

Relationships with younger students in universities: perspectives from Chinese full-time adult students

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Introduction

This paper explores full-time adult students' relationships with younger students in terms of age gap and coping strategies. The data forms part of my Ph.D. research on the new phenomenon that full-time adult students have recently begun studying at Chinese public universities. This research addresses a wider range of issues—including adult students' motives for attending higher education, their experiences of being at university and the influence of higher education on them, than is reported in this paper.

This paper focuses on age gap and coping strategies in terms of identity in that in this research, age was the most salient factor defining who adult students were and influencing their relationships with younger students. Based on the age gap, both sides defined their roles in their initial interaction. The age gap also resulted in different life/work experience, marital status and individual orientations towards university life between them; the latter were also important factors influencing their relationships.

Backgrounds: policy changes

With the expansion of Chinese higher education (Hayhoe, 1996), Chinese adults have more access to higher education than in the decades before 2000. They received higher education through informal routes such as night schools until the 1990s. However, nowadays some of them can become full-time undergraduates through the formal traditional route. The limitations based on marital status and age for national college entrance examinations were abolished in 2001. Adults who are older than 25 years old or married can currently qualify for entry as full-time students in public higher education sectors on condition that they pass the annual national entrance examinations. Age restrictions for national postgraduate entrance examinations were also relaxed in 2002. Potential postgraduate students aged under 40 who want to be government-supported students have opportunities to start their full-time studies. Moreover, self-financing postgraduate students have no restrictions on age.¹ These significant changes allow more adults to study full-time in universities. These adults have changed their traditional Chinese life patterns, in which education is for the young (who are less than 30 years old), work for the middle aged (in their 30s, 40s and 50s), and leisure for the elderly (who are over 60 years old), have adopted a 'cyclic life plan' (Cross, 1981) and have established their roles as full-time learners through a traditional route during their working years. They study at universities

¹ Retrieved 23 January, 2006 from China news network:
<http://www.heb.Chinanews.com.cn>

particularly designed for younger students who are in the majority. What factors affect their relationships with the majority in universities? How do they cope with the relationships? Adult learners' perspectives on these aspects are explored through their narratives in order to understand how they make sense of university life and themselves in a Chinese context.

Theoretical and methodological basis

Regarding adult students' relationships with younger students, Vernon's (1972) theories on human interaction were quoted frequently to explore how adult students learn to interact with younger students. To interpret adult students' perceptions of their interaction, phenomenology was also selected as this research paradigm due to its emphasis on people's perceptions of what happens. Thus, life history interviews and semi-structured interviews were employed to obtain the subjective accounts of the participants.

In the telling of their stories, the participants reconstructed the connections between events with or without their consciousness. This reflects the special importance of narratives, through which people express their own understanding of events and experiences (Atkinson, 2004). More importantly, in agreement with Atkinson, the participants referred to how their lives have been influenced by external circumstances, thus providing short cuts to a Chinese context and forged the connections between their life events and social contexts. As Goodson and Sikes (2001, p.84) point out, "social structures may push storylines in particular directions and the stories then legitimate the structures...in a self-legitimizing circle". In this sense, the connections between events and contexts helped to develop a good understanding of how these adult students have experienced and perceived events that have made them who they are now, and to make their experiences become meaningful and understandable.

Moreover, their stories helped to illustrate participants' identity. Through their narratives, the participants disclosed what kind of person they thought they were or would like others to think they were. Especially when they talked about key events in their lives, they made reference to the instances of how they saw themselves. As Vernon (1972) points out, people are talking about themselves and learning about themselves in talking to others about themselves.

Nevertheless, it was impossible to conduct life history interviews with all the participants due both to several participants' lack of commitments and intimacy of involvement and to limited time and financial constraints. Thus, semi-structured interviews were adopted. The data generated through semi-structured interviews added extra information or corroborative evidence to the findings produced by life history interviews.

Samples

Being purposive samples, the participants were selected according to three criteria.

The first criterion was the age and work experience of student participants. Full-time undergraduate students over 25 and full-time postgraduate students over 30, when they started their studies at university, were chosen. They also had some experiences of work before commencing their studies. The second criterion for choosing tutors and younger students was that they had first-hand experience with adult students. The third criterion was that the interviewed participants were completely unknown to me. As a consequence, the 18 adult participants (from three key universities located in different provinces in China) included twelve men and six women of various ages (such as 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s), subjects, educational achievements, previous occupations and social classes. The wide range of samples offered more opportunities to explore the different perspectives of Chinese adult students on how they interact with younger students. In addition, three teachers and two younger students who had first-hand experience with adult students were also interviewed.

Research findings

Age and coping strategies

In this study, the 12 postgraduate participants were generally 10 to 15 years older than younger students. Except two undergraduate participants, who were married with children and were 32 years and 15 years older than their classmates, the other four undergraduate participants, who were not married, were around seven years older than their younger peers. In this sense, age was the most direct and apparent characteristic in distinguishing these participants from their younger counterparts. Moreover, all the participants had had experiences of work before starting their studies at university. At the beginning of their studies, these participants took different attitudes towards the age gap, thus adopting two strategies of concealment about and disclosure of their ages and previous experiences.

Being the only female undergraduate participant, LJB, in her late 20s, concealed her age and life experiences from her younger classmates because she did not want to be seen as different from her younger peers simply as a result of her older age. As she expressed it:

I think that there is a difference in age between them and me. In fact, I don't like others to draw attention to this aspect. I don't like to explain something [e.g. why she returned to higher education at her age] to others very much... I'm not the sort of person who invites difficulties, so I don't want my classmates to be interested in the age difference. I think that they would ask me if they knew this. I hate explaining...

This concealment strategy indicates that she preferred an identity as '*a normal student*' rather than an identity as '*a non-traditional student*'. This was in order not to be visible as an adult student but to be invisible and integrate with younger students. As she said, "I don't tell them my age and experiences because I want to integrate with them. I don't want them to think that we have any gap or difference".

Nevertheless, interestingly, this concealment strategy caused contradictions between her thoughts and behaviour, thus inhibiting the development of her relationship with younger students. For instance, owing to her sensitivity about age, she always avoided all possible conversational topics concerning age; she never joined in any class activities or university communities, in which she needed to fill in application forms which might include age information.

LJB's behaviour above stemmed from her self-definition not as '*an adult student*' but as '*a normal student*'. In order to defend her identity, she adopted the above 'diversionary tactics', which is one of 'self-defence mechanisms' (Vernon, 1972, p.300). As a result, she was actually separated from the majority of her younger peers at university. As she said:

I don't want to join in the coming graduation party. To be honest, I really have no feelings about them. What's more, they have their own small groups. If I'm a non-essential person, I will choose not to join them.

LJB internalised a sense of herself as 'other' in relation to her classmates through using 'them' to refer to her younger counterparts. It has been seen that she had a distant relationship with her younger peers and had a great sense of 'isolation' from them rather than 'belonging' to her class. Nevertheless, paradoxically, she also pretended to share common interests with them and even had fun sometimes. She showed her affection for them when describing this experience, saying "I like them." Her contradictory expressions suggest that she placed herself on the margins of the majority but was afraid of being an outcast.

Accordingly, based on LJB's dispositions towards her fellow students, which were generated from her familial habitus, she attempted to develop relationships with one younger student, whose family background was similar to hers, rather than those with different family backgrounds. As she expressed it:

Now I have a good friend on campus... I had a friend initially and then I kept my distance later, perhaps because of family backgrounds... Her family background is very good but my friend and I have similar family backgrounds. I think that this supports the law that superstructure is up to economic basis.

On the one hand, LJB's preference in social networks limited her interaction with her younger peers; on the other hand, her social orientation contributed to 'the reinforcement of homogeneity' of her social capital (Schuller, et al., 2000, p.10). Through the 'selective association', as another 'self-defence mechanism' (Vernon, 1972, p.300), LJB secured her identity in order to keep and even enhance her positive perception of herself. Her close relationship with one younger student also helped weaken her isolation from the majority. As Vernon (1972, p.481) points out,

friendships in small circles “serve to counterbalance the impersonality of the large organisation”.

In contrast to LJB, the male undergraduate participants initially disclosed their ages and life/work experiences. Welbor² explained that this was the first step he took when he introduced himself to his younger counterparts in order to build a relationship with them.

At the beginning of the first semester, I told my flatmates³ something about myself... Whether I tell them my age or not, others will work it out. It is better to be honest... Later other classmates found out this... There are very few students who are the same age as me. One girl from another class texted a message to me, “You are 26”. I replied, “Yes”. She said, “Impossible.” I said, “No, I’m not lying.” She asked, “Are you married?” I said, “No”... Later I talked to her for an hour.

Welbor reported that he had done the same thing in high school, where he had been seven years older than his classmates, and it had been a positive experience. This suggests that adult undergraduates who have experienced an age gap in high school are later more confident in how they behave towards their younger peers at university. In this sense, Welbor accepted his identity as an adult student. Moreover, he applied the label of an adult student to himself through talking to his younger peers about his age and experiences. This was because “spoken words about oneself serve to crystallise and stabilise one’s definitions about himself” (Vernon, 1972, p. 289). The younger student’s response to his age also contributed to the strengthening of his identity as an adult student. This was, in part, because he recognised that in younger students’ views, he could have been married at his age. In brief, “The on-going experiences of the individual may, of course, serve to reinforce already existing self definitions” (Vernon, 1972, p.277).

Although the male undergraduate participants accepted their identity as adult students, they did not want to be placed as ‘*others*’ at university. For instance, XDB refused to be treated differently in military training, which new undergraduates must attend at the beginning of the first year. He said, “A military instructor knew my age and wanted to look after me. I told him that I didn’t need any caring for.”

Similarly, all the postgraduate participants revealed their ages and their life experiences. Four of them did this in the first meeting with their younger peers. All received positive responses from their younger counterparts, thus creating a good start in the relationships with younger students. The responses were as follows:

I told my classmates that I was 38 years old. They encouraged me and thought that I was great to continue to study despite my age. I didn’t feel awkward.

² This participant gave himself this pseudonym.

³ Flatmates were his classmates.

(YRZA)

All my classmates thought that my personal and life experiences were very rich and I had lived through some tough times so they elected me class monitor. (Leap)

The positive responses of younger students benefited adult students' adaptation to new university lives. However, owing to their sensitivity about the age gap, some of them initially felt threatened and lacked academic confidence when they started their studies in universities, where younger students were in the majority. In common with the findings of Bourgeois, et al. (1999), they were reassured by the presence of other adult students in their classes. These results were not associated with gender.

Ways to interact with younger students in terms of the age gap

Based on the age gap and traditional cultural norms, the younger students, in their interactions with adult students called them by honorific titles such as 'big sister', 'older brother' and 'name plus teacher'. For example:

I told them the age difference between them and me in the first meeting. I said, "There is no problem. You can call me 'big sister' or 'auntie'. But, don't call me 'grandma'." We get along with each other very well. I'm happy that they say "hello, big sister" when we see each other. (Yao)

The suggested titles, such as 'big sister', helped to define their respective roles in their relationships. It is generally not acceptable for younger people to call senior people by their names in Chinese society. In this regard, these appellations reflect hierarchical relationships with respect to seniority. Does it mean that younger students accepted the vertical relationship when utilising the honorific speech? Faint's experience suggests that the answer was 'No'.

Faint⁴ had worked as a teacher in secondary school for more than 10 years before starting her postgraduate studies. She initially carried double identities as a teacher and an older sister to interact with her younger peers. As she explained:

Both [of my flatmates] were little girls. They were very young. In our daily chats, although we were classmates, I thought that they were younger than me, so I wasn't fussed about anything. When talking to them, sometimes I said "you little girls". I got used to it. They weren't as old as my students. Therefore, I treated my roommates as school children. I did the same in daily life. From my opinion, I thought I should behave like a big sister. They were like my students so I should take more care of them.

It has been seen that Faint specified what had to be done or was desirable in interaction with younger students, based both on the traditional role definition of 'an

⁴ This participant gave herself this pseudonym.

older sister' and on her previous work experience. As Vernon (1972, p.283-284) points out, "It is basically from knowledge of one's role definitions that he is able to decide how he is involved in, engaged with, or intermeshed with, other members of the various groups to which he belongs". However, paradoxically, although her new image of being an older sister was partially constructed through the honorific title used by her younger counterparts, they did not accept the label 'little girls' assigned by the 'older sister'. They resisted the inferior position indicated by a form of address and desired to create their images of being independent adults.

But sometimes I didn't feel this way [I should be an older sister]. In the end, I found out their views. In the beginning, I didn't understand them. They thought I saw them as children. They were not happy with this. They were immature but they wanted to be mature. In the end, I realised this. They thought, "You're older than us. It doesn't mean that you're more qualified than us." That's what they felt. (Faint)

Faint's initial confusion resulted from the inconsistency between younger students' behaviour and language. Their hypocrisy could stem from their own struggles between new individualism and traditional ideologies, both of which coexisted in their minds. Yang (1986, p.160) found that modernization facilitated changes in Chinese students' personality, such as changing their orientation from collectivism to individualism. They had few 'authoritarian orientation[s]' and 'submissive disposition[s]' but put more emphases on 'equalitarian orientation[s]' and 'autonomous disposition[s]'. Liu (2007, p.136) also suggests, "The newly-arising individualism among the younger generation is still under negotiation with the traditional ideologies".

It is thus apparent that younger students' role playing involved 'unprogrammed, dynamic [and] emergent aspects' (Vernon, 1972, p.416). Accordingly, Faint realised that her initial identity as an older sister was challenged and her younger peers did not wish to play this role as little girls. According to Vernon (1972), through Faint's assessment of interaction with younger students, she redefined herself as '*an adult*' instead of '*an older sister*'. As she said, "now we are not such good friends because I think that I'm an adult and they're very young. Usually, they just say 'sister' or 'big sister'". This was because people's self-perception is partially attributed to a consequence of playing their roles (Argyle, 1994). It is clear that Faint experienced a role-making process and thus her relationship with younger students became equal but separate. In her interview, Faint used '*we*' only when talking about the differences between her younger peers and her. Instead, she frequently used '*I*' and '*they*'. Several participants also demonstrated this tendency.

In this regard, younger students preferred to have an equal relationship with adult students. This is supported by other findings in this research. LBB was the person

who, as a younger student, graduated from a university with a Bachelor's degree in 1992. He had had a variety of jobs before returning to higher education for his postgraduate studies in 2008. He was around 15 years older than his younger counterparts. Despite the different ages and life experiences between them, his younger peers initially attempted to use a nickname to interact with him in order to locate him in an equal position in their relationship. The responses of his and his younger classmate were as follows:

Although he's older than us and is the same age as my uncle, we don't care about this. We are classmates. We are equal. We aren't cautious about how to speak to him and behave towards him in our daily life. We never do that. We can have a joke with him. We do this with other classmates. Then we feel great... Occasionally, when he doesn't go home but stays in his university accommodation, we tell him, "Lin Zi, treat us to drinks." He's happy with this. We go out to drink together... He treats us to drinks. He's generous. (Younger student B)

I have a dormitory on campus. Sometimes I have evening lectures at university and I stay in the dormitory... We [LBB and his classmates] are very friendly with each other. We are very good friends. It seems as if I return to my youth. (LBB)

LBB's younger peers initially attempted to behave like his classmates and further confirmed that LBB accepted their definition of his role in their relationship, thus contributing to the establishment of a good relationship between them. Moreover, the nickname given by his younger peers bridged the age gap and strengthened his role as a classmate. Seen from their comments, both partners used 'we' instead of 'I', 'he' and 'they'. This suggests that their positive relationship was strong.

Another example was Welbor, who initially attempted to create opportunities to interact with younger undergraduates and further built his relationship with them through an appointed public role as class monitor. However, later he realised that the role of a classmate, who could share common interests with younger students, benefited his integration with them:

I can tell you now that university students hate you flaunting your seniority. So you need to develop some interests such as playing computer games and volleyball if you want to be able to interact with these people. You can't educate them by using the roles of a class monitor and a senior. It doesn't work. You need to try and find something in common with them. If you have similar interests, you can hang out together, otherwise you will be isolated. (Welbor)

It has been seen that Welbor's identity as a classmate was more significant than his identities as an adult student and a class monitor in the process of developing positive

relationships with his younger peers. Thus, his identity as a classmate decided how he interacted with his younger peers. For instance, he had to develop new interests that younger students had, saying “sometimes I have to learn what they like, otherwise it is hard to communicate with them... Now I make myself like the stuff they do. It is easier for me to communicate with classmates.” In common with the findings of Read, et al. (2003), Welbor adopted a pragmatic approach to adapting to the campus culture created by younger students in order to be accepted by them. As Vernon (1972, p.284) points out, “Awareness of the fact that others are also aware of how he defines himself permits him to reach decisions about how they are likely to treat him, and to adjust his behaviour in accordance with this anticipated reaction”. In this regard, developing common interests with younger students in turn helped Welbor heighten his identity as a classmate but weaken his identity as an adult student.

Summary

Age was the most apparent characteristic distinguishing adult students from younger students. Owing to different attitudes towards an identity as adult learners, they adopted two strategies of concealment about and revelation of their ages and previous experiences. The former raised the risk of alienation, whereas the latter increased the possibility of establishing positive relationships with younger students. These two strategies were associated, to some degree, with age, gender and programme. In undergraduate programmes, gender rather than age was a more likely indicator of different approaches. In contrast, in postgraduate programmes, this selection was not connected with age and gender: all the participants publicised their ages and life/work experience initially; facing younger students as the majority, most adult postgraduates had age pressure in terms of a lack of academic confidence. Additionally, other characteristics, outside the scope of this paper, also impacted upon the relationships, including marital status, work/ life experience, individual orientations towards university life, personalities and idiosyncrasies and university circumstances.

During the interaction process, both sides used titles to admit or bridge this gap. Younger students employed the titles such as ‘older sister/brother’ which reflected vertical relationships; however, they refused the way adult students behaved according to the role definitions attached to the titles. This inconsistency increased the distance between them, thus undermining their relationships. In this regard, younger students preferred to have an equal relationship with adult students. They accepted adult students’ identity as classmates rather than social identities in terms of age and work experience; some of them initially used ‘nicknames’ to interact with adult students. Accordingly, adult students’ role definitions as ‘classmates’ benefited their integration into the majority; they developed or shared common interests with their younger peers. Apart from these public roles, the implicit roles of ‘advisers’ and ‘learners’ adult students played, which were not discussed in this paper, also contributed to their relationships with younger students.

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