going to work in the local biscuit factory... nobody ever sat down with me and thought what are your interests, what would you like to do'. (Pat)

'We were channelled into office work which in the 60's was considered quite good work'. (Jo)

'The careers person came into class and said probably the best you'll all get is Woolworths'. (Mo)

Judging from the latter quote it seems hardly surprising that aspirations were low if messages like that were being conveyed. Career aspirations, even for those who attended grammar school were without exception, towards traditional 'female' occupations. Perhaps this is not surprising given the era when socialisation took place and the prevalent attitudes towards the role of women. Analysis of the career aspirations of the women reveals that those who attended grammar school favoured careers in teaching, nursing, domestic science and secretarial work, whilst those who attended secondary modern schools to hairdressing, nursing and office work. A diagrammatic representation of these aspirations seems to highlight these similarities:-

Figure 1 Career Aspirations by Social Class

<u>Middle Class (Grammar)</u>	<u>Working Class (Secondary Modern)</u>
Nursing	Nursing
Secretarial	Office work
Teaching	Hairdressing
Domestic Science	

All of these occupations are 'traditionally female' focusing upon caring, serving and nursing roles and raises the question as to why the similarities given the different types of school attended and differing class backgrounds. It is evident that the aspirations have

been shaped by attitudes encountered both in the family and the school regarding what is a 'proper' job for a girl and reflect poignantly the process of sex-role stereotyping (See Adams and Laurikietis, 1976, p18). So powerful is this process that it produces the following statistics.

- 1) 95% of nurses are women
- 2) Two out of every five girls who leave school under the age of eighteen go into office work
- 3) There are three times as many women as men in primary teaching

(Source: Adams & Laurikietis, 1976)

The aspirations of the women were destined to add them to these statistics and indeed those from secondary modern schools either left at fifteen or sixteen with CSEs/'O' levels and those from grammar schools either at sixteen with 'O' levels or eighteen with 'A' levels (See Appendix 1). Two went on to higher education although one left after six weeks because of 'boyfriend' problems. The jobs that they ultimately went on to do are examined in the next section.

In summary the data reveals the profound effects of class and gender in determining educational experience and outcome. Whilst some had access to a higher status education due to their class of origin and the type of school attended, gender determined the content of their education. The following would seem to encapsulate this point.

'What did you learn in school today
Dear little girl of mine?
I learned how to cook and sew,
I learned that's all girls need to know.
I learned that men go up in space
That man is the word for the human race.
That's what I learned in school today,
That's what I learned in school'.

(Adams and Laurikietis, 1976, p29)

5.3 Paid Work

The working lives of the women showed many similarities despite their class origins and the type of school attended. This would seem to corroborate the point made earlier regarding the salience of gender. All of the women went on to work in traditional female occupations irrespective of their educational experiences. This can be seen particularly in relation to those who went into office work.

Mo who went to secondary modern and left at fifteen said,

'I started work on my fifteenth birthday. It was awful, a large typing pool. I had quite a few jobs actually always audio typing and shorthand'.

Sandra who went to a secondary modern and left at fifteen said,

'I went as an office girl... I didn't know what point I left there but I did persevere for a long time, but I got out and went and worked in this factory... I lost the end of my finger, it was chopped off in one of the machines and my parents said I had to leave... I ended up going back to office work'.

Katherine who went to a grammar school said,

'After 'O' levels I went into secretarial work'.

Whilst the type of school attended had little effect upon what type of work these women ended up doing, it did seem to affect whether the aspirations of those who wanted to go into nursing were realised or not. None of those attending secondary modern schools managed to do nurse training after leaving school, either because of their lack of qualifications or because they were channelled into 'lower status' work. Pat, who did eventually go into nursing several years after leaving school spoke about her frustration,

'At the school I went to you just knew you were going to be a shorthand typist or an office worker or you were going to work in the local biscuit factory... I think I was just sort of channelled into shorthand typing. I went to a college of commerce after leaving school at sixteen but I very soon realised y'know, after typing to 'William Tell' for the hundredth time that this wasn't my cup of tea...'

Those who went to grammar schools however, seemed to have little problem in realising their ambitions,

'I always wanted to be a nurse, I said it all through my childhood, so it wasn't any problem when I went to the careers officer at school. I went to one of the London teaching hospitals'. (Elizabeth)

'When I left school I wanted to go into nursing and I ended up at Gt Ormond Street'. (Linda)

'I'd always wanted to go into nursing and I went to a cottage hospital for an interview and the matron accepted me easily a couple of months before my seventeenth birthday'. (Jean)

'I wanted to nurse... and my mother said if you're going to nurse go to the best, so I only applied to St Thomas's and I got in'. (Penny)

It is clear from the above that a grammar school education does open up more opportunities to higher status 'women's work' but does little to break down employment patterns prescribed by gender. In essence, a middle class education leads to traditional middle-class female occupations. In this context both class and gender become significant determinants of life chances.

5.4 Marriage and the transition to unpaid work

Work, particularly for those women who had attended secondary modern schools, tended to be a phase to be 'got through', a stop gap before getting married and having children. They had all wanted to marry and a number of them did actually say that in the light of their return to study they could see that they had been 'conditioned' into this view. Mo, who was taking an 'A' level in sociology said in response to my question about whether she had always wanted to get married said,

'Yes, it was just a fill in with a few jobs in between and then get married and have children. It was definitely conditioning, absolutely'.

All of the women, with the exception of Deborah were married by the age of twenty-five and this seems in accordance with findings from other studies; Veness (1962) for example found that 98% of working class women and 75% of middle class married before they were twenty-five. Without exception, all of the women gave up paid work when they had children. One of the women who went into nursing said,

'I think its easier now than it was then, it's more acceptable now for women to work and it's more acceptable for children to go to childminders'. (Helen)

Motherhood was viewed as a way out of paid employment for many of the women (both working and middle class), a phase which they had looked forward to, but the reality of looking after children often did not match expectations.

'It was a relief and a novelty at first but he was just so much work. I found it more exhausting than going out to work. I did lead quite an isolated life and felt that I wanted to go back to work'. (Mary)

'I think I'd had enough of full-time work so it was quite nice to be at home. I sort of threw myself into the mother bit quite well but there's a limit to how many years I could do that. I'd sort of done the bit with playdough and saving cartons and things like that'. (Bell)

'Although when I first had children I thought that this is going to satisfy me, you think you're going to be the earth mother and stay at home and make bread and all those things but it didn't work like that for me'. (Helen)

From the above quotations there are indications that these women became aware of the restrictions that motherhood imposed on their lives and seems reminiscent of a comment made by Gavron (1966, 1983) that,

'Women are seldom prepared for the worst effect of motherhood that of cutting them off from all outside activities from which babies are barred and condemning them to the... company of pre-school age children alone for the greater part of the day'. (p108)

Feelings of wanting to go back to work were tinged with guilt at the prospect of leaving their children, even for those women who needed the money.

'I couldn't go back it was the guilt thing. I remember my next door neighbour offering for a short period because we were hard up, to look after my daughter but I just couldn't consider it... Even when I did go back to work you still had the problem of holidays. You still had those guilts that you shouldn't be doing it'. (Mo)

Mo was, to quote a phrase from Gavron (1966, 1983) 'on the horns of a dilemma' (p122) in that she needed to work but at the same time felt a sense of responsibility towards her child. She was in fact the one woman in the sample who had not wanted to give up work and battled with the prevalent expectation that women should set aside their own feelings and aspirations in order to fulfil their roles as mothers.

'I hated giving up work. I absolutely detested it and motherhood didn't come naturally and of course you feel guilty because my next door neighbours were wonderful, they liked washing, ironing, babies but I didn't. I was pretty bored most of the time, all the neighbours used to make use of each other, go in for coffee. We ran a little playgroup. It was awful when it was your turn but it was lovely when it wasn't'. (Mo)

All the women did return to work as their children grew older but the main consideration was that it fitted in with looking after their children and hence they all went back part-time. The following quotations illustrate this point,

'I went back when my first child was four months old but very part-time, just two evenings a week and then when he was two I had another child so I finished work again and stayed at home for a year. I then went back to work part-time as before'. (Linda)

'I found that I thoroughly enjoyed working part-time and it fitted in with children. My husband left home at seven in the morning and often was

not home until seven at night so I couldn't rely on him at all to help with the children. Doing the district nursing was ideal because I worked while they were at school'. (Ruth)

Ruth's comments also illustrate another dimension of the process of fitting in motherhood with paid work and that relates to the fact that it is the woman's responsibility to organise childcare. This was a prevalent theme running through many of the discussions on returning to work; for example,

'I did two nights a week, Sunday and Monday, I asked my dad to have her and then a friend used to come in, do the tea and look after her for me'. (Pat)

The picture that begins to emerge (and one which is reinforced in the next chapter) is one of these women's lives being characterised by the need to juggle their roles as mothers and paid workers.

'When I did work it was only part-time because I had three children very close together... then I decided when the youngest went to school I could afford some day time work and I took an office job. It was quite hard running the family, dropping them off a school, working the whole time without a lunch break so that I could finish in time to collect them from school...' (Jo)

Clearly motherhood places heavy demands in terms of the amount of unpaid work these women have to undertake and also their availability for paid employment. In addition these women are also wives and I was interested to explore their roles within the marriage relationship vis-a-vis their husbands as this would add yet another dimension to the issue of unpaid work.

The data showed without exception, that roles within the marriage relationship took a traditional form with areas of responsibility clearly demarcated. Male as breadwinner and female as home-maker existed right across the spectrum of social class and the data supports the feminist questioning of assertions of egalitarianism in modern marriage, particularly amongst the middle class by writers such as Young and Willmott (1975). This issue will be explored more fully in Chapter 8.

The power dynamics were shaped by how much money the husband earned and corroborates a point made by Pahl (1989) that the higher proportion of the household's income which an individual contributes, the greater will be that person's power in marital decision making. The comments made by a number of the middle-class women would seem to exemplify this point.

'He said you've got to remember I earn far more than you do and even though I could turn around and say to him if I continued my career I could earn as much as you could, which isn't true and I think he feels he's got the edge on you as long as he has a higher earning capacity and the breadwinner then what I do is secondary'.
(Helen whose husband is an insurance broker)

'Because he's an intelligent man and he wouldn't admit it unless he was under pressure, he wants somebody to look after his children and the home... he earns so much more money than I ever will. Mine is a second income and whatever I say, however much I feel that I have a right to education and a life as he does'.
(Penny whose husband is a 'business executive')

These men clearly have very traditional views, he as breadwinner she as homemaker and can be encapsulated by a comment from Emma whose husband is a sales director,

'He definitely does look upon my role as housewife and mother first and foremost'.

On the issue of role differentiation in the marriages of the working class women, Shirley's experience was common.

'He thinks a woman's place is to do what there is to do in the home, apart from the fact that this woman appeared to have to work as well. No, he doesn't consider that's his department... once when I was pregnant I was stripping the staircase with nitromors not thinking it might damage the baby and he was watching TV'.

The most extreme example comes from Julie and her comments exemplify issues relating to both roles and power.

'My husband has always made the major decisions, various arguments are put forward why his are the best decisions and I don't always agree with them. It's nice to have a partnership but there isn't such a thing... I don't know how much he earns, he gives me housekeeping and if I need more I ask for it. He sometimes takes the micky out of me and says I spend it on clothes and all the rest of it but I don't. If I'm honest I'd say he's got fairly set ideas about roles... sometimes I'd ask him to make a cup of tea but he won't do anything like that. He still can't make a bed...'

There were examples where the women said that their husbands 'helped' them but it was clear that the ultimate responsibility for domestic work and childcare lay with the women.

'... if I say could you Hoover a room he will do it but I have to ask, he doesn't do it off his own back'. (Marie)

'It's my responsibility to organise the arrangements for the children... I have to ask if he can take the children off or if he can arrange his holidays that week. I have to ask him he won't see to do things'. (Helen)

When help is given by husbands it is seen as a time for self-congratulation.

'... if he helps me he tells me he's helped me and makes a big thing of it, aren't I wonderful I've just cleaned the bathroom'. (Helen)

The data on marriage documents the ways in which the women's lives were circumscribed by their partner's expectation that they would perform those tasks traditionally designated as 'women's work'. It was in the light of these roles and responsibilities that the women returned to study.

CHAPTER SIX

RETURNING TO STUDY: THE IMPACT OF LIFE IN THE PRIVATE SPHERE

6.1 Introduction

The background to the kinds of marriages the women have, which is documented in the previous chapter, is important for providing context to their return to study. Women's lives are organised around the demands of husbands and children and in this chapter the strategies women adopted for integrating education with their family life are explored.

6.2 Fitting in with the family

Hughes and Kennedy (1985) argue that marriage and family have different educational implications for women and men (see Chapter 1). They suggest that marriage and family act as an inhibition to women's career development and at the same time act as a powerful support to men's. Whilst the data cannot substantiate the latter point, I would argue that they do substantiate the former and demonstrate that family responsibilities shaped both the chances of taking up educational opportunities and, if that hurdle was overcome, the ability to achieve academically. If the women wanted to return to study then this must fit in with the wife and mother roles and this factor first became evident when I asked about choosing a course and what had affected their decisions.

'I think the most important thing is that it takes place in school hours'. (Julie - my emphasis)

'Fitting in around school hours'. (Marie - my emphasis)

'The course I'm doing is from 10 a.m. to 2.30 p.m., that suits me because **the children are at school and you're back before they come home**'. (Jo - my emphasis)

'I'm hoping to go on to a degree course eventually if I **can fit in with the children and everything**'. (Mary - my emphasis)

'I picked this college because it's just in the day and **doesn't interfere with anybody**. It doesn't prohibit me from being with the children and what I should be doing in the house'. (Amy - my emphasis)

The above quotes illustrate the importance placed by the women on their studies fitting in around their childcare and domestic responsibilities. The childcare arrangements made by the women are explored later but it is clear that unless courses are run during school hours, an immediate almost insuperable barrier becomes apparent for women who wish to return to study.

6.3 Attitudes and behaviour of husbands/partners

In addition to fitting in with children, the women also had to accommodate their husband's/partner's demands. Tapping into this raised an interesting methodological issue as some found it hard to talk about their husband/partner in an unfavourable light, almost as if it was an act of betrayal, voices would drop, almost to a whisper in one case even though there was no-one around to hear, (this issue is taken up in Chapter 10).

I explored the issue of attitudes by asking how much support husbands/partners gave to the decision to return to

study. I made no attempt to define support at this stage and indeed had not realised its complexity as a concept. (This is explored in Chapter 8). The majority (80%) started by saying that their husbands/partners were supportive with comments like,

'He's a very supportive husband'. (Amy)

'He's been very encouraging' (Katherine)

'Oh yes he supports me' (Emma)

'He was quite pleased about me doing the course'. (Pat)

It became evident however during the interviews that this support was not as forthcoming as it first appeared.

'He's encouraged me a lot, he's been very good about it all, yes, I think he's been very good, but um well he can't just drop things and come home, it's just impossible so it isn't quite so easy'. (Marie)

'He's been very supportive... I think when I went to do the course last year he found it difficult in that for the first time he was asked to help, there were things that I wanted to do because I wanted to get on with a bit of work. He found that a bit much because basically he didn't really want me out of the house, he wanted me here for himself and the children. He couldn't quite understand why I wasn't content to be in the house pottering around. So to a certain extent there was a sort of conflict'. (Amy)

The above would seem to indicate that there is lack of support in terms of practical help in the home and the following comments from Emma and Helen corroborate this.

'He doesn't help at all I'm afraid, this was one of the stipulations. He said that it mustn't interfere with his workload... If I was to say that you've got to stay at home to look after the children because I'm going to college, that wouldn't be

acceptable because he's got to be available for meetings. He definitely does look upon my role as housewife and mother, as long as it doesn't prevent me from being a housewife its not going to worry him too much'. (Emma)

'... he can't really see that I've had to give up a lot, he says fine I can do the course but everything else must still run smoothly. I'm still expected to play my roles'. (Helen)

The message that is conveyed so strongly and irrefutably from these accounts is that husbands/partners were 'supportive' if and only if their time is not encroached upon and the traditional division of labour is not disrupted, i.e. women continue to take responsibility for domestic work and childcare. It is almost as if the men were saying, 'I'll support you providing you fit your studies around me and the children'. I found no evidence of husbands/partners accommodating changes in their own lives, fitting in did not apply to them.

There was however an interesting class difference in the responses I received to the question of 'help'. The women with husbands in professional jobs cited the responsibilities they had at work for their lack of help in the home.

'He can't just drop things and come home'.
(Marie)

'He's got to be available for meetings'. (Emma)

'Things have to be fitted in around his job'.
(Penny)

For the lower middle and working class women the reasons cited for lack of help tended to revolve not around work but their husband's leisure activities.

'He is out two or three times a week canoeing and then again at week-ends'. (Shirley)

'If he's on an early shift he's out every evening doing things... he's got quite a busy social life'. (Julie)

'My husband does various things in the evening'. (Katherine)

It is clear that husbands/partners were unwilling to give up their time, either work or leisure, to take on domestic work or childcare.

The lack of practical support by the men in terms of help with domestic work and childcare left the women in the position of having to find ways to fit their studies into their other responsibilities. This process is graphically illustrated in the following quotations.

'I felt that I needed to get out and do a class, so I asked him, because if he's on early duty then he goes out every evening doing things... he's got quite a busy social life, but I didn't do anything. I wasn't jealous although he said I was, but I did envy the time. It's not that I don't want to be with the children, but I just, I was with children all morning. I was with mine in the afternoon and in the evening doing everything with them, at week-ends and I just needed my own space. So I asked him if he could arrange his duty so that I could have Monday to do night class. I wanted to do French and although he speaks French and German he wasn't here always to help with the children's homework. So I said perhaps I could do that, but he wouldn't. So then I found they were doing it in an afternoon class, 1-3 p.m. which would give me time to get back and pick

the children up - no problems. So that's what I do. I picked this college because it's just in the day and it doesn't interfere with anybody'. (Julie)

'One thing that's come up was um, that I might possibly go on to Birkbeck to do art there but it's a couple of evenings a week and he was absolutely against that straight away. I'd have to leave here about 5.30 p.m. and it would be Monday and Tuesday and he said it wasn't acceptable...' (Katherine)

Katherine was quite defensive initially regarding her husband's attitude, seeming to adhere to his view but as the interview progressed and I probed her further she said,

'He didn't know what it was going to entail and I think he was worried that I wouldn't be able to cook his meals... he likes me to be here and also that the boys' lives won't be affected, he thinks I should be here for them. I mean he never wanted me to work full-time'.

She intimated to me that her marriage was in trouble and her feelings of insecurity were very evident during the interview. The following was said with a tinge of desperation in her voice,

'I think it's very important to have one or two evenings a week to be together, we went for a meal together last night, just the two of us. I think it's terribly important at this stage of life actually, we've been married about twenty years, to do things together'.

Katherine and a number of the other women seemed to be walking a tightrope, not wanting to do anything that might upset the marital status-quo; torn between doing something for themselves and risking placing their marriages in further jeopardy or acquiescing for the sake of 'peace'. Evidence of their powerlessness can be seen in

the strategies they had to adopt to broach subjects they knew their husbands wouldn't like, judging their moods before saying what they wanted to say; working out what they would have to do in return for the favour they were going to ask. One subject they knew would be difficult was their returning to study.

'I had to do it quite gradually and not talk about it too much to start with'. (Katherine)

'I got a prospectus and put my name down. I thought about it for a week before I mentioned it to my husband. I explained it wouldn't interfere with anything'. (Julie)

These are not the tactics of anyone who enjoys the experience of equality and give a clear indication that they expected to receive little encouragement (emotional support) from their husbands. Indeed, after the battles to actually do the course, Julie had then to contend with the comments and criticisms her husband made about her work.

'I'd enjoy being able to express myself without somebody saying that's terrible, you haven't said the right word or you've spelt something wrong ... he always likes to read what I've written and he says comma there, punctuation, I wouldn't say it like this. He's a bit of a perfectionist, it annoys him to see that something is not written properly, so it does frustrate him.

Hardly evidence of the encouraging husband helping his wife gain confidence in her writing skills!

Another example of lack of emotional support can be found in Penny's situation. Just as she started her college course her husband

had to go and work in the USA, she decided to stay behind and I asked her how he felt about her not going with him.

'Angry, very angry. We discussed and discussed it... You see I travelled so much I wasn't prepared to ditch everything again and go. He said he supported me but I think if he had been at home he would have felt equally resentful about what I was doing. The practicalities are his job comes first. If things fitted around his job he would be delighted'.

Penny's situation does however raise an interesting issue. Due to her husband's financial position she was able to buy in some of the practical support she needed in order to do what she wanted to do.

'This was the year I had given to do it. The children were just at the right stage... my oldest child had gone to boarding school and the two little ones were still at their primary school... so I set about getting the home organised to have live-in help, an au-pair'.

Emma was also in a similar position financially and was able to pay for her course without telling her husband.

'I certainly cannot tell my husband how much the course cost. If I was to tell him he wouldn't want me to do it... it's quite naughty really, I shall start saving up now out of the money I take out of the bank and putting it to one side. It won't notice, as far as my husband is concerned he doesn't really want to know about the financial side of things so I can quite easily get hold of four hundred pounds but it will be on my conscience that he doesn't know'.

Clearly, lack of money to pay for childcare and courses are real barriers to many women being able to take up opportunities to return to study. Bell made the comment that,

'... the amount of the course fees excludes many, many women... I don't know that many men could actually sponsor their wives, not really. Finance is crucial'.

The middle class women had some advantages in this respect and this does raise the question as to the importance of class in shaping the return to study experience. It is evident that some middle class women do have the option, by virtue of their husband's financial position, of arranging for other women to provide some of the practical help they require, i.e. to do some of the fitting in for them.

6.4 Managing the wife, mother and student roles

With some of the potential obstacles presented by the wife and mother roles 'successfully' negotiated, I then explored how the women coped with their newly acquired additional role of student. I was interested to discover how they integrated their studies into their family life, in other words what strategies they adopted to fit it in.

One aspect of the fitting in was how they made the time to study and the following comments illustrate how this was managed.

'Well, I read nearly every night when my husband is out, and the children are getting older now and I'm actually finding it more difficult, but when they were younger once they got to bed I would study for two or three hours a night. Now they are later to bed so it's just cramming in what I can... I also use the hour and a half when the children are watching TV, I'm keeping an eye on the dinner at the same time, that's when I also study'. (Bell)

Later in the interview Bell gave more detail as to the process,

'When he's (husband) at meetings he comes in from work at about 6.15 p.m. and has to be out again at 6.40 p.m. I'm literally feeding him and then he's out and I've got to clear up and put the children to bed and they are running around now sometimes until 9.30 p.m. so it's not until about 9.45 that I get to see a book other than the little space I've had in the afternoon when they are watching TV'.

Bell's experience was not unique and a number of the women spoke of their attempts to eke out a little time away from their other responsibilities.

'I have found it difficult some nights, its been 9 p.m. before I'm able to sit down and start working by the time I've got the children organised and I'm not a good night person so I get very tired'. (Helen)

'I have found it quite difficult trying to keep up with the studying because I just haven't had the time really... when he's (husband) not in I've still got to get in and get the kids tea and get them to bed y'know. So really its been like ten o'clock before I've got my books out'. (Pat)

It is evident from the above that finding time to study presented real problems and study had to be fitted in around childcare responsibilities. What was also striking but perhaps not surprising given what has already been documented, was the lack of help from husbands/partners with domestic tasks and childcare. This lack of support can be seen in the previous quotes in terms of their absence from the home and consequent non-availability for childcare. There is no evidence from the data to suggest that any exchange of roles took place, the role of student was 'bolted on' to the women's other

roles. This clearly was a source of stress and provided feelings of guilt about family responsibilities.

'I do like to give everything 100% and I haven't been able to do that because I felt I had to give time to the children as well'. (Pat)

'I've been aware that he's (son) been a bit frustrated at week-ends when I've not done things... I've felt that I've had to make a terrific effort to sort of compensate'. (Helen).

Bell made a poignant comment when she said,

'I feel guilty about not giving more time to the children... for wanting to get them to bed so I could get to my studying. It's dreadful I'm sure men don't feel like this'.

One of the ways in which the women made time was to cut down or modify their domestic work.

'I don't think the house is as clean, I don't know when I last cleaned the windows, but is that really important? You prioritise, that's what they teach us'. (Judith)

'I try to get my studying done in the day because I'm a bit more alert, whereas I can cook in the evening, do the ironing and the cleaning. Sometimes I'm still ironing at ten o'clock but I mean that doesn't matter. The housework has suffered, it gets cleaned once a week instead of twice'. (Marie)

'They get a lot more convenience meals I'm ashamed to say, but it's really the only way I've been able to do it, to give myself enough time'. (Ruth).

Clearly the way in which studying was fitted in revolved around cutting down on the domestic tasks the women deemed to be less important, like dusting regularly, cleaning windows and preparing gourmet meals but childcare inevitably remained a high priority.

'The house may not be as clean as it used to be but that's not high on my priority list. As long as the children are well fed and clothed a bit of dust isn't going to hurt anyone'. (Helen)

Helen also made an interesting point when she said,

'I think all married women feel they have something to prove'.

This attitude does seem to fuel the determination of women returners to 'succeed' not only in their studies but also as wives and mothers.

This obviously places them under a great deal of pressure, encouraging them to adhere to a 'superwoman' ideology as their lives become increasingly complex requiring an ever more sophisticated 'juggling act' in the management of their multiple roles. (This is taken up in Chapter 9).

Mature students, because of their responsibilities, are in a much less favourable situation vis-à-vis younger students. This point was raised by Bell when she spoke about preparing for exams.

'When you've got a family it's very difficult to have this mass revision. I think women can do their studying and they can allow so many hours a week but what they can't do is take that tremendous amount of stress all in one go. When you're younger you can put off your social life for two months but life goes on when you've got a family'.

In the management of multiple roles there is evidence from the data that class is a factor in how this was achieved. As mentioned earlier, the middle class women had certain advantages by virtue of their

material circumstances which enabled them to fit in the student role more easily.

'I do have some help, I have some-one come and clean the house once a week. I've got a dishwasher, washing-machine. I think these things help as well'. (Linda)

'We've got a lot of space at home, we've got a study that I use until the course has finished'. (Jean)

Equally with childcare, the middle-class women had options not open to the working class,

'I have the most wonderful au-pair and I think without her it would have been doubly difficult, I'd have been more stressed than I am. I knew I had to have that because they come out of school at 3 p.m. so it was absolutely essential, I couldn't have done without that'. (Penny)

'I have a nanny for the children who comes to the house during the day. She has built up a relationship with the children and they know and trust her;. (Emma)

'There aren't any creche facilities so I have an au-pair'. (Judith)

Those without the financial resources to pay for childcare were reliant upon an informal network of help from female relatives, neighbours and friends.

'I'm very fortunate that my sister doesn't work, she's got four children and lives down the road from me. The children go to her. (Shirley)

'I live on a new estate and there are women in similar positions, they have children of the same age, not that they go to college. We take it in turns to take the kids to school and we've always babysat to let one go shopping, its always been a two-way thing... when I go in to college they have the kids for me. (Amy)

'My girlfriends are quite good, they will always look after the boys for me'. (Julie)

The problems of organising childcare was a great source of stress for the working class women which had an effect upon their studies.

'My neighbour said she couldn't have her the next day and I was thinking, oh, who can I get to have her, so probably when the tutor was talking to me I was miles away. She said I didn't look very happy. I couldn't get home fast enough to try and think, oh, y'know who can have her'. (Pat)

The previous quotes would seem to highlight class differences in that the middle class women were able to buy in help with childcare thus easing the fitting in process. For the working class women however, it was a case of relying upon the goodwill of female 'others' and the resulting problems when this informal structure broke down. (The implications for childcare provision are addressed in Chapter 11).

The data on marriage and the family highlights the strategies the women adopted in order to fit education into their lives in the private sphere. The lack of support they received meant that study had to be accommodated around their husband's and children's seemingly unchangeable lives. In essence, fitting in became a precondition for returning to study.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TRANSITION TO THE PUBLIC SPHERE:- EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE LIFE

7.1 Introduction

Having explored how women's lives in the private sphere affected their experiences of returning to study, I turned to the public sphere to identify the institutional influences. Two questions relating to the transition required answers. These related to the reasons why the women wanted to make the transition and how they went about it.

7.2 The process and problems of access

In answering the question of 'why', class once more became a significant factor. For the working class women their motivation revolved around a desire to improve their employment prospects by gaining the qualifications they did not have the opportunity to attain at school,

'I was looking for a job and I realised that whatever I wanted to do I wasn't qualified to do it. Oh hell, here we go again and I said perhaps I should start taking 'O' levels and qualifying myself. (Sandra)

'I didn't wanna be putting people back to bed for ever, y'know'. (Pat)

'I really needed to get my mind working again and I felt, well brain dead... I thought that if this is the result of so many years at home maybe I'd better start thinking about doing something, I've got my future ahead, I never had the opportunity at school, I left at fifteen'. (Amy)

For the middle class women there was more emphasis upon doing something to give a new interest, the motivation appeared to be more oriented towards 'self-fulfilment' than vocational or academic.

'I was in a bit of a rut with my life I think, I needed to change my lifestyle. I think I got a bit bored just having the children, otherwise I was just playing tennis and bridge'. (Elizabeth).

'It wasn't for a purpose, just for enjoyment'.
(Deborah)

Both Elizabeth and Deborah had left school at eighteen with 'A' levels and Deborah was the one woman in the sample who had studied at university after leaving school. It is perhaps not surprising that their motivation lay outside the realm of gaining qualifications like their working class sisters. Both Elizabeth and Deborah had been relatively successful academically, whilst Sandra, Pat and Amy had not.

Having gained some answers to the question 'why', the next step was to determine 'how' they went about gaining access. Relevant information had to be sought by them and I asked about this process. What emerged has some important implications for the ways in which courses are publicised if they are to reach women wanting to return to study. The following quotations illustrate that information was not derived from the traditional college prospectus.

'It was a matter of looking in the paper really. In fact I was really looking for another job and realising that whatever I wanted to do I wasn't qualified to do it. I was looking in the paper for something that would train me with no qualifications needed and I just happened to see it at the bottom of the paper'. (Julie)

'I saw an article in the local paper'. (Sandra)

'I saw the course advertised in the local paper'.
(Amy)

'I heard about the course from a friend'.
(Katherine)

'One of my husband's patients told me about it.
I think it was also advertised in the local paper'.
(Marie)

These comments illustrate the often informal nature of the information gathering process and the importance of publicising courses in places where women would normally go in the course of their daily lives or in literature that they have easy access to, like newspapers. This is essential, otherwise a potential barrier becomes evident immediately, as the following comments from Emma illustrate.

'It wasn't easy finding out how one went about learning to teach adults. In the end I found out purely by chance, I spotted an advertisement in the adult education brochure for a course. I phoned the college but the person I needed to get in touch with was never there... Unless I'd really plugged at it the idea would have gone out of the window. One thing I think would be beneficial would be to have someone available at the end of a telephone when you phone up for information that you need. After several phone calls and the person isn't there you think, oh sod it, I'm not going to bother'.

Fortunately Emma was sufficiently resourceful to get the information she required but women with less confidence might have given up. This was in fact almost what happened to Shirley.

'I went along to the library and saw this thing "women into work" so I picked up a leaflet and brought it home and buried it under something. I kept pulling this out and saying why did you bring it home if you're not going to do anything... so in the end there was an exhibition and I just forced myself to go. There was a stall I didn't go to and that was Meadowbank.

I had an idea that you had to be rather special to go there and I didn't even try. So I went out and thought I'd have to try something else. As I went along the road I met somebody who knew something about Meadowbank and she practically turned me around and marched me back and made me sit down and I had a chat with one of the women there. That's how I came to do the course'.

Shirley's perception was that she wasn't 'special' enough to go to 'Meadowbank' and she lacked the confidence to ask for information. It is likely that had she not fortuitously met someone she knew, she would not have gone to college at all.

Once information had been gathered however, the next step was to approach the college with a view to enrolling or getting an interview. For some this proved difficult (Emma's experience being a case in point) and presented yet another barrier to overcome. Bell's experience provides another example of the problem,

'I wanted to take a course in statistics thinking it would be helpful in doing a psychology degree in the future. I went along to the college when it was enrolling day and was greeted by a man who more or less dismissed me. He asked me how numerate I was and I said that I hadn't done much really, he didn't give me the opportunity to say excuse me but I have done business statistics. It reinforced the feeling that it was because I was a woman and women aren't normally numerate. That's the impression I had when I left there and also I was a mature student. I went with my son in a buggy (laugh). I just think I was dismissed because I was a mother and next one please. Perhaps if I'd been power dressing and come with a briefcase I might have stood a better chance. I don't know but somebody in dungarees with a kid in a buggy just wasn't on.

Bell's experience seems to illustrate the operation of two male stereotyped images of women: firstly, that women have no aptitude for mathematics and statistics; and secondly, that women who are mothers are not to be taken seriously when they wish also to become students. The latter point is clearly worrying in terms of the extension of access to 'non-traditional' students.

The man to whom Bell spoke acted as a 'gate-keeper' to entry to the college and he effectively managed to keep her out. Fortunately Bell did do a course at another college and went on to apply for a psychology degree. Her next experience however, serves as a powerful example of male 'gate-keeping' and prejudice towards women returners.

'I think my pièce de resistance was my interview at X university, it was just appalling. I shall never forget the man and he was very dismissive of me. He kept saying you realise this is an academic establishment, and he spoke for about fifty minutes about his life and how he had to do lecture tours to keep one's name in the academic arena. He asked me about my family commitments and he was just dismissive of anything I did say which I didn't get much of an opportunity to do. That was more or less the interview, he was appalling. I've learned since that six women who had this man all reported the same. I came out feeling so angry. I just stood in the car park and didn't know whether to shout in anger or to cry because he kept saying, you do realise that the first year is the equivalent of seven or eight 'A' levels. How on earth do you think you'll ever be able to do that and just kept on and on telling me about his life and how he never takes a vacation... I felt that this was just intimidation really and the fact that he kept saying, this is an

academic institution. I knew he didn't have a sense of humour but part of me wanted to say, Oh did I really take the wrong road to Tesco's (laugh). I said, won't you look at this piece of work I've brought along, he said you can leave it if you like. I'm sure it went straight in the bin. He didn't even say goodbye, so discourteous and frightening really'.

Despite what was evidently a very traumatic experience for Bell, she managed to remain reasonably good humoured and this serves perhaps as a testimony to her strength and determination. It could be said that if all education institutions had male academics with attitudes like those outlined above responsible for conducting their selection procedures, there would be few, if any, married women students.

Bell did however have the stamina to press on in her quest for a university place and her next interview serves as a great contrast to the first, instilling perhaps a little hope that not all the odds are stacked against women returners.

'I then had to go Y university and consequently I was in a dreadful state because I thought there's no way I could go through that again, it really made me nervous... My interview was lovely, the women who interviewed me had just started there and had been an undergraduate at A university, but had taught mature women students and was very familiar with the problems. She said she felt that more women should be accepted from access courses but the university wasn't like that at the moment. They hadn't started along those lines which is a shame, especially if you have a tutor like that'.

Clearly having a women tutor who understood Bell's situation made all the difference and there is no reason why male tutors should not

have the same attitude. Unless there is a change in attitudes however, the implications for 'equal opportunities' are serious.

7.3 Provision of facilities at the colleges

Having managed to negotiate the obstacles to access the process of transition was complete and the women embarked upon their courses (Details can be found in appendix 2). In the interviews I then went on to explore the institutional factors which had shaped the experience of being a mature student. It became apparent that those studying at the women's college had a qualitatively different set of experiences from those studying at the FE college and the data will be presented in terms of these contrasting experiences.

The women at the FE college spoke at length about their disappointment and frustration with the uncomfortable surroundings and the lack of quiet places to have a break or study. The following comments serve to illustrate this point.

'I couldn't believe there was nowhere you could go to be quiet. Nowhere you could sit down and have a cup of coffee and take a break. There's a filthy bar, there's a filthy refectory and I shall never forget walking in and thinking where on earth am I. All I wanted was somewhere I could go in the middle of the day to get a bit of quiet'.
(Penny)

'I think it would have been much more pleasant if there had been a common room where we could go and drink coffee away from the young with their smoke and their noise.' (Linda)

'I think the environment could be improved, things like the canteen and the library, there aren't any facilities for us older students.' (Elisabeth)

'The facilities are ghastly but we've just got to get used to it.' (Ruth)

'I was trying to find somewhere to study for my exams and I just couldn't find anywhere. I know you can in the library but some of the younger students are irritating, it's supposed to be quiet but they are always talking.' (Pat)

'The library was like a fifth form common room. There are times when I needed to study away from home, as a mature student I think you need that facility. I thought I'd go and sit in the library but I couldn't because of all the noise from the younger students.' (Mo)

The comments of Pat and Mo illustrate a particular need of women students who may be unable to study at home due to family commitments. At home they must fulfil the responsibilities of their wife and mother roles and therefore need a space away from home to enable them to function in the student role. The facilities they required were not available and provide another example of the women having to fit in, not with family this time but with institutional structures. Ruth's comment that 'we've just got to get used to it' would seem to encapsulate the situation the women have to face.

In contrast to these experiences were those of the students at the women's college.

'It's a very, very, special place, I mean the atmosphere and the facilities are good!' (Amy)

'I love going to the college, the environment is lovely.'(Sandra)

"Meadowbank" is a very warm friendly environment. As soon as you enter the building you feel this isn't threatening' (Bell)

'I think we're terribly lucky to have this college, it's wonderful, it's a new dimension to my life.'(Katherine)

The comments serve to illustrate the vastly different and much more positive experience of these women. The key to this would seem to be in Bell's comment about a 'warm friendly environment.' As the data unfolds it is possible to determine exactly what this means.

7.4 Learning Needs.

Whilst the issue of facilities is clearly a factor shaping the experience of returning to study, an issue of central importance in terms of academic achievement, are the learning needs women bring to the courses they undertake. The data yielded a number of common needs irrespective of the course undertaken or the institution in which it was 'delivered'. The differences emerged however, in the extent to which these needs were met.

One common characteristic of women returners is lack of confidence in their academic ability (see Chapter 2) and I asked them what they felt they needed in terms of support for their learning. Help with study skills was mentioned by the women in the FE college and it was clear that this was not being given.

' I needed something on learning skills.'(Penny)

'I wish there was something to get me back into the swing of reading, studying, writing essays after all these years, that's been very difficult.'
(Ruth)

Bell seemed to sum up the issue well:

'...to have support in those first few months when you are confronted with the first essay. Its very difficult because some women may not have put pen to paper for many years apart from writing maybe children's notes... learning skills yes and also to say that you will come through it, you will learn, your learning curve will just shoot up.'

Bell was able to say this based upon her experience at "Meadowbank" which as the following quotes indicate, provided a very different learning environment. For those studying at "Meadowbank" study skills was an integral part of their course and Penny told me about how the course was structured.

'It was divided into three sections. One was learning how to write again, how to take notes, read, that sort of thing. Then we did literature and we did all sorts of things, short stories, poems and had discussions. Also there was sociology which was a complete new subject for me, I found that interesting.'

The study skills proved to be a vital element for the women in building confidence in their ability and stimulating new interests.

'We did some work on writing skills and I've discovered that I thoroughly enjoy it. I'm sure I didn't at school.'(Katherine)

'The writing skills was fantastic, it was like breaking an egg and it flowing all over the place. I couldn't stop.'(Julie)

'The teacher we had for study skills was so stimulating, you felt as if you were capable of anything. Realising there is a whole world out there and you can do things!'(Mary)

'One part of the course was learning how to write again and how to read more efficiently and that sort of thing. I found that interesting and it was fun to try new things!'(Shirley)

From the above it could be concluded that in the creation of a 'woman-friendly' environment, attention must be given to the provision of learning support. This applies also to the availability of staff for tutorials and again there were contrasting experiences within the two colleges. The women at the FE College said the following:

'There was no support, I feel angry about that because there were times when I've felt that I couldn't cope much longer, but found the staff were so busy and I couldn't actually tell them how difficult it was and I wanted to at times.' (Penny)

'I felt the tutors were very busy and I've tended not to go to them for help, I've managed my-self.' (Linda)

'There's no tutorial support, nothing like that. I think it would be really beneficial because mature students don't feel too confident. You're never sure you're going in the right direction when you've just joined a class and you haven't been studying for many years. You have to find things out for yourself and it is such a struggle at the beginning... I wish there had been someone like a counsellor, even if it was only one afternoon a week, where mature students

could go to discuss things. It would be nice to have a relaxed atmosphere where you could just take any worries that you might have had them ironed out and thereby gain confidence.' (Jo)

The "Meadowbank" students however have a very different story to tell:

'I've got a personal tutor...somebody you can go and talk to about any that crop up, that sort of thing. I think they have a counselling service. I think that's important. They do look after you well. It's not as if you are on your own there.' (Katherine)

'I've found a lot of encouragement, there's always someone whether it be a tutor or a student who will pick you up and set you on your way again.' (Mary)

The women felt that the tutors really understood their problems and this is evident in a comment from Bell:

'....understanding if you're late with an essay or if you have a family crisis...The women tutors will probably think well,...I've been through that, yes I can identify with that.'

One of the women had experienced both 'traditional' provision and 'Meadowbank' and it was clear which had been the most beneficial to her.

'I think evening classes are rather impersonal. You don't feel there is any support structure there. You go along, choose a course and pay your money but I didn't feel there was any support structure at all which we get here' (Shirley)

Two other crucial needs were mentioned by the women and have already been discussed in the preceding chapter in the context of support received from husband/partner (or more

appropriately, lack of it). One relates to the issue of courses being run during school hours. The following comments emphasise this point.

'It suits me very well, I enjoy it, it fits in very well with my children and yes, I think it's structured very well. The lessons are very good, I really enjoy them and three mornings a week is ideal I think.' (Elisabeth)

'I tried to join night schools but couldn't keep to the times because of the children. I realised that night-time study was so inconvenient and it would have to be day study or not at all.' (Jo)

Having painted thus far a very bleak picture of the provision at the F.E. college it must be said that both Elisabeth and Jo were doing the "Wider Horizons" course there and at least in terms of its timing they seemed to have got it 'right'. (However this course has been closed as it proved to be 'uneconomic'). The point that does come across, explicitly in Elisabeth's comments, implicitly in Jo's, is the issue of the course fitting in with their other commitments to the care of their children. Here I would re-iterate a point I made in the preceding chapter, that unless courses are run during the day, women with children find it almost impossible to fit in a return to study. This factor is therefore crucial and underpins all others.

7.5 Financial needs

The second need relates to financial support and the need for the provision of grants for part-time courses. Bell summed up

this issue clearly:

'In one way I think part-time study should attract a grant because if women return to study then realise they have the ability they may well, when the children get older, make it on to a full-time course. I think a lot of women with younger children would like to return to study but feel they can't go full-time and if they go part-time they can't get any money, it would have to be paid by the husband. There's this catch 22 really, so in the end they don't do it and end up filling shelves at Tesco and other things which is very sad...I think funding is basically every married woman's problem.'

Her comments seem to get to the root of the issue namely that most women returning to study have to do so part-time because of their family commitments and part-time study does not qualify for a mandatory grant. Therefore they are forced to rely upon their husband's goodwill and ability to pay. This was a problem for a number of the women, particularly the working-class women who struggled with feelings of guilt about taking from the family income.

'I really feel bad about spending the money on myself, it seems so extravagant but I really wanted to do the course.' (Shirley)

'One course I would have liked to have taken costs £ 150, well there's no way I'm going to pay that on me, you know. I struggle at buying a skirt, I'm certainly not going to just for my benefit.' (Julie)

Perhaps the most vivid example of the problem of lack of money comes from the comments made by Sandra who was divorced and living in her partner's house.

I don't have money, absolutely nothing, and I've been trying to work out if I was offered a place

at the college, how I could afford to do it. I've been thinking I should cancel the interview and then I thought it would be rather wonderful to learn.'

I asked her if her partner supported her,

'No not financially absolutely not, whether I'm unemployed or not I still have to pay my way here, he won't keep me at all...He might put me out on the road. I don't know what my future is going to be as I've nothing of my own, no house, no money, no education.'

Sandra was aware of her vulnerability and lacked the financial resources to make changes in her life.

7.6 Feelings about the Courses and Educational Outcomes

Having discussed with the women what they felt they needed in terms of support for their studies, I turned to their feelings and thoughts about the courses they were undertaking and once again differences emerged between the two colleges. All of the women said they were enjoying their studies but the language used was very different. The "Meadowbank" students expressed excitement and pleasure.

'The course has been enthralling, it's been absolutely brilliant.' (Sandra)

'It's stimulating, interesting and valuable.' (Deborah)

'I'm really enjoying the course, I love coming to college and I can't learn enough.' (Katherine)

'I think every area should have a place like "Meadowbank". I heard someone say the other day that the year here was the happiest year

she'd spent since childhood. The whole philosophy of the place, trying to encourage women who have missed out for whatever reason the first time around and it's amazing. It's so encouraging to know that somebody who was perhaps a waitress is now going to university. I find that so thrilling, that they are not middle-class people and not young people necessarily either!' (Bell)

It seemed that for once these women were not having to fit in, not having to compromise their lives. In this supportive women-centred environment they were flourishing, doing something for themselves, gaining confidence and realising their potential. There were many examples which I feel must be documented in full as the data is exciting evidence of what can be achieved.

'I think it's made me more alive and given me a lot more confidence in life generally... It's been terribly positive to know that I could really do this and the encouragement I got there, " yes you can do it", you can actually do something. You think you're not much good at anything, perhaps I got to that stage. It's terribly satisfying and very exciting.' (Katherine)

'I went back to work in a supermarket and that's a measure of how I saw myself. What I think I am capable of now compared to what I thought I was capable of then is a tremendous difference... coming to college has helped me to see that I can actually do more than I'm doing now.' (Shirley)

'The college has made me feel I could do a degree now, that I'm not entirely written off. I did feel quite like a zombie before I went. I felt as if I only existed from day to day. I never stopped reading but nothing went in but now I feel that it is possible to keep on learning.' (Mary)

'I did speak to one of the tutors and was told in no uncertain terms that I could take a degree course. I was thrilled... I would like to think that one day, if I got a degree, whichever direction I went in I really would like to think of the possibilities of encouraging other people. Encouraging other people who thought perhaps they were brain dead and couldn't do this.' (Amy)

Not only had Amy realised her academic ability she also talked about the way her attitude had changed towards her role vis-a-vis her husband and other men.

'...I've never realised this as much before but the attitudes of some of my husband's colleagues and his friends are very, very chauvinist. Very sort of dominant men and one of the things I think college has done for me its really removed an awful lot of cobwebs...I just feel the world views women as the weaker sex but we've got brains, we want to use them and that's the way I'm going to live my life from now on. I am not going to have any man belittle me in any way...I think I've held back in many respects for the sake of my husband, I've held a certain traditional view of women and I think I've held back...I'm learning I have an opinion and it's going to be heard.'

This would seem to be a very good example of empowerment and Amy had clearly undergone some 'consciousness raising'. Not only did the women at "Meadowbank" learn about literature, sociology and psychology, they also learn in Bell's words: 'A feminist approach to things and the strength to stand up to that'.

Whilst the "Fresh Start" course at "Meadowbank" really seemed to live up to its name, the courses at the FE college

seemed to provide a less liberating experience. Their expression of feelings about the course were much more muted and rather less inspired.

'I am enjoying my studies ,I feel quite privileged in a way.' (Linda)

'I've enjoyed it, I feel its been quite stimulating in a way'. (Ruth)

'I think I enjoy giving expression to myself in a furtive way almost as if I shouldn't be doing this.'
(Jean)

'I like it but I feel quite self-indulgent.'(Mo)

There was a distinct absence of words like 'enthraling', 'brilliant' and 'amazing' that were used by the "Meadowbank" students and whilst I would not wish to detract from the obvious benefits these women derived from their studies, their comments conveyed feelings of guilt from which they had obviously not managed to escape. Little seemed to be achieved in terms of improving feelings of self-worth.

'I'm not doing it for anybody else. I'm only doing it for me. I just want education for the sake of it really, it doesn't seem like a very good motive does it?' (Mary)

This was one of the occasions when I, like Oakley in her research (1981) felt it would be unhelpful not to make comments as Mary was clearly seeking a response from me, perhaps an affirmation that it was acceptable to do something for herself.

Equally, comments about the benefits of the course were often related to the family rather than to themselves.

'I think I am happier and it reflects on everybody else in the family. I feel as if I'm going somewhere now, I know where I'm going and when I'm with the children I give more of myself to them. I think we are all benefitting from it...I think as a family we are probably closer together.'
(Helen)

'I think the course will benefit the children in the end.'
(Jo)

The differences between the comments of the women in the two colleges about their feelings and experience could be linked to the types of courses they were taking. This does raise an important issue of curriculum, particularly if 'empowerment' is to become one of the outcomes of women's education. The implications for provision are addressed in chapter 11.

7.7. Progression Issues.

I discussed with the women what they hoped to do after their courses had finished and many of them spoke about going on to higher education. This was evident in the comments of both those at "Meadowbank" and the F.E. College.

'I've applied for a place at X poly, only because it's near. I don't want to completely disrupt the family life at the same time. I would like to continue studying and it's a degree course which would fit in with the family.'
(Jo)

'I feel quite self-indulgent about this but I'd quite like to go to Y poly as it's close. I want to take advantage of that if I'm going to go anywhere. I'm happy to do that if I can fit in with the children and everything.' (Mary)

'X university appealed to me because they have a remarkable amount of mature students there anyway. Also it's convenient because I don't want to be too far away from home. I want to be able to get back home for the children in an emergency.' (Marie)

What is striking about these comments is their similarity regarding the emphasis upon fitting in with the family and reflects the all pervasive nature of the mother role. Differences emerged however in the amount of confidence the women had in their abilities. The women at the F.E. college seemed to be lacking in this respect as the comments from Penny and Mary illustrate.

'I'm hoping I'm going to have the confidence to go on and do a degree but I'm not sure.'(Penny)

'I would like to go to a poly but I'm worried about not making a success of it, failing definitely does worry me.' (Mary)

These comments contrast sharply with those made by women studying at "Meadowbank" (cited earlier) and clearly much can be learnt from the "Meadowbank" experience regarding good practice in women's education. This good practice does however need to be extended to higher education which is the intended destination for many women after their initial return to study courses. The changes that have been effected in

women's lives will otherwise be lost and Bell's story of her progression to University can be cited as evidence of this. I quote from her at length because her experience highlights some key issues:

'I was accepted at Z university to do a psychology degree. In the prospectus it said they accepted forty students a year, as it turned out they took eighty. To double is a lot isn't it?... There were problems about where we were going to have our lectures, eighty of us going from place to place. The sad thing was there were only 7% mature students and I think 3% the year before...but I think what really saddened me was the method of teaching. I suppose in one way it could be argued that "Meadowbank" doesn't prepare you for the transition to university but I feel that if it can be done on a small scale then it can be continued. It was just eighty of us sat there hour after hour of lectures. On a Monday we went from 12 to 1pm for developmental psychology then in the afternoon from 2-5.30pm with just a five minute break and that was only because students started to walk out and fall asleep. It was just continual lectures, I think I was surprised that they were still doing that; it was almost as if we had gone back in a time warp...I thought university was all about debate and discussion and that's how one learnt. Instead we were just like a black box sitting there recording...I thought this is awful, having been in a place where there is a great deal of interaction and bringing in our own experience and relating it to what was being taught. The lecturers seemed to be there under sufferance really and as soon as they could left to get back to their research or their latest book. I just had the feeling that they weren't there for us and that saddened me in a way because I expected so much enthusiasm... They are just not geared for mature students to say they accept mature students isn't sufficient. We had tutorials once a week and the woman who took us was very nice and said you don't come in just for a tutorial when you've got

children so that was good. I felt that she was receptive but it still wasn't within schooltime. Although I had only to go in twice I had to make childcare arrangements... as time went on I felt this just isn't me and in fact, which is really sad, it's put me off studying. I've been studying for six years and now I feel I can't pick up a book, it's really weird, it's shattered me really.. There was no recognition of the needs of mature students, we were just expected to fit in with the youngsters...

...In a way "Meadowbank" tried to influence me into getting a good degree and I went against all my instincts. My instincts were to go to X poly where I'd have been accepted into the second year. They are geared for mature students, they fit the timetable to mature students and the younger ones have to fit around that. They bend over backwards to accommodate mature students and I should have gone there, but I thought why do I want to play the safe option. I'm going to pioneer here, go out and go for a good degree and really it was the wrong decision. I should have gone where they had creches, their teaching methods are ones of having tutorials in small groups, seminars...but I went against all my instincts mainly because "Meadowbank" wanted us to get good degrees from Y university and other places...I suppose they are really trying to say go for it, you've missed out once, don't miss out again...

...I only lasted four weeks there and I don't know what I'll do now. I actually feel have I got it in me now. The fun that I used to have, the searching, all that excitement about learning has been numbed... I've lost confidence I think, that wonderful confidence that "Meadowbank" gives you and feeling of well-being that you can take on anything...

...Another reason I had to drop out was because of my children. I phoned up the university to find out how many days I would be late to make childcare arrangements and I was told 2 or 3 times a week. My husband said he would help out on one day and so he'd bring work home

and the second day a friend said she'd pick up the children and that meant that on another day I'd have her children, but the system fell down in a very short time because my husband couldn't be home when I needed him. Then my parents came over but they are not for me doing any sort of study, they feel I should be at home, they've never encouraged me with studying. I felt this is awful, it's a real headache and I was only two weeks into the course. I thought I've got another three years of this...it was just a juggling act. All those things made me give up really... perhaps I ought to wait until the children are older or do an O.U. course which might fit in better. It's dreadful, I'm sure men don't feel like this!

This very sad and depressing story, strictly speaking was not part of the main body of data for this study and resulted from a telephone call from Bell three months after the data collection phase was completed. She was anxious to tell me about her experience and I have included it because it graphically illustrates the potential problem of progression for women returners. Firstly Bell seemed to experience what Warner Weil (1989) calls 'disjunction' which she describes as:

'...how one's present experience as a learner relates to previous or concurrent experiences. Disjunction can be associated with feelings of alienation, anger, frustration and confusion,' (p112)

Bell's experience at "Meadowbank" had been of working in small groups, discussion, seminars and drawing upon experience to inform the learning process. She had been used

to 'a great deal of interaction, bringing in our own experience and relating it to what was being taught'. This is exactly the kind of student-centred approach advocated as most appropriate in women's education. (NIACE, 1991; Coats, 1989; Kirk, 1982). Clearly, with large numbers of students (eighty in this case), these kinds of methods are not possible hence the adoption for practical reasons of a traditional didactic approach. Bell was expected to fit into a system which was very alien to her and would seem to confirm a point made by NIACE (1991) that,

'Women need to be prepared if they are moving from women only provision to mixed or mainstream courses.'(p.34)

Perhaps "Meadowbank" should have prepared her for what to expect before she embarked upon the course; perhaps they should have steered her towards a university that did cater for mature students. Bell unfortunately became the casualty of a system unresponsive to her needs and she was defeated by it. The confidence, energy and love of learning that had been generated in her at "Meadowbank" was lost and that is a tragedy, this woman had great potential.

In addition to the problems of having to fit in to a system geared towards the traditional eighteen year old school leaver, Bell had the problems of fitting her attendance at the university around her family commitments. Lack of reliable support from her husband made childcare arrangements

difficult and when she turned to her parents, they didn't support her either. She was clearly faced with an almost impossible 'juggling act' because the university had no childcare provision. It was a 'juggling act' she felt that she could not sustain for three years and consequently she gave in.

Without wishing to stretch the point too far it would almost seem as if 'the system' was conspiring to keep her in her place. At the university, where structures have traditionally been devised by men for men, she was not welcome unless it was on their terms; she must fit in or get out. Within the family she had little support in her endeavours to fit her student role in with her mother role. Perhaps one day if universities wake up to the needs of women returners or when her children are older, Bell will do her degree, she certainly deserves that opportunity to continue and add to her already considerable academic success given that she was 'written off' at eleven as a failure.

7.8. Concluding Remarks on the Data

The data reveals the nature of the problems and obstacles women experience when they return to education. Of crucial importance is their life in the private sphere and the amount of support they receive from husbands/partners as they seek

to manage domestic, childcare and student roles. The data is also, I would argue, testimony to the power of patriarchy in both the private and public spheres and demonstrates how women's lives are circumscribed by the need to fit in with structures not of their own making and which they do not have the power to change.

The data reveals what women need if they are to succeed in the education system and raises important policy issues if obstacles are to be removed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

KEY ASPECTS OF THE RETURN TO STUDY

EXPERIENCE I - 'SUPPORT'

8.1 Introduction

The data presented in Chapters 6 and 7 highlights the vital importance of support for women who return to study and the consequences when it is not forthcoming. To summarise from the data, the support the women needed from their husband/partners took three forms:-

1. **Practical** - Taking time out from their work and or leisure in order to 'help' with childcare and housework in order that the women could:-
 - a) Attend college
 - b) Have time to study at home
 - c) Have 'free' time
2. **Emotional** - To act in sympathy with:-
 - a) The Student role
 - b) The family role
3. **Financial** - Money for fees, equipment, travel and labour substitution.

If the obstacles to women's return to education are to be overcome it is vital that we have a clear picture of their experiences and needs; therefore in this chapter, analysis of 'support' will be undertaken as an emergent concept from the data derived from utilising a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987).

8.2 Analysing support. Practical, Emotional and Financial in The Private Sphere

The data presented in chapter 6 reveals that if husbands/partners were to give any kind of support there were certain preconditions attached to its provision. Summarising from the data, 'Support' was forthcoming providing:-

- 1) There is no change in the division of labour in the home, ie he is not asked to take on any aspects of the role he has designated as hers.
- 2) His time is not encroached upon either for his work or leisure.
- 3) The lives of the children are not disrupted and either she or her designated female substitute is there to care for them.

The message these men were giving was clear; it was a message imbued with patriarchal values and attitudes towards women's role in the family. Her primary consideration must be her wife and mother responsibilities and anything else taken on, i.e. the student role must be accommodated without making changes to his life. These findings on the conditional nature of husband's/partner's support in fact corroborate the findings of Kirk (1977) and Lovell (1980) who, also used qualitative methods (see Chapter 2).

In order to explore the conditional nature of support and provide an explanation as to why the women received so little of the practical support they needed, one vital clue can be found in the way in which roles were assigned within the marriage relationship. As Comer (1982) has suggested,

'Marriage is the first and basic model of the division of labour and power between the sexes...within the institution of marriage, men and women are supposed to resolve the conflicts of the public domain, where education, power and money are so massively weighted in favour of men - where men treat women as inferiors with impunity...(p179).

There is much within the data presented in Chapter 5 to support Comer's point: what has emerged are clearly defined areas of responsibility with male as breadwinner and female as homemaker existing right across the spectrum of social class. It is possibly not surprising therefore, that the women received little in the way of support from their husbands in terms of help with childcare and domestic work as these were not seen by men as part of their role.

Husbands asserted their power in the marriage relationship by assigning the responsibility for domestic work and child care to their wives and refusing to permit them to relinquish it even temporarily while studying. This was evident in the comments of both the middle and working class women cited in Chapter 5, i.e.

'He wants somebody to look after his children and the home'. (Penny - Middle class).

'He definitely does look upon my role as housewife and mother first and foremost....He doesn't help me at all I'm afraid'. (Emma - Middle class).

'...he didn't help me at all if he could possibly avoid it'. (Marie - Middle Class).

'He thinks a woman's place is to do what there is to do in the home'. (Shirley - Working Class)

'If I'm honest I'd say he had fairly set ideas about roles'. (Julie - Working Class).

It is clear from the above that men are regarded as wishing to avoid domestic labour and having the power to do so. Within both middle and working class marriages a segregated conjugal role relationship existed and would seem to contradict Bott's (1957) assertion that this type of relationship was characteristic of working class marriages whilst joint relationships characterised middle class ones. Equally Comer's (1982) point that,

'The Newsons and other researchers have found that the lower down the social scale, the more rigid are the attitudes towards women's domestic role... These attitudes are less rigid amongst the professional classes...(p181).

could be questioned given that my data provides little evidence of a sharing of roles within either class. As mentioned in Chapter 5, this would seem to support the questioning of assertions that middle-class marriages particularly are becoming more egalitarian. (i.e. Young and Willmott 1975). Bell and Newby (1976) for example, suggest that,

'The growth of symmetry in the relationship between husband and wife is more apparent than real...(p159).

and Oakley (1974, 1985) in her study of housework suggests that,

'...only a minority of husbands participate at the level implied by the term equality' (p148),

and refers to the existence of

'...a large packet of domestic oppression'. (p149).

Some scant evidence does exist in the data that husbands did help occasionally with household chores and childcare but this was

placed in the context of 'doing their wives a favour' and led to a time of self congratulation. Responsibility however ultimately lies with her and this finding corroborates a point made by Oakley and Rajan (1991) that,

'Women continue to assume the major responsibility for housework and child care' (p47).

In this context the notion of practical support is also linked to men's time which they are not prepared to relinquish in order to create time for the women to study. The net result is that the student role is added to the domestic role and the women are left with the problem of having to fit their studies around their other responsibilities. (This is explored further in the next chapter).

Evidence of men's unwillingness to give up their time can be found in Chapter 6 in relation to both their work and their leisure. The comments from the middle class women lend support to the idea of male work being sacrosanct and are consistent with the notion that activities within the public sphere are of far greater importance than those in the private sphere. These men had professional responsibilities, they couldn't 'just drop things and come home' (Marie), things must 'fit around the job' (Penny) and 'not interfere' (Emma). It is interesting that none of the working class women cited their husband's jobs as the reason for the lack of practical support, perhaps manual work does not provide the level of

responsibility that would keep men away from their families and thus provide a 'legitimate reason'. To be fair the middle-class men did have to attend evening meetings and to be 'on call', therefore some of the problems may be inherent in the way in which paid work is structured within the economic system. What cannot be attributed to a potential 'structural' problem however, is men's unwillingness to change their leisure activities and the data yields a number of examples, i.e. Shirley's husband who was out two or three nights a week and at weekends, canoeing; Julie's husband who 'has a busy social life' and Katherine's husband who 'does various things in the evening'.

On the issue of leisure, some useful insights can be gained from feminist studies which are premised on the notion that women service men's leisure activities by undertaking domestic work and childcare,

'...so that men are free to go to the pub or to have leisure time out of the house' (Griffen, quoted by Deem, 1986, p13).

Men see leisure as a right and Woodward and Green (1988) suggest that paid work acts as a legitimiser of leisure for men, they have 'earned' the right to do exactly what they like. They go on to make the point that women act as facilitators for other people's leisure often at the expense of their own free time. This point is substantiated by the data to the extent that what the women had to

either give up or struggle to accommodate, was not their 'free' time but their study time. (This is explored further in the next Chapter).

The feminist literature on leisure also emphasises a point I have made earlier,

'...it remains the responsibility of women to do housework and provide child care. It is not in men's interests to disturb these arrangements, because it would decrease the support for their own leisure (Deem, 1988, p13/14).

The ways in which the women managed the effects of their husband's lack of practical support will be discussed in the next chapter, but I wish to emphasise here that it is the issue of child care which presents the greatest potential barrier to women being able to return to study.. The data provides numerous examples of the childcare arrangements that the women were forced to make before they could go to college. These arrangements varied with social class, the middle class women employing other women to care for their children whilst the working class women were reliant upon informal arrangements with female relatives, neighbours and friends. Penny, Emma and Judith (middle class) for example all had either live in au-pairs or a nanny for the children during the day. Those with older children at school ensured that they were home from college in time for their return. The working class women with pre-school children often had to make complicated arrangements and they lived in constant fear of these breaking down. Pat, for example, told me

about the times she spent worrying about who could look after her daughter often to the detriment of her studies. She found it difficult to concentrate in lectures when her childcare arrangements broke down.

Many of the women operated reciprocal childcare support whereby they would take it in turns to look after each other's children. The women were very aware that this process operated very much on goodwill and that it should be seen to be fair; they were mindful of how many days their children had been looked after by others and how many days therefore they would need to 'clock up'. Mo told me about the playgroup that she helped run with her neighbours,

'It was awful when it was your turn but it was lovely when it wasn't'.

Shirley had a sister living down the road and her children went to her to be looked after; Amy lived on a new estate where there were a lot of women with young children and they organised a rota between them; Julie had help from women friends; Pat had help from a neighbour and also her father. Interestingly she was the only one to receive help from parents and a male at that! The data would seem to lend some support to Oakley and Rajan's (1991) findings that working class women are not more closely involved with their relatives, a notion propounded by the 'community studies' of the 1950s and 1960s,. Oakley and Rajan make the point that,

'These evoked an appealing caricature of working class communities revolving around the emotional and practical sustenance of 'mum' a social support resource largely mobilised by young married women who called upon the female kinship network for practical assistance and emotional help with child rearing' (p31).

Within my sample 'mum' did not appear at all as a means of support with childcare and only two of the women had any help from other kin. This can be explained by the geographical separation between mothers and daughters making practical support on a day to day basis impossible.

Turning to the issue of financial support, the women needed money for course fees, equipment and buying in the services of other women (labour substitution). The data provides examples of the extent to which this support was forthcoming and as Bell commented,

'I think funding is basically every married woman's problem'.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, a number of writers have suggested that it is money that is the source of power that supports male dominance in the family (Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Bell and Newby, 1976; Polatnick, 1983; Pahl, 1989) and the data lends support to this proposition given the findings that where husbands were in professional occupations, the most profound role segregation occurred. These men were the most vociferous in articulating their demands and due to the power they wielded economically, placed

heavy demands on their wives to fulfil their traditional roles. To reiterate some of the middle-class women's comments,

'He said... I earn far more than you do... I think he feels... as he has a higher earning capacity... that what I do is secondary'. (Helen)

'... he wants somebody to look after his children and the home... he earns so much more money than I ever will'. (Penny)

Whilst these women were beholden to their husband's demands, they were able to utilise the financial resources available to their advantage by buying in some of the services of other women for child care and housework (see chapter 6), thus freeing them from some of their responsibilities for some of the time.

To the extent that their husbands were aware that they were providing money for their wives to buy in some of the practical support they would not or could not give, it could be argued that they were giving financial support. One of the husbands was however giving financial support to his wife unwittingly. Emma was taking money from their bank account to pay for her course without her husband knowing because she felt that if he knew how much it was costing he would not want her to do it.

It is clear that these women were more privileged in terms of their material circumstances than the working class women who had financial barriers to overcome if they were to return to study. The

middle class women were however still in a vulnerable position because they were reliant upon the benevolence of their husbands. At any time they could withdraw financial support due to their economic power within the family, thus jeopardising the women's chances of studying. Comer (1982) calls this issue the 'politics of economic dependence' and speaks of,

'...a reality in which the husband can spend his money howsoever he wishes...he earns it and gives it to her...' (p186/7 - her emphasis).

Comer also suggests that,

'The only money she spends guiltlessly is on food for the family and clothes for the children' (p186).

This point is corroborated in the data presented in Chapter 7 where Shirley spoke about 'feeling bad' about spending money on herself for a course and Julie who struggled to justify buying a shirt and therefore there was 'no way' she would spend £150 on a course.

In providing an explanation for this type of attitude Comer's work is again helpful when she writes of,

'...the apparatus of women's oppression which asserts that women don't need money for themselves. And the degree to which they internalise their oppression is evident from their statements on the subject. 'I wouldn't dream of spending money on myself'. The 'I-don't-need-money-for-myself' syndrome is a profound response. It is a telling indication of the depth of the housewife's humiliation. She doesn't need money for herself because she hasn't any money' (p187 -her emphasis).

The lack of money was a real problem for the working class women and this was particularly evident in the comments made by Sandra who had 'no house, no money, no education'. The cost of courses is therefore a barrier for those women whose husbands/partners can not or will not support them financially.

Bound up with the issues of both practical and financial support is the issue of emotional support which, judging from what the women said, was also in short supply. Perhaps it is not surprising given what we already know about the attitudes of the women's husbands/partners and what the data reveals about emotional support could be summed up in a quote from Oakley and Rajan (1991),

'So far as emotional support goes, though this is often what women provide for men in marriage, it does not appear to be what men by and large offer women' (p47).

The data yields little in the way of examples of emotional support apart from the women initially saying that their husbands were 'encouraging' (see Chapter 6), but even this was conditional. Lack of emotional support can be seen in the way in which the women had to judge their husband's moods before broaching the subject of returning to study; Julie's husband's disparaging remarks about her work and the way in which he would read and correct her writing and Penny's husband's anger because she wasn't prepared to give up her course. He had wanted her to fit in with his job and she did

tell me that eventually she would have to go if she wanted to remain married. A number of the marriages were in fact in difficulty during the course of this study but all remained intact by the time the women finished their courses. It would be interesting to know whether this is still the case; if the marriages have survived I would argue that it is because of the strategies of appeasement and compromise that the women adopted, perhaps at the expense of their own ambitions. The women were very committed to their children (a theme taken up in the next chapter) and to making their marriages 'work'. Returning to study therefore had to be undertaken within the parameters circumscribed by their husbands if they were not to upset the marital status quo. A point made by Woodward and Green (1988) seems quite poignant;

'...women internalise the idea that womanhood ties them to primary responsibility for the care and well-being of others, in particular male partners and children... Less explicit but arguably more powerful.. is..that the woman is equally accountable for making the marriage partnership and associated parenthood 'work' and continue in the land of 'happy ever after' as portrayed in romantic fiction...(p133).

In essence, the support the women received (practical, financial, and emotional) from their husbands actually cost those men very little in terms of any disruptions to their lives. If the men gave support it was on their terms and is indicative of patriarchal power in the private sphere. Given the lack of support the women received, it is testimony to their determination and will to succeed that they managed to return to study at all.

8.3 Analysing Support - Practical and Emotional in the Public Sphere.

In addition to the issue of support in the private sphere, the data also provides information about the practical and emotional support the women both needed and received from the colleges where they were studying. (Financial support has been omitted from this discussion because none existed, grants were not available for part-time courses). Methodologically it proved to be relatively unproblematic to obtain this information, the women seemed very willing to talk about this aspect of their experiences as it tended not to impinge upon the more intimate parts of their lives.

In terms of both practical and emotional support, the data highlights the contrasting experiences of the women, those studying at the F.E. college received less support than those studying at the 'Meadowbank'. This was evident in the provision of facilities at the two institutions. The women at the F.E. college for example, complained about the library which was 'like a fifth form common room' where the younger students were 'always talking' (see Chapter 7) and how it was impossible to find a quiet place to study. The college provided little in the way of physical space for mature students which is clearly vital in supporting their learning, particularly for those women who had no quiet place in their homes where they could retreat with their books. This was particularly difficult for the working class women who, unlike some of their middle class sisters,

did not have access to a study which they were 'allowed' (by their husband) to use. (see Chapter 6). This issue of the importance of a quiet, physical space in which to study seems uncomfortably reminiscent of a point made by Woolf (1929) that what women need if they are to write is money and room of their own.

In contrast to the experiences of the women at the F.E. College, the women at 'Meadowbank' praised the facilities and my own experience of visiting the college would endorse their comments. The college is housed in a large Victorian mansion and caters exclusively for mature students; upon entering the building the feeling of tranquillity is very evident and seems a perfect environment in which to study. I would concede that a comparison between the two institutions in this context is perhaps unfair given their relative sizes and the kinds of students for whom they are catering, but it does not seem beyond the bounds of possibility that the F.E. college could provide some space for the exclusive use of mature students . (This point is taken up in Chapter 11). Another area of practical support related to the provision of study skills which the women thought vital in helping their learning. Again the data reveals contrasting experiences with the women at the F.E. college saying how much they would have appreciated some guidance. Mo, for example, would have liked to be told how to take notes and Ruth wanted some help in 'getting back into the swing of reading

and writing essays'. For the women at 'Meadowbank' however, this was an integral part of their course and obviously had an impact on confidence and enjoyment as well as providing practical support with the mechanics of study. Katherine discovered how much she enjoyed writing; Mary said that the teacher they had for study skills made them feel they were capable of anything; Shirley found it 'fun' to learn how to read more efficiently.

'Meadowbank' provided therefore, not just practical support but also emotional support through its study skills programme. In addition tutorial support was available; Katherine spoke of her tutor to whom she could go if she had any problems; Shirley spoke of the reassurance and support she received and Mary said she found a lot of encouragement and there was always someone to 'pick you up'. Sadly however, this kind of support was not available at the F.E. college; Penny felt angry about it because there had been times when she felt she could not cope but had no one to turn to; Jo suggested that it would be helpful if there was someone to talk to, to ensure she was 'going in the right direction', and to help her confidence.

The outcomes of providing practical and emotional support can be seen in what the women said about their feelings regarding the courses they were taking. The women at 'Meadowbank' spoke of

the courses as being 'enthalling', 'brilliant', 'stimulating', and their confidence and enthusiasm was very evident. Summarising from some of the data presented in Chapter 7, gives a clear indication of a sense of empowerment and recognition of potential,

'I think its made me more alive and given me confidence...its been terribly positive to know I could really do this'. (Katherine).

'The college has made me feel I can do a degree...'. (Mary).

'I was told I could take a degree course...'. (Amy).

'Meadowbank' seemed to inspire intellectual confidence and the notion of women's right to education which is associated with what Bell called 'a feminist approach to things'. This can be seen particularly in a comment from Amy (see Chapter 7), where she says that college had enabled her to see how she had held back for the sake of her husband and how,

'...the world views women as the weaker sex but we've got brains, we want to use them and that's the way I'm going to live my life from now on'.

The issue of empowerment is raised by Thompson (1983) and Pye (1991) and a comment from one of the respondents in the latter study seems to express similar sentiments to Amy.

'People had been telling me long enough where I should be and what I should be.... Suddenly I felt freed and that nobody was ever going to tell me again what I should be' (p214).

For women with few resources to call their own and little power in the world, the education provided at 'Meadowbank' is clearly

providing the women with the confidence to make changes in their lives.

The empowering effects of the courses at 'Meadowbank' did not however seem to be replicated in the experiences of the women studying at the F.E. college. As mentioned in Chapter 7, expression of their feelings seemed more muted and less inspired,

'...I feel quite privileged in a way' (Linda).

'I like it but I feel quite self indulgent' (Mo)

'I think I enjoy giving expression to myself in a furtive way, almost as if I shouldn't be doing this (Jean).

Mary's comments about her 'only doing it for me', seem indicative of the guilt from which these women had obviously not managed to escape. The lack of emotional support meant that the vital element of confidence building was lacking in their education, their doubts and fears remained.

It could be argued that the detrimental effects of lack of support in the private sphere were mitigated to some extent, for the women at 'Meadowbank', by the support they received there and highlights the importance of a 'women friendly' environment. For the women at the F.E. college, the lack of support compounded their struggles in returning to study and achieving academic success.

8.4 Concluding remarks

The concept of support has emerged from the data as a key aspect of the return to study experience and the findings corroborate a point made by The Taking Liberties Collective (1989) that,

‘We can’t automatically rely on the kind of...support for our own studies that we would expect to receive if we were men’ (p68).

The use of a qualitative methodology has facilitated the identification of what women need in terms of support and crucially by uncovering the ‘private accounts’ of women’s lives we are led to the discovery of just how little they actually received. This information provides for a greater understanding of the problems/obstacles faced by women returners and the ways in which these have been created and are sustained by patriarchal values.

CHAPTER NINE

KEY ASPECTS OF THE RETURN TO STUDY

EXPERIENCE II - 'FITTING IN'

9.1 Introduction

Like 'support', the concept of 'fitting in' has emerged from the data presented in Chapters 6 and 7 and encapsulates major characteristics of the return to study experiences of the women I interviewed. A dictionary definition of fitting in is, 'to belong or conform' and I shall argue that the process of fitting in is symptomatic of women's powerless position as they are forced to conform to structures in both the public and private spheres which are not of their own making. By analysing their experiences of fitting in the workings of patriarchy can be uncovered to reveal how profoundly they shape these women's lives.

9.2 Fitting in - The Dimensions

Fitting in has essentially three dimensions which will be explored in this section. Firstly it is a process which describes the lived reality of patriarchy and has a parallel in Graham's (1982) concept of 'coping' in motherhood. She suggests that,

'Coping is a concept which enables us to see the structures which mould women's experiences... it sensitises us to the way in which women's roles are so constructed that their successful enactments commits the woman to a life of self-negation' (p102/105).

By analysing the process of fitting in, the structures which have moulded the women's return to study experiences can be located in both the public and private spheres. Within the public sphere it is an education system designed by men for men (at least for the women in the F.E. college) and within the private sphere to the patriarchal marriage relationship within which the roles of wife and mother are embedded.

Secondly, fitting in can be described as 'strategy' in terms of the ways in which the women managed the competing demands of family and education. Edwards (1991) suggests that family and education are 'greedy institutions' which both demand that their differing requirements are met fully. It was impossible for the women to separate these two aspects of their lives because of the all pervasive nature of the wife and mother roles. It was they who had been assigned, by their husbands, as ultimately responsible for the care of their children and if they wanted to return to study they were forced to adopt strategies to fit in this responsibility with the student role. (These strategies are explored later in the chapter). The concept of strategy has been used as a way of explaining how women manage particular situations, Finch (1983) for example, writes of the way in which wives utilised 'coping strategies' for fitting their lives around the demands of their husband's jobs.

One of the main reasons why the women had to adopt strategies to fit in relates to the lack of practical support (see previous chapter) from husbands. I would argue in fact, that the concepts of 'support' and 'fitting in' are inextricably linked and that an inverse relationship exists between them, i.e. the less support provided the more fitting in is required. Somehow the women had to create the time and space in their lives to accommodate study and this necessitated great organisational skill and effort. The negotiations that were required constitute the third dimension of fitting in which is labour, this was added on to the other roles and responsibilities the women already had and is explored further later in the chapter.

The dimensions of strategy and labour are also I would argue, overlapping and demonstrate the ways in which the women were proactive in the face of patriarchal demands. This can be most clearly exemplified in relation to the mother role. Given that the women had to take ultimate responsibility for the care of their children, if they were to return to study they had to ensure their children were looked after by other women. This 'mother substitution' is a strategy the women adopted but it also involved them in complex negotiations whereby childcare was either bought or bartered. The bartering aspect particularly involved labour for the women because they would end up having to look after the children of the women with whom they had traded, at times when they were not attending college (see previous chapter). The

ubiquitous nature of the mother role shaped significantly the women's return to study experiences and their concerns and responsibilities were taken with them into the public sphere. This has in fact been a theme in studies of women in paid work. Pollert (1981) makes the point that home was something women brought with them to the factory, the actual process of family care penetrated and altered the consciousness of work. I would argue that this is equally true for women who return to education and can in fact be evidenced by the research on PhD students (Scott, 1985; Salmon, 1992).

Scott (1985) found in her interviews that in general male students did not see domestic aspects of their lives as legitimate topics. Women students however, did discuss the problems they experienced with childcare and fitting their studies into their domestic lives. Similarly, Salmon (1992) documenting the experiences of group of PhD students whom she supervised, says in the chapter on 'Managing' that the women spoke of the problems of their competing family responsibilities whereas these were not mentioned by men.

The following discussion will focus upon the ways in which the women fitted family and education into their lives and how they managed to accommodate the often competing demands of the wife, mother and student roles. Given the centrality of the mother

role within the data, this is now explored further as it underpins much of the fitting in which was required.

9.3 The Ubiquity of Motherhood

From the data it is evident that the women in the study were committed emotionally to the mother role and to fulfilling the responsibilities which ensued from it. The following quotations for example, illustrate this.

'I made a conscious decision that I wanted to bring up my children'. (Emma).

'My duty is to be here for the family... I feel that children need a tremendous amount of stability'. (Amy)

'I think that children deserve to be looked after by one of you... there is something to be proud of in bringing up children'. (Penny).

'I was absolutely sure I was going to be at home to look after the children. There was no suggestion of me leaving them with childminders'. (Janet).

Comments were made also on the positive outcomes of motherhood,

'My confidence came with the birth of Jonathan. Walking down to the clinic one day a car came around the corner without slowing down or anything and I was crossing the road... I grew ninety feet tall. I was a killer queen, from then on I could do anything in this world'. (Julie).

One way of interpreting these comments would be to suggest that what I was told represented the public face of motherhood, that I was given the 'ideologically correct' version of their perceptions of the responsibilities attached to the mother role. It would however

be wrong of me to question the 'truth' of their comments, to suggest that this was not really how they felt, that they had been 'brainwashed' into the acceptance of patriarchal values. It is clear that commitment to the mother role was very real but perhaps one issue that needs to be addressed is what the data can tell us about the contradictions in that commitment. This can be approached by analysing what the women said about motherhood and whether there were any inconsistencies in their comments. The data presented in Chapter 5 on the experience of motherhood does suggest that along with commitment other feelings co-existed and this was true for both working and middle class women. Helen thought that motherhood was going to satisfy her, that she would become an 'earth mother' but went on to say that 'it didn't work out like that for me'. Katherine and Mo said that they 'got bored just having the children' and Jo expressed her frustration about 'those years at home when I could have been doing more'.

These comments indicate levels of dissatisfaction with the mother role and Jo's comment in particular would seem to exemplify the ways in which the role can place restrictions upon their choices and the realisation of their potential.

In analysing these women's feelings about motherhood and the co-existence of both a commitment to the role and dissatisfaction with

it, the work of Rich (1977) provides a useful contribution. She draws a distinction between motherhood as 'institution' and motherhood as 'experience', or,

'...as the difference between women deciding who, how, when and where to mother and men making these decisions for women (quoted by Tong, 1989, p87).

In her discussion of motherhood as institution Rich (1977) suggests that,

'...the institution aims at ensuring that all women shall remain under male control. This institution...has withheld over one-half of the human species from decisions affecting their lives....it creates the dangerous schism between private and public life, it calcifies human choices and potentialities...motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities (p13).

The institution of motherhood in Rich's terms defines motherhood under patriarchy and as Eisenstein (1981) has suggested it '...locks women into a limited set of choices and alternatives'. (p15). I would argue therefore, that what the women were expressing in terms of their commitment, were feelings of enjoyment and fulfilment in their roles as mothers, the experience of the relationships with their children. The dissatisfaction derives from the patriarchal division of labour whereby women became automatically fulltime carers, consigned to the private sphere, powerless and dependent upon men. The message that is conveyed is that childcare is a woman's responsibility, her work. A comment from Mo would seem to illustrate the point,

'My husband didn't seem to understand that when you get married and have children our lives totally change whereas really how much do theirs?...He didn't support me, I think the messages I got from him were, it's your job, you had them, you look after them'.

It would appear that within patriarchal marriage, women cannot have the 'experience' without the 'institution', the two are inextricably linked. To choose to have children necessarily entails taking on the 'unchosen' role of fulltime carer. It is the institutional aspect of motherhood which meant that the women had to adopt strategies to fit in the student role and it is this aspect of motherhood which must be challenged if women are to have an equal opportunity to enter the public sphere of education or work. Rich (1977) calls for a re-evaluation of the mother role,

'To destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood, it is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, imagination and conscious intelligence as any other difficult but freely chosen work' (p280).

Because women are child-bearers (a biological reality) does not necessarily mean that they have also to be full time child-rearers, this suggests Eisenstein, is a patriarchal construction arising out of patriarchal 'need'. It places severe restrictions upon what women can undertake for themselves and in the context of this research, whether they can return to education.

These women's lives therefore, were characterised by having to devise strategies to fit in the student role and the women

themselves did identify one key factor which they felt would help them, this related to the provision of creche facilities. The women spoke passionately and with one voice on this issue.

'I think that day courses are important for women but most important are creches'. (Katherine).

'Whenever you've got women 'en masse' if you take them out of the home you've got to have child care facilities. (Julie).

'Creches, it just goes without saying, every college should have a creche with enough places for everyone. To go back to study it would be so much easier'. (Emma)

'If there had been good childcare facilities, I wouldn't be in the position I'm in now to wait for them to be the right age before I can do what I want'. (Jo).

It is however, not just provision for pre-school children that is required as the following comments from Mary indicate,

'It's older children who are more a problem than the younger ones in some respects because you can, if you pay, get day nursery places, but it's when they're older that it's very hard. They want to be in their own home with the freedom of seeing their friends...in fact that's more of a problem until they're old enough to look after themselves. Five to fourteen is the most difficult age'.

Mary's comment about 'if you pay' raises another important factor in creche provision. As a middle-class woman she did potentially have the resources (if her husband was willing to supply the money) to pay for childcare, this however is not necessarily true for working class women.

Clearly, creche provision would be of tremendous benefit to the women given the lack of contribution to childcare from their husbands and it could be argued that unless provision is made, some women will be unable to take up educational opportunities.

Given the all pervasive nature of the mother role it has in fact been argued that 'role' is an incorrect term for something which is part of women's core identity. Elshtain (1981) for example says,

'Mothering is not a role on a par with being a file clerk..mothering is a complicated, rich, ambivalent, vexising, joyous activity which is biological, natural, social, symbolic and emotional...A tendency to downplay the differences that pertain between say, mothering and holding down a job, not only drains our private relationships of most of their significance, but also oversimplifies what can or should be done to alter things for women' (p243 - Her emphasis).

Following on from Elshtain it could be argued that if the mother role is such a vital part of women's identity it is not surprising that they cannot separate it from the rest of their lives and specifically in this context from the student role.

9.4 Fitting Education Into The Family

As I argued earlier in this chapter, the problems the women experienced in fitting their studies into their family lives were a result of the lack of practical support from their husbands. It would seem that a point made by Comer (1982) that women's lives,

'...are geared to the daily, weekly and annual rhythms of his (husband's) life' (p182).

is 'true' for the women in this study. From the data comes the impression that men see themselves as having no responsibility for childcare and that they have some kind of inalienable right to expect personal service from their wives. The ways in which the women managed the lack of practical support can be analysed in the context of their mother, domestic and wife roles. Essentially it is an exploration of the ways in which the women created time to study, i.e. the strategies they adopted.

Fitting in with Children

The data in Chapter 6 provides numerous examples of the women's attempts to fit in the mother and student roles. Julie, Marie, Jo and Mary spoke of the importance of college courses taking place during school hours so that they could be at home for the arrival of their children and as I argued in Chapter 6, unless courses can be provided between 10 am and 3 pm many woman will be precluded from returning to education.

The women also had to devise strategies to find time to study whilst they were at home with children. Bell spoke of the moments she snatched with her books whilst the children were watching TV or whilst she was cooking dinner. Most studying seemed to be done when the children had gone to bed and for those who had older children it was often quite late in the evening before they could get started. This also created problems because as Helen

suggested 'I get very tired'. It is clear that study was accommodated into childcare responsibilities; time was created not by relinquishing these responsibilities but by using time that would otherwise be spent sleeping or relaxing.

One of the ways in which the women did manage to create time was to organise other women to look after their children for some of the time. This was discussed in the previous chapter and does have some interesting parallels with the work of Lowe and Gregson (Guardian 18.8.92) on women returning to work. In their study they found that 37% of professional and managerial women employed help with childcare and domestic work. They say that, 'with workplace creches still rare, mothers are having to pay other women to stay at home in order to continue their own careers'. They emphasise that it is women who are responsible for organising this and place it in the context that women are in fact buying time and freedom to concentrate on their careers. I would argue that this is precisely what the middle class women in my study were doing but where the comparison with Lowe and Gregson's work breaks down is on the issue of who pays for the childcare. Lowe and Gregson state that professional women pay for it themselves obviously because they have the money to do so, but the middle class women in my study were reliant upon their husbands to supply the money. This is clearly a more precarious situation and was discussed in the previous chapter in the context of financial support.

The working class women were not in a position to buy time and as explained earlier, were reliant upon the goodwill of neighbours, friends and sometimes kin; essentially they had to barter for childcare thus compounding the amount of fitting in they had to do. The inextricable link between support and fitting in can be seen in the issue of childcare and has a class dimension. For the working class women who received no practical or financial support, the efforts (labour) they had to make to organise childcare were great, resulting in high levels of fitting in. The middle class women received no practical support but did receive financial support which meant their childcare arrangements and thus the fitting in was less complex. This can be represented as follows;-

Figure 2 - Relationship Between Class Support and Fitting in

CLASS	FINANCIAL + SUPPORT	PRACTICAL = SUPPORT	LEVEL OF FITTING IN
Middle class	+	-	MEDIUM
Working class	-	-	HIGH

Fitting in Domestic Work

This aspect of the women's lives in the private sphere seemed to be the least problematic in terms of accommodating their studies. They tended to reduce the amount of time they spent on those tasks they regarded as less important. Marie cleaned her house once a week instead of twice and left domestic tasks until the evening so that she

could study during the day. Judith could not remember the last time she had cleaned the windows and said,

'...but is that really important? You prioritise...'

Two of the middle class women bought in help with housework; Linda for example said,

'I do have some help, I have some-one come and clean the house once a week. I've got a dishwasher, washing-machine, I think these things help as well'. (quoted in Chapter 6).

These women bought time in the same way as they did with childcare thus easing the process of fitting in which had to be undertaken. Clearly this was not an option for the working class women who had to assess the relative importance of domestic tasks and their studies.

Fitting in With Husbands/Partners

In addition to having to fit in childcare and domestic work, the women also had to contend with the demands of their husbands/ partners.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, husbands placed a number of preconditions on their wives returning to study which involved demands that their lives should not be disrupted in any way. Julie for example asked her husband if he would stay in on Monday evenings so that she could do a French evening class and although he went out every night of the week he refused. Katherine whose husband also 'does various things in the evening' refused to allow

her to take a course at Birkbeck. These examples indicate the amount of power they wielded over their wives and added to the problems of returning to study. The women were forced to take courses which fitted in with their husband's work and social lives and study was undertaken whilst they were out of the house in a number of cases.

It is clear that the lives of women returners, irrespective of class, symbolise a perpetual juggling act between the demands of family and education. Fitting in presents numerous problems and represents the ways in which these women are seeking to accommodate patriarchal demands into their steps towards doing something for themselves. These demands relate to their service roles and the strategies which were adopted can be summarised as follows

FIGURE 3 - RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ROLES AND STRATEGIES

<u>Service Roles</u>	<u>Strategies for fitting in student role</u>
Mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Paid or voluntary help from other women.- Attending college during school hours.- Delaying studying until children's needs have been met.
Wife	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Not interfering with husband's work.- Not interfering with husband's leisure.- Studying when he is out of the house.
Domestic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Paid help from other women.- Prioritise - do fewer chores deemed to be of less importance.- Doing housework in the evening.

9.5 The 'Problem' of Time

Creating time for study was not without its costs to the women emotionally. The data in Chapter 6 provides evidence of the guilt that many of the women felt about giving time to their studies at the expense of their families. Ruth was ashamed that she gave her family more convenience meals; Pat spoke of not giving one hundred per cent to study because she felt she had to give time to her children; Helen made efforts to compensate for not spending time with her son at weekends; Bell said she felt guilty about not giving time to her children and made the poignant comment that,

'It's dreadful, I'm sure men don't feel like this'.

The women clearly feel under pressure to be 'good' wives and 'good' mothers as well as 'good' students and seems reminiscent of the adherence to a 'superwoman' ideology which was mentioned in Chapter 6. They were embroiled in devising ever more complex strategies in the management of their multiple roles and this required greater levels of fitting in. It is evident that the empowering effects of education (see previous Chapter), particularly for those women at 'Meadowbank' did not extend to the responsibilities they felt towards their families.

On the issue of the guilt felt by women at spending time on themselves, some useful insights can be found in the feminist literature on women's leisure. I am not suggesting that returning to study should be regarded as leisure for women and I am sure that

the women I interviewed would not see it as such, however, there are some interesting parallels in the concept of time. (Some non-vocational education is seen as leisure for women, see for example Henderson 1989).

Deem (1988) points out the guilt that many women feel in spending time on themselves and Woodward and Green's (1988) comment that,

'Women who attempt to exercise their right to independent leisure experience guilt at 'desert-ing' their partners and children, especially when male partners signal clear disapproval' (p136).

seems to be very significant.

The issue of men's leisure and the ways in which women are expected to service it was discussed in the previous chapter and it would seem that men spending time on leisure is legitimate, but for women it is not. As Deem (1988) has said,

'Women's leisure does not seem to command the same degree as legitimacy as men's leisure, either in the home or out of it' (p96).

Patriarchal values seem to 'allow' men to demand and receive service from women and attempts, therefore, by women to claim time for themselves, i.e. to study rather than spend it in service to the household, are seen as 'selfish'. Women's time seems to 'belong' to their partners and children, she is there to service their needs, hence doing something for herself has low priority. This seems to be implicit in a point made by Polatnick (1983),

'A creative woman has no wife to protect her from intrusion. A man at his desk in a room with closed door is a man at work. A woman at a desk in any room is available' (p29).

It would seem that there is an inherent contradiction in the notion of women studying at home because as Deem (1988), has suggested, the home is already a workplace for women, it is where she services the needs of others, it is not a place where she does things for herself.

Expectations of the way in which women spend their time is indicative of power relations within the family. There are clearly practical and ideological problems for women in claiming time for themselves and in this context, claiming time for study. There appears to be some recognition of the problems in relation to women returning to paid work (see for example Woodward and Green 1988) but not in the context of women returning to study.

9.6 Fitting into the Public Sphere.

In addition to the fitting in which had to be undertaken in the private sphere, the women also had to fit into college. The following discussion is linked to the data presented in Chapter 7 and also to the issues of support presented in the previous chapter. As I argued in Chapter 7, 'Meadowbank' provided an environment which was 'women friendly' and supportive (chapter 9). In this context it actually did 'fitting in' for the women by providing for their needs

and therefore this discussion relates primarily to the experiences of the women studying at the F.E. college. This environment proved to be difficult and sometimes hostile with little recognition given to the women's needs. As Gavron (1966, 1985) said,

'The education into which women are expected to fit is a class based vocational system created in the nineteenth century' (p144 - my emphasis).

F.E. colleges have traditionally catered for the vocational training of male apprentices and Sand (1987) suggests that they are,

'...institutions designed for men with women in them' (p61).

The most graphic comments on this issue came from 'The Taking Liberties Collective' (1989) who argue that,

'The legacy of their original purpose, despite opening their doors to different kinds of students is often apparent in the pervasive stench of macho culture and male achievement...which pervades them' (p181).

In the light of this picture of educational provision it is hardly surprising that women students experience problems. The first obstacle, in fact, to be overcome was actually getting a place on a course and for Bell at least, this proved to be problematic. She spoke of wanting to do a course in statistics and went along to the local college to enrol only to find that she was dismissed by the man she spoke with. Her perception of the reasons for this was that she didn't fit the stereotype of a traditional student because she had presented herself dressed in dungarees with a child in a pram.

Fortunately she was not deterred by this but it does raise the issue of just how many women fail to make it further than this initial approach. By definition, however, the women in this study did overcome the obstacles of access but it was what they said about what they found at college which demonstrates another aspect of fitting in. As discussed in the previous chapter, they expressed disappointment with the facilities provided and their comments seemed to corroborate the points made earlier regarding provision. The women, it would seem, were expected to fit into this environment.

In addition to the facilities and perhaps more importantly in terms of academic achievement, scant attention seemed to be paid to their learning needs. Traditionally catering for school leavers, there seemed to be an assumption that women students would 'know' how to study and thus require little outside of the curriculum content to support their learning. Whilst this may be true for younger students arriving at college straight from school and thus having continuity of experience in their learning, it is manifestly untrue for those who have been out of an academic environment for many years. In addition there was little recognition of the women's responsibilities outside college which compounded the amount of fitting in that had to be undertaken. It would seem that the fact that these women were also mothers was a non-issue, perhaps

indicative of the low status and trivialisation of this role in society. As a result, women returners are treated and provided for in the same way as 'traditional' students, they are expected to fit in.

Whilst fitting in was not part of the experience of the women at 'Meadowbank', it was not what Amy called 'a harsh environment', problems were experienced by the one woman who progressed from there into higher education. Drawing upon Bell's experience there appeared to be little recognition of her needs and for her this was a great shock having come from 'Meadowbank'. She was clearly unprepared for the fitting in she was expected to undertake. On this issue a significant point is made by Edwards (1991) drawing upon her work with women students in higher education and is certainly corroborated by Bell's experience. Edwards says.

'I have been asked whether marriage guidance facilities should be available within institutions and/or what advice I would give to mature mother students.... The questions imply that it is women who must learn the appropriate strategy for coping with family and education, not that education institutions need to reconsider their presented values and ethics which are so contraposed to the women's private family based lives' (p482).

Edward's notion of 'strategy for coping' seems to have some parallels with 'fitting in' as the implication is that women must adapt to the institution rather than the institution adapting to the women.

Further evidence of fitting in can be found in the data on women's ambitions and this further exemplifies the ubiquitous nature of the responsibilities of the mother role. The data shows that they were keen to continue their studies but were intending either to delay this because they felt their children were still too young or, if they did intend to continue, to find courses that would fit in with their family commitments. Reiterating some of the comments made,

'I would like to continue studying and it's a degree course which would fit in with the family. (Jo - My emphasis).

'...I'd like to go to - poly as it's so close... if I can fit in with the children and everything'. (Mary - My emphasis).

9.7 Concluding Remarks

Through exploration of the fitting in that women must undertake when they become students it becomes possible to expose the patriarchal assumptions that operate to shape their lives. Within the private sphere these assumptions revolve around women taking total responsibility for childcare and domestic work and men's absolute right to personal service from their wives. If women want to do something for themselves i.e. return to study, they must adopt strategies to meet the competing demands of family and education if they are not to upset the marital status-quo. Within the public sphere the assumptions relate to an education system designed by men for men with little recognition of the needs which women bring to the learning situation.

If women students are to be able to do more than merely fit in, then these assumptions must be challenged. The data point to a way forward in opening up real 'equality of opportunity' for women to achieve academic success.

CHAPTER TEN

SOME METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

10.1 Introduction

Before presenting the conclusions to this study, the following discussion provides some reflections on the value of using in-depth interviews informed by a feminist approach. It picks up on and develops the themes presented in chapter 4 and outlines the contributions the research methodology has made to an understanding and explication of the experiences of a group of women returners.

10.2 The value of using in-depth interviews.

'Listening to women's voices...and learning from women's experiences have been crucial to the feminist reconstruction of our understanding of the world' (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p4).

The methodology adopted in this study has enabled a group of women returners to talk freely about their experiences and relate those aspects of their lives which crucially affect their opportunities to take on and fulfil the requirements of the student role. What has emerged is a different perspective on the 'problems' of being a mature woman student from those documented in the literature. (See Chapter 2). Using in-depth interviews has facilitated the uncovering of key aspects of the return to study experience (see

Chapters 8 and 9) and has revealed a different view of social reality, a reality shaped by patriarchal values and assumptions. It is a reality which I would argue, would not have been uncovered had a feminist methodology not been utilised.

In Chapter 3, I outlined the characteristics of a feminist methodology and presented a case for the use of qualitative methods in uncovering women's experiences and the reality of their lives. These methods maximise the opportunity to explore meanings and,

'Minimise the tendency to transform those researched into objects of scrutiny and manipulation' (Acker, 1983, p425).

Warner Weil (1988) in her discussion of her adoption of a qualitative method in her research on mature students says,

'Qualitative research helps to expose a new language - the language of genuine lived experience. It is a mode of research that does not pre-define the nature of learning and adult learners experiences...Research that is grounded in a concern with meaning and relevance...can shift the ground from which we seek to understand the experiences of adult learners. It has the capacity to enrich - and indeed re-define theory and practice related to adults learning' (p18).

My use of in-depth interviews would seem to corroborate Weil's point because I was able to uncover the 'private' (Cornwell, 1984) rather than the more superficial 'public' accounts of the women's lives. (See Chapter 4). The nature of the interviews facilitated the development of a rapport which enabled the women to trust me

with some of the more intimate details of their lives and as I argued in Chapter 4, this was based upon a 'shared universe of meaning'.

O'Connor (1991) in her research into women's confidants outside marriage talks about the extent to which the respondent,

'...reveals the backstage areas of the self confiding in them about topics or events which are seen as private (money, sexual matters, problems in the marital relationship...general feelings of inadequacy, unhappiness or discontent) (pp243/4).

The data reveals a number of examples which could be categorised from the above, for example Mo's comments on her difficulties in adjusting to motherhood and her feelings of guilt and boredom; Julie's admission that her marriage was not a partnership, that her husband makes all the 'major' decisions and that she doesn't know how much he earns; Marie and Judith's forthright statements on the lack of help they receive in the home; Amy's husband's lack of understanding as to why she wanted to return to study; Katherine's comments on her marital problems; and Sandra's evident unhappiness at having nothing of her own, no money or home.

The 'private' accounts enabled me to find out about those things which so powerfully shaped the return to study experiences and determined what the women could or could not do. The discovery of the compromises that had to be made would not have been possible with a quantitative approach and a point made by Westkott (1990), is useful in substantiating this assertion.

'Conventional social science research continues to assume a fit between consciousness and activity... The assumption reflects the condition of being male in a patriarchal society, a condition of freedom... to implement consciousness through activity' (p64).

She suggests that women's consciousness, what they think and feel has not been tapped by mainstream social science with,

'...its methodological insistence on recording behaviour...considering behaviour alone is insufficient to understanding women under patriarchy' (p64/65).

It is the exploration of the gap between what women want to do (their thoughts and feelings), and what they are actually able to do (their actions) which can be undertaken by using a feminist methodology and specifically in the case of this research, by using in-depth interviews. A clear example of the value of using this research method can be seen in the way in which the interviews facilitated the exploration of 'support'.

10.3 Using in-depth interviews to 'unpack' the notion of support

One of the key factors determining whether the women were able to translate their thoughts about returning to study into action, was how supportive their husbands/partners were prepared to be. It became clear during the course of the interviews that the word 'support' was conceptualised in different ways by the women and as Anderson (1990) suggests in her discussion of the use of interviews in feminist research, we have a,

'Unique opportunity to ask directly, how did it feel, what did it mean' (p98).

Interestingly, in a later article with Jack (1991) she suggests that 'support' is a word which needs to be explored and that women,

'... should have an opportunity to explain what they mean in their own terms' (p17).

Through the interviews it was possible to discuss the women's interpretation of the word and thus deconstruct it to identify its varied meanings. Had I used a questionnaire and asked the question,

'Does your husband/partner support your return to study?'

in 80% of cases (as did happen initially in the interviews), the answer would have been an unequivocal 'yes' (see comments made for example, by Amy, Katherine, Emma and Pat in Chapter 6). The conclusions of the research would have been very different and the workings of patriarchy would have remained untapped and therefore unchallenged.

I can only speculate (indeed, this could make an interesting piece of further research), but I would suggest that a questionnaire might well have yielded data which would lend support to the idea that marriage is becoming more egalitarian in terms of sharing the roles (as purported by Young and Willmott, 1975). This certainly is the impression that is conveyed by the quantitative studies on women students documented in Chapter 2. The use of in-depth interviews however, facilitated the exploration of the marriage relationship and it was through this discussion that the issue of support first became

evident. The initial discussion about marriage took place approximately half-way through the first interview and took the form of the women telling me about how they met their husbands, when they married, when they had children. This information was mainly factual and little was disclosed about their feelings at this stage but on the basis of this information I was able to initiate discussion about their feelings about motherhood and marital roles (see Chapter 5). As mentioned previously, the women said that their husbands supported them and these comments certainly seemed positive; it was not until I probed further that it became evident that the day-to-day reality was very different. I would argue that what I was initially told about the support they received could be equated with the 'public' account of the women's marriages, an 'ideologically correct' version highlighting notions of the 'good' marriage. It wasn't until some rapport was established, that I was trusted enough with the 'private' account where they were prepared to reveal some of their frustrations. On a similar point, Oakley and Rajan (1991) commenting on the data on men as sources of support for pregnant women say that,

'...by incorporating the term 'helping with' is...likely to have tapped ideological rather than behavioural descriptions, so that almost all the women may have been reluctant to describe their male partners as anything but helpful in a general sense' (p54).

The 'private' account revealed the reality of the preconditions of their husband's/partner's support which were documented in chapter 8.

These preconditions profoundly shaped the women's return to

study experiences and necessitated the 'fitting-in' strategies presented in chapter 9.

10.4 Perceptions and compromises

Chapter 9 reveals the extent of the compromises the women had to make in order to translate their thoughts about becoming a student into action, I was surprised that they did not express more anger about their situations, certainly in comparison with say, the women quoted in 'Learning the Hard Way' (1989). At least the women I interviewed were not having their books burnt, essays ripped up, car-keys hidden or being physically restrained from leaving the house. I can only speculate, but if these things had been happening I am sure that the women would have told me given the nature of the relationship which developed between us. It was a relief to know that they were spared these kinds of atrocities at least, but in practical terms, this is not much consolation.

The obstacles they faced were no less real and still presented them with major problems. They are in fact, rooted in the nature of the marriage relationship which, as the data has revealed, for some of the women was precarious. The interviews revealed insecurities and fears of upsetting the status-quo and this seems symptomatic of their powerless and dependent position vis-a-vis their husbands/partners.

Often there was a reluctance to be critical and when criticism was made it was often in hushed tones, as if in some

way it was an act of betrayal. These women were not about to walk out on their marriages, they were not about to 'do a Rita' as exemplified in Russell's (1985) play; they saw their major responsibilities in their roles as wives and mothers. This was the premise from which they began, whether it be returning to study or anything else they wished to do in their lives.

10.5 Asking Questions Back

I have 'borrowed' the above heading from Oakley (1981, p42) because, like her, I found this to be a significant issue in the interviews in terms of the dynamics of the research relationship. It became apparent during the second interviews that I was seen as someone able to supply information and as mentioned in Chapter 4, I believed it would be 'unhelpful' not to respond, indeed it could have been potentially damaging to the research relationship.

Many of the questions were requests for information about courses, grants etc which I answered as fully as I could feeling that this was an opportunity to offer them something in return and to convey to them that I took their concerns seriously. A number of the questions, however, were directed at seeking reassurance about what they were doing, particularly as a number had expressed guilt feelings about their studies (see Chapter 7) and made comments like,

'I just want education for the sake of it really, it doesn't seem like a good motive does it?' (Mary).

'Is it really important though? Sometimes I don't know'. (Julie).

They were keen to find out what I thought and to defer to what they saw as my greater knowledge and experience. My response was to be encouraging, to outline the positive aspects of their return to study although I am aware that my attempts to give positive encouragement could be seen as double-edged. On the one hand it was a genuine attempt to boost confidence, on the other it could be seen as manipulative, i.e. telling them what I thought they wanted to hear in the hope of developing rapport so that they would give me the 'private' rather the 'public' account. This does raise an interesting issue about interviewer involvement and whether it is possible to attain 'genuine reciprocity'. (Ribbens, 1989, p583). I have no definitive answers to this question except to restate that the interviews in which I gave more of myself yielded the greatest disclosure of the more personal details of my respondent's lives. Perhaps this is testimony to Oakley's (1981) statement that there is 'no intimacy without reciprocity' (p49) and would seem to corroborate Bogdan and Taylor's (1976) assertion that,

'It is probably unfair and undoubtedly counter productive for the researcher to completely hold back his or her own feelings' (p108).

10.6 Contributions of the research methodology.

By listening to the women's stories it is apparent that many of the 'problems' they experience as students are rooted in their

relationships within the private sphere. For these women it was not the student role per se that was the major problem, it was fitting in that role with the roles of wife and mother. (See Chapter 8).

Research which focuses primarily on issues of college provision, whilst important is only partial in that it omits a vital area of women's experience. I would suggest, however, that this type of research is much 'safer' and serves the interests of patriarchy more effectively because it does not raise questions regarding issues which serve to keep patriarchy intact, i.e. gender relations. It is safer to tackle issues of educational provision which may lead to calls for the development of or tinkering with equal opportunities policies but which leave patriarchy fundamentally unchanged and unchallenged. Harding (1987) has commented,

'The questions about women that men have wanted answered have all too often arisen from desires to pacify, control, exploit or manipulate women' (p8).

If women are to participate and compete with men in the educational arena on equal terms, changes need to take place regarding expectations of gender roles. (This point is taken up in the next chapter). A feminist methodology facilitates the production of data which can inform what those changes need to be and provides the opportunity to discover and name key aspects of the experience of being a woman returner.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

11.1 Introduction

This research has documented the ways in which women's return to study experiences are shaped by the operation of patriarchal relations in both the public and private spheres. The core of this experience has been characterised by the concept of 'fitting in' to compensate for lack of "support" and I have argued, in the light of the data, for the need for changes in the public sphere in the process and delivery of education for women and crucially, in the private sphere, in women's designated responsibility for childcare. It is this responsibility which most powerfully shapes what women are able to undertake in education and has been identified as a major obstacle to academic success. In this final chapter the changes that are required will be documented and a call will be made for a reconceptualisation of the notion of 'equality of opportunity' in the light of the debate between 'egalitarians' and 'radicals' (see Chapter 1). It is my contention that feminist research must impact at the level of policy and I would concur with a point made by Cook and Fonow (1990) that,

'Feminist research must be designed to provide a vision of the future as well as a structural picture of the present' (p80).

11.2 Policy Implications and Recommendations

i) The public sphere

At the outset I acknowledge the problem of advocating large scale

structural changes on the basis of the data. Finch (1986) raises the issue of generalising from qualitative data and suggests that this is the most obvious weakness of qualitative methods from a policy perspective. This is a criticism which could clearly be levelled at this research and will be taken up in the next section.

The implications for policy which can be derived from the data relate essentially to two key issues:-

- a) Removing barriers to access
- b) Promoting 'women-centred' education.

Taking firstly the issue of access, it is clear that if women are to return to education in greater numbers the obstacles, such as childcare and finance must be addressed. Removing barriers to access can be linked theoretically to liberal feminism (Weiner's notion of 'egalitarians') with its focus upon formal (legal) equality and,

'A more equitable distribution of the sexes in the current social formation as an end in itself' (Middleton, 1987, p28).

From this premise, equality of opportunity implies 'giving' women the same rights as men, increasing their numbers thus improving access.

The emphasis is upon equality of competition and as Weiner (1986) suggests,

'...equality of access... to existing educational benefits' (p5)

and therefore does not imply any changes in the structures women are being encouraged to enter.

Taking up the issue of childcare as a barrier to access, the European Commission on childcare (1991) states that,

'Inadequate provision of good quality affordable childcare services and other measures to reconcile responsibility for the care and upbringing of children with the employment, education and training of parents constitutes a major barrier to women's access to and full participation in employment, education and training on equal terms with men as well as full participation in society'.

It is clear from this statement that equality is seen in terms of access; providing childcare, it is argued, will enable women to participate on the same terms as men. Given that Britain is second from the bottom of the European Community's childcare league table (NATFHE, 1993), any policy measures which improved this situation must be welcomed but the question must be raised as to whether such measures go far enough. Is providing childcare giving women returners 'equality of opportunity'? From the data the answer must be no, as it would do nothing to change the structures women would be entering. Equal opportunities must mean more than merely enabling women to fit more easily into patriarchal structures; it must be about changing those structures and the ethos which underlies them. On this issue an important point is made by Levin and Unruh (1990),

'Equality of access ignores the crucial question of what becomes of the target group once they have been brought in to the system. Increasing the equality of access without increasing the equality of condition may mean, for most of the target group, the opportunity to fail... we have a responsibility to create the conditions under which it is possible for that client group to succeed' (p257).

Levin and Unruh's point about equality of condition has direct links with Weiner's (1986) call for,

'A broader interpretation of equality which recognised equal educational outcome as well as access...' (p6 - her emphasis)

Weiner's critique of the ideology of the egalitarians is consistent with radical feminist critiques of liberal feminism where a contradiction exists in,

'A politics which asks for sexual egalitarianism from within a structure which is patriarchal' (Eisenstein, 1981, p9).

If equal educational outcome is to be achieved then it is clear from the data that the 'major restructuring' Weiner (1986) has argued for (see Chapter 1) must happen within educational institutions. It is not sufficient to give women 'equal opportunity' to enter an education system which is male defined and gives no recognition to their needs.

There is much in the data to support the assertions of radical feminists like Spender (1987), that,

'Patriarchy is the education paradigm' (p143)

and therefore it is important, from a policy perspective that this is challenged if women are to succeed. The following recommendations are derived from the data and corroborate the findings of the previous research on this issue (Kirk, 1982; Cousins, 1984; Coats, 1989; FEU, 1989; NIACE, 1991). It should also be stated that many of the recommendations, particularly regarding

curriculum issues, are already being implemented at 'Meadowbank' which as I have argued previously (see Chapter 7) provides a model of educational provision which is 'women centred'.

For the purposes of clarity the recommendations are presented under a series of headings.

A recognition of the practical and personal barriers

Women's responsibilities for children
Fulfilling the demands of the domestic role
No access to money
Lack of confidence and low self-esteem caused by:-
Memories of 'unsuccessful' schooling
Years at home with children

Provision for the care of children

Both pre-school and school age children at realistic cost. O'Brien (1987) has in fact argued for the practical priorities which must be given to the re-organisation of day care,

'as a precondition of educational innovation'.
(p42 - my emphasis).

Finance/Grants

The financially dependent position of many women must be recognised. Some are dependants of partners who do not support their wish to return to education. Grants are needed for part-time courses as well as full-time.

Publicity

Leaflets and other material in places women visit regularly, i.e. health centres, shops, playgroups, community centres. Clear, jargon free with a contact name provided. Advertisements in local free newspapers. Open days.

Timing

Courses run during school hours and timed to enable women to collect children.

Facilities

Safe, non-threatening environment.
Provision of quiet study areas.

Learning approaches and curriculum requirements

Approaches which are co-operative, shared or experiential. Women should be encouraged to review and value their own experiences, prior knowledge and skills.

Enabling women to recognise their strengths and to (re)gain confidence in their abilities.

Counselling and Learning Support

The need for study skills and tutorial support. Women only provision provides ongoing counselling support but women in mainstream provision are often left isolated and unsupported.

Women-only provision

These types of course (i.e. 'Fresh Start'), have enabled women to regain confidence and proceed to mainstream mixed provision but women need to be prepared to make this transition. (i.e. Bell's Experience)

Progression Issues

Women must be given information, advice and guidance to ensure that they can make informed choices regarding future plans.

'Return to learning begins a sequence that has no necessary end; and if a life craves change it needs the promise of sequence, of progression along a visible route'. (Pye, 1991, p53)

The listed requirements place women's needs firmly at the centre of educational provision and as Coats (1989) has suggested,

'Despite the short term, poorly funded and marginalised nature of much women's education, we have learned major lessons regarding the requirements of all women learners. It is now time to recognise that the resources needed to meet these requirements are not an optional extra but an essential part of good quality educational provision for women'. (p105)

Clearly there are cost implications in the recommendations and the question must be addressed as to what chance of change? This is taken up later in the chapter.

If educational provision for women were to change in the ways outlined it would certainly reduce the amount of fitting in that women would have to undertake but the data does irrefutably point to the fact that women-centred education is not a sufficient precondition for the eradication of 'fitting in'. In the light of this I would in fact argue that an 'outcomes' approach to educational provision still lies theoretically within liberal feminism. It is a more radical variant of it, equivalent to a 'compensatory' model whereby women-centred education becomes compensatory education. It does nothing to challenge patriarchy but provides structures which still help women to 'fit in'.

The limitations of women-centred education epitomised by the provision at 'Meadowbank' can be seen in the data presented in Chapter Seven in terms of the problems the women experienced with progression to higher education. Whilst they had clearly been 'empowered' in terms of realising their capabilities, they were still faced with having to devise strategies to fit their future studies around their responsibilities in the private sphere. In addition, as Bell's experience indicated, women students are expected to fit in with a model of educational provision designed for the eighteen year

old school leaver. It is almost as if women-centred education, as it is currently provided, is operating in a vacuum and therefore the good practice that has been established needs to be extended to women's education at all levels. In terms of outcomes this would provide further extension of educational opportunities to women.

Women-centred educational provision is clearly a vital aspect of the 'major restructuring' which is necessary but it does not go far enough in that it is premised on the assumption that no change will occur in the private sphere. However unless change does occur in the sexual division of labour, women's lives will always be characterised by varying degrees of fitting in. Giving women an equal opportunity to succeed must mean challenging patriarchal power in the private sphere and therefore adopting a radical feminist theoretical perspective.

ii) The Private Sphere

At the outset I would concede that in this area policy implications become more problematic but if women's experiences of 'patriarchal pain' (Ettore 1991) are to be made public and addressed then this cannot be ignored. From the data there is much to support the claims of radical feminist theory regarding the part played by marriage and the family in the oppression of women. Unless this is recognised women will never be able to compete and have the same

opportunities as men to succeed. This point is made by Weiner (1986) but in relation to schooling.

'Unless we acknowledge that sexual inequalities in schooling are directly related to the subordination of women to men in other areas of social and economic life and create strategies for change on that basis, we shall be unable to develop adequate means of subversion (or perhaps revolution) to produce genuine and enduring change' (p273).

It is clear from the data that the major obstacle to women's academic success is the patriarchal marriage relationship within which husband and wife roles are embedded. (Whilst my sample did not include single mothers, Delphy [1991] makes the significant point that this patriarchal sexual division continues after divorce as women remain responsible for childcare and domestic work. She contends that divorce is 'simply a change or a transformation of marriage' [p51]). The key factor, as stated many times previously, is the allocation of the responsibility of childcare and domestic labour to women, it is these roles which prescribe their lives. The provision of childcare, for example, whilst beneficial, simply removes some of the fitting in that is required from the private sphere and places it in the public sphere. Ultimately however, it is still women who are responsible for how this is managed. Rich (1977) seems to get to the heart of the issue when she says,

'Mass childcare in patriarchy has had but two purposes: to introduce large numbers of women into the labour force in a developing economy or during a war... it has never been conceived as a means of releasing the energies of women into the mainstream of culture or changing the stereotypic gender images of both women and men' (p14).

Following Rich's point there is nothing within childcare initiatives which challenges men's roles, in fact it could be argued that it is men who actually benefit from them. If some of the responsibility for childcare is taken away from women, this actually places less onus on men to take on this role. Equally, anti-sexist educational initiatives could work to entrench further a traditional sexual division of labour by enabling women to fit their childcare responsibilities more easily around the student role.

Leonard (1992) in her discussion of the issue of childcare and the reasons why she feels that 'socialised' services are 'way off beam' (p4), makes a significant point regarding men's and children's expectations.

'Children (and husbands) expect to be comfortable in their own homes... looked after by... an adult on a one to two or three basis... It has to be done for children and men in their own homes, at exactly the times and in the form they want. To get something approaching the same quality universally provided by the state, or to buy it, would be prohibitively expensive - so it is exploited, taken free, from women' (p4).

These expectations lock women into their traditional roles at a high cost to their personal ambitions and it is these expectations that must be challenged. It must be recognised what,

'...husbands/fathers personally get from women' (p.4).

There are links here with Rich's (1977) notion of 'institutional motherhood' (see Chapter 9) and the fact that it is a political construction, 'consciously organised' and arising from 'patriarchal need' (Eisenstein, 1981, p16).

Whilst men see themselves as having some kind of inalienable right to personal service from women it seems unlikely that their attitudes will change willingly. The notion of the 'Symmetrical Family' (Young and Willmott 1975) for example seems highly improbable based on the data from this study which corroborates a point made by Lovell (1980b) that,

'While women may wish to expand their horizons beyond the domestic field... men do not exhibit a similar desire to scrub their own floors and wash their own shirts, let alone anyone else's. Unless men can accept a change in lifestyle, the most that women will achieve is the right to do two jobs' (p224).

Lovell wrote this thirteen years ago and judging from an article in the Guardian (19.11.92) based on a report by the Henley Centre for Forecasting nothing has changed. It suggests that,

'Most European men are hypocrites about the house. They express support for sharing household duties but leave the lion's share to their female partners... support for equality between the sexes is far greater in theory than in practice'.

Given that men seem unlikely to change in their behaviour it is necessary to consider what policy initiatives could be effected which would liberate women from the necessity to 'fit in' when

they return to study. Carter's (1988) work on the politics of women's rights makes a useful contribution to this issue.

'One specific way to promote a stronger move towards equality in caring for children is for the state to recognise the father's responsibilities... Equality within the family and a fair sharing of home responsibilities depends on a more radical restructuring of the world of work. One requirement is to a more flexible career structure which would enable people to take several years off work without risking... the possibility of future promotion' (p184).

A similar point has been made by Deem (1986) who argues that changing women's social position will,

'... dramatically affect men's power, lives and rights. Men taking on an equal share of childcare and housework would have consequences for the organisation and pay rates of male employment and for the way that systems of production operate' (p148).

This would certainly constitute a 'major restructuring' of the economic system and how plausible this is, particularly given the current climate, is open to debate but extrapolating from Carter's comments and applying them to this research, the following recommendations could be made.

Firstly, men could be given the right to childcare leave if their wives/partners have returned to education because as I argued in Chapter 8, the more support men give the less fitting in women are required to do. Secondly, men as breadwinners should have a legal obligation to support their wives/partners return to study. If this was deducted from men's salary at source it would alleviate the

problem of men who refused to provide financial support. These measures, if instituted at a policy level, would challenge patriarchy directly. But what is also required is a change in male attitudes, particularly regarding domestic work and emotional support. What improvements in women's confidence in their academic ability might take place if men encouraged rather than criticised and helped women to believe in themselves? This is an area where policy unfortunately can play no part.

Much has been suggested in this discussion regarding the implications for policy and practice arising from the experiences of a small group of women returners. What has been presented is a vision of the future documented in the quotation by Cook and Fonow (1990) earlier in the chapter. This does however, raise two questions:-

- 1) What chance has this vision of becoming reality?
- 2) Has this research the right to be calling for 'major restructuring'?

These questions will be addressed in the next two sections.

11.3 Vision into reality. What chance of change?

'Most of the advances achieved by women since 1944, both inside and outside education have occurred in periods of full employment...' (Deem, 1985, p134).

Based upon the premise presented above by Deem it seems highly unlikely that any of the measures which have been presented to

provide women with the opportunity to succeed in the education system would be implemented even if the political will existed. Coupled with the effects of recession is the seemingly immutable power of patriarchy in the private and public spheres and in the context of education Spender (1987) argues that,

'While men continue to consult only men, to validate educational theory and practice in the light of male experience (as they must inevitably do in Britain if males comprise 97% of the governments of education), then it is almost structurally impossible for women to have a voice' (p145).

On a similar note Weiner (1986) has suggested that,

'... if girls and women are to capture a greater slice of the educational cake, boys and men will have to give up their hold on the system - something they are unlikely to do without a struggle' (p10).

If such radical change is to happen then there must be a commitment from central government and as Acker (1986) has argued this has not been forthcoming beyond 'a vague support for equal opportunities and the need to recruit talented people into science and industry' (p.70).

She suggests along with Finch (1984a) that education policy is,

'more likely to be based on a diagnosis of state needs rather than on considerations of justice'.

The prospects for change are not encouraging therefore given the effects of economic recession, lack of commitment from central government and the under-representation of women in decision making positions. Equally worrying are the potential effects upon

educational provision for women of recent legislation affecting further and adult education. Measures which are going to incur costs, like the provision of childcare and one to one tutorial support which draws heavily upon tutors' time, are unlikely to be implemented.

Another potential obstacle to change relates to the well documented 'problem' of policy oriented qualitative research. Finch (1986) has argued for example, that the kind of research which has fed into social policy has been of a specific type, that is quantitative in orientation and often relying upon the social survey. She argues for a 'realistic appraisal' of the likely impact of any piece of research and suggests that,

'... it is rare for "findings" to be directly translated into "policy"... In relation to the findings of qualitative research that is especially apparent. Simply on pragmatic grounds therefore, there are good reasons for having very limited aspirations about the direct use of research' (p.230).

Bennett and Desforges (1985) in their explanation for the apparent under-use of qualitative research in the formulation of policy suggest that researchers are likely to be relatively low status in relation to those they wish to influence and researchers cannot get near enough to the real 'locus of power in the policy-making process' (p141). In addition the political commitments of the researchers may lead to its rejection. I would argue that these points are particularly significant in relation to feminist research which by definition is conducted by

women who are generating knowledge which may present a direct challenge to male power. It is not in the interests of patriarchy that policy should be formulated on the basis of such research; in the case of this research, for example, calls for changes in gender relations are unlikely to be popular in decision-making structures.

In the light of the issues raised regarding the 'problems' of qualitative research the question must be raised as to the legitimacy of this research calling for large scale structural changes in key social institutions in society. This does lead to some reflections upon the limitations of the research design and the need for further research.

11.4 Limitations of the research and a way forward

This study has a number of limitations, particularly in relation to the size of the sample, the absence of a Black women's perspective and the use of a conventional categorisation of social class. Each of these requires further examination and the implications explored for both this study and for future research.

Taking firstly the issue of sample size; whilst the findings are 'true' for the twenty women who shared their experiences with me, it raises the question as to whether the findings are an accurate representation of the experiences of the total population of married mothers who return to study. Clearly there are problems of generalisability.

However, the findings from other qualitative studies (see chapter 2) would seem to indicate that the data are representative but this needs to be corroborated by further research on larger samples.

Secondly, any further research must include women from racial categories other than white. This study has privileged the experience of white women and it has therefore to be seen as racially limited. The wide-ranging diversity of women's experience discussed in chapter 3 is not apparent and could be explained in terms of the relative homogeneity of the potential and actual sample.

The women did however, differ in terms of their social class and what is striking is the commonality of their experiences across class divisions. The data point to the fact that patriarchal assumptions and power circumscribe the lives of both working and middle class women. The middle class women differed only in terms of their access to material resources, but they were subject to the same set of expectations as the working class women in terms of the sexual division of labour in the private sphere. It would be interesting for further research to explore what other differences between women returning to study a less conventional categorisation of social class might yield.

In addition, it would also be useful to include women who would like to return to study but have not managed to negotiate the obstacles, and are invisible in educational settings and institutions by their absence. This would provide further vital information regarding the barriers to returning to study and the extent to which these are rooted within the private sphere.

In terms of the methodology it would be useful to explore further my contention that through the use of in-depth interviews it was possible to uncover women's experience of returning to study in a way that would have proved impossible with quantitative methods. Of particular significance is the issue of husband's support which has proved to be a key factor and constitutes a major obstacle women have to either overcome or accommodate into their lives when they take on the student role. It would be interesting to discover whether exploration of this issue through the use of, for example, a questionnaire would yield the same results. It is however imperative that the issue of support is further explored empirically and analysis of its significance to women students undertaken, in a similar fashion to the study by Oakley and Rajan (1991) of social support for pregnant women. My research has begun an exploration of support; it is a beginning but we need to know more if women are to have a realistic opportunity to succeed academically.

11.5 And Finally... A contribution to a sociology 'for' women

This research has uncovered the problems experienced by women as they strive to manage the competing demands of the wife, mother and student roles. It is not however just,

'... a doleful catalogue of the facts of patriarchy'
(Westkott, 1990, p64).

it also puts forward strategies for the alleviation of 'patriarchal pain' (Ettore, 1991). It would be naive to assume that this work will change the course of women's education but if it meets the requirements laid down by Riddell (1989) that,

'Ultimately, the ethics of feminist research demand that the work should be useful to women. Perhaps the best that any one person can do is hope that some contribution, however small, has been made to understanding the position of women in society' (p97).

then I have reached my objective.

APPENDIX 1

Profiles of the women in the study

(Class determined by fathers' and husband's/partner's occupation)

Those studying at the F.E. College:-

- Pat:** Age 34
Family background - Working class
Schooling - Secondary modern - left at 16 with CSE's
Training/Employment - Secretarial and nursing
Married to an electrician with 3 children, 7, 5 and 2
- Penny:** Age 37
Family background - Middle class
Schooling - Grammar - left at 18 with 2 'A' levels
Training/Employment - Speech Therapy
Married to a chartered accountant with 3 children 13, 8 and 7
- Elisabeth:** Age 44
Family background - middle class
Schooling - Grammar school - left at 18 with 1 'A' level
Training/Employment - Nursing
Married to a clergyman with 2 children, 16 and 14
- Judith:** Age 40
Family background - Middle class
Schooling - Grammar school - left at 16 with 'O' levels
Training/Employment - Nursing
Married to a restaurateur with 2 children, 15 and 12
- Mo:** Age 41
Family background - Working class
Schooling - Secondary modern - left at 15
Training/Employment - Typing pool/secretarial
Married to a factory supervisor with 2 children, 15 and 13
- Marie:** Age 39
Family background - Middle class
Schooling - Grammar - left at 18 - failed 'A' levels
Employment/Training - Radiography
Married to a hospital consultant with 2 children, 11 and 8
- Jo:** Age 37
Family background - Working class
Schooling - Secondary modern, left at 15
Training/Employment - Typing and book-keeping
Married to a mechanic with 3 children, 7, 5 and 3

Emma: Age 38
Family background - Middle class
Schooling - Secondary modern - left at 16 with 'O' levels
Training/Employment - Art college/Embroidery
Married to a sales director with 2 children, 4 and 2

Helen: Age 38
Family background - Middle class
Schooling - Grammar - left at 16 with 'O' levels
Training/Employment - Nursing
Married to an insurance broker with 3 children, 14, 11 and 7

Linda: Age 44
Family background - Middle class
Schooling - Grammar - left at 18 with 1 'A' level
Training/Employment - Social work
Married to an architect with 2 children, 15 and 13

Jean: Age 42
Family background - Middle class
Schooling - Grammar - left at 16 with 'O' levels
Employment/Training - Social work
Married to a services manager with 2 children, 15 and 12

Ruth: Age 41
Family background - Middle class
Schooling - Grammar - left at 16 with 'O' levels
Training/Employment - Nursing
Married to a merchant banker with 2 children, 15 and 13

Those studying at the women's college:

Sandra: Age 43
Family background - Working class
Schooling - Secondary modern - left at 15
Training/Employment - Factory and office work
Divorced, lives with partner with 2 children, 15 and 12

Deborah: Age 53
Family background - Middle class
Schooling - Grammar - left with 4 'A' levels
University education - Failed degree
Training/Employment - Secretarial
Married to a college lecturer with 4 children, twins - 15, 13, 11

- Mary:** Age 39
Family background - Working class
Schooling - Grammar - left with 2 'A' levels
Attended university for 6 weeks
Training/Employment - Computer programmer
Married to a civil servant with 3 children, 11, 6 and 4
- Katherine:** Age 44
Family background - Middle class
Schooling - Grammar - left at 16 with 'O' levels
Training/Employment - Secretarial
Married to an insurance broker with 3 children, 15, 12 and 10
- Bell:** Age 41
Family background - Working class
Schooling - Secondary modern - left at 15
Training/Employment - Domestic science and secretarial
Married to a joiner with 2 adopted children, 8 and 5
- Julie:** Age 40
Family background - Working class
Schooling - Secondary modern - left at 16 with CSE's
Training/Employment - Catering and clerical
Married to a policeman with 2 children, 9 and 7
- Shirley:** Age 39
Family background - Working class
Schooling - Secondary modern - left at 16 with CSE's/'O's
Training/Employment - Clerical
Married to an engineer with 2 children, 10 and 8
- Amy:** Age 38
Family background - Working class
Schooling - Secondary modern - left at 15
Training/Employment - Factory work
Married to an electrician with 2 children, 11 and 8

APPENDIX 2

INFORMATION ON THE COLLEGES AND COURSES

The F.E. College

Situated in Surrey. A mixed economy college offering courses from NVQ level 1 to PhD level in the natural sciences. (Currently the college has 43% high level work)

Number of students - approximately 3,000 full-time and 4,500 part-time.

Courses taken by the women:-

'Wider Horizons' - an 'A' level course designed for mature students. Run from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. offering a choice of English, History and Sociology studied over one year. This course was subsequently dropped by the college as numbers were relatively small and it proved to be uneconomic. Mature students subsumed into 'mainstream' provision (16-19).

Community Nursing - a one-year full-time course for RGN's wishing to work as Health visitors, District Nurses or Psychiatric Nurses.

Adult Education Teacher's Certificate - a one year part-time course for those wishing to teach in the post-16 sector of education.

The Women's College

A small college with approximately 80 full-time students, housed in a Victorian mansion in a London suburb. The college has a female principal and mostly female staff and aims to help women to:-

- Shape their own future
- Develop intellectual and personal potential
- Stimulate interest in new areas of study
- Build on prior knowledge and experience

Courses taken by the women:-

'Fresh Start' (see also Appendix 4) - a part-time course (16 weeks) run between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. The course covers study skills, literature, history, sociology and psychology applied to women's issues.

The Associate Student Scheme - part-time and offering the study of single modules from within the full-time Certificate in Higher Education.

The Access Course - provides a foundation for progressing onto a degree. Part-time offering a package of humanities, computing and social studies. Study skills and tutorial support are provided.

APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW GUIDES

1) Life History Interview

- Family background
 - Parents' education and employment
 - Number of siblings and relationship with them and parents
 - Parental attitudes towards education - encouragement and expectations

- Schooling
 - Type of school attended
 - Memories of school days - likes/dislikes
 - Subjects studied and reasons for the choices made
 - Qualifications obtained and thoughts about motivation
 - Attitudes of teachers - expectations/encouragement
 - Ambitions whilst at school regarding work/further study
 - Attitudes towards marriage and marital 'ambitions'.

- Post school education and training (if any)
 - Reasons for chosen courses of study/training

- Employment history
 - Types of employment
 - The experience of work

- Marriage and family
 - Decision to marry
 - Partner's job
 - Number of children and ages
 - Marital roles and feelings about them

- The decision to return to study
 - Reasons
 - Family's reaction
 - Friend's reaction
 - The process from getting information to enrolling on a course

• **2. Experiences of being a student (conducted 4-6 months later)**

- The student role
- Feelings about the course - has it met expectations. Insights gained
 - Confidence
 - Study techniques, workload, teaching methods, course structure and timing
 - Support from staff
 - College facilities
 - Finance
 - Impact of study on feelings about self
 - Most rewarding/least rewarding aspects of being a student

Combining study and family life

- Support from family, particularly husband/partner
- Childcare and domestic arrangements
- Creating time for study
- Effect of study on family life and feelings about this
- Any changes in attitude towards husband/children
- Changes in attitude towards wife/mother role

The Future

- Thoughts on progression to further study
- Career plans and ambitions
- Attitude of family towards the above

APPENDIX 4

COURSES FOR WOMEN RETURNERS (National provision)

'Fresh Horizons' at the City Lit

Established in 1966, this was the first return to study course and was open to both women and men. Hutchinson (1978) argued that,

'The principle aim was to provide a relevant educational experience that would meet the needs of adults seeking to build or achieve for the first time, a base for their personal development, whatever the circumstances' (p19). It began as a part-time course, 2 days per week from 10.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. over 24 weeks. In 1973 a full-time course was established and LEA grants available.

Women only courses were made legal under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 (Coats, 1992) and whilst a variety of models exist (see below) they have shared themes (Marshall, 1985)

(1) A recognition of the importance of removing practical barriers to access, particularly for women with young children. The provision of childcare, a commitment to flexible timetabling during the day and around school hours.

(2) The importance attached to feelings and personal experience.

Two broad categories of courses (Stoney and Reid, 1980):-

Return to Study - ('Fresh Horizons', 'Fresh Start')

These courses are of widely varying levels and intensity, from those which serve to increase general ability to study to those which focus upon access to higher education. The syllabus includes study skills and subjects such as sociology, psychology, politics, English and the Arts

Return to Work ('New Opportunities for Women')

The curriculum includes information on study and job opportunities and the practicalities of returning to work, communication skills and confidence building. Ruth Michaels who established the first course at Hatfield Polytechnic describes the course as being,

'A comprehensive guide for the mature woman who may wish to return to active working life but is unsure or unaware of how best to do so. It aims to help the student to become acquainted with the opportunities that exist for re-entry to education or retraining for part-time or full-time employment... or voluntary service. We

also hope the course helps the student to gain new confidence, become aware of new horizons and establish long term goals, based on individual interests, abilities and aspirations. (Quoted by Stoney & Reid 1980, p28)

In addition a number of 'Wider Opportunities for Women' courses were established in the late 1970's sponsored by the Manpower Services Commission but,

'The transformation of the MSC into the Training Commission and the introduction of the individualised 'Employment Training' scheme ended WOW provision' (Coats, 1992, p258)

Coats (1992) makes the point that women's educational provision is under threat. Given its marginal status and the fact that such courses are low priority within colleges (Sands, 1987),

'We are faced with a need not just to build for the future but to battle for our survival'. (Coats, 1992, p259)

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