

# **Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in HE.**

## ***Transitional space, a report on student experiences***

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**DRAFT**

### **Introduction**

This report presents selected interpretations of the narratives of a cluster of non-traditional students interviewed by the Canterbury team. There have been 90 students interviewed, overall, across the 3 types of institutions: an older ‘elite’ university, an ex-polytechnic located in an area of ethnic diversity interspersed with disparities of income and wealth; and a new, more specialised university with emphasis on the preparation and continuing education of teachers and health care professionals. In this paper, we have selected a small number of students whose material has been analysed in some depth and who represent, in illuminating ways, key themes in our work overall. The themes include the importance of familial and psychological capital (alongside more familiar notions of educational and cultural capital) as well as of recognising students as agents who can dynamically exploit the human and symbolic capital of the university. What people bring, psychosocially, and how they can make use of particular resources in universities, can be seen as a crucial in managing transitional processes within higher education. In Bourdieu’s terms, if we think of students as either ‘fish in water’ or ‘fish out of water’, and we want to understand more of how subjective experiences of objective phenomena may develop, this requires more holistic interpretation of subtle change processes: including in the individual’s relationship to the university habitus and in their own sense of identity. Our aim, in this paper, is to build more interdisciplinary ‘psychosocial’ understanding: to this end we connect the object relations school of psychoanalysis and ideas of transitional space, (especially developed by Donald Winnicott (1971)), with Bourdieu’s more sociological orientation (Bourdieu, 1977/2000). We have sought to chronicle and theorise the lived, embodied, and affective as well as cognitive experiences of students and how these may change in transitional space.

### **Methodology**

Like everyone else in the team, we have used biographical narrative methods to chronicle and illuminate the dialectics of learning and agency. However, methodological and theoretical assumptions within the project team clearly vary, despite common commitment to using biographical methods. The differences encompass biographical narrative interviewing itself and what is involved and meant by generating ‘good’ and ‘valid’ narratives, as well as how to interpret these and represent learner lives. There is, for example, a more ‘scientific’ approach, seeking to minimise the presence of the researcher, in the interests of building reliable and even objective data: the narrator is asked, at least initially, to tell his or her story and the researcher retreats into the

background. The other approach tends to be more relational, acknowledging that the researcher's presence shapes the process, like it or not. Unconscious processes, for instance, alongside the workings of power, are seen as part of the encounter, as students may give researchers the answers they, the researchers, might want to hear. This may be born out of anxiety and or a need to impress (see West, 1996). The Canterbury team is closer to the relational end of the interviewing spectrum, emphasising the importance of creating good enough research space for more open and exploratory forms of story telling. To this end, a checklist of points to be covered is provided, in seeking to minimise anxiety, while attention is paid to agreeing an ethical code as well as to the emotional dimensions of the work, at every stage. A proforma is used to identify themes, but also to analyse the quality of the processes, including the transference and counter-transference (another way of describing this is the auto/biographical dynamics), which are to do with the effect of the narrator on the interviewer as well as vice-versa. This can be a source of insight into the meanings and emotions being communicated (Merrill and West 2009). Each proforma consists of standard biographical data, emerging themes, reference to relevant literatures, but also reflection on process issues. There is a thorough immersion in recordings and transcripts, with an exploration of any potential gestalt or overall form in the material, which can help in making better sense of particular elements. The two members of the Canterbury team each completed a proforma and then compared and contrasted material.

### **Transitional space**

Chapman Hoults (2009) has observed how Bourdieu fails sufficiently to engage with how some students, with apparently limited educational and social capital, survive and prosper – becoming fish in water, in effect - even in the culturally exclusive habitus of particular institutional sub-cultures. Of course Bourdieu was aware of this phenomenon and argued, structurally, that such learners serve to mask systemic inequalities but he fails to engage, in these terms, with 'the subjective experience of objective possibilities' (Hoults, 2009: 22). Part of our task has been to chronicle and theorise the quality of such experience; or to put it slightly differently, to consider the kind of psychosocial 'capital' students bring with them and what happens to this as they encounter the cultures of the university.

Donald Winnicott's (1971) provides a sensitising frame to consider some of the processes involved. Winnicott was a paediatrician who meticulously noted and theorised the qualities of relationship in which infants were embedded and the interplay of objective and subjective worlds, self and other. He was initially concerned with transitional processes in early experience, not least how a child psychologically separates from a prime caregiver, in healthy ways, moving towards greater individuation as well as psychological integration. He placed the capacity for play and creativity at the core of development, without overdue concern for what prime caregivers may think or fear as to how they might respond. Winnicott argued that earliest relationships provided templates for life: good enough early relationships, in which the putative self feels sufficiently loved and secure, provide a means simply to be, and a sense of the world as fundamentally satisfying and where desires can be expressed and fulfilled. This, in

Winnicott's perspective, is the basis for fulsome, less anxiety ridden engagement in the world, including of play. Yet no relationships are perfect, and the infant, in processes of separation – all of us, in fact - experience separation anxiety, to greater or lesser extents. We may be preoccupied, at times, with concern for the prime caregiver and her well-being; and even with fear as to how s/he might respond. At one end of a spectrum, a need to appease or please takes over, and a psychological split may develop, in which play – with all its imaginative and symbolic possibilities – loses some of its affective investment and consequent satisfaction. Mind and body are split, with shakier feelings of self the result. Such processes may, qualitatively, find expression in adult experience, with activities, and even the self, feeling false, dead and or meaningless as we become overly preoccupied with what others might say and the fear that we may never be good enough.

Winnicott (1971) argued, as suggested, that these ideas can be applied in adult development; and particular writers have used his approach when thinking, for instance, about story telling itself as a kind of transitional process, which may be more or less productive of selfhood (Sclater, 2004). We can think of university, as a space where a self is in negotiation, and where a process of, or struggle around, separation and individuation - of letting go of past ideas and relationships - may be involved. Like the child, an adult, or rather the infant and child in the adult, may be full of anxiety about her capacity to cope, and or whether s/he can be good enough in the eyes of others. S/he may cling to an existing identity, or be overly preoccupied with what others might think, or with getting it right, which can denude learning and creativity of emotional life and meaning. Learning can be deadened in consequence. The stories people tell – including to researchers – may, on the other hand, become vehicles for a renegotiation of self, which may be more or less legitimised in the eyes and responses of important others. Unconscious 'memory in feeling', forged in previous patterns of relationship, may be evoked, for better but also worse. Successful transitions – involving, for instance, the capacity to play more wholeheartedly with symbolic capital – may depend, in part, on the relational histories people bring with them but also on the responses of significant people in new transitional spaces. Others can help legitimate – and this works at a primitive emotional level - what is attempted and said, and the student can better manage the anxieties and threats to self of transitional space.

### **Capital in all its dimensions: 4 case studies.**

We have selected 4 'telling' stories, as we term them, ones that are representative of wider themes in our material but illuminate particular processes in especially compelling ways (West, 1996). We include a student who dropped out, Keith (all names are of course pseudonyms). We begin with a first generation student at university called 'Nathan' from a mixed race/black background and materially poor part of London. He entered the more specialist university as a trainee teacher. Nathan comes from an area of London with a reputation for violence and gang culture and race is a central issue in his narrative. But his material, at times, is riddled with other anxieties: about managing at university, especially his capacity to cope with academic assignments. These, he said, had always proved problematic for him, at school. Comments from tutors about being 'overly

descriptive' and 'insufficiently critical' brought him to an edge in his first year at university. He struggled too over accommodation, sharing a house in difficult circumstances. Yet his material contains many good 'objects' (new forms of potential capital might be another way of framing this) coming into play, including family, which enable him to keep on keeping on. There is warmth and solidity in these family relationships, full of support yet also challenge. This finds expression in a story of how the family descended to help clean the house and make it habitable when he first arrived at university as well as an academically successful sister who constantly encouraged him with assignments. Every night, there was 'skype' communication between them when problems were most intense. There is, in these terms, rich family and emotional 'capital' to be drawn on in managing anxieties. Nathan, however, also possesses agency himself. He uses his 'race' to get on in the system by joining a number of committees. He ensures that he is often consulted on equal opportunities in the institution, where, as one of our staff interviewees described, there was great uncertainty over diversity and equal opportunities issues.

The dangers of reducing particular capital, and people, to the status of 'deficit', in relation to the university, became central in some of our interpretative work. We interrogated the qualities of the socio-cultural as well as psychological capital Nathan was bringing into the university habitus. There was questioning of our own assumptions in thinking about what the quality of some of this capital. A spectre of deficit might have been lurking in Linden's initial reading of Nathan's text: of overcoming a difficult background, using a range of significant others as well as a strong religious faith. In a different socio-cultural reading, Mehri challenged this: Nathan's multi-cultural background could be seen as rich in capital, enabling him to deal with unempathic and even racist encounters. This was partly psychological but also cultural, in the sense of a learned capacity to engage with diversity, including in others, not least in his school placements, which were an important part of the degree programme. The capital included a strong religious faith, shared by the whole family. We noted, in thinking of our differing responses, of how Mehri's biography was implicated in her reading of the text: as an Iranian woman whose complex cultural heritage had, on occasions, been reduced to a one-dimensional, exotic otherness and deficit. Such auto/biographical sensibilities, alongside the interdisciplinary work, created more complex readings of Nathan's narratives.

In a first interview (2.12.09), Nathan spoke of his thoughts about becoming a primary-ed teacher. He was just 19 and in his 1<sup>st</sup> year. His desire to teach was linked with both ambitions to transform his own future path but also of a wider concern about race and the need for him to serve as a role model for others, particularly young black men.

It's more important for me.... because of the lack of male role models within education, especially primary. Growing up in my primary school, there were no male teachers, they were all female, I think only the caretaker was male, everyone else was female. So I thought, I think it's more important for me to be able to inspire young males... it must have been late primary school because I knew

throughout the whole of secondary school that I wanted to be a teacher...

Racism was no abstract entity in this townscape:

I also have this memory... I remember some boy saying something that was definitely derogatory towards us blacks and um we said oh that's a bit racist and so we got into a big argument and it all escalated out of control and then the teacher got involved and as a result of that, we had to miss our break time for about a week, yes for about a week we had to stand in the hall in separate areas, we wasn't allowed to talk to each other or anything and thinking about that at the interview, it really hit me and I thought, yeh, wow. Like I never want to make a child feel the way I felt at that time and I never want to...I think that the way that the teachers handled it was definitely wrong and they shouldn't have done that and like that was the first time that I really thought about it in that much detail and thought about how it affected me so I thought that's not going to happen when I'm a teacher.

Nathan has moved on and is now in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year. In a second interview (4.5.10), he talked of getting high marks for his teaching practice and a recent essay. He has managed the transition to more of a learner identity rather well and the experience in teaching practice felt like a significant time: a pointer to a future as well as a link back to a past. Some of the students and teachers in his placements made him feel valuable and a significant resource. Nathan found it important to reflect with us on these processes, including on his sense of agency. His struggles over academic work had been important but his family and wider cultural capital, as subjectively experienced and negotiated, enabled him to swim and to overcome some of the feelings of being the fish out of water.

### **Mark and dropping out**

Mark was in his mid-twenties when we met. He was the first in his family to go to university. He considers himself a committed Christian and has been active in his church. He draws, in his story telling, on the support and understanding provided by his parents, of low income and minimal educational background, as well as his wife and children. The church and family are significant others who, we suggest, provide Mark with some psychological capital to keep on, even after drop out. But there are pressures too: to prove himself as a man, a father as well as a student. He is preoccupied with what others might think and often has felt insecure.

Material pressures are part of the transitional equation, albeit with a particular familial and psychological twist. The material pressures faced by Mark, and other students, can drive them to leave fulltime university education. (In fact there are major issues, across our samples, about what 'full-time study' actually means, as a range of part-time jobs might be done, alongside study). Mark had left school at 16 with no qualification and income, and had always worked long hours with low pay. (This was shared with many of the female participants in the study, who returned to education to divert cycles of low paid work for long hours). Mark talked of working long hours in a local supermarket to

‘save, save, save’ whilst also continuing with GCSE and A Level classes. He has also taken care of the children in Church during Sunday School, which, in his story telling, inspired him to become a teacher. Continuing with his supermarket job, getting married, moving in with his wife, creating a ‘good’ home for his three stepchildren, and taking on a teaching degree programme, which demanded that he be ‘creative’, complicated and infected transitional space. He was caught in a broader, even unsustainable struggle, and he abandoned his ambition to become a qualified teacher, at least for now. Self-doubt and anxiety were deeply embedded in his narrative:

I did drop out eventually um the course I found ok but it was more a life decision for me... although I pursued it for the last two years, it wasn't until I actually got in to the system, I was only doing like individual lesson classes, lesson planning and I just had this feeling, it's weird, I can't believe it because I've worked hard to get to this position and then all of a sudden it was something that um, you know I was just looking at the amount of work, I know it sounds, I'm not a lazy person, but I was looking at the amount of work load, I've got three children, a family... I suppose I was observing a lot of teachers and I know a few teachers and I know that all teachers are creative and one of my main problems is that I'm not a creative person and there was a lot of emphasis towards being creative and being exploring, you know, I know teaching isn't about getting up at the front of the class and just dishing out or reading from the sheet, its um...you know it's more than that but there seemed to be loyalties on the creativity side and that really was something that I was struggling with...I know it sounds terrible and I had worked so hard, yes I mean obviously I don't want my GCSEs and A levels to be a waste but obviously I'm still a bit raw at the moment and I'm just weighing up what the options are....

The pressures became too intense, reflecting patterns elsewhere in student narratives, especially among the London sample: of people feeling overwhelmed by childcare and related difficulties, of the weight of poverty and isolation. Of needing to combine work and university in ways that could feel impossible. In Mark's case, there was deep self-doubt too, over his abilities, expressed under the label ‘creativity’. He felt he could not be creative, or engage fully with aspects of teaching and we have a glimpse, if no more, of an anxious inner life and the difficulty of symbolic play. But there is resilience too, which cautions against overly one-dimensional understanding of capital (or even of the meaning of drop-out). Mark remains desperate to prove himself in diverse ways and he has, in fact, dropped-in again, by doing a one-year accountancy course, which can count towards a foundation degree. He wrote to us, in two emails, of a determination to continue with his education.

### **Mathew, and significant others**

Mathew is a black refugee carer/student in his mid-thirties, who intrigued and concerned us. We noted his struggle with academic work primarily because of limited confidence with English, which is a third/fourth language. This cannot simply be read, however, as

absence or cultural deficit. Mathew recognises the value of the languages he does know, viewing them as opportunities for better understanding of others' worlds. He is the son of a local African Chief and has managed to flee numerous war zones. He has worked as an hourly paid-minimum wage carer since arriving on British soil, seeking asylum. He made friends with an English couple gaining their support for his applications for asylum and to pursue a university education. He found a partner with her four sons, creating some psychological/psychosocial resources in his struggle for survival. Two lecturers in a further education college were crucial others in this struggle over status; like good parent figures, we concluded, in reflections with him. He created structures of belonging while those structures provided a psychological/emotional lifeline. Mathew, moreover, had been a drop out from university – from an elite institution – in a programme where he felt devoid of personal support. He worked hard to create support in the new institution in the multi-cultural world of South London. Finding a good personal tutor, and other sympathetic staff and students, was central in his first interview. He brought capital with him, from his background, but also felt vulnerable and uncertain.

A public healthcare degree appealed because of a shortage of, and demand for male carers in the NHS. In a second interview, (11.3.10), he looked back on his struggles and language issues were central:

It is difficult because when we started in the first year they said to us OK this first year we give you the opportunity and accept your assignment as is... that has been changed because of the stage of second year so you're now needing proof reading and that makes it difficult for people like me considering my background which I'm always constantly worried about how to translate my thoughts my ideas from one language to another, from Mende/Kissi/Creole languages, to African English, then to British English is something that makes it difficult for me....

But his narrative was far than one of deficit: his cultural diversity was seen to be an important resource in negotiating a new identity and managing anxieties:

Well from my languages from the various languages that I've gone through if you look at health for instance you cannot purely have a disease by itself. In that way you look at the medical models instead of looking at the social... or psychosocial aspect of it for the patient...having got some ideas about the um psychosocial aspect of health, taking it back to my past cultures... without making the connection with the social aspect you cannot treat the patient... so I bring in this system where I realise or begin to understand how I can actually help the sick from different cultures.

Mathew, like a number of students, was in a world where boundaries between full and part-time study, work and university, family and student life, were confused:

I do work...I used to work for agency but agencies shifts are not constant so I joined BUPA as a healthcare assistant. The rate is £5.90 for an hour... my partner is a nurse works shifts... I would be looking after the kids I have four boys... I've

given up sleep lost hours of sleep to attend to the family and then education sometimes. I go to bed by three o'clock I get up by four o'clock five o'clock... I get up... prepare whatever I've got to take into [my] school, eat and shower the boys and leave them to dress by themselves and then go pack their bags/ lunch and leave home by 8 o'clock they're supposed to start classes by 8.30 I mean 8.45 I'm supposed to start by 9... I have to drive to drop them to a neighbour who is very close to the school and who can just walk... so it's very much more difficult than people might think.

Yet, he coped. But at the end of a second interview, he talked of struggling with an assignment and Mehri responded with concern. The interview itself became, for a moment, an explicit transitional space, in which he thought about his options and looked to us for guidance:

I don't want it to be a sign of weakness if I ask somebody to help me [proof reading my essay], that might make me a weak person.. but there are a lot of resources which they call academic skills...I did it once, I've never done it again...but I have to change that because if I want to succeed I have to do that because the system is set up for that.

He asked what we thought and the boundaries between biographical narrative interviewing and educational counselling blurred. Mehri, especially, encouraged him to seek specific help and to overcome his reluctance to do so. He wanted to know what she thought. Admitting vulnerability and finding people who respond empathically to it was a dangerous business, he said, and he valued our meetings. He had made the decision to try again.

### **Sue and the turmoil of *class*: juxtaposing class with race**

Sue is a serious and passionate student of Law, based in an elite institution. Divorced with two children, she has been on benefits and a carer for her father till his death. She had returned to a childhood ambition to practice law. Her biography embodies determination to overcome difficulties, which include poverty and emotional vulnerability. She perseveres with the challenges of learning in higher education. Whilst deeply disturbed by class and its manifestations in the academy, she is resilient. We noted with interest that the issue of *gender* was relatively unimportant to Sue; rather it was the class system that troubled her. She looked for recognition in the academy, feeling awkward in lectures and in the world of the Inns of Court, but good when being an advocate in court, especially when representing marginalized people. In her first interview (10.8.2009), she said:

I mean it's getting used to...the gap with the education you know it's so different going back into that environment you know comparing with younger students, you know, but it's a natural progression for them and they're up to speed with everything...well I would need to complete my degree and do the bar...a year at bar school ... I don't doubt I will do it, I don't doubt myself, I really don't. I worry

about how good I will be... sorry... (upset)

She talked of her relative 'lack of education' and constantly asked in seminars what words meant. She said she had learned 'the confidence to speak up and say oh what's that then....and I'll look it up later'. She talked of different types and styles of lecturers: some easy to listen to, others humorous and some very serious:

that's really a bit tricky so I don't want to be spoon fed the information but the same times you've got to hit the ground running with it... But in a courtroom I've always felt more comfortable for some strange reason which goes against anything I'd normally feel....

### **Criminal Law**

Sue talked at length about her background, in all the interviews: the law was 'just part of your everyday life'. She grew up in South London, where arrests and even murder, as she put it, were frequent companions. She also mentioned feeling an outsider in the community, at times, of 'not wanting to push buggies down the High Street':

You know I wanted to make something of my life and always believed that you could do whatever you wanted to do, and.... that that wasn't all there was you know there was a lot more to it than that and you could bring up children and have children and ideally you know in a situation where you've got a husband or stuff like that and if it doesn't work out like that then you just get up and get on with it but it was never going to stop me from doing what I wanted to do, be a success in my own business or you know to do this, what I wanted to do since I was about 11 years old .

Sue agonised about moving between the different habitus of the university and the street and over what others might think. Negotiating the space was hard:

I've really agonised over the way I speak and stuff I think you know I'm just not going to be able to speak how I would wish to speak and I've got to be comfortable with that and if make slips so be it I've got to say this is me and here we go.... and you know you do get I mean when I've been in many courts and listened to advocates and you get sort of international words of English together. So I think well never mind I can't speak English but neither can you (laughing)  
.....

In the classroom, accent could be equated, she said painfully, with very negative qualities:

to ignorance and bad manners and you know all of that and lack of intelligence...I've got to understand that it is natural and just think and overcome that with my own abilities. It's like an inner turmoil almost every walk of life comes with prejudice and you know discrimination and I put it akin to racial

discrimination it's no different really from social discrimination you know but that's not recognised it doesn't really.

She had been fearful of 'messing it up and then you've humiliated yourself because you've pretended to be something you're not...' She was, she said, past trying to speak in a particular way; and if she changed, 'then I would have all my family ridicule me.' She had also subscribed to *The Times* newspaper for 2 years, and thought of the law as a 'kind of close knit community'. The space was difficult to enter. In a second interview, Sue talked more of her Dad and his heroic struggles against legal authorities, including the police. He was, she said, an important influence, inspiration even, whose struggle, she said, continued to inspire her against injustice. She had been a successful business woman too, underlining the danger of reducing Sue simply to deficit status. She was both vulnerable and tough, having survived in difficult circumstances, including a divorce. Her psychological capital was both strong and vulnerable. And her story telling could be vibrant and she felt we listened. She was no feminist or socialist, she said – values often promulgated by members of the law faculty, (which had a radical reputation) – but she felt deeply about injustice. She was managing the transition rather well and the resources drawn on included some of her teachers, her own biography as well as, however minimally, the opportunity to talk and reflect with us.

## **Helen**

Helen, like Sue, was also a student in an elite institution. She had been sexually and physically abused as a child, and struggled with a range of psychological as well as financial difficulties. She had in fact progressed well, by a second interview, with her marks increasing 'from a 59 up to a 76 average'. She was now being encouraged to do a Masters degree in Anthropology and Palaeolithic Archaeology.

Helen came from what she termed 'a bit of a troubled family' as well as from a working class town in Kent, a place where the numbers going to university, not least a university like hers, were small. But she had been a good student at school yet never went to university. At 18, 'I was living with a boy and I had a full time job and all of my friends were graduating and having fun and I was like I'm stuck in an office and you know playing grown up and I didn't really feel grown up.' Eventually, she looked at her friends graduating and wanted to be like them.

A father and stepfather had been abusive, and her mother seemed attracted to such men, as Helen realised through counselling. Because of this, she felt better able to talk about her emotional life:

.... because nine times out of 10 I feel fine about everything and I don't know a hormonal period comes up and I just kind of crash a little bit and get a bit teary and feel a bit sorry for myself and I went to counselling and it's all fine again, I think it's just one of those things. I mean I was a bit worried about repeating my mum's mistakes with my boyfriends."

Her route to university was via an Access course, where she found substantial support, although struggling financially:

I had about two jobs on the run... I was quite shocked because the course fees wasn't too bad, it was about £500 per year but um trying to get financial help, the course was two hours a week too short for the adult learning grant, obviously no student loan, Barclays wouldn't give you a career development loan because you need to do a degree afterwards so basically it was my overdraft that got me through.

She had little idea of what she wanted to do for a degree but found 'anthropology and then I fell in love with the subject'. An English teacher was 'almost like a mother in some ways', she felt, while a sociology teacher 'made it fun, he made it concise, he made it easy to understand, he kind of, he made it clear what the university would be expecting when we moved on to that which helps a lot'. The child in the adult was sustained in this space. Yet the transition to university was nonetheless difficult:

My first year at uni was horrible, I hated it...it reminded me of being back at school, um except bigger and scarier. I made the decision not to live on campus during my first year because of living away from home for so many years which I kind of regret now because I found it a lot more difficult to make friends um, but I didn't like the course, I felt I had no support from any tutors, my personal tutor I introduced myself and that's the only time I have spoken to him... unfortunately people are nasty to other people so there is a little bit of that going on where I wasn't quite fitting in any of the social groups, it was unbearable. I think because I didn't have many friends because I didn't live on campus, that's what I think, I think maybe if I moved on to campus and made some friends maybe I wouldn't have stood out so much, I mean I don't mind standing out, it's just.

She applied to do an anthropology degree, but could not settle and her marks were 'terrible'. She almost gave up but a course on paleoanthropology, and a new group of people she engaged with, helped her claim some space.

I've really got into, fossil hominids and like where cultures first evolved from like language and dance and I've just found a passion for it and that's the one part of the degree that I'm getting 70s for, I just love it, I want to go to the rift valley in Africa and I just want to spend my life kind of figuring out the first cultures and the first civilisations and that's what I found a passion for... I find it interesting and absolutely fascinating and it's just the way, it's kind of like science stuff things like the legends, I personally think it's very black and white but with kind of human evolution it's like you know because we evolved from ape like creatures, where we always religious or was that something that kicked in when we became more human like and just things like that, yes its fascinating and I just love the fact that evidence suggests we all come from the same place but we are so diverse as well, I love that.

She played, joyfully as well as perceptively, with these ideas in her story telling, with us: story telling, as suggested, can be a transitional space, productive of selfhood in its own right.

## **Conclusion**

Being and becoming a student in the diverse spaces of an increasingly diverse university system requires different levels of understanding. This includes the psychological alongside the socio-cultural, to be understood in dynamic, not deterministic ways. There can be dissonance as different capitals meet – the working class world of South London and the middle class habitus of an elite university – and students may struggle to claim space. But there is a danger of reducing people to deficits or failing to acknowledge the nuance of lives and what has been learned in them as well as the role of agency. Family matters, and the capital this can nurture, lies at the heart of some of these stories. Teachers too, looking after the child in the adult. Research itself can serve as transitional space, where there is an experiment with self and story. A feminist cultural anthropologist, Jennifer Crawford (2005), emphasises the importance of taking time with narrators and of being attentive to the other, as we might be in relation to music, art or poetry. Of the need to listen for the rhythms and poetics of the everyday, and how transitional moments appear in surprising ways. How the struggle to become a learner may be highly idiosyncratic as well as representative of more general trends, at one and the same time. Of how a range of characters, from the past as well as the present, may enter transitional space – teachers, fathers, sisters and even researchers as well as particular symbolic languages – as part of the play of identity and selfhood; and of how some enable more space to be claimed, for self and symbolic play. A person can feel more alive, and, in this instance, more of a student, in the process. In object relations theory, the play of the inner world is, just that, like a drama, with distinct casts of characters, from a present as well as past. But the role characters play may change and transitional space can involve new relationships, including with the past and its *dramatis personae*. New qualities in intersubjective experience can translate into a different quality of internal life, however provisional and we may feel more of a subject, or agent, in the process.

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