# SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS IN THE BORDERLANDS:
# THE EFFECTS OF RETURNING TO STUDY ON THE 'CLASSED' GENDER IDENTITIES OF MATURE AGE WOMEN STUDENTS

Submitted by:

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# ABSTRACT

My contention is that 'class', as one of a vast configuration of facets that make up women's identity, has received too little attention within mainstream feminism recently. This thesis is framed within longstanding debates in feminism related to the possibility of addressing differences amongst women, while retaining gender as the defining feature of feminist work. I draw on conceptions of identity as multiple, shifting and contingent, and argue that identity is formed and shifts within the borderlands (after Anzaldua 1987) at the interface of the various discourses to which one has access. Such conceptions of identity are employed to investigate the effects of exposure to the new and different discourses of higher education, and Women's Studies, on the 'classed' gender identities of mature age women students.

The 17 mature age women students who participated in the research were enrolled in Women's Studies programs at two different universities. Group interviews were conducted at each university, and these were then followed up with individual interviews. Throughout the thesis, I draw on reflexive research methodologies and consider my positioning as a mature age student who identifies as 'working class' in relation to the study, its outcomes and possible theorisations.

In my analysis of the interview material, I offer various approaches to illustrate the difficulties inherent in debates about identity and difference. In an approach that focuses on the similarities amongst the women, it appears that this group of mature age women students were defined by themselves and others, both within higher education and outside academia, through their relationship to the family and motherhood. I then present a second approach that focuses on the differences amongst the women. Here it emerges that there were many differences amongst these mature age women students in relation to 'class', race, ethnicity, sexuality and so on that are not reflected in the approach that focuses on similarities. How the

women defined and articulated their experiences in relation to the family and their experiences of returning to study were very different. Focusing on differences in this way suggests that the possibility of coming to any conclusions about mature age women students, 'working class' women, or indeed even women, as a group becomes unfeasible.

I then suggest a different approach, one in which I investigate the borderlands at the interface of the similarities and differences amongst the mature age women students. This approach suggests that this group of mature age women students negotiated their sense of self within the borderlands of the discursive spaces to which they had access. What becomes apparent in this approach is that there were a number of different ways that women were positioned within the family in relation to their 'classed' gender identifications. In an approach such as this it is possible to explore how the women's identities as *women*, and as differently *classed* women were formed and shifted with their exposure to new and different knowledges and discourses of higher education and Women's Studies.

# STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the thesis 'Searching for answers in the borderlands: The effects of returning to study on the 'classed' gender identities of mature age women students', and submitted for the degree Doctor of Philosophy, is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Signed... ... ... ..█████████████... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ..

Date... ... ... ... ... ...15/3/2001... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... .

# CHAPTER ONE: SETTING THE SCENE

## INTRODUCTION

There is a constant tension within feminism in relation to the possibility of claiming 'woman' as the identity of the subject of feminism, while recognising that gender forms but one of the vast configuration of facets that constitute woman's identity. That this has continued to be an issue reflects the tensions inherent in the debates about identity and difference. This thesis reflects such tensions. Like most feminists, I intend gender to remain the central focus of my work. As a 'working class' woman, however, I am concerned that my identity as a 'working class' woman is recognised within feminism. I contend that women's sense of self is not only gendered, but also 'classed', and that this affects their lived experiences as women. Problems arise however, when investigating the 'classed' nature of gender identity and how such investigations can or should be undertaken.

In feminist debates about identity and difference, the choice is often presented as one of *either* identity as 'woman' *or* differences amongst women. That is, feminists must choose to focus either on 'woman' as the identity of the subject of feminism, or on the vast array of differences amongst women. This either/or choice appears to lead to either a silencing of the lives and experiences of many women, or a form of never ending focus on difference that may make it impossible to speak of women at all (Alcoff 1990; di Stephano 1990; Hartsock 1990; Tsolidis 1996 2001).

In searching for methods to investigate the 'classed' nature of gender identity in ways that may offer partial solutions to the dilemmas of identity and difference, I draw on a study of the lived experiences of a group of mature age women students.

In this chapter, I set the scene for the thesis as a whole. In my search for ways to investigate the 'classed' nature of gender identity, I draw on the work of feminists from minority ethnic and racial groups within feminism, and feminists who work within a broadly poststructuralist framework, who I refer to as feminists of difference.

I also draw on literature and fiction relating to mature age women students, and my own lived experiences as a mature age student, a 'working class' woman, and a feminist. I use this discussion to illustrate the issues with which I am concerned, and my belief that mature age women are a particularly useful group through which to investigate these issues. This discussion also allows me to tease out theoretical issues and questions that emerge within debates about identity and difference. Having illustrated why mature age women students are a useful group to study, I then outline the current study of mature age women students.

## SETTING THE SCENE

### *HOW CAN ONE BE A SUBJECT OF FEMINISM, AND A FEMINIST... AND BE DIFFERENT?*

My interest in gender identity as it is 'classed' arises from my own lived experiences as a 'working class' woman. In a number of ways, I have often felt silenced within mainstream feminist literature because of my 'class' identification. I can relate to this literature as a woman, however, I have felt that as a 'working class' woman my lived experiences are rarely represented. This oversight reflects the concerns of many feminists from 'working class' backgrounds that 'class' in any form appears to have fallen from the mainstream feminist agenda (Brine 1999; Lawler 1999; Skeggs 1997; Reay 1996a 1996b 1997; Walkerdine 1990).

As I outline in chapter two, my interest in 'class' is not of a traditional materialist or social sense. What interests me is how it may be possible to explore gender identity as it is 'classed'. I

use quotation marks throughout the thesis to indicate that I am not employing 'class', in the traditional sense. After Butler (1995), I use quotation marks around terms to:

> Show that they are under contest, up for grabs, to initiate the contest, to question their traditional deployment, and call for some other. ... The effect of the quotation marks is to denaturalize the terms, to designate these signs as sites of political debate (p. 54).

The issue of exclusion and silencing within mainstream feminism has long been a concern for many feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups. Many contend that mainstream feminist theory is often developed employing essentialist and universalist ideas about gender as though there is an essential core, and a universal set of experiences that all women share. They suggest that the lives and experiences of many women other than white, Western, 'middle class' women are not represented within mainstream feminism (Gunew 1993; Huggins 1991, 1994; hooks 1984, 1990a; Kishwar 1994; Lorde 1984; Tsolidis 1993a, 1993b, 1996b, 1997, 2001).

Feminists who work within a broadly poststructuralist framework similarly criticise essentialist notions of 'woman', based on the assumption that women share an essence of womanhood that is static and universal to all women (Yeatman 1994; Gunew & Yeatman 1993; Luke & Gore 1987; Weedon 1987; Scott 1990). Both these groups of feminists argue that universalist categories such as that of 'woman' are not useful to reflect the diverse range of experiences of women. I explore within the thesis whether the works of feminists of difference offer ways to investigate gender identity in its multiplicity. I consider whether these bodies of work will offer approaches to investigating the ways in which gender identity may interact with 'class' identifications.

I refer to feminists of difference in the recognition that they are not an homogenous group. Not only are there often differences between these feminists from ethnic and racial minority groups within feminism, and those feminists who work within a poststructuralist framework; there are many differences within these groups. The literature of feminists from racial and

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minority groups within feminism, for example, covers the work of Black American, Chicano, feminists of colour, Indigenous Australians, Australian feminists from ethnic minority groups, and feminists from third world countries. Clearly, to suggest that all feminists from minority groups share identical aims and concerns would be misleading. Similarly, feminists who draw on poststructuralist theorisations have a diverse range of approaches, aims and concerns. In addition, some feminists from ethnic and racial minority groups within feminism draw on poststructuralist theories.

As I discuss in chapter two, that I have chosen to categorise such diverse feminists despite these differences reflects a struggle throughout the thesis, and also reflects the debates within which the thesis is framed. I find the impulse to categorise hard to resist. If I cannot talk about women, or indeed 'working class' women or 'middle class' women, and if I cannot talk about feminists, or feminists of difference, how can what needs to be said get said? If there are no feminists, and/or no women, what then is feminism?

What also emerges within the debates about identity and difference, and is reflected within the work of many feminists from minority and racial groups within feminism, is how it is possible to be a feminist if one does not fit the identity of mainstream feminism. Many feminists of difference argue that the identity of the subject within mainstream feminism is that of a white, 'middle class' Western woman. Questions emerge then as to who can have an identity as a feminist. As Tsolidis (2001) asks, 'how do we remain both feminist *and* different?' (p. 3).

Being feminist and being different is also an issue that I feel acutely. My work focuses primarily on women and gender issues. My academic work and my personal leanings all point toward a will to change conditions for women in some way or another. I identify myself as feminist. I also identify as a 'working class' woman. To claim an identity as a feminist, do I have to let go of the other facets of my identity as a woman? Is it possible to retain an identity

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as a 'working class' woman within mainstream feminism in which white, 'middle class' women are the main constituents?

I have often felt torn between what mainstream feminism offers me, as a woman, and my feelings of connection to the work of feminists from ethnic and racial minority groups. Those feminists concerned with racism and white privilege seem to offer to me a way of thinking about my 'class' positioning within feminism that was not stimulated by mainstream feminism. However, I am conscious that race and ethnicity are not equivalent forms of oppression, and of the inherent dangers of equating them. In chapter two I discuss these issues and suggest that drawing on a number of approaches to difference may offer some solutions to my feelings of exclusion both as a woman within feminism, and as a feminist who is different.

I am aware that 'class' and race or ethnicity can not be equated and take care not to do so. However, I believe that work from these groups can be useful to explore 'class' identity if used reflexively. Thus, I draw on this work in the recognition of these differences, and in respect for the very different ways in which racism and white privilege shape the lives of women. I further propose that this work may offer new ways of thinking about 'class'.

In many ways, the debates about identity and difference appear to entail a choice as to whether, as a feminist, one chooses to focus on gender to the exclusion of difference, or focus on the differences amongst women, and thus risk the possibility of focusing on gender at all. Thus, it seems one must either ignore one's own excluding difference within mainstream feminism, and the difference of the groups to whom one belongs (for example race, 'class' and so on), or emphasise one's difference, and renounce one's feminist identity.

An increasing number of feminists are suggesting a middle path; an approach that attempts to maintain gender as a central referent, whilst remaining flexible enough to consider difference. Feminists have suggested that conceptions of identity similar to that expressed by de Lauretis

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(1986) may be useful (Alcoff 1988; Tsolidis 1993a, 1993b, 1996). Identity in these conceptions is viewed as multiple, shifting, contingent and often contradictory. It is possible to construct gender as the common denominator in feminist theorising in this way of thinking, however, analysis is not tied to gender in such a way as to deny the possibility of acknowledging other aspects of identity. Within conceptions of identity such as these, identity is considered to be formed through our histories, and mediated by the discourses to which we are exposed and have access. Within conceptions such as this, I believe that I can explore how women identify as women, and the ways that this is 'classed'. I argue that an investigation of the effects of returning to study on mature age women offers a useful way to explore issues of identity and difference.

## *HOW REFLEXIVE CAN ONE BE BEFORE IT BECOMES AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL?*

This is not an autobiographical thesis, however autobiographical aspects creep in. I did not enter this project as an interested outsider, an objective researcher, investigating issues 'out there'. My experiences were inextricably linked to the women in the study. This research is therefore in no way divorced from my own lived experiences. Like Middleton (1993):

> The genesis of my research questions ... lay deep in the tensions and conflicts of my everyday life... There was no split between my personal and my intellectual dilemmas. I lived my feminism. I was inside my own questions and methods, positioned within the object and the process of my inquiries (p.65).

The theoretical framework I have chosen, the methodology, and method used, the topic and the questions I have asked, all bear the marks of my own journey through education, my own personal history, and the discursive spaces to which I am exposed outside the realms of academia. I have aimed within this thesis to include details about my life and experiences that will be useful for the reader to understand how my background may have influenced the research, and how my positioning may have affected my relationships with the research participants.

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Having made the choice to position myself within the research another problem arises: How much of me do I want to expose to readers I do not know (or perhaps, more importantly those I do know)? How much or little of my background ought I to include? Do my readers really want to know about me? What is relevant and what is incidental? By revealing how I feel, will I be judged in a certain way? The latter concern is not uncommon. Reay (1996) talks of constantly writing herself in and crossing herself out; 'Coming from a background where individuals are always more judged than judging makes self-disclosure a dangerous, risky enterprise' (p. 445).

That I continually frame questions and issues within my personal lived experience raises a number of issues that are of central concern within feminism. For how far is it possible to rely on the personal without becoming autobiographical? There are concerns by some (McLeod & Yates 1997) that an endless reflexivity can lead to nothing being said; as no one can speak for experiences other than their own. McLeod and Yates (1997) ask:

> Must we end up 'just talking about ourselves'? Is all research ultimately ever
> autobiographical? Given the prevailing hyper-reflexivity about both the constituting role
> of the researcher and the partiality and contingency of any truths produced by research, is
> there any point in attempting to undertake empirical research? (p. 23).

That I have chosen to position myself within this thesis in the ways in which I have (despite these concerns) is discussed in depth in chapter three, where I outline the issues and discuss how I have addressed these within the study.

### The lived experiences of being a 'working class' mature age woman student

Having left school at 15, and returned to study at 30, I have long been interested in the effects on other women of returning to study as a way of understanding my own experiences. Similarly, my interest in identity formation processes stems from my personal experiences as a student. As I progressed through my first degree, I became aware that the ways I identified myself, and the ways others perceived me, underwent a number of changes. My exposure to different knowledges, and to discourses that were unfamiliar to me (and my family and

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friends), led to many changes in the ways I identified myself. It also led to changes in the ways others identified me. As I changed in response to my exposure to new and different discourses and knowledges, those around me began to perceive me as different to them and different to how I had been before.

While studying at VUT, I had noticed differences between many of the lecturers and myself in 'class' terms. Whilst studying sociology, I often felt that the ways in which 'class' was defined and theorised did not relate to my experiences of being 'working class' at all. However, many of my lecturers were from 'working class' backgrounds, as were the majority of the students. It was when I began doctoral study at Monash University that I became particularly aware that, as a 'working class' woman, I was different, not only from most of the academic staff, but also from other students. I began to feel increasingly different, not only at university but also at home among my family, as I was doing something totally alien to them. My family and friends still have difficulty understanding that I will be called Dr when I finish although I will not be a medical doctor! I often feel that I am living in two worlds. Like Reay (1998),

> I have become more and more the chameleon, constantly evaluating and calculating to what extent, and with whom, I can reveal different aspects of self. I change my behaviour, my accent, and my body language to fit the social context that I find myself in. I recognise that, to an extent, this is everyone's experience of the social world. I doubt that they feel the same sense of fraudulence and inauthenticity as I do when I am masquerading as an academic (p. 14).

As an undergraduate, I majored in Women's Studies. Exposure to the feminist knowledges that I was offered within this discipline had profound effects on me. Having had no previous exposure to feminist knowledges, I began to question my life as a woman in depth; who I was as a woman, and who I was as a mother and wife, all became the subject of much soul searching.

My identity as a 'working class' woman was deeply affected by my return to study. I became interested in whether other women had shared my experiences, and if not, what the

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differences were. I wanted to look at these issues more broadly in the sense that, yes, I wanted to explain my own experiences to myself, but I also wanted to explore these in a broader sense to understand how these issues related to identity and difference.

## RETURNING TO STUDY AT A MATURE AGE

I read *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 1963), *The Women's Room* (French 1978), *Educating Rita* (Russell 1986) as a mature age woman student. I was particularly interested to note that, while all related to my experiences as a woman returning to study, *Educating Rita* was more reflective of my experiences than *The Women's Room* or *The Feminine Mystique*. It became clear to me as I thought through this, that the primary differences were related to 'class'. The women to whom Friedan and French refer in their work are all 'middle class' women. In drawing on this and other literature that related to mature age women students, I illustrate why it is important not to ignore 'class' issues.

### RETURNING TO STUDY - A SOLUTION TO THE 'PROBLEM WHICH HAS NO NAME'?

Education has always been considered by feminists as one of the primary means by which women can gain equality to men (Wollstonecraft 1792; Woolf 1929). Friedan (1963) argues in her seminal work *The Feminine Mystique*, that returning to study can be seen to offer women an identity of their own. Friedan argues that, through education, mature age women can gain an identity of their own which is not reliant on their role as wives and mothers.

While Friedan's is not the first to call for the education of females, her book speaks to many of the issues within my research. She writes of women from a similar age group to the women who I interviewed (30+[1]) She suggests that higher education was one solution (paid work

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[1] While Friedan does not specify the exact ages of the women she researched, she does note that they were her former college classmates, 15 years after graduation. Thus, they would have been at the least 35 years old at the time Friedan's study was undertaken.

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outside the home another) to the dissatisfaction of women in the 1960s. She argues that this dissatisfaction is a result of women having no identity other than that of wives and mothers.

Based on her research in the 1960s, Friedan is concerned with what she calls 'the problem which has no name', which she identifies as 'the feminine mystique'. This, she argues, is a general dissatisfaction amongst women in the United States with their roles as housewives. 'The problem which has no name', she suggests, arises from the discrepancy between the reality of women's lives and the images to which they are trying to conform. The women within Friedan's study say things such as, 'I feel empty somehow... incomplete' (p. 20) and, 'I feel as if I don't exist' (p. 20).

The 'feminine mystique', Friedan argues, leads women to believe that the highest value for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity. This belief, she suggests, is instilled in women through the education that girls were offered in the 1950s, which (among other things) offered sex-directed education that encouraged females not to think about careers but to aim to be wives and mothers. Thus, she argues, women have no identity of their own other than that of being somebody's wife and somebody's mother. Women live through and for their husbands and children. Friedan claims that 'the feminine mystique permits, even encourages women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question 'Who am I?' by saying 'Tom's wife... Mary's mother'' (p.71-72).

Friedan argues that women who became housewives, and spent their life up to that point planning for that role, are evading the natural growing up process. She claims women suffer:

> A stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique... our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfil their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role (p.78).

Friedan suggests a new life plan for women, in which higher education plays a major part: 'the key to the trap is, of course, education... I think that education, and only education, has saved,

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and can continue to save, American women from the greater dangers of the feminine mystique' (p. 357).

In the years following publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, an increasing number of women have returned to study as mature age students; often entering higher education for the first time, without having completed their secondary education at an earlier age. One could ask whether, as Friedan suggests, returning to study offers mature age women an identity of their own - whether it saves them from the 'feminine mystique'.

An increase over the past two decades in the number of women returning to study at a mature age has led to many works that aim to document the experiences of such women. Research on mature age women students commonly focuses on exploring why women return to study (Curtain 1998; Kelly 1987; McLaren 1985); their experiences as mature age women students within education (Edwards 1993a, 1993b; Martin 1986, 1988; Moore 1990; Pascall & Cox 1993); the effects of this experience on their lives (Britton & Baxter 1999; Curtain 1998; Kelly 1987; Pope 1996); and their relationships with family, friends, husbands and children following their return to study (Ballmer & Cozly 1981; Burns & Scott 1997; Burns, Scott & Cooney 1996; Chilton 1991; Kelly 1987; Moore 1990; Suitor 1988). I draw on these works in outlining the effects of returning to study on Rita and Mira.

### EDUCATING RITA AND MIRA: STORIES OF RETURNING TO STUDY

Set in the United Kingdom, *Educating Rita* (1986) tells the story of the fictional character Rita, a hairdresser, who at the age of 26 started studying at Open University. Rita, a 'working class' woman believes that studying will offer her more choices in how she lives her life. *The Women's Room* (1978) is set in the U.S. and tells the story of Mira, a fictional North American 'middle class' woman. Mira had dropped out of a degree course when young to marry. She returns to

study at 38 after a suicide attempt following her divorce. Mira finishes her undergraduate degree and enrolls for a PhD at Harvard University.

Both Rita and Mira had been unhappy within the role expected of them as women (Chilton 1991; Kelly 1987; Martin 1988; McLaren 1985; Pope 1996). Both felt that they did not comfortably fulfil the role of woman that seemed to be expected of them by society and their families. Both had married, and Mira had children, however neither was happy. Mira never liked being a suburban housewife. She never felt comfortable in suburban life, and never felt that she fitted in with the other housewives around her. She did not find fulfillment as a wife and mother, and felt incomplete. Despite these feelings of dissatisfaction and unfulfilment, Mira based her life around this role, and felt that she had no identity other than that of wife and mother. It is perhaps no surprise that she attempted suicide when this identity was threatened by divorce.

Rita had been similarly unhappy in her role as a wife. She felt that there was something 'tapping in her head' telling her she had it wrong. Rita did not want to have a baby, and she was under increasing pressure from her husband to do so. She wanted to 'discover herself' first. Rita believed that gaining an education would give her more choices in life than being a wife and mother. She said, 'I've been realizin' for ages that I was, y' know, slightly out of step. I'm twenty-six. I should have had a baby by now; everyone expects it. ... see, I don't wanna baby yet. See, I wanna discover meself first' (p. 178).

Having returned to study, both Mira and Rita go through a period during which they feel different to the other students they meet within the university setting - they feel that they do not belong. While Mira had felt comfortable at the local college, where there had been many mature age women students, at Harvard she feels that she does not fit in. One cause of this feeling of isolation is her age. She feels invisible as a mature woman amongst younger

students. However, it is not only age. 'It's - I feel as if I come from a different world. The suburbs - not that I liked them, I never felt part of them really - but they have different rules. I don't feel part of it here, either' (p. 346).

Unlike Mira, Rita feels highly visible at university. While Mira is invisible as a mature age student, Rita is visible as a 'working class' woman within a setting that is predominantly 'middle class'. Her speech and her clothes make it clear that she is a particular type of woman, a 'working class' woman who looks very different to most of the other women at university. She is very aware of her difference and, in an attempt to fit in, she tries to become like the 'middle class' students. She begins to talk 'properly' – 'no point discussing beautiful literature in an ugly voice' (p. 217). Rita dresses differently, stops smoking and changes her employment.

Mira also changes the way she dresses. She 'ceases to feel her appearance'; she begins to dress more casually, and lets her hair return to its natural colour. Mira begins to realise she does not need a man to define who she is - at one stage she even questions her sexuality.

Gaining an education changes the ways both Rita and Mira think about the world in general and themselves in particular. They become more comfortable with who they are as women. They gain a new sense of self by returning to study. Both increasingly realise that education is giving them an independent identity, one that is not reliant on others (specifically husbands and children). For both, as Friedan suggests, and the literature on mature age women students confirms, returning to study has given them an identity as a woman that is not reliant on their role within the family. Rita says:

> I've begun to find me – an' it's great y' know Frank. It might sound selfish but all I want for the time bein' is what I'm finding inside me. I certainly don't wanna be rushin' off with some feller, cos the first thing I'll have to do is forget about meself for the sake of him (p. 197)

The changes Rita undergoes are not without confusion and anguish however, particularly in her relationships with her family and friends. Her husband does not want her to study. He

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realises how much she is changing because of her return to study and attempts to change her back to the way she had been before she entered university.

Rita's family and friends also do not understand why she wants to study. She suggests that they do not want her to be different to them. 'It's like drug addicts, isn't it? They hate it when one of them tries to break away. It makes me stronger coming here' (p. 195). Her friends and family do not like her studying, nor do they understand it, which means that she has no one to talk to about her experiences:

> Because I'm a freak. I can't talk to the people I live with any more. An' I can't talk to the likes of them on Saturday [at a dinner party], or them out there ['proper' students], because I can't learn the language. I'm a half-caste (p. 208).

Rita feels that she is becoming alienated from her family and friends. However, as a 'working class' woman, she feels that she does not fit into the university setting. Rita increasingly feels that she belongs within neither her old life nor the new.

The feeling of alienation that Rita experiences in relation to her family and friends is not an issue for Mira. Mira's ex-husband and many of her friends have attended university, making her study acceptable in a way that it is not for Rita. Rita's family and friends have no knowledge of university study, nor are they supportive of her decision to return to study. Mira also has the luxury of not having to work to support herself and can be involved with a group of people similar to herself in order to discuss what she is learning. Studying is not as alien to her and the people around her as it is to Rita.

By the end of *Educating Rita*, Rita appears to be resolving the issue of feeling alienated at university and amongst her family and friends. She starts smoking again and is speaking the way she had before she returned to study. She appears to realise that she had not 'found herself' as she had hoped when she returned to study, but rather had tried to be like others.

Rita comes to the realisation that education gives her the choices she had hoped it would. She can now act as she wants and does not need to copy others.

Mira similarly recognises that she has control over her life, and can choose how to live. Confronted with the choice of whether to move to another state with the man she loves, she chooses to remain where she is and not be reliant on a man for her happiness. Returning to study appears to have strengthened her identity enough so that she does not feel that she has to follow a man. Both Rita and Mira now feel that they have choices in how they can be women and in their role in life. Education has offered both these women an identity as women, which is not reliant on others.

### Research on mature age women students

This dissatisfaction with the role expected of women that both Rita and Mira experience is reflected in a number of studies conducted on mature age women students. A number of studies have found that women returning to study spoke of the expectation they perceived as they were growing up that they would marry, have children, and that this would be their goal of adulthood (Chilton 1991; Curtain 1998; Edwards 1993a, 1993b; McLaren 1985). A British study by McLaren (1985) for example, that examines the earlier educational backgrounds of women who had returned to study, found that:

> The cultural expectation that women would end up marrying and having children and that employment would be secondary seemed to have had an overriding influence on the students' lives' (p. 10).

Almost forty years after Friedan (1963) identified 'the problem that has no name', a recurring theme within studies of mature age women students is that women are still dissatisfied with their roles as wives mothers and housekeepers. Some authors suggest that women return to study to gain 'an identity of their own', which could be distinguished from that of wife and mother (Chilton 1991; Kelly 1987; Martin 1988; McLaren 1985; Pope 1996). These authors

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often refer to the inadequacy of domesticity as a life's work and source of identity (Pascall & Cox 1993).

In an Australian study, Kelly (1987) explores the types of women who return to study, and also why they return, and the resultant effects on the women, their husbands and their children. She found that more than half the women she researched found little to recommend the role of homemaker: 'They were escaping from what they perceived to be an unstimulating home environment. But they were also keen to develop an identity that could be distinguished from their role as wife and mother' (p. 43).

Similarly, Martin (1986 1988), in another Australian study investigating the expectations and realisations of women returning to study, found that the women she interviewed felt that they had either outgrown, or never really fitted, the role of 'woman' prescribed for them in the home.

That returning to study gives many women an identity of their own which is not derived from their role as wife and mother is also reported by a number of authors (Chilton 1991; Kelly 1987; Martin 1986, 1988; McLaren 1985; Pascall & Cox 1993; Pope 1996). A common finding within these studies is that returning to study changes the ways in which mature age women students think about who they are, and their sense of where they fit into society as women. These studies show that the women studied are more comfortable with themselves and are pleased that they have an independent identity for themselves which does not rely primarily on their relationships with husbands and children. They are no longer only 'someone's wife or someone's mother' (Chilton 1991; Kelly 1987; Martin 1986, 1988; McLaren 1985; Pascall & Cox 1993; Pope 1996).

The differences that emerged between Rita and Mira are similarly reported in studies of mature age women students. A number of studies found that, like Rita, mature age women

students have problems with family and friends when returning to study (Edwards 1993a, 1993b; Martin 1985; Pope 1996; Suitor 1988). It is of particular interest to this thesis that problems with family and friends have been suggested to be issues primarily with those women who identify themselves, or are identified by the researcher, as 'working class'. Martin (1985), for example, found that 'working class' women felt distanced from, and could not share their experiences with, their family and friends. Similarly, Edwards (1993a, 1993b) found that 'working class' women felt that their relationships with their parents were affected by their return to study:

> While most of the white middle class women had friends who had studied, often at the degree level, the majority of the black and the white working class women did not have many friends who had any experience of further or higher education (p. 142).

Both Martin (1985) and Edwards (1993a, 1993b) note that many of the women experience what they refer to as a role conflict on their return to study. They felt that they were not 'working class' but nor were they 'middle class'. The 'working class' women reported in both these works felt unsure of where they fitted as a result of study, and had a number of issues in their relationships with family and friends as a result of this.

The stories of Rita and Mira are useful to illustrate why mature age women students are a particularly valuable group through which to investigate issues of identity and difference. Their stories also indicate that education does have effects on the gendered identities of women.

It is apparent from the stories of Rita and Mira, and the research on mature age women students, that returning to study has similar effects on mature age women in how they identify in relation to gender. It is also apparent that there are different effects in relation to how they are 'classed'. That their experiences are similar in terms of gender issues, but different in relation to their 'class' positionings highlights the dilemma feminists face within debates about identity and difference. A focus on the similarities between Rita and Mira would be informative in terms of gender and education, but there is also important information to be

elicited from the differences between their experiences. Clearly, their experiences within education were very different because of their 'class' positionings. If one were to a focus on similarities between these women in relation to gender, these differences would not be recognised

*RAISING QUESTIONS ABOUT IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE*

Feminists have long considered the patriarchal family and the discourses associated with the family as oppressive to women (Barrett 1988; Friedan 1963; Oakley 1974; Richards 1990; Tuttle 1986). What emerges within the literature mentioned above relating to mature age women is that women, the family and women's role within it, play an important role in how women identify themselves and are defined by others.

Mature age women students form a group distinctive from young female students, and male students within higher education. As mature women, they are tied to an identity that is defined within the family in ways that young female students and male students are not. Returning to study appears to affect how women identify as women and this makes them an interesting group through which to explore gender identity in relation to education.

However, as I discuss in chapter two, many feminists from minority groups within feminism have argued that mainstream feminist approaches to the family are not appropriate to their own experiences of the family (Davis 1981; hooks 1984; Pettman 1992). Similarly, feminists who draw on poststructuralist theories argue that grand narratives such as that of the patriarchal family are not adequate to represent the different forms that family can take (Weedon 1987).

Whilst I have thus far suggested that returning to study can have positive effects on mature age women, feminists concerned with gender and education argue that access to education in itself is not enough. Feminists who have analysed the discourses of education suggest that

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while females may have gained access to education, education is still a male bastion in many ways (Luke & Gore 1992; Martin 1994; Spender 1981). It has been argued that the experiences of females within education are very different from those of men (Belenky et al 1986; Bunch & Pollack 1983; Luke & Gore 1992; Tsolidis 1993a, 1993b, 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Wollstonecraft 1792; Woolf 1929). Feminists have examined and critiqued the ways that education is constructed primarily by, for, and about males. Investigations of the male-oriented structures and knowledges of education have long been of concern to feminists (Belenky, et al 1986; Bunch & Pollack 1983; Davies 1991; Deem 1978; Kenway 1990; Kenway & Willis 1997; hooks 1994; Luke & Gore 1992; Pateman & Gross 1987; Spender 1981; Walkerdine 1990; Wiener & Arnot 1987). It is argued that women are in a double bind. They either have to develop the masculine traits that are considered 'the norm' within the intellectual disciplines, or surrender the opportunity to be recognised as 'real' students (Martin 1994).

Many feminists argue that it is not only gender that disadvantages females in education (Arnot et al 1999; hooks 1994; Tsolidis 1993a, 1993b, 1996b; Walkerdine 1990; Weiner 1994'). Feminists from ethnic and minority groups argue that the knowledges and discourses of education are not only masculine; they are also those of the culturally dominant (hooks 1994; Tsolidis 1993a, 1993b, 1996b, 1997; Weiner 1994). Hooks (1994) argues, for example, that:

> To avoid feelings of estrangement, students from working class backgrounds could assimilate into the mainstream, change speech patterns, points of reference, drop any habit that might reveal them to be from a nonmaterially privileged background. (p.181)

That education is an important site for the construction of identity in relation to 'class', race and ethnicity as well as gender is well documented (hooks 1994; Walkerdine 1990; Tsolidis 1993a, 1993b, 1996b, 1997). The relationship of 'class' and education is often an ambivalent one. That Rita experiences such confusion about her 'class' identity as a result of her exposure to the discourses of education is reflected within the work of many feminists from 'working

class' backgrounds (Brine 1999; Mahoney & Zmroczek 1996, 1997; Reay 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Skeggs 1997; Walkerdine 1990).

There are a number of similarities in the ways that Black and white 'working class' feminists talk about their experiences of being 'working class' within higher education. Hooks and Childers (1990b) discuss the ways that Black women and "working class" white women have many issues in common and appear, in many ways, to understand each other more than 'middle class' white women and Black women, or 'middle class' women and 'working class' women. Hooks (1984) notes that 'working class' white women appear less threatened than 'middle class' feminists when being confronted with critiques of women from non-privileged groups. She suggests that white women from non-materially privileged backgrounds felt that their understanding of 'class' difference made it easier for them to listen to women of colour without feeling threatened.

However, despite the similarities and empathy between Black and white 'working class' women, and despite my leaning toward the work of feminists from minority groups to explain my own experiences, 'class' can not be equated with race. White 'working class' women can appear to be 'middle class', and gaining a higher education can bestow to a certain extent, some of the trappings of 'middleclassness'. That is, class status can change throughout one's life. While Black women may accrue some of the trappings of 'middleclassness', this does not overcome the racism that they experience. Black women can not, no matter what the circumstances, be taken as white. Racism does not go away with education. I thus use the literature of feminists from racial minority groups in the recognition that 'class' can not be equated with race.

Many feminists argue that Women's Studies addresses many feminist concerns about the male-oriented structures and knowledges of education. Women's Studies, they argue, offers a

safe space in education within which women can learn, and empowers women by offering them new ways of thinking about, and being, women (Bowles & Klein 1983; Giles 1990; Hughes 1999; Jackson 2000; Lather 1991)

Women's Studies as a subject has also been shown to affect how women define themselves as women and their position as women within society (Bowles & Klein 1983; Giles 1990; Hughes 1999; Jackson 2000; Lather 1991). Investigating mature age women students who have studied Women's Studies thus allows an exploration of the effects of knowledges that question and challenge traditional discourses of womanhood on the identities of women.

A number of feminists have explored the effects of Women's Studies on the gendered identities of women (Giles 1990; Hughes 1998; Jackson 2000). Women's Studies however is often based on the feminist theories that exclude the lives and experiences of some women (hooks 1994; Hull & Smith 1983; Sheridan 1991; Crowley 1999). Crowley suggests that: 'The mistresses' house remains intact although now conceived as having multiple voices' (Crowley 1999 p. 142). Jackson (1998, 2000) has studied 'working class' women and their attitudes toward Women's Studies. She has found that 'working class' women often feel marginalised in the Women's Studies classroom, which they feel is 'middle class' in its approach. Hooks notes that many Women's Studies courses focus on women of colour at the end of semester or lump everything about race and difference together (see also Hull & Smith 1983). Alternatively, the work of Black people or women may be included within the Women's Studies curriculum with no reference to race or ethnicity, as these contribute to systems of oppression. It is argued that even within the Women's Studies classroom, where one aim is to overcome issues relating to the masculine knowledges and practices of the academic disciplines, the white, western, 'middle class' nature of such knowledge often goes unchallenged.

Mies (1993) quotes Moa Tse-Tung as saying that: "If you want to know a thing, you must change it.' (If you want to know the taste of a pear you must change it, i.e. you must chew it in your mouth, Mao Tse-Tung 1968 in Mies 1993 p. 70-71) (Mies 1993 p. 4)'. Thus, Mies suggests that:

> Only when there is a rupture in the 'normal' life of a woman – a crisis such as divorce, the end of a relationship, etc – is there a chance for her to become conscious of her true condition... As long as normalcy is not disrupted they are not able to admit even to themselves that these relationships are oppressive and exploitative (p. 71)

I would argue similarly, that exposure to the knowledges and discourses of higher education, and specifically Women's Studies, can lead to ruptures in the lives of women, particularly for those who have had no exposure to feminist knowledges in the past. I suggest that Women's Studies may 'disrupt' women's sense of themselves as women. I am seeking to understand how women, as *women*, identify themselves in relation to 'class' and the effects that returning to study has on their identities as 'classed' women.

Examining a very specific group, as I have done, is useful in exploring the specificity of knowledge and experience, without essentialising the identities, or universalising the experiences, of *all* women. It allows a way of exploring issues of identity and difference within specific discursive spaces without suggesting that these are the experiences of all women. It allows also a way of exploring these issues in relation to broader feminist debates.

Within this chapter I have illustrated why mature age women students are a particularly useful group through which to explore gender and 'class' identity issues. I have drawn on the literature of feminists concerned with educational issues to show that education is a particularly useful site within which to investigate identity issues. Within these parameters I have highlighted that not only gender identity may be affected by exposure to the discourses and knowledges of higher education and Women's Studies, but that within the discursive spaces of higher education and Women's Studies, a range of differences are present. Thus, the

effects of exposure to these discourses and knowledges may differ according to the identifications of various women depending on race, ethnicity and 'class'.

## SETTING THE SCENE FOR A STUDY OF MATURE AGE WOMEN STUDENTS

My concern within this thesis is related to issues of identity and difference, and consequently I aim to explore the similarities, and differences, amongst mature age women students. The intention of the study is not to suggest that all mature age women students have the same lived experiences of attending university at a mature age. Clearly, from the literature presented above this is not likely to be the case.

I do not suggest that in a different time or place this group would have the same lived experiences that are outlined here. This study is contextually specific. For example, if I were investigating this group 20 years ago, or even 1 year later, the results could be very different because of changes in context (for example, changes in higher educational policy). Even in the context of this time and place there are differences between universities - the type of students they attract; their policies; and how established they are. I outline now the context within which the current study of mature age women students takes place.

### Women and higher education in the 1990s in Australia

Australian Government policies have, for a number of years, attempted to encourage access to higher education for marginalised groups within Australian society. The abolition of university fees in Australian universities in 1974 led to a dramatic increase in the numbers of people pursuing higher education. The 1980s and 1990s in particular saw not only the expansion of the higher education sector (from 1987 to 1992 the increase in total students was 42%) (DEET[2] 1993) but also an emphasis in participation and equity for disadvantaged groups who had previously been excluded from higher education. A significant policy that was introduced

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to address these issues was *A Fair Chance For All* (1990), which identified those groups that the Government considered to be disadvantaged in terms of gaining access to higher education. These groups were defined as: people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; women (in terms of participation in non-traditional areas of study and participation in postgraduate research); people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB); people with disabilities; and people from rural and isolated areas.

Statistics indicate that policies aimed at increasing the numbers of women in higher education were successful. In 1995, 55 percent of all enrolments in Australian institutes of higher education, were women (Dobson, 1996). The number of women in higher degrees by research had also increased, from less than 28 per cent in 1980 to 42 per cent in 1995. In other postgraduate courses, women comprised over 53 per cent of total enrolments in 1995. Women however were still under-represented in many fields of study including engineering, science, business, agriculture and architecture and were over-represented in arts, education and health (Dobson 1996).

Statistics also suggest that there has been a steady increase in the numbers of mature age women entering the higher education system over the past 20 years. In the years between 1987 and 1996, the numbers of commencing students in the 25-29 year age group almost doubled (from 9,710 in 1984 to 18,380 in 1996), and there were similar increases in the 30+ age group (from 21,389 in 1987 to 40,714 in 1996) (DEETYA[3] 1996).

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[2] Department of Employment, Education and Training.

[3] Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

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As an indication of the distribution of mature age women students in the university, DEET data from 1994 shows that of all women enrolled in higher education in Australia, mature age women accounted for 14 per cent of women students from NESB, 27 per cent of women students who were born overseas (in countries where English was not the first language), 81 per cent of postgraduate women, 29 per cent of undergraduate women, 50 per cent of women enrolled in education, 43 per cent of women enrolled in arts, and 43 per cent of women enrolled in health. Enrolments of mature age women, similar to female students overall, were concentrated in arts, education and health.

**Two different universities**

The two universities from which the women are drawn were chosen because of the differences between them. Statistics (Dobson 1995) indicate that Victoria University of Technology (VUT) and Monash University attract students of different ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. As I outline in chapter three, not only do these universities attract different types of students, but they are also different types of universities. Monash University is well established; one of an elite group of universities (known as the 'group of eight') in Australia. VUT is a relatively new university based within the Western suburbs of Melbourne, and draws a large percentage of its students from this area. The Western suburbs population has a high proportion of people from low-socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Terry 1995; Van Moorst 1995).

A comparison of VUT and Monash University reveals the differences in their student populations. A significant percentage of students studying at VUT are from ethnic minority and/or low socio-economic backgrounds (Terry 1995). A study conducted by Van Moorst and Ballock (1995) indicates that VUT had a higher proportion of students from low socio-economic sectors of the community (as defined through postcodes) than other Victorian universities. In 1995, 44% of VUT students were from the two bottom quintiles as compared

to 39.58% of the whole state (Van Moorst & Ballock 1995). In contrast, 51% of students at Monash University's Clayton campus in 1999 were from a high socio-economic status (SES), while only 10% were from a low SES (Ferrier & Heagney 1999).

DEETYA data (Dobson 1996) indicates that VUT had a higher percentage of mature age women students who spoke a language other than English, as compared not only to Monash University, but to Australian universities overall. Similarly, VUT had a higher percentage of mature age women students not born in English speaking countries than Monash University and Australian averages overall.

Just as universities differ, so too do Women's Studies programs, and these often reflect the wider discourses of the university within which they are based. As I have outlined above, the two universities from which the participants of the study were drawn were very different in a number of ways. At the time of the study, The Centre for Women's Studies at Monash University offered three degree programs: BA, MA, and PhD. Women's Studies was interdisciplinary and could be taken as a major, minor, or as individual subjects within the BA. No first year subjects were offered during the period up to and including 1994. Women's Studies was offered at VUT within the BA course. In 1994, it was a major offered within the Department of Social and Cultural Studies. Women's Studies at VUT is now offered within a B.A., Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma, and MA.

### The participants

The current study was based on group and individual interviews with 17 mature age women students. All participants were studying Women's Studies (2nd year, 3rd year and/or postgraduate) at either VUT or Monash University. All but one of the women were, or had been, married and had children.

The women who were chosen as participants for the study were thirty years of age or older at the time that the research was conducted. There are different definitions of mature age entry to university (in terms of age alone, eligibility can range from 21-28 years). My interest within this research was in the effects of higher education on identity formation processes. I felt that as thirty is an age when these women would have relatively established lives, choosing to return to study could possibly lead to different ways of thinking about themselves. These women were, in many cases, being exposed to the discourses of higher education for the first time. All but three of the women had begun their current degree at a mature age.

My aim was to involve the participants as much as possible within the study. As I discuss in chapter three, I employed a number of measures to ensure this. Each woman participated in two interviews, one group and one individual. Two group interviews (the women from VUT forming one group, and the women from Monash University the other) were conducted. Each woman was then interviewed individually; the issues that emerged during the group interviews loosely framed the individual interviews.

The interviews were largely unstructured. My intention when planning the study was to explore the effects of the discourses of higher education and Women's Studies on the 'classed' gender identities of mature age women students. However, I aimed to allow the interviews to be as participant-driven as possible. I discussed with the women what I was interested in and then encouraged them to discuss issues that were of interest to them in relation to this topic. I did not commence the interviews with set questions or issues to be discussed, and the analysis was driven by the themes that emerged during the interviews.

Following all the interviews, I conducted a preliminary analysis of the issues that I identified as emerging within the interviews. This analysis was sent to the participants, who were asked to

make comments and suggestions. These comments were treated as interview material along with the group and individual interviews.

My interest within this study was to explore differences amongst the women in relation to their 'classed' gender identities. However the women were not asked to assign a 'class' positioning to themselves, nor did I assign them one on the basis of income, geography and other factors. I grouped the women by what they said, or did not say, about 'class'. Therefore, if a woman said she was from a 'working class' background that was the group within which I placed her. I elaborate on the 'class' groupings and how I placed the women within these groups in chapter three.

## CONSTRUCTION OF THE THESIS

In this chapter, I have discussed the questions and debates that form the basis of this thesis. An examination of *Educating Rita* and *The Women's Room* sets the scene on a number of levels. Through this, I have identified mature age women students as a particularly useful group through which to investigate identity issues. The examination of *Educating Rita* and *The Women's Room* also illustrates the questions that concern me. The differences and similarities between the main characters of these two novels served to highlight current concerns regarding issues of identity and difference within feminist theorising and research. The similarities and differences between the characters also illustrate questions about how feminists may deal with differences amongst women while retaining gender as the distinguishing feature of their work. I have briefly discussed within this chapter, conceptions of identity that, I believe, may help to address these concerns. I have also outlined the study of mature age women students through which conceptions of identity and difference will be explored.

Chapter two explores a number of theoretical issues in greater depth through a review of feminist literature relating to identity and difference. Throughout this chapter, I explore how

feminists have addressed issues of identity and difference, and how useful these approaches are in addressing my concerns with exploring gender identity as it is 'classed'. Drawing on the work of feminists who are concerned with difference, I outline how these authors suggest that difference has been silenced within mainstream feminism. I then consider how this relates to the ways in which feminists have employed 'class' theories to explain and analyse the oppression of women. I consider within this discussion how the decline of traditional 'class' theories by feminists has caused 'class' in any form to fall from the mainstream feminist agenda. I then explore whether approaches to difference taken by feminists from minority groups within feminism, and feminists who draw on poststructuralist approaches, may be useful in my search for ways to investigate gender identity as it is 'classed'.

In chapter three I outline my study of mature age women students. I discuss how the issues that arise in chapter two, particularly those related to ways of dealing with identity and difference are addressed within the study. In chapter four, I introduce the mature age women students who participated in the study. Within this chapter, I aim to give the reader a sense of the women's' backgrounds, particularly as it relates to their 'class' identifications. Here I outline the 'class' groupings within which I have placed the women, and why I chose these particular groupings.

In chapter five, the group interviews are elaborated in relation to themes that describe the effects of study on these women's 'classed' gender identity. I examine how the effects of the new discourses and knowledges were played out within the discursive spaces of the university, and those outside the academic setting. I describe how the women participants positioned themselves, and were positioned by others, as women and as students within these spaces.

Chapter six and seven explore the themes that emerged within the group interviews in more depth by drawing on the individual interviews, telephone conversations with the women, and

responses to the outline of issues that was sent to them. To illustrate the difficulties in addressing issues of identity and difference I suggest that the themes that emerge within the study can be focused on in two ways, and thus, lead to very different conclusions. In chapter six, I draw on the similarities that emerged amongst the women in relation to the effects of their return to study on them as women. In chapter seven the focus is on the differences in how the women articulated their experiences of returning to study.

Chapter eight considers a different way of approaching the similarities and differences amongst these women. I draw on Anzaldua's (1987) notion of the borderlands as an alternative discursive space within which to investigate identity formation processes. Drawing on conceptions of identity that view it as shifting, multiple and contradictory, in which gender is the common denominator, but not the sole referent, I explore the borderlands between the discursive spaces to which the women have access. I consider whether an analysis such as this can provide possible solutions to the issues about identity and difference that form the basis of the thesis.

Chapter nine offers conclusions in relation to the 'classed' gender identities of mature age women students and the implications of these in broader terms. Most particularly, I consider how feminists may think about gender and education in relation to policy and pedagogy. The implications of this for Women's Studies are also discussed.

# CHAPTER TWO: SETTING THE SCENE THEORETICALLY

## INTRODUCTION

As discussed in chapter one, my interest in this thesis is framed within a number of related debates within feminism. Debates about how feminists can retain gender as the defining focus of their work, while addressing the multiplicity of experiences constituted within the category 'woman' continue unabated. The issue of whose experiences have been drawn on to form the identity of the subject within feminism has left many women feeling excluded from, and silenced within, mainstream feminism.

I consider trends within feminist theorising that I believe will allow me to investigate the 'classed' gender identities of mature age women students. Drawing on the work of feminists who are concerned with the differences amongst women, I outline why issues of difference have continued to create divisions within feminism. I draw on two diverse bodies of feminist theorising that aim to recognise and address differences amongst women, those feminists who I refer to as feminists of difference. I refer specifically to the literature of feminists from racial and ethnic minority groups within feminism, and the work of feminists who work within a broadly poststructuralist framework. As mentioned briefly in chapter one, I have referred to two extremely diverse groups as feminists of difference. While there are vast differences between and amongst these groups, they share a concern that difference has been silenced within mainstream feminism. What they also share are their attempts to address differences amongst women.

In outlining the problems associated with difference, I note how these not only make it difficult to retain 'woman' as the subject of feminism, but also how this relates to the possibility of using 'class' theories to explain the oppression of women. My interest is to

explore ways of investigating gender identity as it is 'classed'. However, as I have noted in chapter one, this thesis is not about 'class' per se. In fact, I draw on the literature of feminists of difference to illustrate that 'class', as a category, and 'class' theories as a way of investigating oppression are of limited use for feminists in explaining the oppression of women.

What also emerges within debates about identity and difference, is that many feminists (particularly those from racial and ethic minority groups within feminism) question how they can have an identity as a feminist without surrendering their difference (hooks 1984; Kishwar 1984; Tsolidis 2001). What this chapter represents is a review of the literature relating to identity and difference, and my own working out of where I fit in in relation to the debates. As I noted in chapter one, theoretical debates about identity and difference have personal interest to me. Snitow (1990) asks, 'it may be a pleasure to be 'we', and it may be strategically imperative to struggle as 'we', but who ... are 'we'?' (p.10). This question goes to the heart of the problems I have experienced. I want to be a part of a 'we'. However, there are times when I do not feel that I am one of the 'we' that is the basis of some articulations of feminism. I have sometimes felt that my experiences as a 'working class' woman are not represented. Similarly, I have struggled over how I can identify as a feminist. If my experiences as a 'working class' woman (and other women from similar backgrounds as me) were silenced within much mainstream feminism, why would I want to be a part of such a movement? I consider within this chapter how feminists of difference have addressed this issue.

I have chosen to refer to two very diverse groups as feminists of difference, despite the tenuous nature of this term. In the following section I problematise my use of this term by discussing the differences in how different feminists within the category feminists of difference discuss the patriarchal family given its significance within women's conception of self. Having discussed the very shaky foundation on which the term feminists of difference

resides, I then draw on the literature from feminists from within this group to justify my continued use of the term.

## FEMINISTS OF DIFFERENCE AND THE PATRIARCHAL FAMILY

The patriarchal family, and women's role within it as dependants and mothers, is considered by feminists as central in the oppression of women (Hartmann 1995; Oakley 1974; Richards 1990). As noted within chapter one for example, Friedan (1963) argues that the problem that women experienced in the United States in the 1960s was a result of their identification within the family. Women, she argues are allowed no identity of their own that does not relate to the family. It appears from the literature related to mature age women students discussed in chapter one that Friedan's argument holds true. What emerged within this work was that women felt that they had no identity outside that which was defined within the family.

Feminists who work within a materialist framework often focus on the family and women's unpaid work within it to analyse women's oppression. Drawing on Engels (1884) work on the development of the sexual division of labour for example, some focus on issues such as the ideology of the family and women's unpaid work within the family as the reason women are oppressed, both within, and outside, the family (Hartmann 1981; 1995).

Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today* (1988) is a well-known example of feminist work that draws on materialist theorisations of 'class'. Barrett argues that the role of the family and domestic ideology is considerable in the oppression of women. She argues that the oppression of women occurs both within a material structure in which women are largely financially dependent on men, and within the ideology of the family. Within the ideology of the family, Barrett argues, women are confined to a primary concern with domesticity and motherhood. She goes further to argue that the ideology of the family has detrimental effects on women not only within the realm of the home, but within the public space of paid work and education as well. As women are defined within the ideology of the family for example, they are

participants within the paid work force by being restricted to employment that reflects their role within the family such as caring professions (those occupations that are also low paying).

Feminists of difference argue that theorisations of the patriarchal family such as those of Friedan and Barrett, are often essentialist and universalist. It is important to define the terms essentialism and universalism, as they recur often within debates about identity and difference. The terms are often used interchangeably within feminist theorising, however as Grosz (1990) notes, there are distinctions between them. Essentialism assumes that common to all women is a fixed essence, one that is assumed to be given or natural, and tied to women's biology and 'natural' characteristics. Assuming a common identity of all women leads to a number of problems. This has often resulted in discrimination against women in a number of ways. Attributing an essential core identity to all women does not recognise that female identities are also raced, 'classed' and so on.

Universalism, using Grosz's (1990) distinction, refers to the attribution of common and unchanging social categories, functions and activities to all members of a particular social group. Neither essentialist nor universalist positions take seriously the historical and geographical differences across different cultures, or even within a single culture.

*FEMINISTS FROM RACIAL AND ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS AND 'THE FAMILY'*
The universalising by mainstream feminism of particular women's experiences within the family has long been an issue for many feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism (Davis 1981; hooks 1984). The arguments that suggest women's oppression lies within the family do not recognise that women have very different experiences of the family across cultural lines.

While Friedan (1963) and Barrett (1988) for example, argue that women's oppression could be found within the family, and that dismantling patriarchal and capitalist institutions such as this

would overcome the oppression of women, feminists of difference show the shaky foundations on which these theories are developed. Barrett (1988), for example, was roundly criticised by many Black feminists for her analysis of the family, and particularly the analysis offered, with McIntosh, in *The Antisocial family* (1982). A debate ensued within the pages of *Feminist Review* (1986) about the role of the family in the lives of Black women, and the racist assumptions on which Barrett and McIntosh's work were based (Amos & Parmar 1884; Bavnani & Coulson; 1986 Kazi 1986; Mizra 1986; Ramazanoglu 1986).

Carby (1982) argues for example, that Barrett's focus on women's dependency on men within the family, is a problem:

> The use of the concept 'dependency' is also a problem for black feminists. It has been argued that this concept provides the link between the 'material organisation of the household, and the ideology of femininity'. How then can we account for situations in which black women may be heads of households, or where, because of an economic system which structures high black male unemployment, they are not financially dependent upon a black man (p. 67).

Arguments such as those by Friedan, that women must break free from the oppressive bonds of the patriarchal family by entering the paid work force, do not recognise that Black and poor women have always worked through necessity. Their experiences of work are thus often not fulfilling. They are often the maids and housekeepers of the very women Friedan is suggesting should work outside the home. Hooks (1984) suggests that in order for the women that Friedan argued must work outside the home, poor and Black women will often be used to clean their homes.

While often critical of the ways that the family has been represented in mainstream feminism, many Black and Indigenous Australian feminists argue that rather than an institution that oppresses women, the family for them is the only place where they can escape the racism they face outside the home (hooks 1984; Huggins 1991). For those feminists from groups who have fought to keep their families together, for example Black American women under

slavery, and Australian Indigenous women under government policies which saw the removal of their children, arguments for the dismantling of the patriarchal family are particularly offensive.

The issue of privilege, and some feminists lack of recognition of this, is a concern with many minority feminists. Some argue that claiming that all women are oppressed equally does not acknowledge that some women, although oppressed by men, are in a position to oppress other women (hooks 1984; Huggins 1991, 1994). Huggins (1994) suggests that 'middle-class' white women are not simply bedmates of their wealthy husbands: '...they are economic, social and political bedmates united in defense of private property, profiteering, militarism and racism - and the exploitation of other women' (p.7). White, 'middle class' feminists' position, Huggins argues, is based like that of men on the oppression of other women. Others are concerned that many white feminists do not recognise the unearned and unacknowledged privileges that being white bestows on them (Ang 1995; hooks 1990; Hurtado 1996; Lorde 1984; McIntosh 1989; Morrison 1993; Moreton-Robinson 1998a, 1998b; Spelman 1988).

What has also continued to be a tension within feminism is the issue of racism (Bhavnani & Coulson 1986; Huggins 1994; Pettman 1992; hooks 1984). Hooks (1994) argues:

> The contemporary feminist call for sisterhood, the radical white woman's appeal to black women and all women of color to join the feminist movement, is seen by many black women as yet another expression of white female denial of the reality of racist domination, of their complicity in the exploitation and oppression of black women and black people. Though the call for sisterhood was often motivated by a sincere longing to transform the present, expressing white female desire to create a new context for bonding, there was no attempt to acknowledge history, or the barriers that might make such a bonding difficult if not impossible (p.102).

While criticisms of mainstream feminism's approaches to the family are common amongst feminists from minority groups, one can not suggest that their concerns are the same, or that their approaches to dealing with difference the same. This represents a problem with how difference has often been dealt with within feminism. Many feminists from minority groups

within feminism argue that it is not possible to merely include minority women into the structures of mainstream feminism as they stand. Attempts to 'add on' the experience of women from different backgrounds does not permit a satisfactory explanation of the different experiences of being 'woman'. There are also concerns that some of the approaches taken to issues of difference do not recognise the many differences within particular groups. Feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism argue that they are often treated as universal representatives of specific groups (Gunew 1991b; hooks 1984, 1990a; Mohanty 1991; Trinh 1989, 1991). Trinh (1989) and Mohanty (1991) argue for example, that feminists from Third World countries are often taken as representatives of *all* Third World countries without recognising the differences amongst, and indeed within these countries (for example in relation to class, caste, and religion).

Approaches to difference that suggest that *all* Black women, for example, are different to *all* white women are not adequate in that they do not recognise that there are differences within groups of Black women. Not only are there differences, for example amongst Black women in one country (in relation to 'class' and so on), the experiences of being a Black woman is different in different countries. The experiences of being a Black woman in the United States, for example, or in Australia are very different. In the United States the histories of Black women have emerged from slavery, and in Australia, colonialism, and therefore have led to different ways of being Black in these two countries.

In Australia feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups argue that it is not possible to talk about women without considering the complex intersections between race, ethnicity, gender and 'class' (Ang 1995; Gunew 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1993; Huggins 1991, 1994; Moreton-Robinson 1998a; Tsolidis 1993a, 1993b, 1996b; Vasta 1993). The experiences of Anglo-Celtic, Indigenous, and women from backgrounds other than English speaking are vastly different. They go further by claiming that even speaking about women from

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backgrounds other than English speaking, does not recognise the cultural differences between these groups (Ang 1996; Gunew 1991b; Gunew 1993; Huggins 1993; Tsolidis 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Vasta 1993). Thus, it would be misleading to suggest that all women from minority groups experience the family in the same way.

*FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACHES AND 'THE FAMILY'*

An increasing number of feminist theorists have adopted poststructuralist approaches in an attempt to overcome problems of essentialism and universalism within feminism (Haraway 1987; Kenway et al 1997; Middleton 1993; Weedon 1987; Yeatman 1990, 1993, 1994, 1995). There are differences between postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches. I refer to them together as poststructuralist in recognition that they are different, but also in the recognition that they are:

> Both responses to the questioning and destabilisation of the categories which have been foundational in Western thought such as those of truth, universality and objectivity (Hughes 1994 p. 12).

That both postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches share a challenge of universalist categories of 'truth' and 'knowledge' is what interests me here. The intention of poststructuralist approaches is to dissolve static meanings, terms and categories and centered theories of power. In approaches such as these, grand narratives, or universal theories that aim to explain the oppression of broad groups of people are shown to be limited.

Those feminist who draw on poststructuralist theories of power (commonly after Foucault), argue that it is no longer possible to discuss relationships of power using universal theories (Barrett 1991; Sawicki 1991; Weedon 1987; Yeatman 1990, 1994). Power in poststructuralist terms is not invested in the individual, or in one particular group, but is dynamic, localised, and relational. It is produced as a constantly shifting relation, rather than a possession or commodity, and is exercised and exists in action. Those who draw on conceptions of power such as this argue that it is impossible to focus on any one category as the locus of oppression

(Barrett 1991; Sawicki 1991, 1994; Weedon 1987; Yeatman 1990, 1994). Therefore it becomes difficult to argue that patriarchy, as a dominating structure of society, oppresses all women in the same way. Similarly arguments such as those of Barrett (1988) that the patriarchal family as an institution oppresses all women in all areas of their lives does not recognise the shifting nature of power across time, place and cross culturally. Approaches such as those of Barrett do not recognise that the family is experienced differently by different groups of women. Nor does this note the very different forms that the family takes in different times (Haraway 1987).

Conceptions of discourse, commonly drawn from the on the work of Foucault are used within feminism. Discourses are historically, socially and institutionally specific structures of statements, terms, categories and beliefs that operate in specific contexts and institutions. Discourses are assumed to be outside human intervention, beyond dispute and already known. Within society one set of discourses is dominant, and reflects certain values and interests (Weedon 1987). Weedon (1987) argues that:

> Discourse, in Foucault's work, are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern. Neither the body nor thoughts and feeling have meaning outside their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourse constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases (p. 108).

Thinking of the family in terms of discourse, one recognises that, while there are taken for granted ideas about the family and women's role within it, these differ over time, in different places, and are mediated by race, 'class' and so on. Weedon (1987) argues that:

> How we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects, and how we give meaning to the material social relations under which we live and which structure our everyday lives, depends on the range of social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent (p.26).

As discourses are historically specific, there is a need to look at the specific details of a discursive field to uncover particular regimes of power and knowledge (Scott 1990;

Walkerdine 1990; Weedon 1987). So for example, how is it possible to explain the experiences of women who are not within a patriarchal family, for example sole parents, or lesbian couples?

Women are constructed within the discourses to which they have access. Thus there is no authentic self, repressed by society; the subject is constructed, even over-determined by society. There is no essential core nature to human beings (Butler 1990a, 1990b, 1995; Weedon 1987). The attraction for feminists in this schema is the promise of increased freedom, of free-play, of a plurality of difference unhampered by a gender identity formulated by patriarchy. It also offers a way of theorising the construction of subjectivity (Butler 1990a, 1990b, 1995; Weedon 1987).

Feminists who work within a poststructuralist framework then, show that, not only is it difficult to sustain universalist categories and institutions such as the family, but also broad theories which attempt to explain these. Similarly, accepting that there are no universal categories and institutions within which women are oppressed, there is no subject 'woman' whose experiences can be drawn on to investigate women's oppression.

*HOW FAR CAN DIFFERENCE GO BEFORE THERE ARE NO WOMEN?*
In considering the literature of feminists of difference, one could conclude that it might be impossible to speak of, not only broad categories and institutions, but also women as a group at all. With the myriad differences amongst, within and between groups of women, it has become hard to justify any approach that draws on the experiences of women. One could ask who is the 'woman' for whom feminism speaks?

It is here that I find myself in a dilemma. I find feminist work that draws on poststructuralist theories attractive. I believe within this work it is possible to recognise differences amongst

women. However, like many feminists, I am concerned that what may ensue is a total degendering of analysis (Alcoff 1988; Harding 1990; hooks 1990; Tsolidis 1996).

The question that arises from poststructuralist approaches however is how can feminists deal with the myriad of differences amongst (and indeed within) women, while also retaining the possibility of feminist research and theorising taking gender as its central referent. It has been argued that many attempts in feminist literature to avoid essentialism and universalism have gone too far (De Lauretis 1990; hooks 1994; Spivak 1993; Tsolidis 1996a). These authors argue that the increasing emphasis on differences and multiple subjectivities within feminisms risks the possibility of a political project of feminisms. If feminists can not claim gender as the sole referent of their work, if the category of woman is impossible to sustain in the recognition of the myriad of differences amongst women, how, they ask, can the aim of feminisms be to improve the position of women. Alcoff (1990), for example is concerned that a:

> Post-structuralist's view results in what I shall call nominalism: the idea that the category 'woman' is a fiction and that feminist efforts must be directed toward dismantling this fiction (p. 417).

Many feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism, despite having criticised the essentialist and universalist tendencies of feminism, are often the most critical of poststructuralist approaches (hooks 1990a; Tsolidis 1996a, 1996b). As Hartsock (1990) argues, it is just when feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism have begun to feel that they have an identity, that poststructuralists are arguing that there is no subject, that there can be no identity as Black, and so on. It appears that the choice is that of an essentialist position, in which the subject is analysed in terms of gender alone, or as a genderless subject, which leads to a degendering of analyses.

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An increasing number of feminists of difference suggest that, rather than having to choose between a focus on 'woman' as the subject of feminism, or a never ending focus on difference, that a third approach may be warranted. In an approach such as this the focus remains on gender, while simultaneously recognising the differences amongst women (Alcoff 1988; Anzaldua 1987; Collins 1991; de Lauretis 1987; Haraway 1987; Mohanty 1991a; Scott 1990; Trihn 1991; Yeatman 1993). As Scott (1990) for example, argues:

> When equality and difference are paired dichotomously, they structure an impossible choice. If one opts for equality, one is forced to accept the notion that difference is antithetical to it. If one opts for difference, one admits that equality is unattainable (p. 142).

She suggests that deconstructing the binary oppositions created by either/or choices is useful. Deconstruction investigates binary pairs such as man/woman, masculine/feminine, or identity/difference through an implicit or explicit contrast of one term to the other. One term, commonly the first, is dominant (for example man or masculinity), the opposite of the subordinate secondary term (woman or femininity). Within binary pairs, a positive definition rests on the negation or repression of something represented as antithetical to it. Thus, man and masculinity are defined in their negation or repression of woman and femininity. Hence, deconstruction can examine how meaning is made. Scott (1990) argues that deconstruction as a method:

> Consists of two related steps: the reversal and displacement of binary oppositions. This process reveals the interdependence of seemingly dichotomous terms and their meaning relative to a particular history. it shows them to be not natural but constructed oppositions, constructed for particular purposes in particular contexts (p. 137).

Similarly Yeatman (1993, 1994) argues that in the binary pairing of equality and difference it is useful to think in terms of *and* rather than *or*. 'The sophistication of the 'and' comes when, instead of accepting the two terms of a binarism as separate terms, they are posited as existing within each other' (1994 p. 18). Thus one can explore how the two terms (equality and difference) are reliant on each other for their definition. Yeatman suggests that by

deconstructing the ways in which equality and difference exist within each other, that politics occurs. Thus, she argues, politics occurs in the space between mainstream feminism and the claims to equality of feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism – within a politics of difference.

Yeatman argues that, just as feminists have used their positioning as insiders and outsiders within the dominant discourses of academia to critique masculine discourses and knowledges, feminists from minority groups use this positioning to critique the dominant discourses of feminism. Thus, in the space in *between* identity (as women) and difference (as women), one can explore the discourses and knowledges of feminism and how they are limited in that they silence many women. She argues that it is within a politics of difference, in between the dominant discourses of feminist thought and the critiques of difference that a politics can occur.

The focus on between these spaces as a site of investigation has been common amongst feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism. Hooks (1984) for example, describes the space where those feminists who are not of the dominant discourse reside as the margins. Anzaldua (1987) speaks of borderlands. She suggests that:

> The borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy (p. 1)

Mohanty (1991a) drawing on Anzaldua's conception of the borderlands, suggests that consciousness within the borderlands: '...is a plural consciousness in that it requires understanding multiple, often opposing ideas and knowledges, and negotiating these boundaries...' (Mohanty p. 36).

Feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism have used various terms to describe those who reside in the margins, borderlands, and in between spaces. Collins (1991)

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for example, refers to outsiders within, Spivak to subalterns (1993), Trinh (1991) to insiders outside, Anzaldua to 'la mestiza'. They use these terms to refer to those feminists from groups that are subordinate within the dominant discourses of feminism. Similarly they note the effects of this positioning. Anzaldua (1987) for example suggests that:

> Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their values systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision (Anzaldua 1987 p. 78).

Similarly, Collins talks about how outsiders within are changed by this status, and argues that being an outsider within is a useful position to be in:

> Outsiders within status is bound to generate tension, for people who become outsiders within are forever changed by their new status. Learning the subject matter of sociology stimulates a reexamination of one's own personal and cultural experiences: and yet, these same experiences help to illuminate sociology's anomalies. Outsiders within occupy a special place – they become different people, and their differences sensitize them to patterns that may be difficult for established sociologists insiders to see (Collins 1991 p. 53).

Some feminists (Alcoff 1988; de Lauretis 1987 1990) have suggested ways of theorising that appear to fall in between approaches that rely on identity or difference. Alcoff (1988), writing about the divide between cultural and poststructuralist theorists, argues for a third way of approaching the issues. She suggests such an in between approach may help overcome some of the problems associated with poststructuralist feminist approaches and cultural feminist approaches. Alcoff suggest that a conception that best fits this is offered by DeLauritis. Alcoff (1988) suggests that de Lauretis:

> Formulates a subjectivity that gives agency to the individual while at the same time placing her within 'particular discursive configurations and, moreover, conceives of the process of consciousness as a strategy. Subjectivity may thus become imbued with race, class and gender without being subjected to an overdetermination that erases agency (p. 425).

De Lauretis (1987 1990) suggests that identity should be conceived as a shifting, multiple and often self-contradictory concept, but in such a way that gender remains a defining feature. Within such conceptions, identity is experienced as something which shifts within particular

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discourses to which we have access, and which is mediated by our histories and backgrounds. Thus identity is not static but is constantly shifting as we are exposed to new and different discourses. De Lauretis (1986) argues that:

> A new conception of the subject is... emerging from feminist analysis of women's heterogeneous subjectivity and multiple identity. ... I would further suggest that the differences among women might be better understood as differences within women. For if it is the case that the female subject is en-gendered across multiple representations of class, race, language and social relations, it is also the case... that gender is a common denominator: the female subject is always constructed and defined in gender, starting from gender (p.14).

Thus, in these terms, identity is constructed through a continuous process, and is continually renewed. It is a result of one's interpretation and reconstruction of one's history, mediated through the discursive contexts to which one has access. Hence exposure to new or different discourses has effects on our identity. While poststructuralists see subjectivity as constructed totally by the discourses one is in, de Lauretis (1990) argues: 'Consciousness of self, like class consciousness or race consciousness ... is a particular configuration of subjectivity, or subjective limits, produced at the intersection of meaning with experience' (p. 8).

De Lauretis (1987) argues that subjectivity is neither over-determined by biology (essentialist) nor by culture, but rather by the inner and outer world to which one has access. Thus, unlike poststructuralist approaches where identity is solely constructed within discourses, it is within discourses and histories that meaning is made and shifts over time. She argues that:

> Self and identity ... are always grasped and understood within particular discursive configurations. Consciousness, therefore, is never fixed, never attained once and for all, because discursive boundaries change with historical conditions (p. 8)

De Lauretis (1997) suggests that identity can be self-contradictory. Not only is it complex, for example, a composite of various aspects including race, ethnicity, 'class', sexuality and gender, each of these aspects is subject to different rules. As the rules between the different aspects of identity often incompatible there can be contradictions between these.

In definitions of identity such as that suggested by de Lauretis (1987), one can accept the importance of gender while not pinning it to a static concept of woman. Rather one can focus on the multiplicity of being woman, and as such circumvent essentialist notions of identity that suggest a natural condition of being woman. As identity comprises diverse configurations of gender, race, ethnicity, 'class' and sexuality, and is not only gendered, but 'classed', raced, and so on. Each aspect of these configurations is however influenced by gender, by the fact that one is a woman - gender is the common denominator. So, for example, while a woman may be Black, and feel that she identifies more with Black men than white women, she is still constructed as a woman within the discursive context of her Blackness.

Within a conception of identity such as this, the problems of drawing on experience as a source of feminist knowledge are diminished. DeLauritis (1990) argues for the need to 'theorize experience in relation to practices ... , [with an] understanding of gendered subjectivity as 'an emergent property of a historicized experience', and the notion that identity is an active construction and a discursively mediated political interpretation of one's history'(p.263).

Conceptions of identity as shifting, multiple and self contradictory may provide ways to investigate the 'classed' nature of gender identity. In chapter one I discussed my interest in 'class' as a facet of gender identity. It would have seemed that the logical place to search for answers to the questions with which I am interested would lie within the work of feminists who have drawn on materialist theories. That I have chosen instead to draw on the work of feminists of difference reflects the growing decline of 'class' as a theoretical approach and as a category of analysis.

During the 1960s, 70s and 80s many feminists drew on materialist theories, commonly the work of Marx and Engels, to explain the oppression of women (Barrett 1988; Hartman 1981; Philips 1987; Sargent 1981; Young 1981). A materialist approach is based on the notion that human consciousness is determined by material conditions. While aware of the inherently sexist nature of these theories, feminists have attempted to adapt 'class' theories to explain the ways in which women have been oppressed by capitalism and patriarchy (Abbott & Sapsford 1987; Barrett 1988; Harding 1981; Hartman 1981; Philips 1987; Sargent 1981; Young 1981). As traditional 'class' theorists examined the oppression of the 'working class' in relation to capitalism, feminists who drew on materialist theories examined the materialist bases of women's oppression. Within these approaches, women were often constructed as a 'class' similar to the 'working class'. For example, women's oppression can be seen to be a result of the sexual division of labour, women's unpaid work in the home, the family and so on. It has become harder to maintain a 'class' analysis of women's oppression in the face of the critiques of feminists of difference. As I have discussed above, the use of universal and essentialist categories is difficult to sustain. Similarly drawing on notions of the family as the source of women's oppression does not reflect the different experiences of women within the family, or the different ways the family is constituted across time and place. As sociological thinking has shifted with time, the feminist notion of retaining 'class' as a basis of the oppression of women has become increasingly difficult.

A number of factors have led to what Pakulski and Waters (1996) and Milner (1999) refer to as the death of 'class'. Traditional theories of 'class' have waned in the recognition that capitalism has changed. There are new and different forms of 'class', and 'class' categories have become harder to define. Pakulski and Waters argue that, 'Like beads and Che Chevara

berets, 'class' is passe, especially among advocates of the postmodern avant-garde and practitioners of the new gender-, eco- and ethno-centred politics' (p. 1).

Ironically, feminists, who have been critical of the sexist nature of traditional 'class' theories, have been suggested to have played a part in the decline of 'class'. Laclau and Mouffe (1986) identify feminists' critiques of the exclusion of gender from 'class' analysis as a contributing factor in the decline of the use of materialist approaches. They also argue that the exclusion of minority groups from 'class' analysis combined with the increasing adoption of poststructuralist approaches has also contributed to the decline of 'class' in contemporary theorising.

As it has become harder to justify the use of 'class' theories, because of poststructuralist and feminist interventions, it appears that 'class' as a form of analysis, and indeed in any form, has fallen off the agenda within much feminist theorising (Skeggs 1997).

There are increasing calls to reconsider 'class' in conjunction with gender in feminist research (Lawler 1999; Mahoney & Zmroczek 1996, 1997; Reay 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Skeggs 1997; Walkerdine 1990; Yates 1997). Such feminists argue that while 'class' as a theoretical tool may have lost its power and usefulness, 'class' still exists and has effects on the lives of women; thus there is a need to find new ways of thinking about 'class'.

Brine (1999), Lawler (1999), Skeggs (1997), Reay (1996a, 1996b, 1997) and Walkerdine (1990) argue that we need to rethink 'class', because 'working class' women are increasingly being overlooked by feminists. They agree that traditional materialist approaches to 'class' are not useful in explaining 'class' and suggest that, while material conditions do affect women, feminists need to think about 'class' in terms of subjectivity and identity. Lawler (1999) claims that:

> The inequalities of a class society do not begin, nor do they end, with economic inequality: indeed, economics may not be the most meaningful way to talk about class. Though I would not want to argue that class is reducible to symbolic systems, it is my argument that one of the ways in which social class is made 'real' is through cultural mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, of normalization and pathologization (p. 2).

Skeggs (1997) and Reay (1996a, 1996b, 1997) suggest that the disappearance of 'class' as a form of analysis, and of 'working class' women as a group, assures the place of 'middle class' women as the norm within feminism. They argue that only those for whom 'class' is not experienced as deprivation and exclusion can ignore it. Many argue that to abandon 'class' as a theoretical tool does not mean that 'class' does not exist anymore, only that some feminist theorists do not value it (Lawler 1999; Reay 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Skeggs 1997). Skeggs argues that:

> We... need to think about the relationship between responsibility and knowledge: to ignore or make class invisible is to abdicate responsibility (through privilege) from the effects it produces. (p.7).

Yates (1997) offers a word of caution when attempting different ways of theorising 'class'. While she agrees that there is a need to reconsider 'class', and that traditional ways of doing so are limited, she questions the approaches of some theorists to the problem. For example, she notes that the recent work of Skeggs (1997), is based on a very specific group of women within a very specific geographical location. Yates argues that Skegg's study:

> Does not reflect on the extent to which this may be an artifact of the particular group she has decided to study. The point here is that identification of the group to be studied is as much an issue as what is imputed from the study, and we need to beware of practices of romantically recreating 'the working class' in their 19th century guise by sociologists and anthropologists going out to select samples who look like theories they are familiar with (p.3).

Yates notes that much of the recent work that aims to reinstate 'class' as a form of analysis within feminism is largely autobiographical. Researchers' draw on their own experiences of growing up as 'working class' in Britain in the 50s, 60s or 70s, and thus are not reflective of the very different 'class' formations of contemporary society.

It is often those feminists who are from 'working class backgrounds' who are interested in keeping 'class' on the feminist agenda (Brine 1999; Mahoney & Zmroczek 1996, 1997; Reay 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Skeggs 1997; Walkerdine 1990). Yet they do not draw on the work of feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism, many of whom have are from communities in which 'class' disadvantage is felt immediately, and have retained 'class' as central to their work (hooks 1984, 1990a, 1994, Davis 1981; Huggins 1991, 1994 Hurtado 1996). This is not to suggest that all Black, Indigenous Australian, women of colour and so on, are all from 'working class backgrounds' (see hooks 1994). Perhaps this is a reflection of the way that these groups are silenced within feminism (hooks 1990a, 1994).

As I mentioned in chapter one, some feminists suggest that there is an affinity between 'working class' women and Black women (hooks & Childers 1990). Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) posit that how we can think about 'class' should be, in many ways like the way we thin about Black. Black people are a diverse group, the importance of racism gives 'black' its meaning, not cultural homogeneity, a political category, defined by a politics that opposes racism through which it is constituted as object. 'In our view, 'class' must function in a related way. 'Working class' as a designation is the object of exploitation, and is Other to the bourgeoisie. It is a political term that deserves to be kept in the armour of our fight against oppression' (p.204-208).

However, while I believe that the work of feminists from minority groups within feminism may be useful to me to investigate 'class' issues in relation to women, I am also very conscious that, compared to many Black women, for example, I am in a relatively privileged position. I recognise that, as a white woman in Australia I have benefited from the theft of the lands of Indigenous Australians. I am conscious that I am able to go about my daily life without worrying that I will be subject to racism. I have never had to worry that my children will be taken from me, and that I have many advantages within Australia because of the colour of my

skin. I am also conscious that as an Anglo-Celtic woman, I am more privileged than many women from other backgrounds are. Thus, I do not suggest that women experience 'class' in the same way as race or ethnicity are experienced. However, I do suggest that if drawn on in a reflexive way that conceptions related to identity and difference offer ways to explore 'class' identity.

## CONCLUSIONS

I believe that the conceptions of identity I have outlined are useful for my project, particularly if these can be linked to the lived experiences of women. Kenway et al (1997) describe the frustration many feminists feel at the tendency for some feminist work to ignore the lived experiences of educational inequality when they state:

> We were frustrated with the feminist theorising which seemed to feel no obligation to connect substantively to empirical referents. We were also frustrated with the research which was so gender reductionist and microanalytic that it could not see other and broader patterns of power within and across schools. Consequently, this book is about gender reform in the flesh – its many forms in many circumstances (1997 p. xvi-xvii).

My intention in this thesis is to consider how theorisations of identity I have outlined here are useful when applied to the lived experiences of mature age women students.

Accepting that identity is multiple, and is formed from diverse configurations of race, ethnicity, "class" and so on, the effects on people of exposure to new discourses within any particular discursive space will be different depending on their histories and backgrounds. How one identifies oneself within one discursive space may be different to how one identifies oneself within another space. For example, to be a woman within the discursive space of the family implies different expectations and behaviours to that of being a woman within the male-oriented discourses of education. The variability can lead to contradictions within how one identifies oneself, as the rules governing different discourses are often conflicting. For example, consider the contradictions inherent in the term "working class" educated woman. It is uncommon for any "working class" person to be university educated, just as it is

uncommon for wives and mothers to be within the tertiary education system as students. Moreover, one can question how an identity as a student fits within the discursive space of being a wife and mother. My interest is in exploring how mature age women students negotiate the different discourses and knowledges to which they have access and make meaning about themselves as "classed" women within different discursive spaces.

# CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCHING MATURE AGE WOMEN STUDENTS

## INTRODUCTION

There are a wide range of feminist methodologies, and much dissent as to what makes research specifically feminist (Griffiths 1995; Reinhartz 1992). Most feminist researchers agree however that feminist research should focus on gender. Lather (1991a), for example, argues that:

> Very simply, to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one's inquiry... feminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principle which profoundly shapes/mediates the concrete conditions of our lives. ... Through the questions that feminism poses and the absences it locates, feminism argues the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness, skills and institutions as well as in the distribution of power and privilege (p. 71).

The debates about identity and difference that I have referred to throughout the thesis are present within feminist debates about methodology. Concerns emerge as to how feminists can conduct research on gender issues without essentialising and/or universalising the lives and experiences of women. As discussed in chapter two, many feminists are concerned with the use of experience as the basis of knowledge, as the experiences that are taken as knowledge about all women are in fact the experiences of particular women; that is, white, Western, 'middle class' women. However, Scott (1992) proposes:

> Experience is not a word we can do without, although it is tempting, given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject, to abandon it altogether. But experience is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsions. It serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that it is 'unassailable'. Given the ubiquity of the term, it seems to me more useful to work with it, to analyze its operations and to redefine its meaning. This entails focusing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of 'experience' and on the politics of its construction. Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested therefore political (p. 37).

In the debates about the role of experience, many have suggested a form of reflexivity and positioning of the researcher within her research as a way of overcoming issues of essentialism

and universalism. However, there are concerns that this can lead to a never-ending reflexivity in which nothing can be said about anything other than one's own experiences (McLeod & Yates 1994). This emerges within my own research in a significant way. As I have noted throughout, this thesis is intensely personal. Not only theoretically, and as a feminist, but in relation to the study of mature age women students. However, as I have stressed, this is not an autobiographical thesis. In this chapter, I discuss the ways I have addressed issues such as this within my research project.

## A STUDY OF MATURE AGE WOMEN STUDENTS
### *THE SPECIFICITY OF EXPERIENCE*

As discussed in chapter two, many feminists argue that one must focus on the specificity of knowledge and experience to overcome the issue of universalising the experiences of women (Yeatman 1994). My study of mature age women students was designed in such a way as to draw on the lived experiences of a very specific group of women, at a particular time of their lives, within specific discursive spaces.

I believed that the study would benefit from a comparison not only of different students, but different Women's Studies and universities. I could also then explore women from different backgrounds at different types of universities.

The choice of universities was partly a personal one. I have contact with both of these universities, as I am currently a student at Monash University, and a past student and sessional tutor at VUT. In addition, having attended both universities as a student, I was very aware of the differences between these two universities. Indeed, it was during the time as a student at Monash University that I struggled most with the very issues that have evolved as the central concerns within this thesis.

I contacted all Women's Studies students at VUT and Monash University who were female, thirty years or older, and who had begun their degree course at a mature age. At VUT, I attended tutorials and lectures where I outlined the study and, leaving a form to be completed and my contact number, I asked those women who met the above criteria to contact me if they wished to participate in the study. At Monash University, as there were no classes in Women's Studies during the semester that I was recruiting participants, I obtained the names and addresses of all students eligible to participate and contacted each individually by mail. Again, I asked them to indicate their interest in participating by contacting me. Thus, participation in the study was voluntary, and partially self-selecting.

While I had initially intended to interview all women who expressed an interest in participating, I found that a disproportionate number of VUT students expressed interest in the study, perhaps because of the different method of recruitment between the two universities. In order to have similar group sizes at each university, and as Women's Studies at Monash University is not offered at first year level, first year VUT students were excluded as participants. Thus, there were nine women from VUT and eight from Monash University. All had begun their current degrees at a mature age, and three women had previously begun, but not completed, a degree at a younger age.

As outlined earlier, the universities were chosen for this study, in part, because of their diverse student bases. VUT I felt would offer a range of women from backgrounds other than English speaking, and from different socio-economic backgrounds, and thus I would be able to explore differences amongst this group of mature age women students. However the women who volunteered to participate in the study were, in the main, Anglo-Celtic

It is argued that a broader definition of reciprocity and reflexivity overcomes the concerns of focusing on experience as the basis of research. Lather (1992), for example, argues that feminists should be self-reflexive, reflecting on the ways their own value commitments insert themselves into their empirical work. Thus, there is reciprocity between the researched and the researcher, and between theory and data. Reciprocity between theory and data allows data to generate propositions using *a priori* theoretical frameworks without allowing such frameworks to become rigid (Lather 1991b p. 62).

Reciprocity within the research process is seen as important to feminist research (Acker et al 1991; Lather 1991a, 1991b). I attempted to be as reciprocal with the women as possible. I attempted to establish a relationship with the women during initial telephone conversations with them. During these telephone conversations, I answered any questions the women had about the study, and attempted to build a rapport with them. At this stage, I also outlined my interest in the study, what I hoped to find, and my personal interest in the topic.

Each participant in the study was involved in a group interview and an individual interview. In order to compare the experiences of students at each university, the participants were divided into two groups: students from Monash University, and students from VUT. The group interviews were conducted at the home campus of each group. The group interviews ranged in duration from 2 – 2.5 hours.

I drew upon the work of DeVault (1990) and Mies (1993) in the overall approach to the interviews. These authors suggest that the researcher should minimise the impact of the power differential between the researched and researched. Both suggest that the interviewer should aim to relate to the subjects of the research in such a way as to be as informal as possible, using as their starting point shared experiences of being women.

As I shared common lived experiences with these women, having myself returned to study as a mature age woman student and having also studied Women's Studies, the interviews were often more similar to informal conversations than formal interviews. I use the term interview in the broadest sense and retain the term primarily to reflect the power relationship inherent within the research process.

As my concern within the research was to be as reciprocal as possible in the sense that I aimed to allow the participants as active an involvement as possible (recognising the restrictions within a thesis), I did not begin the study, nor enter the interviews with set questions or expectations. While I was interested in identity, and how gender identity is 'classed', I planned to explore these as they emerged within the interviews as raised by the participants. To some extent, this could be referred to as a semi-structured approach. As Reinhartz suggests:

> Semi-structured refers to a research approach whereby the researcher plans to ask questions about a given topic but allows the data-gathering conversation itself to determine how the information is obtained (Reinhartz 1992 p. 18)

This method, I believed, would allow the participants an active involvement in resulting interview material.

In the group setting, participants were asked to discuss how they think that they have changed as a result of their return to study, particularly in relation to how they think about themselves. This proved to be a minor aspect of the interview. As I outlined that this was what I was interested in exploring, and then let the discussion take its course with only minor direction, the women tended to focus more on issues to do with their lived experiences as mature age students. One aim of these group interviews was to determine issues that interested the women, and it was these issues that I used to focus the individual interviews.

I emphasised during the group interviews, and again during the individual interviews that I was particularly interested in differences amongst the women. I did this for two reasons:

Firstly, I wanted the women to be aware of the issues that I was interested in exploring within the research. Secondly, I wanted the women who did not fit the traditional profile of a mature age student (for example, not married, no children, 'working class', or lesbian) to know that their input was valuable.

The individual interviews ranged in duration from 1.5 to 3.5 hours. The participants were asked where they would prefer to have the individual interview conducted and all but two chose to be interviewed in their homes. The remaining two women were interviewed at Monash University, as was their preference.

Material from the group interviews was used to form the basis of the individual interviews. Similarly, issues that arose within individual interviews were incorporated within the following individual interviews. Following each interview, I made a brief summary of the interview, noting things that may be improved in following interviews, and issues that arose that may be useful to incorporate into future interviews. In this way, the study evolved as it progressed. If a woman said something that may be useful to the study, I included it in the following interviews. I said for example, 'in an interview with another woman she said', 'what do you think about that?' or 'has that been your experience?' This also gave the participants an active role in the development of the study, and some control over how the study evolved. Each interview was therefore informed by those before it.

Within the individual interviews, participants were first asked to outline their educational background, and, in many cases, this was the only prepared question that was required, as all other issues that I was interested in exploring followed from this. As the interviews were largely unstructured there was a lot of conversation that had little to do with the topics of interest. This was a direct result of the reflexive approach that I employed, and I believe that this conversation may have contributed to the development of a rapport with many of the

women, and consequently may have elicited more open responses than may have occurred with a more structured approach. If a topic of interest to the thesis had not been discussed however, I would introduce it when relevant to the discussion, or when discussion flagged.

All the interviews were taped with the women's permission. In two instances, the tape was stopped when the participant became upset. In both cases, the women became upset when talking about problems they were having with their husbands. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the thesis in order to protect the anonymity of participants; with the exception of three participants these pseudonyms were chosen by the women themselves (these three women asked me to choose a name for them). In addition, identifying information, such as the names of husbands and family members, has been removed. All participants were given the opportunity to view the transcripts of their interviews and request that information that may identify them to be removed. None of the women requested any information be removed.

I chose to transcribe the interviews myself, in order to further protect the women's anonymity, and to become thoroughly familiar with the interview material that I was to analyse. At times it was not possible to identify the speaker in the group interviews, and sometimes the tape was unclear. These instances were noted in the transcripts.

When copies of the transcripts were sent to the participants, I invited them to clarify issues or make further comment if they desired. Only one woman responded, to further elaborate something that she had said which she felt was not clear in the transcript.

Reciprocity between the researched and the researcher involves a 'give and take' on the part of both. Within this process, there is a mutual negotiation of meaning and power. Meaning is constructed through negotiation with the research participants rather than the researcher imposing meaning on situations (Lather 1991b).

Consequently, and as a way of reporting back to the women, following the group and individual interviews a preliminary analysis of the data was conducted[4] in order to identify the themes that arose during the interviews. A copy of this was sent to ea 1 participant, and they were offered the opportunity to comment on my interpretation of the primary issues that had arisen during the interviews. They were also offered the opportunity to add any comments that they thought may be relevant. The aim of this was to allow a negotiation of meaning with the participants. Lather (1991a, 1991b) suggests this fosters a sense of collaboration with participants, allowing them to participate in the research in a way other than mere narrative. I was particularly interested in offering the women in the study a degree of involvement in the research outcomes. Nine participants responded to this initial analysis, and their feedback was incorporated into subsequent analyses. In addition, some women took the opportunity to give feedback or offer additional comments on the group interview when I contacted them by telephone to arrange their individual interview. This was also incorporated into the analysis where relevant. Thus, the material that was analysed for the study was drawn from four sources: Group interviews, individual interviews, written feedback on the preliminary analysis, and telephone feedback on the group interviews prior to the individual interviews.

*TREATMENT OF RESEARCH MATERIAL*

**Defining the themes**

As my aim was for the study to be as participant-driven as possible within the confines of a thesis, I chose to identify the themes as they emerged within the interviews, rather than impose any predetermined constructs on the findings. Having done a preliminary outline of the issues that emerged within the group and individual interview transcripts, and having received feedback from some of the women, I then proceeded to refine the themes. I

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[4] See appendix

reviewed the interviews individually, both by tape and transcript, and determined the main issues that emerged in the group interviews and each individual interview. I then looked for themes and issues that appeared across the interviews, and chose those that appeared most consistently.

Choosing only some of the many interesting and relevant themes and issues was not straightforward, particularly as the interviews were largely unstructured. In addition, how to present the themes that I had identified as emerging within the research material posed problems for me. Having placed myself theoretically within debates about identity and difference, and having highlighted the difficulties in addressing these issues, I found myself in a quandary. The impulse to create a structure was strong. Yet, it was of concern that a heavy focus on the similarities that emerged within the themes may universalise participants' experiences of returning to study. Alternatively, it was possible that a focus on differences may suggest that it is not possible to talk about mature age women students as a group.

I was also concerned that my positioning may lead to bias in my interpretation of themes. Reay (1996b) claims that:

> Interpretation remains an imperfect and incomplete process. There are many possible readings of interview transcripts. From where I am socially positioned certain aspects of the data are much more prominent than others. I have wrestled with the conundrum of whether this constitutes an undesirable bias or whether it can lead to a real reflexivity. I have tried to address the difference my difference makes by centring my analysis in feminist understandings of what women share, as well as focusing on the differences between them (Reay 1996b p. 70).

Lather (1991b) experiences similar difficulties. She suggests that her:

> Keenest sense in the writing of this chapter is the many different directions I could have gone within it, the gulf between the totality of possible statements and the finitude of what is actually written or spoken. The structuring impulse I have settled on is to craft four narrative vignettes, to tell us four different 'stories' about my data (p. 123).

Drawing on Lather's approach, I have chosen to present the themes that emerged within the study of mature age women students in a number of ways. This approach allows the reader to

see that, while I have come to a number of conclusions about the resulting themes, these are my interpretations. Others may read different conclusions to that presented.

The theoretical lens through which one examines one's research material has effects on how they are interpreted, and the conclusions that can be made from them. In chapters five, six and seven I offer different presentations of the themes using very different approaches. In chapter five I describe the themes that emerged within the group interviews. Here I focus on how the participants spoke of their experiences of returning to study within the particular discursive spaces to which they have access. Chapter six draws on these themes to explore how these emerged within the other research material (individual interviews, telephone conversations and responses to the outline of issues that had been sent to them). In this chapter, I focus on the similarities amongst the women. I briefly suggest some of the conclusions that could be drawn from a focus such as this. In chapter seven I revisit the themes outlined in chapter five and explore the differences that emerged within these, and briefly consider what these differences may mean. Presenting the themes in the way that I have, illustrates the issues that have formed the backbone of the thesis, that is how feminists can deal with differences while retaining gender as the defining feature of their theorising and research.

When presenting quotes from the research material I use ellipses to indicate where text from the transcript has been edited. When relevant I indicate what the discussion was about in the section that was edited. Often, within the interviews the discussion that I felt reflected a theme was interrupted, and the discussion moved on to other issues, returning later in the interview. In this case, I have indicated this by presenting line numbers [for example 1-3] to show that there was a significant break in the thread of the discussion. Following each quote presented, an indication of the source of the quote, and relevant line numbers are included, for example (Individual interview 10-21).

## Defining 'class' categories

While my research is concerned primarily with gender, as I have outlined throughout the chapters thus far I am interested in differences amongst women in relation to gender identity as it is 'classed'. I did not approach the interview material looking for 'class' differences initially. I analysed for themes, and then examined the differences that emerged that reflected how the women identified themselves in 'class' terms. Thus, I have started with an interest in themes that relate to gender, and then explored nuances that emerged within these themes in relation to 'class'.

As I have discussed within chapter two, there are dangers in creating false categories, as Lather (1991b) argues, to put in to categories is an act of power. The participants were not asked to identify themselves in relation to 'class', nor did I assign a 'class' position to them in relation to postcode (geographical location), occupation, or income. While I did not ask them directly about 'class', I did, in the course of the interviews, mention my own experiences as a 'working class' mature age woman student. Thus, 'class' was introduced to the interviews in this context. Sometimes the women then elaborated on their own experiences in terms of class. 'Class' then, in this study is self-attributed. By raising issues in the way that I did, by talking about my experiences and the ways these were influenced by my 'class' background, and identity now, some women had chosen to comment on this as well. Based on their own self-attribution in terms of class, or lack of, I categorised the women into 'class' groupings: That is, by the ways they spoke of 'class'.

Those women who said 'I'm 'working class' in the present tense, or those who defined themselves as different to 'middle class' people, I refer to as 'working class' women. Those women who said they were from a 'working class' background, but did not identify themselves in 'class' terms in the present tense, I refer to as women from 'working class backgrounds'. Some women did not identify themselves in 'class' terms in any way, and one woman called

herself 'middle class'; I refer to these women as 'unclassed/middle class' women. This is an uneasy coupling as it assumes that those who did not define themselves in relation to 'class' are 'middle class', however it distinguishes between those who spoke of 'working class' identification in one form or another and those who did not. As becomes apparent in later chapters this is not a particularly accurate term, but is useful to distinguish the groups. There are therefore three groups: 'working class', women from 'working class backgrounds', and 'unclassed/middle class', and whilst I refer to the women within these groupings, I do so in the recognition that they are not fixed categories.

As the women were not asked directly to define themselves in 'class' terms, these categories are certainly not fixed or definitive ones. However, it becomes clear within the following chapters, that how the women spoke of their lived experiences of returning to study do appear to correspond in a number of ways with the three groupings I have identified. Thus, 'class' in this study is not based on an objective measure. The women who identified themselves as 'working class' may not be accurate in traditional measures of 'class'. However, their own identifications interest me here. As Middleton (1993) states:

> Part of my thesis relied on people's descriptions and analyses of what had happened. ...
> It was possible for a woman to be wrong in her interpretation of past events. ...
> However, these adult memories and interpretations were accepted as valid because the
> central concern in the study was not the events themselves but the interpretations the
> women made of them and the importance the women attached to these interpretations
> (p. 68).

## REFLECTING ON THE STUDY: REFLEXIVITY

While it is common for feminist researchers to focus on the power relations that occur within the research process, they tend to focus on how their position as *researchers* puts them in a powerful position in relation to the *researched*. They often do this without reflecting on how their social positioning as, for example, white, 'middle class' and so on can lead to different power relations to the women they are researching, and the effects of this on the research process including analysis and interpretation of the data. Bhavani (1994) argues that, 'the

micropolitics of the research situation need to be analyzed and not only noted' (p. 34).
Similarly, Reay (1996a) argues that:

> On a fundamental level reflexivity is about giving as full and honest account of the research process as possible, in particular explicating the position of the researcher in relation to the researched. I would argue it requires more; that reflexive practice should constitute a process of uncovering/recognising the difference your differences make (Reay 1996 p. 443).

When reflecting on the research process, my positioning as a researcher from a specific background becomes apparent. While aiming within this research to provide a methodology that diminished power relations as far as possible, I recognise the impossibility of this. In reality, as the researcher I had a control over the process, and the results of the research in ways that the participants did not.

A number of power relations emerged within the research, and this was particularly the case around 'class'. As my own lived experiences so closely mirrored many of the participants in many ways, mutual 'oh yes' and 'me too', were common. Indeed, it was often difficult when differences appeared, after sharing so many common lived experiences of returning to study. This I feel was often a result of my own positioning as a 'working class' woman. In an interview with one woman who to my 'working class' eyes appeared to be upper 'middle class', for example, I felt very 'working class'. Her experiences were so totally different from my own. These were often to do with what I perceived as 'middle class' assumptions. However, despite the clear 'class' differences between us, and in some ways feeling at a disadvantage because of my 'class' background, I also recognised that, as I was the *researcher* and she the *researched*, that the power relations were in a sense reversed.

While there appeared to be, in many cases an affinity between myself and many of the women who identified as 'working class', I became aware of the danger of assuming that all our experiences were shared. At times, the differences between myself and my background and theirs surprised me. It is easy to fall into assumptions that all who share a similar background

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have had the same experiences as we have. I had to work hard to note the differences that emerged between the participants' experiences (and this was particularly the case with the 'working class') women and my own. As Reay (1996a) suggests:

> There is always the risk of conflating your own experiences with the very different experiences of other women from working-class backgrounds (p. 453).

Often, when I had described something that I felt that was a result of my background, the women would comment, 'well I'm from a 'working class background' and I didn't feel that at all', for example. This made me think closely about imposing my experiences on these women because I believed that they were from similar backgrounds to mine, and the assumption that, therefore we shared identical experiences.

My concern within this study was to investigate differences primarily in relation to 'class' amongst mature age women students. Because of this, I did not seek out women from ethnic and racial minority groups when it became clear that the majority of the participants were from white, Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. However, that few women from minority groups chose to participate in the research project concerns me and raises a number of questions. Did I frame my outline of the study in such a way as to discourage such women from responding? Did these women feel that I would not be interested in their experiences? Was the study constructed in such a way as to reflect my white, Anglo-Celtic background, and thus did not raise issues relevant to such women? Was the issue related to mature age minority women not choosing to study Women's Studies rather than the design and presentation of my research project? As I discuss in Chapter nine, this has implications for future research in terms of the pedagogy and curriculum of Women's Studies.

Cannon et al (1991) argue that it is common for women from less dominant groups in society to be reluctant to participate in research. They suggest a number of reasons for this:

Skepticism about the purpose of the research, worries about protection of anonymity, and structural obstacles such as less free time. Dominant-group women have less reason tan minority-group women to suspect that they or members of their group will be exploited in research (p. 113).

These are issues that should be considered in the recruitment of research participants. As I have discussed at length throughout the thesis, the lives and experiences of women from minority groups have been silenced within mainstream feminist theorising and research. It may not be surprising then that so few were interested in participating in a research project conducted by a woman from the dominant ethnic and racial group.

## CONCLUSIONS

Within this chapter, I have outlined some of the debates and issues that arise within feminist methodologies. I have suggested that a feminist approach that focuses on reciprocity and reflexivity offer ways of addressing the problems of essentialism and universalism that are of concern within the use of experience as a source of knowledge. I have then outlined how, drawing on particular feminist methodologies, the study on mature age women students was conducted.

I have, within this thesis aimed to be as reflexive as possible in relation to my own positioning both within the interviews, and the thesis as a whole. I have aimed also to be reflexive in how the power relations played out within the interviews. Positioning myself as I have done within the research makes transparent to the reader my own interests and background and how these have affected the research process, and offers as such a reading premised on this. Thus, this research does not offer definitive answers, but rather those emerging within a particular discursive space, among specific women, and from research conducted by a specific researcher with a specific positioning within the study.

In the following chapter I introduce the women and give details about how they described their backgrounds. I also outline what each participant said about 'class' that formed the basis of their allocation to one of the three 'class' categories, and indeed on which the three class categories were created.

# CHAPTER FOUR: INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

## INTRODUCTION

In chapter two I outlined conceptions of identity that I suggest offer ways of investigating 'classed' gender identity. Here identity is defined as shifting within the discourses to which one has access, and is mediated by one's history. In chapter one I outlined the discursive spaces that the mature age women in the study have encountered when returning to study. The present chapter outlines the way that they spoke about their histories, and the backgrounds that they brought with them to the new discourses of higher education and Women's Studies. I introduce the women who participated in the study, and I outline those details that give an overview of their histories, and the discourses to which they have access outside the discursive spaces of higher education and Women's Studies – the discursive space of their everyday lives.

As I have noted throughout the thesis, I am not using traditional definitions of 'class'. The participants were not asked to designate a 'class' category to themselves. Nor did I ask them to define what they meant by 'class' when they did mention it. I have also noted the difficulties of defining 'class'. In the descriptions of the ways the participants spoke about their backgrounds I describe how the women spoke, or did not speak, about themselves in 'class' terms as an indication of why I have placed them within the 'class' groupings that I have.

The introductions offered within this chapter are presented by considering the two universities separately, presenting such details as level of study, number of children and so on. In the following section, I present tables that show the differences and similarities between the two universities in relation to these details.

## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE VUT AND MONASH UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANTS

There were a number of similarities, and a number of differences between the participants from VUT and Monash University in relation to their background details. I consider these within this section, presenting tables of these. I then consider the differences that emerge across the universities in relation to the 'class' groupings.

Table 1

BACKGROUND DETAILS OF THE PARTICIPANTS FROM VUT

| Educational background of VUT participants | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Name** | *DEBBIE* | *JANE* | *JOY* | *JULIA* | *KATHY* | *MARIANNE* | *MEGAN* | *NICOLE* | *SALLY* |
| *PREVIOUS LEVEL OF EDUCATION* | Left school at 16 | Attempted year 12 | Began Undergrad degree | Completed tertiary study | Left school at 16 | Began tertiary study | Left school at 15 | Began Undergrad degree | Left school at 15 |
| *LEVEL OF STUDY* | Undergrad | Undergrad | Undergrad | Postgrad | Undergrad | Undergrad | Undergrad | Undergrad | Undergrad |
| **Educational background of family and friends** | | | | | | | | | |
| *SIBLINGS AND/OR PARENTS UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND OR PROFESSIONAL* | No | No | No | No | No | No | No | Yes | No |
| *SPOUSE (OR EX-SPOUSE) UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL* | No | No | Yes | No | No | N/A | No | No | Yes |
| *FRIENDS UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL* | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| **Marital status and number of children of VUT participants** | | | | | | | | | |
| *MARITAL STATUS* | Married | Separated | Separated | Married | Married | Unmarried | Separated | Married | Separated |
| *CHILDREN* | 3 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| *AGE RANGE OF CHILDREN* | Primary/secondary school age | Primary/secondary school age | Primary school age | Pre-school age | Adult age | N/A | Primary/secondary school age | Pre-school age | Primary/secondary school age |

Table 2

BACKGROUND DETAILS OF THE PARTICIPANTS FROM MONASH UNIVERSITY

| Educational background of Monash University participants | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Name** | *ANN* | *GEORGINA* | *ISABELLE* | *JEANINE* | *KATE* | *NATALIE* | *PAM* | *RUTH* |
| *PREVIOUS LEVEL OF EDUCATION* | Left school at 15 | Began Undergrad degree | Year 12 | Year 12 | Year 12 | Left school at 15 | Began Undergrad degree | Left school at 15 |
| *LEVEL OF STUDY* | Undergrad | Undergrad | Undergrad | Undergrad | Postgrad | Postgrad | Undergrad | Postgrad |
| **Educational background of family and friends** | | | | | | | | |
| *SIBLINGS AND/OR PARENTS UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL* | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | Yes |
| *SPOUSE (OR EX-SPOUSE) UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL* | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| *FRIENDS UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL* | No | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| **Marital status and number of children of Monash University participants** | | | | | | | | |
| *MARITAL STATUS* | Separated | Married | Married | Separated | Married | Married | Separated | Separated |
| *CHILDREN* | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| *AGE RANGE OF CHILDREN* | Primary/secondary school age | Primary school age | Primary school age | Primary school age | Adult age | Adult age | Primary school age | Adult age |

Table 3

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITIES

| Educational background of the participants | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | LEFT SCHOOL AT 16 YEARS OR UNDER. | UNSUCCESSFULLY ATTEMPTED YEAR 12. | SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED YEAR 12 BUT DID NOT CONTINUE | BEGAN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE FOLLOWING YEAR 12. |
| MONASH (8). | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| VUT (9) | 4 | 1 | 0 | 4 |

There were few differences between the universities in relation to the educational

backgrounds of the participants.

Table 4

| Participants' marital status and number and age range of children by university | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | MARITAL STATUS | | | NO. OF CHILDREN | | AGE RANGE OF CHILDREN | | |
| | MARRIED | SEPARATED | UNMARRIED | 2-3 | 4-5 | PRE-SCHOOL | PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOL AGE | ADULT |
| MONASH (8) | 4 | 4 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 3 |
| VUT (9) | 4 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 1 |

'Again, there were few differences between the participants at the two universities in relation to

whether they were married or separated/divorced from their spouses. There were slight

differences in the number of children. All the women at Monash University had either two or

three children, while three of the women at VUT had four or five children.

Table 5

| Educational background of participants' family and friends , by university | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | SIBLINGS UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL. | SPOUSE (OR EX-SPOUSE) UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL | FRIENDS UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL |
| MONASH | 4 | 6 | 5 |
| VUT | 2 | 3 | 4 |

The Monash University participants were more likely to have a spouse (or ex-spouse), friends

and siblings who were university educated than the participants at VUT were.

Table 6

| 'Class' self-identification, by university | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 'WORKING CLASS' | FROM 'WORKING CLASS BACKGROUND' | 'UNCLASSED/ MIDDLE CLASS' |
| MONASH (8) | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| VUT (9) | 5 | 2 | 2 |

There are a number of differences between the universities in how the women identified in 'class' terms. While five women at VUT identified as 'working class', only one woman at Monash University identified herself in this way. However, more women at Monash University identified as being from a 'working class background', or did not identify in 'class' terms, than at VUT.

Table 7

### SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN 'CLASS' GROUPINGS

| 'Class' identification & educational background of the participants | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | LEFT SCHOOL AT 16 YEARS OR UNDER. | UNSUCCESSFULLY ATTEMPTED YEAR 12. | SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED YEAR 12 BUT DID NOT CONTINUE | BEGAN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE FOLLOWING YEAR 12. |
| 'WORKING CLASS' | 4 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 'WORKING CLASS BACKGROUND' | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| 'UNCLASSED/ MIDDLE CLASS' | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |

The 'working class' women were more likely than the other 'class' groups to have left secondary school at sixteen or younger. One half of the 'unclassed/middle class' women had started a degree when younger, but not completed it.

Table 8

| 'Class' identification & Family and friends educational backgrounds | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | *SIBLINGS UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL.* | *SPOUSE (OR EX-SPOUSE) UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL.* | *FRIENDS UNIVERSITY EDUCATED AND/OR PROFESSIONAL.* |
| 'WORKING CLASS' | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| 'WORKING CLASS BACKGROUND' | 4 | 4 | 3 |
| 'UNCLASSED/MIDDLE CLASS' | 2 | 3 | 6 |

The 'unclassed/middle class' and 'working class background' participants were more likely to have siblings, friends, spouses (or ex-spouses) who were university educated and/or professional.

## THE PARTICIPANTS FROM VUT

### Debbie ('Working class')

Debbie left school when she was 16. She said that she had wanted to be a kindergarten teacher:

> But my parents said 'no way you haven't got the brains for it'. Because it was four years then, to be a kindergarten teacher. Because you had to have first aid as well. So when they said no, I said, 'well I refuse to go back', so I didn't go back (Individual interview 6-9).

After leaving secondary school, Debbie worked as a bookkeeper. When her children were young, she did not undertake paid work. Debbie returned to study at 40, completed her V.C.E. and then began a Bachelor of Arts degree. When I asked Debbie why she returned to study, she replied, 'what really spurred me on was that I got very sick, and um... I had a cerebral hemorrhage, at 30. And I was very sick and then I really started the soul-searching bit' (Individual interview 47-49).

Debbie was the first person in her family to go to university. At the time I interviewed her, her son was enrolled in a degree course. Her children ranged in age from primary school age to university age. Her husband was self-employed. At the time of the interview, Debbie was not in paid employment.

Debbie did not say 'I'm 'working class', she did however talk about how she was different to 'middle class' women. She spoke of how it was more difficult for women like her to return to study; she defined this in relation to economics and geography:

> I think that's got a lot to do with the area, because I think the households ... Whereas in our areas everyone has to pitch in and help. Because our husbands couldn't go out and get an $80,000 job, you know what I mean. And therefore the woman does have to put in. Whereas over there it's... it's um, it wouldn't be fit for the women to put in as much. I mean the man has to look after... it's still the old Australian attitude that the male has to look after... and that's OK, and probably in our area the man has to look after the female. But realistically we can't afford it (Individual interview 157-165).

### Jane ('Working class background')

As a teenager, Jane attempted year 12 and failed due to a number of personal issues. I asked Jane whether her parents encouraged her to go on with her education when she was younger:

> Yeah I don't know what would have happened if I had have repeated year 12 and wanted to go on to uni. Because, I was the eldest of 9 kids, and you know Mum and Dad didn't have any money, like they were, um, yeah they were very 'working class' people. And, um, Dad worked for the railways and Mum didn't work outside the home. And, um, whilst I think they would have been happy if I'd got accepted to uni, I don't know how I would have, how I would have negotiated that, because that was just after, I think the year after I did year 12 was the year uni fees were abolished. ... I don't know, I really don't know that it would have been possible for me to go to uni anyway. But yeah they certainly did encourage me to stay at school (Individual interview 280-294).

Jane was the first in her family to go to university. When I asked her why she returned to study, she replied:

> It was something I always wanted to do. It wasn't like I thought 'oh, I'm on my own now, what can I do. Or I'm 35 what can I do now, or the kids are going to grow up what will I do now. It's like... it was just something I was always going to do, I'd always intended that I was going to go back to study. Um, I was going to do it as soon as [daughter] went to school, but then had to get a job because we had no money, and then like, then once [husband] left it was sort like, it was sort of, it was almost like [Tape unclear] there's nothing in my... there's nothing standing in my way (Individual interview 602-609).

Jane did not undertake paid employment when her children were very young. At the time of her interview, Jane's children ranged in age from primary to secondary school age, and she was employed part time in clerical work. Jane said that most of her friends were professionally employed and or university educated. Her ex husband was self-employed.

Jane spoke of herself as being from a 'working class' background. This she defined mainly through her father's employment, and economically:

> I mean we were in a working situation in that Mum and Dad never owned their own house or anything like that. Dad was an assistant stationmaster or something, [Tape unclear] sort of 'working class' position and he supported 9 kids on that. And we didn't go hungry or that, but Mum and Dad I know went without a whole heap, so that we could have what we had (Individual interview 629-624).

## Joy ('Working class')

As a teenager, Joy completed HSC and began a degree at LaTrobe University. Her parents actively encouraged her to further her education, however she did not complete the degree she began when she left secondary school:

> It was interesting, the seven kids that got into Uni, from my year, six dropped out... I really think it was just such a real culture shock for all of us. And we would talk about it and say this is just... Because they were all from the other side.[5] You either went to Monash or LaTrobe, no one got into Melbourne (Individual interview 119-124).

> I felt, I didn't feel as if I fitted in. That was the thing, because I just felt like a, I felt very much like a working class girl, up against all these people who had far greater vocabularies, and I, like if I actually stopped to think about what they were saying I may have contributed as every bit as much insight as they did, but they couched it better than I did. So, I felt very insecure. Basically. Which why I think I would have done better at Teacher's College because there are probably more people like me (Individual interview 22-28).

Before Joy had children, she had worked in public relations. She chose to not undertake paid employment when her children were young. Joy was the first in her family to go to university. She gave a number of reasons for her return to study. One reason was that she had been going through a divorce from her husband and study was a way of regaining some of the confidence she had lost during this process.

Joy also said that she returned to study because not finishing her degree when she was younger was unfinished business. She felt that she was lesser in some way because she was uneducated, and that she needed to use her brain. Joy talked about education as nourishment,

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[5] Some of the women refer to the 'other side' when discussing people who live in affluent suburbs of Melbourne.

and said that she would feel stupid if she were not studying. Her ex husband had been professionally employed (a company director). She said that most of her friends were also either professionally employed or university educated. At the time of the interview, Joy was on a sole parent pension. Her children were both of primary school age at the time of interview.

Joy identified herself as 'working class'. She spoke of this in a number of ways. She talked about the differences between 'working class', 'middle class' accents, and the area one lived in as a marker of 'class'. She gave an interesting anecdote that reflected her attitude to 'class'. She talked about her experience of going to a film about a 'working class' woman with women she identified as 'middle class':

> Um, yes I felt very 'working class'. All of a sudden. They do look different, [People from Eastern suburbs] they do, they do look different. They're taller, they dress differently somehow. They've got that bohemian look down pat more than I... I probably had leggings on! Is that a 'working class' symbol or what? You know I should have had a singlet... But, and we were sitting in there and the film was all about this very 'working class' woman, you know with the outside loo and everything. You know what it's like over in England. And I was sitting there thinking, they're living vicariously, like experiencing 'working class' life vicariously through this film. And I've actually lived it. Look they're all sitting there going [Tape unclear] probably having their little intellectual conversations and I'm thinking, this is what my life was actually like you know. ... But it just... all of a sudden I realised that this is how they get their taste of what it's like to be 'working class'. And probably... not even thinking that it happens in Australia. That, yeah that this is something that maybe happens over in England or whatever. ... And when we came out, [friend] and her partner were talking about the film. And she actually made some reference to 'working class'. But she felt so uncomfortable actually saying, 'you know, these kind of, um, you know, these 'working class' types'. And I felt like saying, 'I'm a 'working class' type, you know', hang on a minute here. It was just that I felt very uncomfortable in that environment. I realised then that if I am out of my comfort zone I am very aware somehow that... Just even the most simple things, like buying the tickets, maybe there is a way of doing this that I'm not aware of. And I had to show my pension card. You know, of all places, I had to show my pension card. I'd really prefer to pay the extra. ... Because I really feel that, that ['class'] is such a part of my personality I will never lose that. ... It is a lack of bullshit. 'Working class' people have a real bullshit detector don't you think. I mean a kind of pretension, I mean that kind of bullshit, I don't mean... ... And this is why I could never lose it I think. Because I don't know if I want to be like that. I see them as being rather amoral actually. A lot of 'middle class'... Very self serving (Individual interview 559-659).

## Julia ('Unclassed')

Julia was an International student from a Pacific island. She had completed two diplomas before commencing a Bachelor of Arts in Community Development in Australia. She spoke of how her parents fought for their daughters to become educated:

> My family, my parents were not educated either, sort of formal schooling. They didn't speak in English, and they struggled to get a job, just to get enough money for us to go to secondary school. For my partner's family, [partner's father] he became a British Commissioner. ... As for me, I came from a village and... My father had to go to another place to find a job, and... I mean I just couldn't believe that we survived on... like a dollar a day and so forth. Getting enough food for the... And so when we got to secondary school, all my sister, my two sisters and myself, we decided that we had to get education in order to get something for our parents. Because we knew how it was hard. As for him [husband], he enjoyed his young life, he had everything, he had a big house, and he had a thatch roof house. So, and I think that's why it's so different. As for his family, I think his father regretted that none of his kids had a degree, went to university. Cause he had a full life (Group interview 663-679).

I asked Julia why she chose to come to Australia as an international student:

> One guy just came in the office one day and gave me this brochure about the Community Development course at VUT Asia/Pacific stream. They were advertising, and I just looked at the course content, and said, this is what I want to do. I applied. (Individual interview 38-40).

Julia worked as a training officer before her return to study. Her husband is a blue-collar worker. Both Julia's children are pre-school age.

## Kathy ('Working class')

Kathy left school when she was 16. She said that she:

> Always wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. And, um, there was no encouragement or... any help to, to help you decide, or help you go in any direction. And now I've thought about it, I think you could have got scholarships when I left. But I didn't know about that either, so you thought, you just gave up. You didn't... you know you didn't pursue it. And everybody's saying, 'oh you ought to be a dress maker, blah blah blah'. [Tape unclear] And that's what I became, and I thought well that was it. You know, there wouldn't be any more education after that. But it would have been nice if at least someone would have said, well encouraged you to do something or go somewhere, of find out something for you, you know. If your parents found out. And as well as that you couldn't afford to go to uni (Individual interview 4-14).

I asked Kathy why she had returned to study. She said:

> I heard about Preparation for Tertiary Studies [PTS, a return to study course offered at VUT]. And I had to write an essay, and I thought, I never wrote an essay in my life. How am I going to do this. And, so... we had to do that in return to study, so I got into PTS.

> ... So I did all right, and if you pass you get into the BA. And then I spoke to someone along the way, about wanting to teach children with learning difficulties, and they said, really, you should become to be a teacher. So if you get into the BA you can do a Dip ED. So that was a direction to go otherwise I might... I might as well do it. And that was it! (Individual interview 121-132).

Kathy was the first in family go to university. She had always worked as a Dressmaker, and continued to work after she had children. Her children were all adult age. Kathy's husband was a blue-collar worker.

Like Debbie, Kathy did not call herself 'working class', but rather talked about how she was different than 'middle class' mature age women students. She said that, unlike her, 'middle class' women had it much easier in relation to returning to study. Debbie also talked about how she felt that, while she had no one to talk to about what she was learning, 'middle class' mature age women students had people around them who understood what they were doing:

> Kathy: [Friend] at school, I said I just haven't got anyone to talk to it about. And she said 'oh, my friends love it, they can't wait for me to get to their place and start spouting...'
> Gail: But what do her friends do?
> Kathy: Oh well, they're professional people, and they come from sort of upper class or whatever. So I'm thinking oow I'd love to meet them. That's why I like to stay friends. We're really good friends, and I want to sort of keep friends with her because you know you get into a different area. And she say's oh they can hardly wait to... they say what do you learn next and they can't wait (Individual interview 371-379).

### Marianne ('Working class')

Marianne completed HSC, and was the first in her family to do so. She began a course at Agriculture College, which she did not finish. She returned to study in part because she had done a lot of menial work and was sick of the treatment she received:

> I worked with horses. And I mean I've done lots of menial jobs here and there, and... Never held a job down for longer than twelve months. Just boredom and you know... You know putting up with crap from people and getting treated like an idiot and... And that's part of the reason I decided to come back, and do this. Because I just thought, god I've got over 30 years of work left in me, I just want a decent job, with decent pay. And it was about respect too. I'm just sick of being treated badly. And the industry I worked in was you know, was notorious for ill treatment of staff and... Yeah, I mean I just got sick of it and thought I'd do something about it (Individual interview 16-24).

Marianne felt that unlike other mature age women students, she was studying to get a decent job rather than to find herself, for 'empowerment' or confidence. She said that returning to

study for her was about independence and respect. She felt that this is different to why other mature age women return to study. She called herself an unruly woman, she was not married and had no children. Marianne was not in paid employment.

Marianne identified herself as 'working class'. This identification emerged in a number of ways, mainly in relation to the different attitudes of 'working class' and 'middle class' people, and the area in which one lives. For example:

> I just said chip on my shoulder. But, if your attitude reflects your 'class' or your position, and people from the Eastern suburbs, 'middle class' people, they have an attitude and a position but it's not called a chip in the shoulder. That's normal. And our attitude or our perspective is, you know, labeled 'oh, you've got a chip on your shoulder'. And it's not, it's just... that's where we come from (Individual interview 120-125).

> It was when I'd sort of finished high school and left home, it was then that I realised that, you know... And people say to you, the first thing when you meet people, especially in Melbourne, and they say Australia's 'classless'. And... bullshit. And they say, 'where are you from'. And that's, and they sort of pigeonhole you from there (Individual interview 156-160).

### Megan ('Working class')

Megan said she was bright at school, but that she was not encouraged by the school, or her family to continue her education:

> Oh no, I just run amuck, horrible person I was. Left school at 15, did the usual stuff, you know like hung around with the kids on the streets all that sort of stuff. Got pregnant way too early. And then it wasn't until, I've been back at school five years. After my husband left I went into Social Security and he said to me 'why don't you go back to school', and I said 'OK'. So that was probably the Monday, and I started school on Thursday (Individual interview 8-13).

Megan's ex-husband was an executive. Megan's children's ages ranged from primary to secondary school age. She undertook part time paid employment when her children were young, in retail and childcare.

Many of Megan's reasons for returning to study related to her children. She wanted to understand what was happening with them as they grew up, but more importantly wanted to offer a role model for them, something that she had not had. None of Megan's family or

friends were tertiary educated (indeed, she had never met anyone who had been to university before her return) and she wanted her children to have what she did not:

> And it's a role model for my kids. Because none of my family was educated, you know what I mean. They just aren't educated people. You know my dad was a truck... not that there's anything wrong with that. But, if I want my kids to become any thing of themselves they've got to have, they haven't had any other role model. The only role model I can give them is going to uni and learning... ... And it's really important to me to have my children do well. If my kids go to uni, then I've done well (Individual interview 351-358).

Megan called herself 'working class', but was unsure of what this really was:

> Yeah see I've got this thing about 'class'. Some people say it's where you live, some people say it's how much money you have. Some people say it's how much education you have. And I think that is why I look at people and think 'you ignorant'. Because I think I'm a higher class because I've been more educated. Not because I've got more money, because I'll never have more money, not with four kids, for gods sake, even if I had a husband. So therefore I'm saying class is education. Is based on education. But I don't think that. You know what I mean? (Individual interview 968-975).

In response to the outline of the issues that I sent her, Megan noted my mention of 'class' issues that had arisen within the interviews. She wrote:

> I know I am not 'middle class' but stating that I am from a 'working class' background does not cause me any concerns. I now take the approach of what constitutes 'working class'. If it's geographic then yes I am 'working class', if it's education no I'm not. In regards to having to justify my education and especially Women's Studies to others, I really don't give a hoot. I can justify, argue and persuade from a feminist perspective with great confidence (Written response).

### Nicole ('Unclassed')

As a teenager, Nicole completed HSC, and began a degree at RMIT. She was not happy in this course and dropped out. Nicole worked in a clerical position until her first child was born; at the time of interview she had not returned to paid employment and her children were pre-school age. She was an undergraduate student in the Faculty of Business, and was doing electives in Women's Studies. Nicole's husband is professionally employed as are the majority of her friends. Her brother was a medical doctor.

I asked her why she returned to study:

I was feeling left behind, not having gone on to tertiary. I sort of felt well... I'd like to see if I could do it. You know you sort of have all these doubts, and I had to prove to myself, whether I could do it (Individual interview 22-25).

And the other thing that made me want to go back too, is that I wanted to have a better idea... of the learning process that he [son] will have to go through. Like my Mum and Dad... didn't even, I think my Mum only went up to form 2, or whatever it was at the time. And there was no way they could help me, with assignments or anything, or have an idea of how to go about it, or technique or... 'hey, lets go and visit a library, do you know what a library is?' They had nothing like that. Every thing was done at school, and school stopped there. If you had a problem at home... 'well sorry, no one can help you'. And I thought, I really want to have... the knowledge, if I don't know something, I know how to go and get it. And maybe his schooling might feel more comfortable. And if he doesn't understand something straight away, then he'll learn how to find out about it. Rather that get to that 'oh my god I can't do it,', and then you can't think straight and... I really want it to be different (Individual interview 116-129).

I asked Nicole what her parent's attitudes are toward education:

Well my Dad's an only child, so, and he was born in Germany, and he did a trade. So he would have been more happy if my brother had have done a trade. Yet my brother wouldn't even know which end of a hammer to hold. He's like that. And my mother never did. She was born in Malta but she came out here... when she was ten. But she only went up to form 2, whatever it was then. So... no, and all the other cousins, have got kids that are younger than my brother and I. And only one of them is an Accountant. So, yeah it's still a rare thing. It's not a common thing (Individual interview 574-581).

Although I mentioned 'class' issues I had encountered as a student, Nicole did not respond by mentioning 'class' in relation to her own experiences.

### Sally ('Working class background')

Sally left school at 15. She was the first in her family to go to university. Sally separated from her husband (a solicitor) before her return to study. Most of her friends were professionally employed or university educated. She was employed in the public service. Sally did not undertake paid employment for ten years after her first child was born. I asked why she returned to study:

Something that I'd always had at the back of my mind. I thought that I'll do that when I've got time, but I'd sort of envisioned picking up an odd subject here and there, something that was a particular field of interest, something that I'd still like to do. But then when I was in that situation, 'well look, I may as well go for it now, may lead to employment'. It started off not as employment oriented but as I've got into it I've thought, well why do all this work if it's not... (Individual interview 38-45).

Sally was on a sole parent pension at the time of her interview. Her children ranged in age from primary to secondary school age.

Sally said that she was from a 'working class' background:

> We lived in Williamstown. Dad was a wholesale butcher, Mum had never worked, except during the war. She was at, you know, at home. Nana lived with us, we were just one of your basic 50s family, you know, just, what else do you want to know? .... Um, so it's a 'working class' family, well Mum wasn't 'working class', Mum was 'middle class', Dad was 'working class', so she married 'down'. If that's of any importance, she didn't think it was (Individual interview 211-225).

Like Jane, Sally attended a Catholic school. However, she made a distinction between 'working class' and 'middle class' Catholic schools:

> But see, the school I had with the Josephites, right, and this particular nun... ... We were her cross in life, we were the children of the poor, and I used to say to her, look we are not 'the' poor. But we were the children of the 'working class', so we were never going to go anywhere. We were going to be teachers and... and I think in fact she was very frustrated herself with the fact that all these... because there were some incredibly bright girls, brilliant, and they went into teaching or nursing, right... but these girls could have done like PhDs in biochemistry and... I mean they were just, you know those incredibly bright girls. And I think she was very frustrated, you know when I look back, herself, that we were being channeled into this... stereotypical thing. So I think... so there was no confidence instilled in your own abilities. A girlfriend of mine was taught by the Charity nuns at Gardenvale, they just churned out doctors, lawyers, this was in the 50s. ... One was a 'middle class' school and one was a 'working class' school. So, different nuns, different aspirations, different um, finances for your parents to send you on. Different expectations... (Individual interview 426-443).

## THE PARTICIPANTS FROM MONASH UNIVERSITY

### Ann ('Working class')

Ann was the only woman at Monash University who said that she was 'working class'. She left school at 14, and returned to study to do year 11 at TAFE. Ann was the first in her family to go to university.

Ann did not undertake paid employment when her children were young and living with her. She said that she would never have returned to study when her children were young. Ann had one daughter living with her at the time she was interviewed. She was on a sole parent pension. I asked Ann why she returned to study:

> I didn't really, um... because the kids were living up in Queensland and I was bored witless and I'd always decided I was going to go back to school when they were grown up. And I happened to drive past Box Hill TAFE one day, and there was this big VCE thing. So I thought I'll do year 11. And then I thought, I got through that, then I'll do year 12, and just sort of... you're expected to go on to uni, so... ... That's all it was, I

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mean I didn't even know if I could do year 11. So I mean uni wasn't even in my plans. University was somewhere other people went. (Individual interview 21-34).

Issues related to 'class' emerged often in Anne's individual interview. She talked about her family:

Well we were ['working class'] but Mum has this sort of upper class mentality. And from what I can understand, Gran, her Mum, her father was a horse trainer, and apparently quite, quite wealthy. Lost it some where along the way. And they had servants and everything. ... But Mum never grew up like that, I mean we were just totally poor 'working class' (Individual interview 883-890).

She also reflected on the relationship between 'class' and education, in response to the written feedback about the interviews. She asked:

Did you find that those women who identified strongly as 'working class', felt a tension between this and higher education as a marker of 'middle class' status, and a supposed means of 'escaping' the constraints of 'working class' origins? I'm not suggesting they necessarily would, but I wonder if they do as I sometimes do, resent being slotted in with perceptions that people in universities are far removed from the realities of real life, the 'ivory tower' syndrome? I find this rather unfair, but I suspect that I may have once thought the same, possibly because of the prestige associated with a university education and supposed elite status of students. ... Confession - at the same time as I feel this, I also get some satisfaction from knowing that I have been exposed to the ideas, knowledge and thoughts of intellectuals etc, etc, even if I don't agree with a lot of what I read, and this sets me apart from, e.g., my family (Written response).

## Georgina ('Working class' background')

As a teenager, Georgina completed HSC and began an Arts degree at LaTrobe University. She did not complete this degree as she had trouble with aspects of study, which she attributed to her Greek background. While Georgina's parents encouraged her to further her education, like Nicole at VUT, they had no understanding of what this entailed and could not help her. This she believed was a result of their lack of education, and also their ethnicity. Georgina's ethnicity was an issue for her:

And, and, I'd got really snobbish to the point that I really denied it. You know, I'd sort of say... I'd just deny that I was Greek. There was a period that I said that I was Welsh (Individual interview 374-377).

Finishing her degree is very important to Georgina:

My sense of success was measured by I suppose my, um, intelligence. You know it was sort of a big thing for me to resign myself as being... stupid. And I don't know why because I'm not stupid, but you know that was a big thing for me, it was something that I

had to prove. And unless I could achieve those academic goals, then obviously I might not have the... intellectual capacity to cope. So I think that has been a thing that always... had to be sort of realised and stated categorically, and through the academic processes. And so here I am still going (Individual interview 446-454).

Georgina said that she was from a 'working class' background, which she defined in terms of where she grew up:

In Hawthorn. But, um, in Alban Hawthorn that back in the 60s was sort of the 'working class' Hawthorn. Sort of the [Tape unclear] Hawthorn East, which was sort of... East Hawthorn being the sort of itinerant workers, sometimes they had a job sometimes they didn't, but where we were was sort of stable 'working class'. We were the only Greeks in the area. It was mostly elderly and middle aged English people. Which, we were a bit of novelty, because we weren't a threat to them. So, that wasn't too bad (Individual interview 236-248).

It is interesting that Georgina, like Joy, had also attended LaTrobe University when younger and had trouble fitting in. However, unlike Joy who felt that she did not fit in because she was 'working class,' Georgina said that she did not fit in because she was Greek. She did not consider LaTrobe University a 'middle class' university as Joy had but called it a 'charity university'. She said:

There were a lot of idiots at LaTrobe, a lot of sort of druggies and hippies and people that you knew that were there sort of piggy backing on a welfare system. There was a really thick environment there so... No I felt pretty comfortable at LaTrobe, there was a few people there who I knew had come from the private school system. And I always used to think what the hell are they doing there. You know, they've had a lot of privilege. Sort of like a Clayton's degree (Individual interview 293-308).

Georgina's husband and one of her brothers was university educated. Her friends were also educated and/or professional people. At the time of the interview, Georgina was working in the Public Service. She had two children both of primary school age.

## Isabelle ('Working class background')

Isabelle attempted, but did not pass year 12 when younger:

The funny thing with my family was that they always expected that we would both go to uni. My Dad was a brickie. He had to leave school when he was 13, and he always hoped that we would do better. And I think that his family, for a 'working class' family, sort of they owned farms and things like that. But they, how should I put it, they did take into account the cultural things, but they just didn't have... Like he used to love to listen to classical music, but he didn't know anything about it, so... even there what he listened to was really plebeian compared to what [husband's] parents would listen to. You know for him it was just awful to think that... so then again it was different. But they did have

expectations for us, it's just that they couldn't help us. And it didn't work for me, it worked for [sister] (Individual interview 108-118).

Isabelle's sister started but did not finish a degree. When she was younger, Isabelle worked in the Public Service and in childcare. When she had children, she worked part time. At the time of her interview, her children were in the primary school age range.

When I asked Isabelle why she had returned to study, she gave a range of reasons. She said that she had been contemplating returning to study when she met her future husband and he encouraged her.

Isabelle said she was from a 'working class' background. She defined this in a range of ways. As noted above it was in relation to culture, father's occupation, and so on. However, she made an interesting distinction between 'working class' people from the country and 'working class' people from the city:

> **Isabelle:** You know there's a difference here between city kids from a 'working class' environment, and country kids from the same sort of 'working class' environment. Nothing was impossible for us. We didn't have any barriers. Most of the friends that I had from [town where she grew up] for instance, are professionals, of one sort or another. And most of them... I was the one who didn't go to uni. But most of them did. And they were all of them 'working class'. I could tell you an interesting story about all... only one, one whose father was a school teacher, she would be the exception.
> **Gail:** That's funny, because I've noticed that a couple of the women that I've interviewed, are the same. They've said that they are from 'working class backgrounds' but came from the country, and they are completely different than the...
> **Isabelle:** You don't seem to see the barriers around you, or see the distinction as much between you and 'middle class' people. But in the city, I can see how you could. Because it's so different, you really can notice the difference (Individual interview 373-386).

### Jeanine ('Middle class')

Like Isabelle, Jeanine grew up in the country. She completed year 12, but did not continue her education at that time:

> Did well at school, but, um, didn't get any particular encouragement to go anywhere. The assumption was that I would end up... I remember my mother saying, you know, giving hints that I should marry someone who makes a good income. In other words the assumption that you would end up being dependant on someone else. My parents, Mum died the year died the year after I finished high school. Dad died the following year. So... um, and I was working. ... Plus my brother had a nervous breakdown during my HSC year. So my, how I was doing at school and whether I went to uni and so on was never important, compared to everything that was going on. So, it wasn't something that I gave

much thought to because it wasn't something that I was given encouragement to think about seriously. And the high school was, even though technically they were encouraging girls to do well, basically girls were still being pushed into doing secretarial and so on (Individual interview 15-29).

She was the first person in her family to go to university:

My father was a Dental Technician, his parents ran milk bars. My mother, actually she got her leaving certificate, which was a big thing in those days. And her father was a Publican, and her mother... came from, landed, people who had land, grazing properties in the western district. They didn't go to university back in those days. So, yeah I'll be the first (Individual interview 132-137).

Jeanine worked in a bank, managed a shop, and worked in childcare when she was younger. When her children were young, she did not undertake paid employment. She had separated from her husband since her return to study. At the time of her interview, Jeanine was on a sole parent's pension. Her children were in the primary school age range. I asked Jeanine why she returned to study:

It was something I always wanted to do. And actually, I knew during [son's] kinder year, I knew I wanted to something. I knew I didn't want to go back to the Post Office, um, but I had to do something. The idea of being a home Mum when both of my kids were at school... And I also didn't think it was fair. I mean I could take up tennis, and I could go out and do lunch. But I think that's a bit... parasitical. My husband works full time and I do an hours house work and then spend the rest of the day flitting around like a socialite, I mean... ... And a little bit of that is fun. But it gets boring. And I must admit I like to do something constructive. I mean I like some time to go around and socialise, but... (Individual interview 177-203).

Jeanine is the only woman in the study to call herself 'middle class'. In a telephone conversation with Jeanine, I mentioned that I was interested in 'class' differences amongst the participants. She said that she considers herself a 'middle class' woman, but says, 'I'm a pensioner!' This put her in an ambiguous position. 'Here I am living on a pension!' She called herself a hybrid. She said she had a 'middle class' upbringing. This she ascribed to 'middle class' values.

### Kate ('Unclassed')

Kate left school in year 11, and returned to do a BA at 30. She worked in a bank and the Public Service when she was younger. She was the first in her family to go to university.

> Well I... I was always brought up to value education. I think my parents always sort of pushed, if you can get to uni, good. But I mean I never got there, when I was younger. And I think it was... I never had any confidence either. When I went back to uni I kept thinking to myself, what am I doing here, I should, I don't have the intelligence for this, or what ever it takes! (Individual interview 37-41).

Kate's husband was university educated. She said that his return to study had been the catalyst

for her own return:

> And then my husband, we were um, we were not long married, and my husband took the urge to go back to university. He'd been studying at tertiary level, and um, dropped out because his Mum couldn't afford to keep him there any more, and he'd lost his scholarship. Although he was still getting quite good marks. And, um, so he decided he wanted to go back to uni and do something, as a mature age student. So he applied and got in. And I put up with him for a few years studying. And I thought, well if he's doing it I can do it too. And um, I heard about Deakin University... off campus study. And I thought I'd apply. I didn't really think I'd get in. But they accepted me! That was a bit of a shock. (Individual interview 12-22).

Kate's children are all adult age.

## Natalie ('Unclassed')

Natalie left school at 15:

> Um, well I left school at 15. Um, which was in Queensland, and that was called junior. Which would probably be the equivalent of year 10. Although there was only four years of high school anyway then. But, um, so there was sort of 2 years that I didn't do. That was mostly because I was at boarding school, which I hated so much, that I gave my parents no peace until they let me leave. Then because I was only 15 I did a year in Business College. Um, and then went into secretarial work (Individual interview 4-10).

At 45 years of age, she returned to study to do her HSC, and then commenced a BA. I asked

her why she returned to study:

> I think, it was really because, when my kids got to high school, um, that I started to feel ignorant. They would talk about things and I would think, I don't know anything about that. I'm really quite ignorant. And, um, so of course I had to do HSC. Because I hadn't finished school. So, and also there was one friend who was quite influential as well, in the sense that she was doing HSC. And I don't know that it would even have occurred to me except for her. But, the combination and the fact that she was doing it, but I thought, oh, I could always go and do that. And, um, I really enjoyed it. And took 2 years to do 3 subjects at HSC. (Individual interview 16-24)

Natalie's children were all adults. Her husband was an executive, and most of her friends were

professional and/or educated.

### Pam ('Unclassed')

Pam completed HSC when she was younger and began a degree at Melbourne University that she did not complete. She worked in Public Relations when younger. Pam worked part time after her children were born. At the time of the interview, she was working in a clerical position part time. She is the first in her family to go to university:

> I'm one of 9 kids, and I'm the first to go to uni. And when I went 20 years ago I was the first to go to uni. But my sister's kids have gone to uni. But no, no-ones... My brothers went on and got apprenticeships, so they've got very good qualifications, just a different means in those days. ... Oh look, there's no support there, Dad thinks it's a whole lot of bullshit. Um... but I don't have a lot to do with them anyway, we're not really close. Because I'm the only one, all my family's in the country and I'm the only one in the city. And they've always thought I was a bit... They always thought I was a bit strange anyway. 'Pam's the one with all those high faluting ideas', you know, and they just dismiss it (Individual interview 322-332).

I asked Pam why she had taken up her degree study again:

> Well I went back to study after my marriage broke up. But I was always going to. I'd sort of hummed and haaed about it for a few years. And then the kids were too little, and I was always going to, but it was like the catalyst that said, 'OK do it now'. And also, I actually don't know, well my marriage was rocky anyway, it wouldn't have survived this study. Wouldn't have survived (Individual interview 96-100).

> It's always frustrated me that I never finished that first degree, it's like an unfinished thing. A personal thing. I wanted to do it as an example for my kids too. To sort of finish something. So a personal thing, and also I sort of wanted to spend the rest of my working life doing what I wanted to do rather than what I have to do. So I think I'll probably always work part-time because of my kids. Well you can't pick and choose when you're part-time, whereas I felt that I get something behind me I'll have more option to be selective. I'll have a bit more... you know, a bit more behind me (Individual interview 123-131).

Pam's ex-husband, and her friends were professional people and/or university educated. At the time of the interview, her children were primary school age. Pam did not mention 'class'.

### Ruth ('Working class background')

Ruth left school at 15, and returned to study at 42 to do a degree. When she left school, she worked in a winery. When she had children, she did not undertake paid work. Ruth has separated from her husband (who was a businessman), since her return to study. Her brothers were university educated:

> I came from a big family, I had 7 brothers. I have 2 sisters. But it was pretty well established by the time I came along that the guys went on to school, the girls waited till

they got married. You know, it was quite a traditional family as you can imagine. And there was a part of me that wanted to go on. You know I often look back at that time and I think, you know, if only I had kicked up a bit, but I was scared shitless about going to the local state school. After coming out of a very... I don't know confined... protected... environment. but my father found me a job, so I went and did it. And that was that (Individual interview 78-86).

Ruth said that her background was 'working class':

Oh well my background was very much 'working class'. I'm not sure how you'd define 'middle class' (Individual interview 561-568).

I asked Ruth why she had returned to study. She said that she had been doing voluntary work with the church, and that she had returned to study to get the qualifications to be able to enter the paid workforce. Her children were all adult at the time of her interview.

*ILLUSTRATING THE DIFFICULTIES OF DEFINING 'CLASS'*

How the women in the study self attributed 'class' indicates the difficulties inherent in defining 'class'. Within this section, I note the ways the women talked about 'class'. Just as I did not ask the women to describe themselves in 'class' terms, but relied on whether they spoke of 'class' or not to place them into 'class' categories, when they did describe themselves in 'class' terms, I did not ask them to define what they meant by this. Here I note the ways they talked about what 'class' meant to them as it emerged within their discussions.

The women who I have placed within the category 'working class' had a variety of ways of talking about 'class'. Marianne, Megan, Debbie and Kathy spoke of the ways in which, as mature age women students they were unlike mature age women students 'on the other side', who, by implication they appear to mean 'middle class' women. They believed that the difficulties that they experienced as students were not experienced by 'middle class' mature age women students.

Joy, Ann and Marianne spoke about 'middle class' people being articulate, or speaking nicely, which they felt that they do not. Joy, Ann, Marianne, and Megan made comments about 'middle class' culture, attitudes, even clothes, being different.

I think Megan sums up the difficulties of defining 'class'. She believed that the education she has gained makes her 'middle class', as she equated ignorance with being 'working class'. She then said 'class' is not based on education. She called herself 'working class', but she had very little money. She made a distinction between herself and 'middle class' people, but also made a distinction between herself and 'working class' people.

What was particularly interesting in how the 'working class' women talked about 'class' is that it was most commonly based on difference. It was not being articulate, not living on 'the other side', not having friends who were educated, and not having the same attitudes and culture. Even Kathy and Debbie who did not call themselves 'working class' noted how they were different to 'middle class' people.

Again, no firm definitions of 'class' emerged amongst those women who said that they were from 'working class' backgrounds. Jane, Isabelle and Sally spoke of having 'working class' backgrounds because of their father's occupations or income. For Georgina, her background was 'working class' because of the area she lived in when growing up. Isabelle spoke at length of 'middle class' culture being able to appreciate classical music.

What was also interesting within this group is that while they said they were from 'working class' backgrounds, they made distinctions between their background and other 'working class' people. Georgina made a distinction between the area in which she grew up, which she said was 'stable' 'working class', and another area that was 'itinerate' 'working class'. Isabelle noted that her father was interested in classical music, unlike most 'working class' people. She also made a distinction between 'working class' people in the city and in the country. Four of the women, Georgina, Isabelle, Sally and Jane, felt that, unlike other 'working class' people, their families valued education.

Only one woman called herself 'middle class': Jeanine mentioned the difficulties in defining 'class', but suggested that it was the values within which she was brought up. She did not elaborate on this, so I am unsure what values she was referring to. She suggests that 'class' is not determined by money.

What I think is particularly interesting is the relationship of education and 'class' that emerged within how the women talked about 'class' identifications. What emerged was that, while the 'class' groupings are certainly not fixed groupings, there is a relationship between how the women talked about education, their family's attitudes toward education, and the 'class' groupings within which I have placed them.

It is interesting to note that five of the six women who identified as 'working class' said that their families did not value education, and that they had not been encouraged to remain at school when they were younger. In addition, their parents had neither the money nor the knowledge of the educational system to have allowed them to continue even if they had wanted to.

All the women who identified as 'working class' were the first person in their family (and amongst their friends) who had been to university. Similarly, few of the 'working class' women said that they had friends or family who were professionally employed.

What is particularly interesting is that the women who said that they were from 'working class backgrounds' all said that their families valued education. Factors other than this accounted for their not continuing their education when they were younger. For example, Jane cited financial reasons, while Ruth stated that only boys in her family were considered worthy of education. Being a member of a family that valued education was also cited as a distinction from other 'working class' people by Jane, Isabelle and Sally.

The women from 'working class backgrounds' (and the women who did not identify in terms of class) were more likely to have had spouses and friends who were either post secondary educated and/or working in professional occupations (Isabelle, Sally, Ruth and Georgina). Nicole, Natalie and Pam all had spouses who were professionally employed. Similarly, all spoke of their friends as either post secondary educated and or professional employed.

## CONCLUSION

Within this chapter, I have introduced the participants of the study. I have described the discursive space of their everyday lives and histories. I have shown how I have categorised the participants in relation to 'class' based on how they talked about their own class. I have highlighted the similarities and differences amongst the participants depending on the university they attend, and the 'class' groupings within which I have placed them.

The following chapter outlines the themes that emerged within the research project. Here I outline the themes that emerged within the interviews with this particular group of mature age women students. As I have outlined in the previous chapter, I endeavored to allow my interviews with the women to be participant-driven as far as possible within the confines of a thesis. That is, the themes were not pre-set, but were drawn from what the women said. The resulting themes therefore were not neatly structured around themes that I had predetermined before speaking to the women. The themes, which I identify in this chapter, are ones that emerged within the interviews. They reflect the women's concerns and the issues they raised as mature age women students, and are those that I have identified as being useful to address the issues of identity and difference with which I am concerned.

# CHAPTER FIVE: TALKING ABOUT BEING MATURE AGE WOMEN STUDENTS

## INTRODUCTION

My primary aim in the current research is to investigate how identity forms and shifts within specific discursive spaces. In conceptions of identity such as this, identity is formed and shifts not only within the discursive spaces to which one has access but is also mediated by one's history. In the previous chapter, I outlined the backgrounds and histories that the participants brought with them to university. This chapter examines the ways in which the identities of the group of mature age women students have been affected by exposure to the new discourses and knowledges that they have encountered within the discursive spaces of higher education, Women's Studies, and the discursive spaces of their everyday lives.

Identity formation is not something that can be measured statistically. Nor can one define or describe another's identity for them. We define ourselves differently in different contexts. Our definitions of self are subjective and as such difficult to pinpoint and measure. We define ourselves in many ways according to the discourses and knowledges to which we have access. We also define our sense of self in relation to how we believe others position us (Griffiths 1995). My discussion of the themes that emerged within the study of mature age women students is based on how these women defined *themselves*, and the ways they felt *others* positioned them, as women and students. I explore these themes in relation to the discursive spaces to which these women have access; that is, the discursive spaces of the universities they attended, the Women's Studies programs they undertook, and their everyday lives. The themes presented are based around the discursive spaces to which the women have access. I outline how the women spoke of their experiences as mature age women students within the discursive spaces of the university and within the discursive spaces of their everyday lives. I

also describe how they spoke of the effects of the discourses and knowledges of Women's Studies on their sense of self as women.

Within this chapter, I draw on the group interviews. Here I present how the women talked about how they experienced being mature age women students, both within the discursive spaces of the university, and within the discursive spaces to which they have access in their everyday lives, and how they spoke about the effects of Women's Studies on them. As the group interviews are used in part to inform the direction of the individual interviews, it is useful here to offer lengthy excerpts to show how the discussion of each theme emerged. I outline the broad issues that emerged within the group interviews, and an overview of how this group of mature age women students discussed their experiences of returning to study. The excerpts presented are not always neat. Within each theme, I present those excerpts from the group interviews that indicate how the women spoke about themselves within that particular space. While I have edited for repetition, there are times when one of the participants made a comment that differed from the general tone of the discussion. It is those comments that differ to the general discussion, or those that indicate differences within a theme, that form the basis of chapter seven. To enable the reader to refer back to these when they are being discussed I have placed boxes around those sections of the discussion that show differences between the universities, and within the university excerpts.

### TALKING ABOUT BEING MATURE AGE WOMEN AT UNIVERSITY

All the women were aware that I only interviewed mature age women students. I began both group interviews by outlining my interest and how I envisioned the interview going. I said that I was interested in differences amongst the women. I outlined my interest in the research, drawing on my own experiences to illustrate this. I present here those sections of the group interviews that indicate how they talked about their experiences as mature age women students within higher education.

*VUT*

At the beginning of the VUT group interview, I mentioned that I had conducted the Monash

University group interview the previous week:

> Jane: What did they do previously though? Have they all done the traditional wife
> mother bit that we've probably all...
> Gail: Well I don't really know, I haven't really asked them that, but I... I think that a lot
> of them are single Mums, now. A few were still married...
> Joy: Of women who go back to study most of them are single mothers, do you think?
> Sally: If they start married they finish divorced.
> [Unsure of speaker] That's what [Lecturer] told us.
> Sally: Because he went around the room and said a third of you women [will not
> complete your degree]. Well there were a couple of women who were considering not
> going on because he said that (VUT group interview 31-42).

The discussion moved on to the difficulties that mature age women students have in juggling

childcare and studying:

> Debbie: It's keeping up that expectation... No matter what's going on around you're
> expected to be a woman, you should know, and we'll leave it in your hands, and you've
> got all these other things to do. And I think that's...
> [Unsure of speaker] Is that being a woman or is that being a parent?
> Debbie: No I think it's just being, well being... the children come to you, like... like well
> I've got one at RMIT and he's studying and I need the computer and I give up the
> computer. ... I mean that's the self sacrifice that you do. And I think sometimes you
> have to stop and say 'hey, hang on a minute'. So now we've got a roster. ... So, yeah, it's
> really hard, and it's a combination. You know, if something goes wrong, or if somebody's
> sick, you're running to the doctors, you're studying there at the doctors...
> Jane: Yes I've done lots of studying in the doctor's waiting room.
> [Unsure of speaker] And in your coffee break at work. ...
> Kathy: But that's what changed with me. My studies come first. If it doesn't fit in, well,
> too bad. That's what's changed. ...
> Debbie: But that depends on the age of your children though. You see you can't do that
> with little ones. You can't say, 'well I'm sick and vomiting', 'Oh go look after yourself'.
> [Laughter].
> Gail: And it depends if you have a husband around too I suppose.
> Sally: It does. [Many of the women agree]. But I'm, moving towards, I've got one in year
> 12 this year. ... And you know, and so what happens... you know you type up her essays
> because it's 2 o'clock and she's asleep. And that sort of stuff. But that stopped. I said to
> her one night, I just burst into tears one night and said 'well this is it I'm not doing it any
> more', and I didn't. So I'm moving to that thing of yours that you know, bugger you,
> because the marks come in it's not 'oh well Sally was helping [daughter] and she had sick
> kids...', none of that is taken into account.
> Megan: I mean I made the comment I think, no matter what mark I get I did it with 4
> children by myself.
> Sally: I do think that but I sort of think you should get a sort of loading, for how many
> kids you have. [Laughter]. But every time you get a mark you think 'I could have done
> better', because there's always been a family crisis. [The other women agree]. There's
> always been something that's stopped you just getting that last...
> Sally: But then I don't have another life, do you have another... you don't have another
> life. Like you go to uni and you look after your kids, and you...

Kathy: I have another life, I make sure I do. I do things from when I get up till when I go to bed, but I have another life.

Jane: Oh I have another life.

Sally: But if you're on your own.

Jane: I am on my own. Yes, and I have another life. My kids go to their Dad's every weekend and I... that is my time. ... Now one day of that I work, I have a part time job as well as the study. But I still make sure I have time for myself, because whilst the study is to a certain degree, you know a good thing about my life, and it's for me, I still figure I need a social life. I go off to the movies, I go to the footy, I go you know to a play, I have to have time off.

Megan: See I don't have a break from my kids. My ex's not there, so uni is my break. If I didn't do uni then... Because I work just about full time, then I would work full time, or I would work more or I would do more with the kids. I would have found something to do with that time. Not for me, so uni is my time. ... See with my kids I'm with them until 8 o'clock and then it's rack off. Get out of my face, this is my time. See I don't even open a book 'til 8.30 at night. There's no point (VUT group interview 113-143).

The discussion again moved on to the other issues. Jane returned to the issue of being a

mother and a student:

Jane: Well you raised the issue of guilt before, and we didn't get to talk about it. Um, I decided a number of years ago that I'd had a life full of feeling guilty and so I wasn't going to feel it any more. ... I was made to feel guilty about my marriage going wrong, I was made to feel guilty about everything that ever happened to the kids. I mean if the kids fall over in the back yard it's your bloody fault, never mind what they are doing. Everything's our fault, so I just decided a few years ago I was never going to feel guilty about anything. I don't feel guilty about studying, I spent 15 years looking after the kids. And only going to work part time when my ex husband was home. ... So I don't feel guilty about studying, I don't feel guilty about the fact that the kids have to go without things because I'm studying, because I went without a whole lot, a lot, when they were growing up. ...

Megan: I mean, my coming back to uni is really important to me, but it is at the bottom of what's important. You know like, I have a job. If I don't work my kids don't eat, or they wouldn't be able to do the things they do and have the things they want. So I work, my kids, and unfortunately school comes last. That's why none of my work's handed in and I don't care. I mean if I was to fail because my work wasn't in it's not because of me as a person, it's not because of my ability, it's because, I have children and I have to work. And that's the way I think about it, bugger it, you know, like the world's not going to come to and end because I didn't hand in an assignment (VUT group interview 530-538).

*MONASH UNIVERSITY*

At Monash University Ann, the only woman at Monash University who had identified herself

as 'working class' explored her initial university experience:

Ann: I was in first year, because I did VCE at Box Hill, and there were a lot of um, there weren't many my age, there were a lot of younger kids who sort of dropped out. So they'd had a bit of a life and usually a hard life. When I came here in first year, and I think I was right, I mean I looked at them, but I was sure I could pick the private school... but know and I mean, and driving around in cars they've got the mobile phones and all this sort of thing. I mean it doesn't worry me. I couldn't care less what I am but... There were all these different people.

> Jeanine You're confronted with it. With the fact that you *are* whatever.
> Ann I mean it was interesting, I wasn't. I didn't think, 'oh I'm only 'working class', cause I don't care. But...
> Isabelle Judging by the toilet doors, or the backs of them, there's a bit of a debate about private schools (Monash University group interview 23-35).

The topic changed, and then focused on the issue of juggling family responsibilities and

studying:

> Pam: Even though my studies are really important to me, they are still the last line. Like if they need me at work, extra work, or if my kids are sick, the study is always relegated to the bottom of the heap. Probably because I am on my own.
> Jeanine: One of the realities of life.
> Georgina: See, I'm the opposite to that. I wouldn't defer my subjects any longer.
> Pam: Well mine's geared to accommodate it, but, if something goes wrong, it's... I still get through my studies and I don't defer, it just means ... I find that is still the last priority, the sick kids and the money to sort of run the family are still my... But the study, keeps me going, gives me you know... yeah it does it, not just mentally, personally. You to sort of know that I do have this other terrific little thing that I'm doing.
> Jeanine: For you.
> Pam: Yeah, and even though it's relegated I know that it's still there.
> Georgina: But you've still got time restraints with your study (Monash University group interview 87-112).

The discussion moved on to other issues, until Ruth returned to the issue of being a mother

and a student:

> Ruth: Compromise is something that comes up right throughout the study, isn't it? For me certainly. I did my degree course full time. That's at the Catholic University so it was a small university with other mature age students, which I think saved me somehow. There were a lot of people going through the same process. But that compromise, I'm still doing it, I'm still trying to work out when my priorities lie. Not just my priorities but my responsibilities. You know, 'who am I, what am I meant to do, how should I be, do I sound confused?'
> Isabelle: I think responsibility is interesting, yeah, it's not just your priorities, it's your responsibilities.
> Jeanine: But you have a responsibility to yourself as well. And that's something I focus on. Maybe some people might claim too much. But you have a responsibility to yourself to do something for yourself and like you say, you've still got your studies there, and it makes you feel good. You know even though you relegate them you don't let them go altogether, and that's a responsibility to yourself, not to let them go. You'd be denying them if you let them go. And chances are the other people you're responsible to would suffer as a result if you weren't looking after yourself in that respect.
> Ruth: I find a great sense of achievement at the end of semester when you look back and you think 'oh this happened and that happened but I did it.' I find that...
> Isabelle: There is a sense of guilt for me a lot. For instance I just got through 2 essays in a pretty short space of time because I had, I'd really relegated the studies too far into the background for most of the semester. And particularly Women's Studies, that was a really bad idea because there's a real lot of catching up to do. Just in terms of understanding and getting the essay together. And um, it sort of happened again, but the reason I did that was because I was, I had been feeling guilty that I'd been neglecting the other areas of my life. So, whether I give my time to them and whether I give it to studies, I'm always

guilty for one or the other. Because I'm doing Women's Studies I'm telling myself a lot this is to do with being female.

Kate: Well it took me 10 years to do my undergraduate program because I continually deferred whenever something came up in the family, you know a death or an elderly person needed caring for, or something with kids, I'd defer. Yeah, that was... my study was a little hobby as far as the rest of the family was concerned. My husband would say that all the time 'oh Kate's little hobby'. And I didn't see it that way at all, it was important to me, but...

Jeanine: But you didn't challenge them?

Kate: No, I sort of felt, it was the guilt, you feel you have to give up... ...

Natalie: I've been studying for 10 years now, including doing HSC for 2 years at TAFE to start with, and now my kids have grown up and left home. But they were teenagers when I started, and I remember, I'd forgotten all this sort of thing, I used to do all my reading in the family room, so that I wasn't locked away. So I was there, accessible for anyone who wanted to talk and ask this and that or help with that. And I would only go to the study when I was starting to do stuff on the computer.

[Unsure of speaker] It's actually being allowed that private space, you have to fight for it (Monash University group interview 204-212).

Later in the interview, the issue of how as mature age women students, this group was aware

that they are different to other students:

Jeanine: I started out at Frankston campus, we had a mature age lounge. ... But we had a space. Now if the weather was fine I'd always make a drink and go outside and end up sitting chatting to the young students, but sometimes I'd sit in there, and a couple of other mature age students. ... Now I don't like the idea of just being put aside in a little box, separate from all the other students, but it is still nice to have a space where if you feel like it you can go and chat to other mature age students. I enjoy talking to the young students. I like to think they've enjoyed talking to me.

Isabelle: But some of them feel nervous talking to mature age students.

Gail: But your experiences are really different... but some of them are annoyed that mature age women students tend to get better marks.

Natalie Because they do the work. Because I've done the reading.

Gail: I've always said, when I get good marks, it's not because I'm smart, it's because I work so hard. I would not say to anyone 'yeah maybe I'm intelligent' it was always 'But I work harder than anyone else'.

Jeanine: Well some people said to me 'oh yeah you do well because you're really smart' and I said 'whether I'm smart or not the fact is I've worked bloody hard'. But let's not deny the fact that some people work hard to get good marks.

Isabelle: I find that there's something, that things come with age with me. Um, I can't think of any other reason because I wasn't like this when I was studying a school, I fact I was just the reverse. Um, but I can't compromise with anything I do. I've got to think that it is right. That I've understood it completely otherwise it just doesn't go in. I can't make myself hand in anything that I think is wrong, or...

Ann: I can't write, I can't write unless it is what I really want to say. I've known other people who can just write garbage just so they'd have something to hand in. I mean I'm not saying mine is spectacular, most of the time it's not, but it had to be...

Ruth: It is interesting isn't it. That seems to be common to mature age students that you don't just hand something in. I mean I did study with a guy, a mature age guy, who he would ask the lecturer how many marks he'd given him for the last assignment so he could work out how many he's need (Monash University group interview 457-492).

It is clear from the excerpts from the group interview transcripts that these mature age women were aware, as mothers and/or wives that they had different experiences as students than young students, or even male mature age students. The women range in age from 30 years to late 50s, and had children with ages ranging from very young (under one year old) to adult (over 20 years). It was not surprising therefore, that they spoke of the ways they negotiated being a mother and a student, and how this negotiation in many ways set them apart from other students. How this was articulated emerged rather differently amongst the women, and it is these differences that I explore in more detail when outlining the other research material.

<div align="center">TALKING ABOUT WOMEN'S STUDIES</div>

Women's Studies is offered differently at VUT and Monash University. Many of the women at VUT began to study this subject because of a lack of alternative subject offerings at the times when they were able to attend university. Thus, many of the VUT students had different reasons for choosing to study Women's Studies than did the Monash University students. However, the women at VUT continued the subject past first year, and in many cases decided to major in Women's Studies, indicating that while they may have had little choice in choosing the subject originally, they had made a choice to continue. The women were also at different levels of study; some were undergraduates, and others were postgraduates. I present here the ways in which the discussion indicated the effects of studying Women's Studies on the women, noting how they believed others' perceptions of the discipline.

*VUT*

> Marianne: If you say you're doing Women's Studies, people automatically, people are always attacking you. And I'm sick of justifying what I do, it's like 'kiss my arse'. You know, 'I don't have to justify anything to you'.
> Sally: What I've found... instead of getting really aggressive and jumping up and down the way I used to and blow steam out my ears, now I tend to sit back and just think, 'well I've got the knowledge pal, I'm right, you're wrong'. I'll still argue, but I've just got that confidence, that self esteem that I didn't have before I came here. To sit back, and instead of becoming aggressive, I just argue and say, 'well you know, you'd have to be right you're a man', or something like that (VUT group interview 265-271).

The discussion moved on to other issues. I made a comment that the status of women is low

in our society, Megan said:

> **Megan:** But I think Women's Studies really makes you confront those issues. It's like...
> the first couple of Women's Studies I wanted to slit my wrists. Why bother! It's so
> confronting, you know, and then when you really get... you learn, and then you go out...
> And the next day you go out, and you're confronted with it, and you think no, crap, this
> is not on.
> **Jane:** See I didn't find it confronting. I didn't find it depressing either. What it did was
> explain to me everything that's happened to me in the last 35 years. And all of a sudden,
> 'oh, that's why'. See I didn't find it confronting, I just, it was almost a relief that it wasn't
> me, it wasn't about anything I did, it wasn't a lot of decisions that I made, it was about
> the bloody system. You know, and there was all this thing there to explain everything that
> had happened.
> **Marianne:** My mum and her friends all left school when they were 14 and married at 18
> and they already know all that, but not in terms of academic discourse, but they know it.
> **Jane:** You already know it. But there's something to explain it. ...
> **Debbie:** And I think that's where Women's Studies has to be very careful. Because if
> you're not out there fighting the cause, and you're staying home doing the traditional
> thing, it's not right. And I think some times a lot of the women you talk to feel that. And
> I reckon it's a damn hard job, to stay home all day and look after children, and really
> they've got the most important job looking after the kids of the future.
> **Sally:** But surely Women's Studies is about choice, not being bulldozed one way or the
> other.
> **Debbie:** I got the impression in the first year that... and I don't think that was fair, and
> in fact I argued... (VUT group interview 361-371).

Having moved away from the issues related to Women's Studies, Julia, who had not spoken

previously, said:

> **Julia:** It was never advertised at home that there is a Women's Studies program here at
> VUT. ... When we got here, we found out that there is a Women's Studies, and
> interestingly only the mature age female Pacific Island students wanted to do Women's
> Studies. Because of I think of how they experienced at home as being housewives and
> um, the traditional system is there. It doubles the depression that's given by the western
> system. ... I think doing Women's Studies has really changed my life. And the way I
> think of being a woman. Because I never think I'm a woman, or a repressed woman from
> a Pacific Island country. Only when I took up Women's Studies, and I said, 'oh, so this is
> what it is'. [The other women laugh and agree]. Ever time I took [Tape unclear] and that
> has given me an identity, being a woman, doing Women's Studies. All other overseas
> students from my country are male students. Except myself. And doing Women's
> Studies.
> **Gail:** So what are you going to do, are you going to go back and stir up all the women?
> **Julia:** That's what I'm, I'm getting the feeling right now, that even though I'm getting my
> identity as being a radical woman from a traditional society, at the same time I'm opening
> up, like I'm opening up things for debate. ... So I mean that's how I mean that doing
> Women's Studies has changed my life totally (VUT group interview 470-485).

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A lengthy discussion also emerged within the Monash University group interview about

Women's Studies:

Jeanine: I know when I started my course everyone said 'oh dear', and everyone said 'how does your husband feel, does he feel threatened and all that sort of stuff'. Well after we separated I said did you feel threatened when I started to get good marks and stuff and he said 'no'. When we started having problems everyone assumed it was because I was at uni. And it wasn't, it wasn't an issue. There were other issues, when I was at uni and getting good marks, because he doesn't have a degree and isn't particularly academic. It was not an issue. But then everyone thinks that there will be, but it doesn't have to be.
Natalie: I actually know someone whose, when she first started at Monash, a man, a friend, said to her husband, I love this, 'don't let, don't let your wife do Women's Studies or it will break your marriage up'. Scary stuff ain't it. 'You should not let her do it'.
Ruth: It is very common thinking though I think. ...
Pam: I did Women's Studies to, sort of, because I felt that way anyway and I was interested in getting, if other people felt that way too and maybe looking at the theory and looking at it in more depth.
Jeanine: You were already heading in that direction it just gave you some focus and...
Pam: Well yeah, I mean it just, I was interested, it wasn't even heading in that direction I don't think, it was just... You know seeing if other people felt the things I felt...
Natalie: For me it was an articulation of things that I couldn't really articulate. And I heard Moira Rainer describe it beautifully, when she was Equal Opportunity Commissioner still on the radio. And she said ' we used to say it's not fair. Now we say it's sexist, or it's harassment or it's... we now have the words'. And that's how I always felt, when I started work women were certainly getting 50% of what men were getting and I used to say 'it's not fair'. Why should women get less than men, it's not fair'. That was really something that I didn't have the words for.

Ruth: Well it's quite a milestone isn't it, to look at something difficult and say, is this writer up themselves or... or am I completely hopeless. And to be able to move out of that phase and say, I'm not completely hopeless.
Jeanine: But don't some writers, I've just read a book of Irigary's, and I quite liked it. And I liked it but I think there are some writers that just... but some of the stuff we've read in Feminist Theories [Tape unclear] Kristeva, and I even wrote in the contents at the start of the reader waaa. I don't want to read any of this for the exam, because I didn't get it the first time and I don't think I will in the tenth time. So... And I'll accept that there are some people who just naturally use complex language, but they seem to use it well. Other's seem to talk in complex language and talk in circles.
Georgina: But you take the risk of saying that all literature has to be popularist so that it can be read by... you are in fact patronising people by this sort of process of reductionism. ... And I think you run the risk by doing that little reshuffling, regardless of intentions whether they are good or bad.
Jeanine: There are some who might use complex language, but you're sitting there with your dictionary in hand, you can actually understand what they're saying. Whereas another author you'll sit there with dictionary in hand and at the end of it you'll still have no idea.
Georgina: But that's like life, sometimes things just go over the top of your head.
Ann: I don't think they really want to because they're keeping it up on that level where only a few people can understand. I think if they really wanted to do anything, it really should really be more accessible.
Pam: But, I've found that being at work, picking the kids up and taking them to this and that, and than and have to sit down at the end of the day and read Kristeva, it was like 'what's she on about, doesn't she...' I found it, that part of it really difficult. It was sort of this high theory and... (Monash University group interview 286-329).

There are a number of interesting issues that emerged within the two groups' discussions

about Women's Studies. Particularly relevant to this thesis are the many ways that the women

spoke of the effects of Women's Studies on them, and their perception that both within and outside the university Women's Studies is often not considered a 'real' subject.

### TALKING ABOUT BEING A WOMAN/STUDENT IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Within both the Monash University and VUT group interviews, much discussion related to the reactions of family, husbands and friends to their studying:

*VUT*

> **Marianne:** I think it's not how you see yourself, it's how other people around you see you. And, I know, it's caused rifts in a lot of friendships. And... and with my family. ... It's true but I've just drifted apart from a lot of friends, and, some of it is that we just grew apart, but some of it was people perceived that I'd changed when I didn't perceive any change in myself. [Nicole agrees] And, um, and my family too. And I think I talked about it to you on the phone, how it's a 'class' thing, yeah my identity, and, and it's sort of up in the air. And I think it probably changes you more personally. I mean I came here thinking I'll get a degree to get a job, but it probably changes your opinion, I think it has more of an impact on you personally.

**(Unsure of speaker):** What way do they think you've changed?
**Marianne:** Um, well I don't know, I suppose you just um, your lifestyle changes, I think, and you start, and you can't afford to do the things with money, and it comes down to money. And plus maybe you start... wanting to do different things.
**Gail:** Do you think some people see it as threatening?
**Marianne:** Yes, yes.
**Sally:** I went to afternoon tea with a couple of friends a couple of weeks ago, and they were rabbiting on and rabbiting on, and I sat there and I thought, God I'm bored, and it was really sad. It gave me a fright, cause these are women I've known for so long, and then one of them was having a bad time at work ... And I said something about, you know women in management. And she just turned and flew me. And it's that sort of dismissing any knowledge that you have, because they don't want to hear it it's like 'oh that's a lot of shit, what a load of crap, you're not in the real world'. Even though I have been in the real world. I mean, but that was really sad.
**Gail:** How many of you are the first one in your family to go to uni?
**Jane:** I have sister that has been in teaching, but out of 9 of us I'm the only one. She since done a degree...
**Megan:** They don't understand the importance of uni. They'll say come out to dinner and I'll say I have to study. 'Oh do it when you get home'.
**Debbie:** I felt distanced with my friends, because I went back and did VCE before I came back to uni, because I didn't know how many brain cells were left... So I did VCE to see how I'd cope and then I thought ok, I'll keep going. But the time when went back, because I was just hitting 40, and they said 'oh she's just going through a mid life crisis'. So they just went along with it, and then when I said what I've got into uni I'm going to go ahead, well... that was a different ball game. You know, so even though I see them, I am distant, and I think that's the saddest part because I... like you realise, that as much as I like them and they've terrific friends over the years. ... And I'm getting emotional, but I really don't have that much in common with them. And I feel so sad because they're so good hearted but I'm not interested, if you know what I mean (VUT group interview 166-219).

After a discussion of other issues, Debbie comments on the different ways that she is treated as a student than she had been as a mother:

> **Debbie:** Well that's true just being a mother. Because I find it fascinating that when my kids go to school, the teachers would hardly discuss anything with you because you were the mother. But when they found out I'm doing a degree, unbelievable, they... Look all my friends at the school see me and they say 'well you'll find out so much Debbie'. And they talk to me, and I just think that it's really sad, treating the mothers... like little kids. They don't tell you anything. But if they know you're doing a degree, you're on their level (VUT group interview 388-395).

Later in the interview, I asked Kathy how she had experienced returning to study:

> **Kathy:** I don't feel guilty, I'm happy, I'm having a good time. Um, I think my whole family is proud of me, everybody that I know. And one girl said that I'm her role model, and I said 'what does that mean', and she said, she hopes to do what ever she wants to do, you know at my age. And, um, I did feel guilty in the first year, but now I don't. And I've put everything... my studying goes in front of everything else. It doesn't matter how anybody else feels.
> **Gail:** How old are your kids?
> **Kathy:** The eldest is 25. ... And I've done a good job bringing them up, so... I've got it all figured out now. My husband always says we're all in charge of our own destiny, when I used to say 'oh, can you do this with me, blah blah'. Everybody's in charge of their own destiny, and I thought 'you... I'll fix you up'. I repeat everything he says, cause he comes out with these really good sayings and I remember them, and I can use them on him. So if he complains, I say, everyone's in charge of their own destiny. I'm in charge of mine so... And I'm happy.
> **Debbie:** Well at first when I started studying, the guilt was thrown at me something shocking. [Some of the other women make comments on this]. I just said 'hold on a minute here, things just have to change'. So he sort of thinks ironing that's it. and I think, hold on there's lots of other things to be done around here. My father in law, as soon as he heard I got into uni came around and said 'what are you doing?, you're my son's wife you have to be home. You're going off, you're leaving the 3 children', he said 'where is your place here?' and he's never discussed... well we don't talk to him now anyway. He made the effort to come around and give me a lecture. ...
> **Marianne:** But it isn't just husbands, I know my sister stopped talking to me. And we haven't spoken... and it sort of coincided with the time I started uni. She just cut off all contact.
> **Gail:** Because of uni?
> **Marianne:** Well it was never discussed, it's just... But my Mum comes to see me, and if I mention something about uni she changes the subject, it's just an abrupt change. It's just total denial that... and I don't know why, it's not like... I don't really take it as seriously as I should, and I'm not. It's not something that I go on about. But the thing is I don't knock them for what they do. But they can't accept... But they just don't want to discuss it.
> **Jane:** That's what people want to know, when they know that you're studying, apart from your friends and that. It's what will you be qualified to do when you finish, and I say 'absolutely nothing, it's an Arts degree' (VUT group interview 638-715).

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> **Ann:** Do you know what I do, um somebody will say, I'll say I'm at Monash and they'll say 'oh you're a teacher', because I'm so old. I say 'no, I'm only a student'.
> **Gail:** Oh no, that's like *only* a housewife.

> **Pam:** I find that I'm always saying 'oh I'm only doing my undergraduate', because most of my friends if they are studying are doing a postgraduate... So I find that I'm only an undergraduate (Monash University group interview 194-203).

The discussion turned to the attitudes of their husbands and/or ex-husbands to their studying:

> **Jeanine:** Before I separated you know, if I had an essay due my husband would take the children out. And then come home and cook tea and bath the kids, and do every thing. [Laughter from the women and cries of 'so why did you separate']. Obviously there was a little bit more to it than that. I thought about getting him in for weekends or something.
> **Natalie:** Well it didn't cause any problem. I've been married for 30 years, and um... There obviously times of irritation when he'd say 'oh you're studying' or he'd want to go somewhere and I'd say 'no I can't, I've got to do this essay' and he'd say 'well when is it going to be done' But when that little irritation was over, he would be fine about it (Monash University group interview 217-226).

It appeared that some of the women feel that they have become isolated since returning to

study:

> **Isabelle:** But I haven't got time to catch up with my neighbours and the people who live around me because I, I'm studying, and because they know I'm studying, they don't bother me either. So you do find yourself in a kind of a bubble after a while.
> **Natalie:** Well when I first started here which I think is the key, we didn't have semesters, we had a year long class. And I have collected Monash friends along those years, and I now belong to three different groups which meet regularly. ... And it doesn't matter what subject comes up, someone has majored in that, or something else, and you just get into these wonderful conversations (Monash University group interview 369-387).

Just as some of the women in the VUT group had noted the relatively low status of women in

society, Jeanine said:

> **Jeanine:** I've tried to strike those words from my vocabulary [*Only* a mother]. And I do it when I do discussion groups for mothers, you know when... Because mothers have a, you know 'I'm only a mother, I'm only a housewife, I'm just a whatever...' And whenever anyone says that I always pick them up on it. I say 'no you're not only a housewife, you're a housewife and a mother. And it's a demanding job'. Um, and mothers tend to, have a way of putting themselves down you know, 'oh yeah, another child, with every placenta that goes a few more brain cells go'. It's not acceptable, the reason you forgot to bring that along tonight is because you have too many things on your mind. ... So it's just something that women often do form the habit of saying only and just, and making excuses for themselves.
> **Ruth:** But that reflects the common perception, that housewife is a pretty lowly sort of work really.
> **Jeanine:** It's nice to be able to put student on a form, instead of housewife. ...
> **Natalie:** I had the opposite experience recently, which embarrassed me enormously. I belong to another group of women and I was giving a talk on something, and the woman who introduced me, introduced me as an intellectual. I was so embarrassed. And I just thought, I mean I've gained a lot of confidence from coming to uni but not to that level. I wonder when does anybody warrant that title. ... But it was such a foreign label to me (Monash University group interview 409-440).

I mentioned that my husband had at times felt neglected when I was studying, Isabelle said:

Isabelle: That's what bothers [husband] too. Because he's studying too he knows that it all has been done, and you have to give time to it. So you know, so there's no lack of understanding there. But it's still... when it comes to the crunch, when I'm not there, for as long as it takes to write an essay. Or two in a row as it just has been. That's starts to get to him. Because no amount of understanding compensates for the fact that he feels sort of deprived of my company I suppose and then, um, and it's not physical, you'll think I'm sexist about this, but you know he's, like every other guy I've known and he really needs company. And you know, I guess I mean female company, and that's why he's married. And so, as understanding as he tries to be that's what really annoys him.

Natalie: But I do think that with all the problems, it's been the most enriching experience can possibly have to me, studying, yes [Other women agree]. Even just to read the paper and when there's... There might be a reference to some piece of classical literature or something that fits in to the story... 'Oh! I know what they're referring to'. [Other women agree] And I really find that a great thrill. Always still... to just to be educated, to have more education than I had.
Jeanine: To be a little more critical of things. You know you hear a politician or you read a journalist saying something and you say 'oh, hang on a second, I think there's a little bit more to that than what you're saying'.
Ann: That's why I did politics, because I thought when I see these politicians on TV [Tape unclear] I want to be able to say, 'why?'. So I did two years of politics and there's a little bit there but...
Jeanine: Any critical theory or anything that causes you to look into, not necessarily the politics, to look beyond...
Ann: I mean I knew I disagreed with what they said but I had no counter argument, like it was intuition not a rational...
Natalie: And I think in that sense too, it validates your opinion too. Although I agree with you [Kate] that the more you know the more you know how little you know. But nevertheless I used to before... I would have... I was very opinionated actually, but I would always then bend to thinking 'oh, but I don't have the education that that person has so they probably know a lot more about it than I do', and so I would be likely to bend to that, but now I can accept that there are 2. It's my opinion and their opinion and mine's just as valid as theirs.
Ruth: But I mean it helps in all sort of areas doesn't it. I mean even with your children at school, or your dealing with doctors. You don't have to sort of have to take their word that this is the way it is. You think I can see that they're operating from such and such a theory and... (Monash University group interview 551-591).

I asked Ann why she had returned to study:

Ann: Because I wanted an education. I left school when I was 14 and I always said I wanted an education when I got older. And then I have to justify it and tell fibs to people. [The other women agreed].
Gail: Yes. I've always had to do that. But I was doing it because I want to do it.
Ann: Yeah that's what I do it for. And then when I say I'm doing Linguistics and Women's Studies most people drop the Women's Studies, they don't ask about that, and I don't know why, which is just as well. ... But I get that with Linguistics 'what can you do with that?', so straight away I trot out the speech therapist. And then I really, I go through all the things, and I say [Tape unclear] and um, and then I think 'I don't have to justify this'. I don't have to but I do. I mean when I first started I didn't justify it I just said 'I'm doing this'. I went back and I did year 11, to see if I could get through that and sort of each year has been a [Tape unclear] and I didn't feel the need to justify it but now I feel I sort of do.
Isabelle: I find myself justifying it before anybody even asks me why I'm doing it. Because I know that I must have sort of a insecurities about why I'm doing it myself.

> Ann: Because I'm on a pension and why aren't I out working and, oh... And I find that it is the people that I know that when they were young had done a year at uni and dropped out and have never done, and I find that they the most critical. Because I've actually persisted and I'm almost there.
>
> Jeanine: They find that threatening. I know I, I know I got charged with this the other day. How do you feel, I mean you're getting a pension and you're studying and those other students, they're not getting a pension, to come and study. So well I'm not getting a pension to go and study, I'm getting a pension to raise my children. And I say well how many hours of community work have you put in, and not for your kids school. And how many phone calls have you had from distressed nursing mothers at 2 o'clock in the morning. So I'm getting to the point where I'm not bothering to answer.
>
> Ann: But then Mum, she told me this last year, and I thought gee Mum, you really know how to do something for me. Um, 'all university students are bludgers. And the worst ones are Arts students'. And I'm thinking gee Mum, I really busted my gut the last 4 years, and... ... But she's got no concept of what it is, because learning literature is um, memorising poetry and reciting it. And you know, girls should leave school... (Monash University group interview 604-716).

It is clear from the discussions at both the universities that the attitudes of family and friends had an impact on how these women experience being mature age women students.

## CONCLUSION

I have drawn on the group interviews to show how the mature age women students spoke about themselves as women, and as students. This was presented around how they spoke about themselves as women and students within the particular discursive spaces to which they have access.

Within the following two chapters, I consider these themes in relation to the other research material. That is, the individual interviews, the women's responses to the outline of the issues that was sent to them, and telephone conversations that I had with the women over the course of the study. In chapter six, I consider the themes described in this chapter by focusing on the similarities amongst the women. Chapter seven approaches the research material very differently. Here I consider the differences that emerged amongst the women.

My aim in presenting these two different focuses on the research material is to demonstrate the difficulties inherent in debates about identity and difference. Having to choose one way or the other would lead to very different analyses.

# CHAPTER SIX: FOCUSING ON GENDER

## INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I drew on the group interviews with mature age women students to give an overview of the ways in which they described their experiences of returning to study. In this chapter, I draw on the individual interviews, telephone conversations and the women's responses to the outline of the issues sent to them to consider how the themes of the group interviews emerged within these. In the previous chapter, I considered how the women spoke about themselves within the discursive spaces of higher education and their everyday lives, and also how they spoke about Women's Studies within the group interviews. In this chapter, I draw on the other research material to consider whether the women spoke in a similar way about these issues when they were not amongst a group of their peers. I focus in particular on the similarities amongst the women.

## TALKING ABOUT WOMEN'S STUDIES

The ways in which the women spoke about Women's Studies within the group interviews suggests that, to varying degrees, and for a significant number of the women in this study, Women's Studies led to changes in the ways they thought about themselves and their role in society as women. This similarly emerged within the individual interviews. Many of the women had long been concerned with women's rights, but had no way of expressing these. For these women, Women's Studies has given them the knowledges and theories they needed to articulate their concerns. Many said that this has given them confidence they had not had in the past. Just as she had in the group interview, in the individual interview Natalie spoke of the ways Women's Studies had offered her knowledges that had articulated issues related to women that had concerned her in the past. Sally and Jane also spoke in their individual

interviews of the confidence that had gained by having the knowledge to be able to articulate their thoughts and feelings on gender issues.

Natalie and Jane had rethought their histories in the sense that they recognised that it was not they who were 'out of step' because of their feelings of 'something wrong' about the ways in which women are treated. They realised that it was the expectations of them by society as women that may be wrong. These women appeared to have experienced a shift in their identities: that is, from being different, to belonging to a group with similar views, and a body of thought which validated their opinions and feelings. They felt that they were now able to understand and explain what had, in the past, made them feel 'out of step' with the rest of society. As Natalie said:

> The things that I had always felt and knew really to be wrong. But felt that I was so out of step with everyone else, that maybe there was, there was this little niggling thing that, well, other people don't seem to think like this, so maybe there is really something wrong with me (Individual interview 112-115).

While neither Kathy nor Nicole spoke about the effects of Women's Studies in the group interview, this emerged strongly in their individual interviews. Kathy said:

> You think, oh, this person wrote in this book, such and such and it's exactly what you think. And you think, oh goodness, it's just released the pain of thinking that you're different. That you're different to everybody else... Yeah, and that's what's so good about going to school, because a lot of people have got the same ideas as you (Individual interview 69-70).

Later in the same interview Kathy said:

> I loved it. I'm reading Women's Studies stuff while I'm on holidays. And when I read these books, I'm thinking, oh I love this, I love this. And one of them I was crying. It's got to do with how I felt, and how you should act, and it was something that I'd felt for years and this lady was writing about it (Individual interview 264-269).

Kathy and Nicole had gained awareness that the role of woman prescribed by society (and which they had not felt comfortable with in the past) was not the only, or necessarily the right, role for them.

Nicole, Kathy, Sally and Jane spoke of never quite feeling comfortable with how they had assumed they were expected to act as women. For these women, Women's Studies explained for them that the reason they had felt uncomfortable with the role expected of them was that it was not the only way that they could be women. Women's Studies had given them the knowledge that the ways of being woman prescribed by society is not the only or necessarily the right ways for them. Women's Studies offered them a new identity as women within which they felt more comfortable.

Changing appearances after returning to study appeared to be common: Jane and Marianne felt that they did not have to conform to the images of woman they felt were commonly accepted in society. Jane said:

> I've realised you don't have to look a certain way. I don't have to dress a certain way, I don't have to wear make-up, I don't have to, you know have my hair done all the time, and all that sort of stuff. Um, that it's OK to be just me. And... you don't have to... it's sort of like I've realised that I don't have to pretend any-more to be anything else. I can be just who I am (Individual interview 243-247).

For Jane, the knowledges she gained led to her feeling more comfortable with herself. She had the confidence to look how she wanted, and act how she wanted. She does not have to be 'feminine', recognising from her study that this is but one way amongst many of being a woman.

For some of those women in the study who, in the past, had given little thought to themselves as women within a patriarchal society, the realisation that the ways they had lived their lives were not necessarily the only, or best, ways to live came as a shock. This shock led, in some cases, to a questioning of everything about their lives. Their identity as women had been challenged. The ways they had thought about themselves as women and their role in life were been exposed as not the only possible ways. This was particularly the case for Ruth. Ruth had been a very strict Catholic, Women's Studies had challenged the ways she had accepted as being the best for women in the past. The knowledges she had gained within Women's

Studies were liberating in the sense that she had learnt new ways of thinking of herself as woman. She said:

> I think, at the same time, while I was doing the Women's Studies, it was, as I said, it was comforting to have things named, or good to have things named, but also my values kept being challenged all the time. Like Sociology of the Family, you see... well maybe the family isn't all that it's cracked up to be. And although you know your own experience, I knew my own experience of the family wasn't all it was cracked up to be... And so then I'm left thinking, well what is sacred? There's um, there's part of me that would love run back to be what I was. It would be so easy. If I could be a good mother and, you know, cook them good meals and keep them all nice. That gives me a role in life. And it's like... I mean it's just the temptation I think. It often comes up, but... that idea of a role I think. And it also gives you purpose... it's um, it sort of defines who you are, all that sort of stuff. I think that's why I want to hide, run back into that. Of course there's this other part of me that says 'no, that's not the way to go' (Individual interview 592-599).

While Ruth's experiences appear to have been uncomfortable, she said that she certainly would not want to go back to how she had been before. In her words, 'you can't put the toothpaste back in the tube'.

However, the knowledges that these women are being offered within Women's Studies do not reflect common discourses relating to women that are present within society as a whole. Natalie, Pam, and Sally spoke of constantly having to justify the fact that they were studying Women's Studies. They spoke of having to explain not only why they are doing it, but also why there is such a subject at all. Natalie, Pam and Sally spoke of the ways that, when people knew that they were doing Women's Studies it was assumed that women's issues were all that they were interested in.

Pam found that Women's Studies as a subject, and the knowledge she has gained from it, were not well accepted by many people:

> Yeah, when you mention that you are doing Women's Studies, her [friend's] husband just, like 'this nonsense, this is time wasting stuff'. And when he heard I got into Law it was like 'I'm glad you're doing a real subject, you'll be able to do something with this now'. ... People say to me what sort of dropouts, what sort of women do those subjects. What sort of women are in your class, what bunch of weirdos are you doing this with. I find that really incredible. No other subjects have I done where people say what sort of people are doing that with you... And the other thing I've found is that people dismiss it as a subject. Like it's not a serious subject. It's something that girls go off and do. Frustrated girls go off and do (Individual interview 522-530).

That the knowledges of Women's Studies are not accepted widely within society is clear from the experiences of these women. I now consider how the women talked about themselves as women and as students within the discursive spaces to which they have access. I then consider how the women have adopted the knowledges they have gained in Women's Studies within their life in general.

## TALKING ABOUT BEING MATURE AGE WOMEN AT UNIVERSITY

What emerged within the group interviews was that mature age women students recognise that they are different than younger students, and even male mature age students. This was also apparent within the other research material. The most commonly expressed way that the women felt that they were unlike traditional students, was the conflict they felt between their roles as wives (or ex-wives) and mothers, and their student role. All the women, whether they had young children or teenagers, or those who are sole parents or married spoke often and at length of the difficulties they had combining being a wife and/or mother with their study. While one might assume that sole parents would have more difficulty in juggling childcare and studying, there appeared to be little difference between how these women spoke, compared to the married women. This raises a number of questions about the role of husbands in their wives studying that emerges often in the remainder of this chapter.

A number of women spoke of how they feel guilty if their studying took time from their families. Joy, a sole parent, felt that she did nothing well, either as a student or as a mother:

> I feel like I do nothing well. And, yeah... and the house is a mess, my relationship with the kids isn't what it used to be because I'm always yelling at them because I'm always stressed about getting stuff in. And even if I'm not, even if I'm getting all right marks, I feel like I'm not really learning. I feel somehow I'm not getting the most out of it. So, um, I do feel as if... I do nothing particularly well. Um, and I do feel tremendous guilt, but I always have, that's just me. But I try, I am trying... I am aware of it and I am trying not to buy into as much. But even the thing like having the perfect house. And I've never had it. I've never had the perfect house. But I still feel really guilty that I somehow haven't conformed to... Because I have friends that have conformed to that (Individual interview 253-255).

Isabelle, who is married, spoke of feeling guilty about the time that her studying took from her children:

> I guess I'm the sort of parent who, I feel really obligated to give a lot of time to them. See I had a guilt complex about [eldest daughter] because she likes to talk before she goes to sleep at night. That's when she will open up, and she actually waits for that time. And when I'm studying, a) I haven't got the time, and b) I am so tired that I just haven't got the patience, and so often I have to say, 'I just can't. I can't sit and listen tonight, I'm just so keyed up'. And that makes me feel bad, because I know that is important to her (Individual interview 131-142).

While not all the women spoke of feeling guilty, most, whether sole parents or married, spoke of going to great lengths to ensure that their studying did not inconvenience their families. Nicole, for example, who is married, studied when her children were asleep. Kate and Natalie, both also married, spoke of always studying at the dining room table so that they were always accessible to their children.

Pam and Megan, both single mothers, arranged their lives so that their studying did not take time from their children. Pam said:

> It's, my social life is the one that I give up. That's the part that goes. I say no to a lot of things because I need to do the work. And I don't feel guilty about that you know, oh yeah you know I can justify that. Work, well I have to go to work because I have to earn a living. So that goes, but um... Yeah. I give up other things. Like I've given up my exercise, and I don't go out a great deal. And I don't watch TV or anything like that. So the study fits in that other gap. And, because I don't have a partner, I think that's a big guilt thing to deal with for a lot of people. I don't have that guilt. Yeah so, no because I don't think that I do compromise the family. I never would, I don't think I ever would . (Individual interview 419-431).

Jeanine, a sole parent, spoke a great deal about having responsibility for oneself, but also spoke of studying when it would least inconvenience her children. She studied when they were in bed or at school. She also stated:

> Because how can you be a good mother, I mean given ultimately it's like an ulterior motive. How can you be a good mother if you're not looking after your own needs. Ok you have to temper that obviously you don't want to be selfish with it. But you have to look after yourself. I mean I could chuck in my studies, I mean things are going to be tight financially, I could chuck in my studies and go and get a job, which means we would have more money. Which would mean that my kids would be better off, in monetary terms. But I would be totally miserable, um, and they would suffer, they would suffer from that. I'm not very good, I'm not a good martyr (Individual interview 341-354).

Thus Jeanine felt a responsibility to care for herself purely for the benefit of her children, and to be a good mother. What is clear from how these women spoke of themselves as women and as students within the discursive spaces of the university, is that their responsibilities as wives and/or mothers characterizes their feelings of difference from traditional students.

## TALKING ABOUT BEING A WOMAN/STUDENT IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Much discussion arose within both groups about how they were treated by their families and friends, after returning to study. These discussions provide a way of determining how others allowed the women an identity as students outside the discursive space of the university – in the discursive spaces of their everyday life. A common theme within all the interviews was the reactions of the women's spouses (for those who are still married), family and friends to their studying. The reactions were articulated mainly around whether or not the women received support for their studying, and whether others took their study as a serious venture.

Again, one would expect that there would be significant differences between those women who are sole parents and those who are married. Both Joy, a sole parent, and Debbie, who is married, said that people had 'thrown guilt at them' for not putting their children before their study. Kathy, who is married, said her husband got annoyed with her study, especially when she did not care for him in the ways that she had in the past. She said:

> And, you know a lot of people, including me, had difficulty going to school because, you know, hubby wasn't too rapt about it, you know. Not cooking his tea, not doing housework. But you can sort of understand their side of it can't you. Because you're not getting money. You know if you're not getting money, and you're not... (Individual interview 244-245).

However, Kathy understood that her husband's attitude to her as a woman reflected traditional views about women. She said:

> But you know why, because they've been brought up, you are the housewife, that's your job. And you've got to do this no matter what. They can't change it, they can't change their thinking to think 'oh yes you can do this'. But you have to be at that sink, chained to that sink. And you have to do all this housework (Individual interview 535-539).

The women generally thought that their study might have been perceived differently if they were men. Joy said:

> If a man's working and doing this part time he is a god isn't he. Look at how much he has taken on. But if a woman's doing it, it is like you said, a little hobby. And why isn't she out in the workforce? (Individual interview 372-374).

Similarly, Nicole had found that:

> I'm studying, but it's different to my brother's study. Like, he's got fair dinkum stuff, and I'm doing 'something', do you know what I mean. Like, for me, I've still got to make sure that my house is maintained, that I do the shopping, that I feed the kids. But my brother, hasn't got time for this, so my mother will do it. Do you know what I'm saying. (Individual interview 550-554).

Jeanine said:

> And he [friend] said 'yeah, it's not *just* a case of extending the mind now'. Well it was never just a case of extending the mind. You know this bored housewife, just needs to extend the... Because we all know that bored housewives don't have very extensive views! You know they all need to extend their minds (Individual interview 765-771).

Marianne commented a number of times that her father believed that she should be married and have children rather than studying. She said:

> I said to Mum one day, 'you know Dad, I think he thinks I'm like a total slut', and you know I wasn't married at 18 to a boy I was virgin to, and living round the corner in a house and land package and having three kids. And she said, 'well, you've hit the nail right on the head' (Individual interview 487-490).

Joy, Megan and Ann claimed that there was criticism of them as single mothers, on a pension and studying. They spoke of others not thinking that they were entitled, as sole parents, to have anything in their life other than their children. Joy said:

> Being on a pension too, I really do have to justify that. So I'm on a pension, I'm sitting on my fat backside, doing this, and they're paying for me. And I'm not even keeping my house terribly clean. It was probably all her fault that the marriage broke down in the first place' (Individual interview 380-383).

Most of the women spoke of how their study was accepted by those outside the academic setting on a conditional basis. Even those who said that they received support and understanding from their spouses said this was only offered as long as study did not inconvenience them too much. While most spoke passionately of their love of studying for its

own sake, they spoke of constantly having to justify to themselves, and particularly to others, why they were studying. They often justified their study as leading to better employment prospects; thus study would ultimately contribute to the families' earnings. Natalie said that:

> But, no, he [husband] took it quite seriously I think. But there's always that little proviso, I think with the majority of males, as long as it [study] doesn't inconvenience them too much, then it's fine. And it's even quite serious (Individual interview 331-333).

Similarly, Isabelle said that, while her husband actively encouraged her to return to study, he did not like to be inconvenienced at all by her study. This was interesting as her husband was also studying for a degree and thus understood the pressures of study.

Some noted that there were concerns by their family and friends that their studying was taking time from their children and families, and that their own interests were being put before others in a way that is not commonly accepted for women. For some, their family and friends believed it was acceptable for them to be working, and thus contributing materially to the family (despite having to put their children into childcare), but not acceptable if this was to study. Georgina said:

> I don't think it's something that they are sort of enthused by it ... And, um, my father's, 'what are you going back for at your age. What are you doing going back and wasting your time, you could spend your time working instead'. As far as he was concerned it was an extra 11 hours a week that I could have remunerated with income. Or it would be time I could spend with the kids (Individual interview 1028-1047).

Thus, there appears to be an assumption that it is acceptable to place children in childcare when it is for the families' material benefit, but not when it is for the benefit of the women themselves.

## CAUGHT BETWEEN THE DISCOURSES OF UNIVERSITY, WOMEN'S STUDIES AND EVERYDAY LIFE

From the women's reports about the attitudes of others to their studying, it appears that the ideology of the family such as that outlined by Barrett (1980) is alive and well – and the 'feminine mystique' still has power over how women are perceived in all areas of their lives. Friedan (1963) argues that returning to study offers women an identity outside the family that

is divorced from that of being someone's wife or someone's mother. When considering the ways in which this group of women spoke of the attitudes of others to them as mature age women students, it appears that they were not allowed an identity outside that related to the family. It follows women (and in particular women who are wives and mothers) whatever realm they are situated within. That these women went to such lengths not to inconvenience their families is not surprising when considering how they spoke of others' attitudes to their studying. The expectations of society upon women stress the importance of women placing their families before themselves. The themes presented in the previous chapter suggest that these mature age women students were positioned by others, both within and outside the university, as different from traditional students.

What emerges within a focus on the similarities amongst these mature age women students is that, within the discursive spaces of higher education, and within the discursive spaces of their everyday lives, mature age women students are defined as women and students through their relationship to the family. As mothers and/or wives there are expectations placed upon them, and they have expectations of themselves, that their families should not be inconvenienced by their study.

As I outlined in chapter three, I came to the research with few preconceived ideas about what I would find within the study. I adopted a methodology in which I would not have pre-set themes and questions, but which allowed the themes to emerge from the women, rather than from my pre-conceptions. Having read literature relating to mature age women students I had noted that much was concerned with the effects of returning to study on their lives as wives and mothers. I had expected that the group of women in my study, as Women's Studies students, would be aware of feminist issues. Perhaps naively, I did not expect that issues related to the family would prove to be such a strong theme amongst this particular group of women. Surely, I thought, women who have been exposed to feminist critiques of the family,

and women's role within it, would have resolved the issues of combining study and family responsibilities. I say this was a naïve expectation, as I myself had not, and have not, resolved these issues. I thought that perhaps I was particularly slow to have my consciousness raised! That the family, and issues related to study and family responsibilities, did emerge so strongly as an issue for this group surprised me. That it did despite my expectations to the contrary demonstrates to me that this is an issue for mature age women students that can not, and should not, be underestimated.

An analysis that drew on the research material that focused on similarities amongst the women in relation to gender issues could provide useful insights in relation to gender and education, women and the family, and Women's Studies. That mature age women students appear to be defined in terms of their relationship to the family suggests that mature age women students consider themselves to be outsiders within education. While feminists concerned with gender and education argue that this is the case for all females, the findings of the current study suggest that mature age women students may be in a unique position. As Friedan suggests, females are channeled through 'sex directed' education into aspiring to become wives and mothers. That mature age women students have already fulfilled this expectation before entering higher education places a very different perspective both on their experiences, and the impacts of study on their identity.

An analysis that was concerned with feminist theorisations of the patriarchal family may similarly benefit from the issues that emerged amongst these mature age women students. It may be anticipated that there would be differences between the women in relation to whether they were married or were sole parents. These women were not members of a patriarchal family thus it would be expected that the expectations of them would differ to those of the women who were married. As sole parents have total responsibility for their children, they do not fit notions of the patriarchal family as dependants on a male breadwinner as suggested, for

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example, by Barrett (1988). However, there appeared to be few differences in how this group of women was defined within their family, irrespective of their marital status. All were subject to the expectations, both by themselves and the people around them (both within and outside the university setting) that their responsibilities as mothers and/or wives came before their studying.

The feelings of guilt expressed by the women, and of the lengths they would go to in order to avoid inconvenience to their families is not unique to women who return to study. Oakley (1974) and Richards (1990) found similar effects upon mothers and wives who returned to the workforce. It would appear, as Barrett (1988) suggests, that women are defined within the ideologies of the family, whatever they may do.

For feminists who are concerned with issues related to Women's Studies this group, similarly present interesting findings. The positive effects of Women's Studies on women have been documented. Bowles and Dueli Klein (1983) for example have suggested that Women's Studies is empowering for women, offering them a safe space within the masculine ideology and knowledges of the university. It appears that for the women within the current study, Women's Studies led to a raised consciousness and the realisation of a capacity to articulate feelings of oppression. However when exploring how these women spoke of themselves in relation to being women and students, there appeared to be contradictions between how they spoke of the effects of Women's Studies, and the way they lived their lives as women. As a direct result of their studies, they were convinced in principle that, for example, they should not feel guilty about having time for themselves. They were also aware of, and often upset by, how the people around them perceived them primarily as mothers and/or wives. It appeared difficult for these women to reconcile their histories (how they had thought of themselves as women in the past) and the expectations of others of them as women, with their new knowledges of ways of being women. It appears that even with exposure to Women's Studies

these women remained defined by themselves and others, within and outside university, in terms of their relationship to the family.

# CHAPTER SEVEN: FOCUSING ON DIFFERENCE

## INTRODUCTION

In chapter six, I presented a focus on the research material from the study of mature age women students that a focused on the issues related to gender. I suggested that one could come to a number of conclusions about women, women and education, and women and the family. Within this chapter, I revisit the excerpts from the transcripts of the group interviews to consider how a focus on difference may come to different conclusions. I focus here on those sections of the transcripts that I marked out in chapter five that suggested differences both between and within the universities. In this chapter, I explore these differences.

This chapter is organised around the same themes that shaped chapters five and six. That is, how the women spoke of themselves as women and as students at university, and in their everyday lives, and how they spoke of the effects of Women's Studies on them. Within each section, I examine the differences that emerged within this theme between the two universities.

I then consider the differences that emerged amongst the women within each university drawing on the other research material. As I have noted throughout the thesis, my particular interest is the 'class' differences amongst the women. In this section, the themes are organised around the 'class' groupings within which I have placed the women. While my primary focus is on 'class' differences, a number of differences emerged amongst the women that can not be accounted for by 'class'. I describe these differences.

*DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITIES*

At the beginning of the VUT group interview I made mention of the fact that I had conducted the Monash University group interview the week before. Some of the women expressed an interest in the Monash University group of women:

> Jane: What did they do previously though? Have they all done the traditional wife mother bit that we've probably all...
> Gail: Well I don't really know, I haven't really asked them that, but I... I think that a lot of them are single Mums, now. A few were still married...
> Joy: Of women who go back to study most of them are single mothers, do you think? (VUT group interview).

While I had mentioned within the Monash University group interview that I would be interviewing VUT students as well, none of the women indicated an interest in this. While this could be because I had already conducted the Monash University interview before the VUT interview, and the women were aware of this, as I discuss below, while many of the women at VUT asked again within their individual interviews about the Monash University women, this was not reciprocated.

As noted within chapter six, what emerged within both group interviews was that the main ways these women spoke of their experiences as students was in relation to the difficulties of juggling childcare and family responsibilities and study. The discussion of this issue took up much more time within the VUT group interview than it did at Monash University. There were differences between the two universities in the tone of these discussions. While the two quotes below are extreme examples of more subtle differences between the universities, they are useful to show the differences in how the women spoke of themselves as mothers.

Debbie, in the VUT group interview said:

> Debbie: No I think it's just being, well being... the children come to you, like... like well I've got one at RMIT and he's studying and I need the computer and I give up the computer. ... I mean that's the self sacrifice that you do. And I think sometimes you have to stop and say 'hey, hang on a minute'. So now we've got a roster. ... So, yeah, it's really hard, and it's a combination. You know, if something goes wrong, or if somebody's sick, you're running to the doctors, you're studying there at the doctors... (VUT group interview)

While in the Monash University group interview, Jeanine said:

> Jeanine: But you have a responsibility to yourself as well. And that's something I focus on. Maybe some people might claim too much. But you have a responsibility to yourself to do something for yourself and like you say, you've still got your studies there, and it makes you feel good. You know even though you relegate them you don't let them go altogether, and that's a responsibility to yourself, not to let them go. You'd be denying them if you let them go. And chances are the other people you're responsible to would suffer as a result if you weren't looking after yourself in that respect (Monash University group interview).

As I discuss below these differences in how the women articulated their responsibilities in relation to their children and families in general were common within the individual interviews as well.

While the quote above represents the general tone of the discussion within the two universities, there were differences amongst the women *within* the group interviews. Not all the women in each group spoke in the same way about their experiences as a mother and/or wife. For example Isabelle, at Monash University spoke more in line with the tone of the VUT group interview:

> Isabelle: There is a sense of guilt for me a lot, for instance I just got through 2 essays in a pretty short space of time because I had, I'd really relegated the studies too far into the background for most of the semester. And particularly Women's Studies, that was a really bad idea because there's a real lot of catching up to do. Just in terms of understanding and getting the essay together. And um, it sort of happened again, but the reason I did that was because I was, I had been feeling guilty that I'd been neglecting the other areas of my life. So, whether I give my time to them and whether I give it to studies, I'm always guilty for one or the other. Because I'm doing Women's Studies I'm telling myself a lot this is to do with being female (Monash University group interview).

Similarly Jane spoke differently than the other women within the VUT group interview:

> Jane: Well you raised to issue of guilt before, and we didn't get to talk about it. Um, I decided a number of years ago that I'd had a life full of feeling guilty and so I wasn't going to feel it any more. ... I was made to feel guilty about my marriage going wrong, I was made to feel guilty about everything that ever happened to the kids. I mean if the kids fall over in the back yard it's your bloody fault, never mind what they are doing. Everything's our fault, so I just decided a few years ago I was never going to feel guilty about anything. I don't feel guilty about studying, I spent 15 years looking after the kids. And only going to work part time when my ex husband was home. ... So I don't feel guilty about studying, I don't feel guilty about the fact that the kids have to go without things because I'm studying, because I went without a whole lot, a lot, when they were growing up (VUT group interview)

The difficulties of being a mother and/or wife were not the only ways that the women discussed their experiences of being students. In the Monash University group interview, Ann commented on her first impression of students at this university. She noted that they all appeared to be 'middle class'. It appeared that the other women in the group interview did not share Ann's experience, as the topic quickly changed:

> Ann: I was in first year, because I did VCE at Box Hill, and there were a lot of um, there weren't many my age, there were a lot of younger kids who sort of dropped out. So they'd had a bit of a life and usually a hard life. When I came here in first year, and I think I was right, I mean I looked at them, but I was sure I could pick the private school...but know and I mean, and driving around in cars they've got the mobile phones and all this sort of thing. I mean it doesn't worry me. I couldn't care less what I am but... There were all these different people.
> Jeanine: You're confronted with it. With the fact that you *are* whatever.
> Ann: I mean it was interesting, I wasn't. I didn't think, 'oh I'm only 'working class', cause I don't care. But...
> Isabelle: Judging by the toilet doors, or the backs of them, there's a bit of a debate about private schools (Monash University group interview).

It is clear that, there were a number of differences between the university groups in how the issue of being a student emerged, there were differences amongst the women within the groups. I now explore these differences by drawing on the other research material, and based around the 'class' groupings within which I have placed the women. I consider how the women talked about being mothers and/or wives and students; how they talked about themselves as mature age women students in general; and how, in some instances, 'class' was an issue in how they talked about themselves as students.

## *DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE UNIVERSITIES BASED ON 'CLASS' GROUPINGS*
### On being a mother and/or wife and student

As indicated above, there were differences amongst the women within the two group discussions about how much they have a responsibility to put their children and families before their study. While some of these differences can be explained by the ages of the women's children, and whether they had sole responsibility for their children, these factors do not explain the differences adequately. I explore now how the women spoke of themselves as

mothers and/or wives within the 'class' groupings to determine if how they identified in 'class' terms made any difference in how they articulated their experiences.

### 'Working class' women

In the previous chapter, I suggested that there were similarities amongst the participants in that, while articulated differently, most appeared to relate their experiences as students through how this related to their responsibilities as mothers and/or wives. In reconsidering this and focusing on the differences in relation to 'class' interesting difference emerge.

It was more common for the women who identified as 'working class' to have spoken of feeling guilty for taking time away from their family responsibilities, and the ages of their children and whether they were sole parents or not did not appear to make a difference here. Therefore, for example Debbie, who was married and had children ranging from late primary school to university age said:

> It's a hard mix though isn't it. Because their [children's] study, while it is more important than yours, I grant you that... Oh, they're at the start of their life. So they've got... I think you've got to get them to a level... but I think they've got to give to you as well. I just give it up [the computer] because I think his [son's] life... you know younger. (Individual interview 682-703).

Kathy, who was married and had adult children, said that when her children were younger, she had felt guilt for taking time that could have been spent with them to study. She also spoke of how her husband was often annoyed that since she had returned to study she did not care for him as she did in the past. She went on to say that she understood his attitude, as she was not earning money.

Joy, a single mother, spoke of feeling that she did nothing well, she felt guilty because of this. She says that her children are little, and thus need more time and attention (both her daughters were of late primary school age). Megan was a single mother, with children ranging from primary school age to late secondary age said:

> I mean I love my kids, but I don't want to get to the point where my kids are stopping me from doing something. Because then I think that's when you get resentful, and I think that's when you lose something (Individual interview 394-397).

She went on to say, however:

> I mean I wonder if that's like, you know these bloody people who can just put their kids in crèches to go out with their friends. That's because their whole upbringing and raising children, not from the western suburbs, is a lot different than ours. To them that's a natural process you do (Individual interview 754-757).

Ann, a single mother who has a teenage daughter living with her, spoke of how, when her children were younger, she was a 'perfect' mother. She said:

> I never went out and worked... when they were little. Um, and I was always there when they came home, and, I was a wonderful housewife, I was absolutely amazing. It was quite sick when I think of it (Individual interview 253-256).

Whether these women's children were very young or not, and whether they were married or not, they appear to have rather fixed ideas about their responsibilities as mothers and/or wives.

### Women from 'working class backgrounds'

It is interesting to note that the issue of feeling guilty or not emerged different within the group of women who identified themselves as being from 'working class' backgrounds. Isabelle (who was married) talked about feeling guilty that she was spending time studying when she should be spending the time with her husband and children (both of whom were late primary school age).

Sally and Jane however spoke differently about the issue. Sally was a sole parent with children from primary to secondary school age. She noted the difficulties of putting her children's studying before her own. Jane was also a sole parent with children ranging from primary school to young adult age. Jane spoke at length about how, while in the past she had felt guilty for anything that had happened to her children, she now refused to do so.

*'Unclassed/middle class' women*

Amongst the 'unclassed/middle class' women, the issues related to being a student and a mother and/or wife were articulated rather differently. While, as I noted in chapter six, the end result was that they went to great lengths to ensure that their families were not disadvantaged in any way by their study, they did not talk in terms of guilt in the way the two previous groups had done. For example, Kate and Natalie (both married with adult children) said that when their children were younger they had studied in an area of the house where they would be accessible to their families. Nicole, also married, but with two pre-school age children, has had a great deal of difficulty arranging child-care for her children while she studies. Julia, who was married with two pre-school children says that she was lucky that her husband was not a traditional Pacific Island man. She said, 'because if he was a real traditional man, he will never stay home and baby sit' (Group interview 485-486).

Pam (a sole parent), who had children who were early primary school age spoke of having no social life. She had given this up so that she did not take time away from her children. Jeanine, also a sole parent whose children were primary school age, spoke at length about the responsibility women have to themselves, not only to their children.

## On being different to 'middle class' mature age women students

*'Working class' women*

As I noted above, within the VUT group interview, some of the women were interested in the Monash University mature age women students. This was repeated in many of the individual interviews, particularly amongst those women who identified as 'working class'.

The 'working class' women at VUT appeared to have a number of preconceived notions about the women that I had interviewed at Monash University. Marianne, for example talked about how, unlike Monash University women, the women from VUT did not have the luxury of studying for pleasure. As noted in chapter four, where I discussed how Debbie had talked

about 'class' she suggested that it was easier for women 'on the other side' to be able to return to study.

Kathy felt that she had different experiences as a student because her friends were not 'upper class'. She had complained that her friends were not interested in what she was learning. She asked me:

> Has everyone had the same thing with friends? ... [Woman] at school, I said I just haven't got anyone to talk to it about. And she said 'oh, my friends love it, they can't wait for me to get to their place and start spouting...' Oh well, they're professional people, and they come from sort of 'upper class' or whatever... (Individual interview 367-376)

She wondered whether 'working class' women would, like her have no friends with whom to discuss what they were learning. She asked:

> So what did the others say about their friends, the same thing? Except for the ones who are 'upper class' (Individual interview 401-402).

In a written response to the outline of issues that I had sent her Ann said:

> I remember you talking about the VUT women and their working class status but I was surprised that they had such opinions about Monash University women. I know Melbourne Uni. had 'snob' value. It didn't occur to me that there would be institution differences. I'm relieved their opinions are unfounded (Written response).

### 'Unclassed/middle class' women

Within the outline of issues that was sent to all the women, I noted that fact that while the women from VUT had expressed interest in the women from Monash University this was not reciprocated. While Natalie, Isabelle and Jeanine responded, only Jeanine made note of this. In her response, she said she found it interesting that Monash University women had not been interested in VUT She had not thought that 'class' was an issue, and suggested that this is a 'blinkered vision'. She suggests that; 'It is easier to be blind to barriers when you belong to a group' (Response).

### On being 'classed' mature age woman students

Ann's comments in the Monash University group interview about noticing that Monash University students appear to be 'middle class' was one of the comments about 'class' that

emerged within the group interviews. It was an issue that emerged within the other research material.

*'Working class' women*

Within Ann's individual interview, I mentioned to her that following her comments at the beginning of the Monash University group interview about amount of 'middle class' students at Monash University, that she had said very little. She said that she had felt bored rather than uncomfortable in the group, and that she had nothing in common with the other women. She said that, unlike the other women in the Monash University group, she was not 'middle class', and not heterosexual:

> Like most of those women were terribly articulate, which I'm not. And that sort of throws me. Whenever I'm somewhere and people start talking like that, I think, oh god, and I keep my mouth shut (Individual interview 351-352).

Ann also noted the assumptions of lecturers at Monash University that all students are 'middle class'. She mentioned a tutor who said:

> 'Why didn't you print it out'. I said 'on my portable typewriter?' 'Don't you have a computer?' I said 'no'. He said 'oh, I thought all students did'. This was how off the beam he was... I mean just the assumption that all students had a computer. And everyone knows that I have a ten-dollar op shop typewriter (Individual interview 924-929).

Marianne at one stage in her degree had gone to Melbourne University for a subject not offered at VUT She said;

> I got into the class at Melbourne Uni and I was just like a fish out of water. I was just like, who are these people! I just couldn't believe their attitudes. I mean they weren't horrible people they were just... they're just different. And I remember sitting in between girls... The teacher said oh you know, 'just turn to the person next to you, introduce yourselves. And where are you from', and the girl on one side was from Brighton, and the girl on the other side was from Kew. And they're all doing Arts/Law. And I said, you know 'I go to VUT' and... Yeah never heard of it, and 'I'm only doing Arts'. And you know, I mean I'm over apologizing. And these two women immediately just bonded and they just... I was in between them and they were just talking to each other and I just became invisible... I think that just really highlighted the difference and... And it wasn't, it probably was never a struggle for them to go to uni, it was something they never even thought about. They just did, and um, that really brought it home to me going there (Individual interview 132-148).

Similarly, as noted in chapter four, Joy had felt very 'working class' and thus different at LaTrobe. It appears from what Ann, Marianne and Joy said of their experiences of feeling different than other students that it is when they were not the 'norm', but different in some way that they become particularly aware of that aspect of themselves that makes them different. For these three women, realising that, because they were 'working class', they were different than other students led to a heightened awareness of themselves as 'working class'.

### Women from 'working class backgrounds'

Georgina said that she was from a 'working class background', and, like Joy said that she had had bad experiences at LaTrobe University. While, in a similar way to Joy she had felt that she was different to other students. This she said was a result of being Greek, rather than her 'class' background. She said, 'I really had carried, um, a big cultural cringe about being a, a wog' (individual interview).

## TALKING ABOUT BEING A WOMAN/STUDENT IN EVERYDAY LIFE
### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITIES

Within both group interviews, the issue of how family and friends reacted to their study was a common theme. Similarly many of the women spoke of how returning to study had effects on relationships with their family and friends. These were however, issues that were discussed in more depth within the VUT group, and emerged rather differently than within the Monash University group interview. In the VUT group interview Marianne said:

> Marianne: I think it's not how you see yourself, it's how other people around you see you. And, I know, it's caused rifts in a lot of friendships. And... and with my family. ... It's true but I've just drifted apart from a lot of friends, and, some of it is that we just grew apart, but some of it was people perceived that I'd changed when I didn't perceive any change in myself. And, um, and my family too. And I think I talked about it to you on the phone, how it's a 'class' thing, yeah my identity, and, and it's sort of up in the air. And I think it probably changes you more personally. I mean I came here thinking I'll get a degree to get a job, but it probably changes your opinion, I think it has more of an impact on you personally (VUT group interview).

This was rather different than how gaining an education appears to have affected the women

at Monash University:

Natalie: But I do think that with all the problems, it's been the most enriching experience can possibly have to me, studying, yes [Other women agree]. Even just to read the paper and when there's, there might be a reference to some piece of classical literature or something that fits in to the story... 'Oh! I know what they're referring to'. [Other women agree] And I really find that a great thrill. Always still... to just to be educated, to have more education than I had.
Jeanine: To be a little more critical of things. You know you hear a politician or you read a journalist saying something and you say 'oh, hang on a second, I think there's a little bit more to that than what you're saying'.
Ann: That's why I did politics, because I thought when I see these politicians on TV [Tape unclear] I want to be able to say, 'why?'. So I did 2 years of politics and there's a little bit there but...
Jeanine: Any critical theory or anything that causes you to look into, not necessarily the politics, to look beyond...
Ann: I mean I knew I disagreed with what they said but I had no counter argument, like it was intuition not a rational...
Natalie: And I think in that sense too, it validates your opinion too. Although I agree with you [Kate] that the more you know the more you know how little you know. But nevertheless I used to before... I would have... I was very opinionated actually, but I would always then bend to thinking 'oh, but I don't have the education that that person has so they probably know a lot more about it than I do', and so I would be likely to bend to that, but now I can accept that there are 2. It's my opinion and their opinion and mine's just as valid as theirs.
Ruth: But I mean it helps in all sort of areas doesn't it. I mean even with your children at school, or your dealing with doctors. You don't have to sort of have to take their word that this is the way it is. You think I can see that they're operating from such and such a theory and... (Monash University group interview).

However, again, there differences within the group interviews. consider Ann's comments:

Ann: But then Mum, she told me this last year, and I thought gee Mum, you really know how to do something for me. Um, 'all university students are bludgers. And the worst ones are Arts students'. And I'm thinking gee Mum, I really busted my gut the last 4 years. ... But she's got no concept of what it is, because learning literature is um, memorising poetry and reciting it. And you know, girls should leave school... (Monash University group interview).

Ann's experiences of studying in relation to the ways it is perceived by her mother appear to

be different than the other women in the Monash University group. They were however

reflected within the research material of the women who identified as 'working class'.

## DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE UNIVERSITIES BASED ON 'CLASS' GROUPINGS

### 'Working class' women

In the previous chapter, where I focused on the similarities amongst the women I noted that it was common amongst the women to feel that others accepted their studying only when it did not inconvenience their families. A closer look at this however, shows that, just as there were differences in how the women articulated their experiences as mothers and/or wives and students based on their 'class' positioning, there were differences in how they spoke of others attitudes to their studying. It was the 'working class' women who were more likely to report that their families and friends criticised them for studying at the expense of their families.

As noted in chapter six it was Joy and Debbie who said that others made them feel guilty for neglecting their children. Marianne reported that her father believed that she should be married and have children instead of studying. Kathy said that her husband was critical of her studying because she did not care for him as well as in the past.

The women who identified as 'working class' were quite often very upset that their families were not supportive, or were even hostile toward their studying. They felt hurt that their families were not happy for them in what they felt was something very important to them. All the women who identified as 'working class' said that they could not talk to their family and friends about their studying. Ann, Marianne, Debbie, Megan and Kathy (all the first in their families, and often the first amongst their friends, to go to university), spoke often of having no one in their lives outside the university setting who had any understanding of what university was like. Kathy, for example, talked about her disappointment that her friends were not interested in what she was learning. She says she has no one to share her new knowledge with:

> I've thought, this will be terrific. You know I've learned all these things at school, and we'll be able to talk about them, and I'll be able to say, 'ah, I learned this and this is very interesting, and such and such was saying this in her book'. No, no, no, no. No-one's interested... No. But I think that they're proud of me. ... But... it hasn't worked how I

thought it was going to work. So I'm a bit upset about that, right (Individual interview 349-350).

Most however recognised that their family and friends had little understanding of what studying at university was like, or recognised the value of study. Megan said:

Your whole way of life just, the way you look things just changes. And because, I mean I don't know about you, but in my social circle, nobody does any of this stuff. So they all think that you're a bit loony. 'Oh here she goes again'. ... They pretend like I don't do it actually. And I don't think intentionally. They don't understand. They just don't understand (Individual interview 296-297).

Most of the women who identified as 'working class' were constantly asked what they were getting out of their study in material terms. They felt that their family and friends did not think that they have the right to study for the pleasure of gaining knowledge, but that study should have a material reward. Marianne said:

Mum said, 'how's uni', and I said, 'I'm finished'. And the next, it wasn't, 'oh, congratulations, well done'. It was, 'have you got a job, what are you going to do?' And I said, 'actually I think I'll have a celebration, because I just finished three years of university and I'll have a degree'. And she said 'oh yeah, yeah it's good I suppose'. And then my Dad said, 'well what are you going to do, that's all right, but where is all this going to get you?' (Individual interview 452-459).

Similarly, Kathy said:

People always say, 'and what are you going got get out of it at the end?' They want you to get, something. They want you to get... but they don't realise what you're getting. I keep on explaining what I'm getting (Individual interview 206-208).

Marianne's comment in the VUT group interview about her 'class' identity being 'up in the air' was reflected amongst many of the 'working class' women. While they call themselves 'working class', they were aware that, as university students, they were now different from their family and friends. Just as Rita (as discussed in chapter one) had felt that she did not fit in at university, and no longer fitted in with the people around her, many of the 'working class' women reported a similar feeling. For instance, Joy, mentioned Educating Rita to explain how she felt:

Yeah well that's where that film *Educating Rita* really hit a nerve for me. That scene where she's bought that really cheap bottle of plonk. Her lecturer invites her over to a dinner party, and she stands out in the rain realising that it somehow isn't appropriate. And then

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goes back to that pub where her Mum and all of them are singing. And her Mum is crying, and there has to be better songs to sing than this. And I thought, oh god, it's just ripping my heart out. Because it's like there's just no-where this woman can live and be comfortable. She doesn't fit in, at all (Individual interview 152-159).

Many spoke of how becoming a student had led to rifts between family and friends. Some felt that while they were not 'middle class' because of their education, they were not really 'working class' any more either. Marianne spoke about this at length:

But yeah it gets sort of... it sort of alienates you from... your sort of 'working class', I don't know about 'class', I mean they're really all 'out of working class' now but... It was... you were leaving the fold or something. And I didn't feel that I had less in common with them. Like I suddenly became so smart and so educated that I couldn't relate any more, but it was then that they... or I perceived that they had a problem. I don't know, I feel like you're caught, you're in limbo. You don't sort of fit in with, I don't identify with either 'class' now, and I don't know where I belong (Individual interview 351-353).

Ann, a student at Monash University, said similar things. In chapter four I presented an excerpt from her lengthy response to the outline of issues, in which she reflected on the relationship between 'class' and education.

In a number of ways, returning to study has appeared to make the 'working class' women unsure how to define 'class'. They recognised that they were different than 'middle class' students and other mature age women students. However, their education has made them different to their 'working class' family and friends.

*Women from 'working class backgrounds'*
The women who identified themselves as coming from 'working class backgrounds' quite often reported that their friends were supportive of their study (Sally, Jane, Georgina, and Ruth). What is interesting is that their family members were often less supportive, and showed less understanding toward their study (Georgina, Jane, Ruth). This is not surprising when considering that, as I discussed in chapter four, most said that their friends were often tertiary educated. Their families however were 'working class', and often had minimal understanding of higher education.

*'Unclassed/middle class' women*

Unlike the 'working class' women and the women from 'working class backgrounds', the 'unclassed/middle class' women were more likely to have husbands and friends who had been post secondary educated. Similarly, they were often not the first in their families to have gone to university. This group of women did not report that their families and friends and/or husbands were un-supportive. While the support they received for their studying was commonly tempered by the fact that it was often not taken very seriously, they did not report active disapproval.

I mentioned to Natalie that I have found that I often did not have anyone to talk to about university and what I am learning because no one else among my family and immediate social group have been to university. She said:

> But maybe, see I do mix with people a bit, who maybe you don't in your social life, who... Like this really close friend who's a Family Therapist, her husband is a lecturer at LaTrobe in Family Therapy. And there is that sort of difference. So we will often actually have like parties and dinner parties, where I am talking on that sort of level. And a lot of people will sort of be on that level as well. So I don't know that there is really anyone there to really be impressed (Individual interview 534-542).

## TALKING ABOUT WOMEN'S STUDIES

### *DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITIES*

In the Monash University group interview, a lengthy discussion emerged about the obscure writing of some feminist writers. While other issues related to Women's Studies were discussed, this formed the most prolonged discussion:

> **Ruth:** Well it's quite a milestone isn't it, to look at something difficult and say, is this writer up themselves or... or am I completely hopeless. And to be able to move out of that phase and say I'm not completely hopeless.
> **Jeanine:** But don't some writers, I've just read a book of Irigary's, and I quite liked it. And I liked it but I think there are some writers that just... but some of the stuff we've read in Feminist Theories [Tape unclear] Kristeva, and I even wrote in the contents at the start of the reader waaa. I don't want to read any of this for the exam, because I didn't get it the first time and I don't think I will in the tenth time. So... And I'll accept that there are some people who just naturally use complex language, but they seem to use it well. Other's seem to talk in complex language and talk in circles.
> **Georgina:** But you take the risk of saying that all literature has to be popularist so that it can be read by... you are in fact patronising people by this sort of process of

reductionism. ... And I think you run the risk by doing that little reshuffling, regardless of intentions whether they are good or bad.

Jeanine: There are some who might use complex language, but you're sitting there with your dictionary in hand, you can actually understand what they're saying. Whereas another author you'll sit there with dictionary in hand and at the end of it you'll still have no idea.

Georgina: But that's like life, sometimes things just go over the top of your head.

Ann: I don't think they really want to because they're keeping it up on that level where only a few people can understand. I think if they really wanted to do anything, it really should really be more accessible.

Pam: But, I've found that being at work, picking the kids up and taking them to this and that, and than and have to sit down at the end of the day and read Kristeva, it was like 'what's she on about, doesn't she...' I found it, that part of it really difficult. It was sort of this high theory and... (Monash University group interview 286-329).

At VUT, the discussions about Women's Studies were related more to the effects of the knowledges they were learning on how they think of themselves as women. Julia for example said:

Julia: It was never advertised at home that there is a Women's Studies program here at VUT. ... When we got here, we found out that there is a Women's Studies, and interestingly only the mature age female Pacific Island students wanted to do Women's Studies. Because of I think of how they experienced at home as being housewives and um, the traditional system is there. It doubles the depression that's given by the western system. ... I think doing Women's Studies has really changed my life. And the way I think of being a woman. Because I never think I'm a woman, or a repressed woman from a Pacific Island country. Only when I took up Women's Studies, and I said, 'oh, so this is what it is'. [The other women laugh and agree]. Ever time I took [Tape unclear] and that has given me an identity, being a woman, doing Women's Studies. All other overseas students from my country are male students. Except myself. And doing Women's Studies (VUT group interview).

There appear to be differences between the women at the two universities in the ways they discussed Women's Studies. However, there were also differences within the group interviews. For example, while the majority of the women at VUT spoke positively about the discipline, Debbie adds a note of caution:

Debbie: And I think that's where Women's Studies has to be very careful. Because if you're not out there fighting the cause, and you're staying home doing the traditional thing, it's not right. And I think some times a lot of the women you talk to feel that. And I reckon it's a damn hard job, so stay home all day and look after children, and really they've got the most important job looking after the kids of the future (VUT group interview).

### 'Working class' women

It is interesting that, while on the whole the 'working class' women spoke in a more positive

way about the effects that Women's Studies had had on them, they were also the most likely

to have been critical about some of the knowledges that they were offered within the

discipline. Joy, Marianne and Debbie all spoke of feeling excluded on one level or another,

they felt that the knowledges they were gaining within Women's Studies did not always reflect

their lives. Both Joy and Marianne spoke of the ways in which they believe feminist theory is

written for and about 'middle class' women. Marianne said:

> But if I talk to my Mum who's 60 and a friend of hers who comes out for coffee
> sometimes, and they talk about... They know everything that I've learned in Women's
> Studies. But, um, they don't put it in academic terms. She said, 'I've just realised that I've
> been a feminist all my life. I never even knew feminism existed'. She said 'it's only
> something I've heard about recently, but that's how I've always felt'. Of course with
> them, it's, feminism, it's a 'middle class' movement, for educated... (Individual interview
> 307-309).

Debbie had expressed a concern within the VUT group interview that Women's Studies (and

feminist theory in general) did not value mothers who choose to stay within the home, she

raised this issue again in her individual interview.

I mentioned to Ann that many of the women spoke to me about the ways that Women's

Studies had given a theory to explain what they had only suspected in the past. She said:

> Yeah the theory was all right, but I'm sort of doing Women's Studies because I thought it
> would be what I already knew or had come to conclusions about, but they were giving it
> a name. In fact it's really not for me... radical enough. It's not political enough. We get
> lots of French feminist philosophers garbage. Now that's what I found, and it wasn't
> relevant to anything, it was just these women writing lots of... irrelevant garbage. And we
> spent so much time on it... But how does it change women's lives? It doesn't. And it's
> this very elitist ivory tower thing, and only academics, and only some academics, can
> understand it. And what's the point (Individual interview 457-459).

### Women from 'working class' backgrounds and 'unclassed/middle class' women

The women from 'working class' backgrounds and the 'unclassed/middle class' women were

more likely to have said that Women's Studies had given them the confidence that they had

the knowledge to articulate their feelings and thoughts about women's role in society. This was the case with Jane, Sally, Natalie, Nicole, Pam and Jeanine.

## CAUGHT BETWEEN THE DISCOURSES OF UNIVERSITY, EVERYDAY LIFE, WOMEN'S STUDIES, 'CLASS', RACE, ETHNICITY, RELIGION, SEXUALITY...

While there are a number of similarities within the class groupings in the ways in which the women spoke of being mothers and/or wives and students, how they spoke of Women's Studies, and their family and friends reactions to their studying, there were also differences within these 'class' groupings.

### DIFFERENCES WITHIN 'CLASS' DIFFERENCES

The women interviewed for this study are not only women, nor are they only mature age women students. The majority of the women were from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds; one had a Maltese/German background; one was from a Greek background; one was an international student from a Pacific island, and identified herself as Brown. One woman identified herself as a lesbian; eight women were married; eight were separated or divorced; one had never married. All but one had children, and these children ranged from very young to adult; eight were sole parents. Six women identified themselves as 'working class'; five as coming from 'working class backgrounds'; six did not identify themselves in relation to 'class'. Some grew up in rural areas' some urban; some identified as Catholics; others as lapsed Catholics. How these women spoke of the family then, and their role within it, and the expectations of others in relation to them as mature age women students, varied to a great degree, as did their experiences as mature age women students.

**The family**

It appears that 'working class' definitions of the family were different. The women who identified as 'working class' and even to a degree the women from 'working class backgrounds' appeared to have very different ideas, and it could be argued much more restrictive ideas and expectations of them as women, and their responsibilities within the

family than those women who did not identify themselves in terms 'class'. These groups of women were more likely to have said that their parents and siblings believed that they were neglecting their families.

It would be misleading however to suggest that there are 'working class' and 'unclassed/middle class' forms of the family, and that these are universal. The group of women who identified as coming from 'working class backgrounds' appear to fall between the other two groups. While, like the 'unclassed/middle class' women the women from 'working class background' did receive conditional support from husbands and friends (who were likely amongst this group to be tertiary educated and/or professionally employed) this was not the case with their parents and siblings. It appears that they still had a residue of 'working class' ideas about the family and their role within it. This group of women appear to be caught between the 'working class' discourses in which they grew up; and the 'middle class' discourses within which they live now.

However, even within the three 'class' groupings I have suggested that these women fall loosely into, there were differences. Just as gender is not the sole facet of women's identities, nor is 'class'. These women's definition of the family, and their place within it were also subject to religion, race, sexuality and so on. Ruth for example, who identified herself as coming from a 'working class background', differed from the other women from 'working class backgrounds'. Having been raised in a very strict Catholic family, her and her family's definition of the family differed to the other women who said they were from 'working class backgrounds'. What the family was to her is based very much on Catholic principles.

Ann identified as 'working class' and her family's expectations of her as such reflected how the other women who identified as 'working class' spoke of their families ideas about what

constitutes a family. Ann however was a lesbian, and as such the family had a different meaning to her.

Julia spoke of the different expectations of her as a Brown woman from what she called a traditional society. She spoke of the expectations on her from her family that, as a woman, she had a responsibility to care for her parents when they are ill. That she refused to do this led to a concern that she was not fulfilling her duty to her family.

### Being different to other students

While Joy, Ann and Marianne were particularly aware that they were different to other students because they were 'working class', this did not appear to be the case with Kathy, Debbie, and Megan who also identified as 'working class'. The difference appears to be that only those 'working class' women who had attended universities other than VUT (Ann, Marianne and Joy) were aware of themselves as different at university because they were 'working class'. They had been exposed to the discourses of universities that had a more traditional 'middle class' student base.

### Women's Studies

It is not surprising that the ways in which the women speak about Women's Studies differed. For those women who identified as 'working class', and even many of those from 'working class backgrounds', Women's Studies offered a very different way of being women than those they had been exposed to in the past. That the women who identified as 'working class' appeared to have had difficulty in applying this to their lives is not surprising, as they appeared to be subject to more restrictive ways of being women in the discourses they had access to outside Women's Studies. Accepting that Women's Studies offers new ways of thinking of one's self as a woman, and critiques of cultural discourses of mature womanhood, it is not surprising perhaps that for the 'working class', and women from 'working class backgrounds' there seems to be a bigger disjuncture between how they had lived their lives as women, and

feminist knowledges about this. There were however again differences within the 'class" groups.

It was more common amongst the women studying at Monash University than at VUT to have said that Women's Studies was not considered a 'real' subject by their families and friends, and having to justify their reasons for doing this subject. The women at VUT who spoke of the issue of Women's Studies not being accepted by their family and friends as not legitimate study (Sally, Julia, and Nicole), were those who had friends or family who were familiar with higher education. It was those women who identified as being from 'working class backgrounds', and those who did not define themselves as 'classed' whose families and friends were more likely to be familiar with higher education, and thus recognised that Women's Studies knowledges are different than that commonly offered within the university.

Julia noted that women who were other than white, western women were often excluded from feminist knowledges and within Women's Studies. Similarly, Ann commented on what she perceived as the heterosexual nature of Women's Studies.

### As students

When discussing identity it is clear that it is not only in one discourse that identity is played out and formed, but the many discourses within which women lived their lives. Within this, however there were differences depending on the university the women attended (which have differing discourses), as well as their 'class', race, ethnic, and sexual identities. How the women identified as students, for example at VUT if they defined themselves as 'working class', was not the same for the woman at Monash University who identified as 'working class'. How the women defined themselves, and their experiences of returning to study was a result of the discourses they are exposed to within the university they attended (which differ), and the discourses they live within outside the university setting.

A focus on the differences amongst the mature age women students suggests that it may become impossible to speak of mature age women as a group. There are differences between the universities, within the universities, and even within the 'class' groupings that I have identified. As Butler (1990) argues:

> If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariable produced and maintained (p. 3).

For those feminists who are critical of the universalising and essentialising of women's experiences within the family the themes that have emerged within this chapter are particularly relevant. As feminists from ethnic and racial minority groups within feminism argue, the family is experienced differently along race, ethnic and 'class' lines. Similarly, as feminist theorists who draw on poststructuralist approaches argue, institutions such as the patriarchal family are not useful to explain the very different ways that women experience the family. There were differences amongst the women in relation to 'class', race, religion, and sexuality (Haraway 1987; Weedon 1987; Yeatman 1994). Not only were there differences along 'class' lines, there were differences within these groupings in relation to religion, sexuality and race.

It is clear that it would be difficult to sustain a universalist argument for the definition of any one ideology of the family and its effects on women such as that offered within the previous reading. There are obviously a number of discourses of the family, rather than one ideology of the family as the reading for gender suggests. That these women, as women, were defined in their relationship to the family appears to be the case, however the very different ways that the family is defined and articulated.

This shows the usefulness of drawing on notions of discourse rather than ideology. It is clear that power is not situated solely within the family, or within the university. Focusing on an ideology of the family, or the university is limited in that it does not recognise that power is obviously not held within any one ideology of either. It is clear from this reading that these women were positioned differently within the different discourses to which they had access. It is also clear that the different discourse within which they live outside the university have has effects on their experiences of being students depending on the particular discourses of the universities they had access to.

### Defined in difference

What I find interesting in how the women spoke of themselves as mature age women students is that their definition was in relation to how, in one way or another, they are different than other students. While there are similarities in the ways the women speak of how, as mature age women students they consider themselves to be, in a sense, outsiders within education as mature women, there are a number of differences again in how this was articulated. How they defined themselves was in whatever aspect of who they are that made them different within the discourses they had access to. Therefore, for example, all the women are aware that, as mature age students they were different to younger students. The 'working class' women were aware that they are different to 'middle class' students. Julia was aware that she was Brown and therefore different than white students. What is interesting to note here though, is that it is only when the women were different to the dominant group within the discursive space within which they were situated that they defined themselves in this difference.

Feminists who draw on theories of deconstruction suggest that binaries are constructed in a way that while the more powerful side of the binary is defined in its difference to the less powerful side, this is not overt (Weedon 1987). Only those from marginalised or oppressed groups define themselves in this marginalisation. So for example, women are more concerned

with gender if sexism is the only marginalisation they feel, and this appears to be the case amongst the women in the study who were 'unclassed/middle class' of course this highlights my concerns mentioned earlier about the categorisations I have used. Clearly, the women who I have called 'unclassed/middle class', are 'classed', it is just not acknowledged or recognised by them.

What is particularly apparent when examining the ways in which these mature age women students were affected by their return to study is mediated by their different positioning within the discourses of higher education. It is clear that these women were positioned as subjects differently depending on their race, 'class', sexuality and so on. Drawing on notions of subject positions it could be argued that the 'unclassed/middle class' women, although positioned as powerless in relation to their gender, were more powerful because of their 'class', race, ethnic, and heterosexual positioning.

### Problems with focusing on gender or difference
In chapter six, I presented the themes that emerged within the study of mature age women students with a focus on gender issues. In this chapter, I have focused on the differences that emerged within the themes. Both approaches I believe offer interesting insights into the experiences of mature age women students. Both however lead to different conclusions.

It could be argued based on the approach that focuses on similarities amongst the women that *all* women would be empowered by Women's Studies in a similar way. One could also assume that *all* women experience education in the same ways, and that as women, *all* women are tied to a specific ideology of the family that is oppressive in the same ways. Many would argue that an approach such as this is universalistic and essentialist.

Adopting an approach that focuses on differences raises a number of questions. One could conclude from such an approach that women share nothing. The differences depending on

'class', race, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and so on, suggest that the diverse histories the women brought with them to their study, and the discourses within which they live their everyday lives, mean that the effects of study on them are very different. From this, one could conclude that, not only is it impossible to talk about mature age women as a group, but women as a group is impossible to consider.

The two foci of the findings of the study of mature age women students have highlighted the issues inherent in both approaches, and illustrate the debates within feminism in relation to identity and difference. However, what also concerns me within these foci is that these women are seen to have no agency. Within each focus they are defined by the knowledges and discourses they have available to them in such a way that it appears that they have no input into the ways in which they make meaning of themselves as women.

In the focus on gender issues, it appears that the women's identities were determined by the discourses of the family in a way that suggests that they have no control over who they are. Similarly, in focusing on differences the women were defined within whatever discourses they were positioned within at any one time.

Chapter eight considers a way of analysing the themes that emerged within the study, that I believe can help to overcome some of the issues that I identified within the focus on gender and the focus on difference. I offer an analysis of the borderlands. In this analysis, I explore the similarities, differences, contradictions and silences that have emerged within the themes within the study. Rather than resolve these, I explore how one can work through these, and provide an analysis that in a sense falls in between that suggested by the focus on gender and that suggested by the focus on difference.

# CHAPTER EIGHT: EXPLORING THE BORDERLANDS

## INTRODUCTION

The two ways of understanding the themes that emerged within the study of mature age women students offered within the previous chapter illustrate the debates within feminism about identity and difference that are central to this thesis. I have shown that both of these approaches are limited in a number of ways. However, I also believe that both have merits. The focus on gender has in many ways a particular resonance for me personally – as a feminist, as a former mature age woman student; as a Women's Studies student, and as a woman who is a wife and mother. This focus offers me possible explanations for why, as a mature age woman student, I had often felt a vast dissonance between what I had learned within Women's Studies (which has had a huge impact on me as a woman), and how I lived my life outside Women's Studies within my family and with friends. I had felt empowered by Women's Studies, but had still felt very much a woman with responsibilities first to my husband and children who I felt had to be put before my studies.

The focus on gender also appeals to me as a feminist. The belief that, as a woman I am part of a sisterhood of women who share experiences in our womanhood. However, while the warm fuzzy feeling of sisterhood is certainly appealing, it does not reflect that, in many ways I feel silenced within much mainstream feminist literature as a 'working class' woman.

While the focus on gender explains my experiences as a woman returning to study, it does not explain them as a 'working class' woman. Thus, the focus on differences also has appeal to me. I find my experiences explained, not only in relation to gender, but also in how these experiences are 'classed'. Within this approach, I can see why I feel different, both within the discourses of university and outside these, in the discourses of my family and friends. Here I

can understand why many feminist theories, while relevant on some levels, have little to say for my experiences as a 'working class' woman. Within this focus, I can see that many women, not only 'working class' women, are silenced in much mainstream feminism.

However, this way of focusing the themes of the study led to a number of questions as well – if feminists continue to degenerate further and further into differences between and within groups of women, how then can feminism retain gender as its defining feature? It appears from these approaches that the choice is either focusing on gender – and silencing the lives and experiences of many women; or focusing on differences – and not being able to focus on gender at all.

Within this chapter, I offer an alternative way of approaching the themes that emerged within the study of mature age women students. This approach is one that I believe can help to overcome limitations of the previous two ways of approaching the research material. Here I consider how it may be possible to investigate identity in the space that occurs where identity and difference overlap, at the interface of identity and difference. In this approach, I draw on Anzaldua's conception of the borderlands (1987).

This is not a neat approach. The boundaries between discourses and categories become blurred, and there are contradictions. However, it is within overlaps, contradictions and messiness, I argue, that identity formation, and how we make meaning about who we are, can be explored. I investigate the borderlands through the ways in which the mature age women students in the study (the inhabitants of this discursive space) speak of their experiences of returning to study.

As I have stressed throughout this thesis, I am interested in investigating differences related to the ways that gender identity is 'classed'. This is not to suggest that ethnicity, race, religion and sexuality do not also have varying affects on this group of women. Rather I am concerned to

explore whether I can isolate 'class' as one of the many aspects of women's identity and investigate how this interacts with these women's gendered identities. Thus, while the focus here is on gendered identities as they are 'classed', it is in an attempt to explore this as one facet of identity amongst the many that form women's sense of self. Within this chapter, I explore the nuances of 'class' as it relates to gender identity.

### THINKING ABOUT THE BORDERLANDS AS A DISCURSIVE SPACE FOR INVESTIGATING IDENTITY FORMATION

When thinking about this third approach to the themes that emerge within the study of mature age women students, I had difficulty deciding on terms. I wanted a term that would best describe the discursive space within which I believe these mature age women students reside, and where it would be possible to explore the effects that returning to study had had on them. This is a space I argue, at the interface of the discourses to which the women have access. Within this space, I believe I can investigate the women's similarities as women, and differences as 'classed' women.

I considered margins (after hooks 1984), and boundaries (after David et al 1993), but felt that these did not quite capture the sense of the space I was interested in. To me the margins and boundaries relate to either side of the discursive spaces that interest me. David et al (1993) for example, use the concept of the boundary for investigating the interface between mothers and education. They argue that the boundary in their use is not fixed, that it is semi-permeable as well as elastic, and serves to illustrate differences amongst women. While I believe that this is a useful concept, I would suggest that they refer to the boundary as the edge between mothers and education. While they consider what happens in the interactions and connections on either side of the boundary, my concern is to explore the spaces where different margins and boundaries overlap. The space at the interface for example, of the discourses of education and the discourses of the family.

I believe that Anzaldua's (1987) conception of the borderlands best describes the space to which I refer here. This conception offers a way of exploring the interface of the different discourses, and the ways in which mature age women students negotiated meaning and constructed their identities within this. In this conception, the borderlands can be seen as new frontiers, unexplored territory, where few have been before. Anzaldua (1987) claims that:

> Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderline is a vague and underdetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants (p. 3).

Proweller (1998) for example, uses this conception to investigate identity formation processes amongst upper 'middle class' adolescent females. She argues the case for 'class' as a border zone:

> Where girls are actively reshaping what it means to be classed and gendered, repositioning themselves as upper middle-class in relation to meanings and social practices that have been presented to them (pp. 14-15).

In thinking about terms for those who reside within the borderlands, I believe that Collins' (1991) notion of outsiders within, and Trinh's (1991) notion of insiders outside, are useful. Using these terms offers a way of exploring the positioning of mature age women students within the borderlands of the discursive spaces of the university and the discursive spaces to which they have access outside these. I make a distinction between the terms because they refer to very different positionings.

Collins (1991) names those entering a powerful community who are from less powerful groups in society, as outsiders within. She argues that:

> As an extreme case of outsiders moving into a community that historically excluded them, Black women's experiences highlight the tension experienced by any group of less powerful outsiders encountering the paradigmatic thought of a more powerful insider community. In this sense, a variety of individuals can learn from Black women's experiences as outsiders within: Black men; working-class individuals, white women, other people of colour, religious and sexual minorities, and all individuals who, while from social strata that provided then with the benefits of white male insiderism, have never felt comfortable with its taken-for-granted assumptions (Collins 1991 p. 53).

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Within this notion of outsider within, I will discuss below how mature age women students can be seen to be positioned as outsiders within the discursive space of higher education. I will also argue that, as students, this group of mature age women has also become insiders outside. Trinh (1991) defines insiders outside as those from oppressed groups who, for one reason or another, have moved out of this group. So for example, those women who were 'working class' who become university students have moved away from their 'working class' community because they were entering discourses that are not common for 'working class' people to enter. Trinh suggests that:

> The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside... Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that underdetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider. She is this Inappropriate Other/Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definitions of otherness arrived at (Trinh 1991 p. 74).

It can be seen from these definitions of outsiders within, and insiders outside, that they refer to different positionings. I now examine how the mature age women students in the study spoke of themselves in ways in which they can be seen to perceive themselves to be outsiders within the discursive space of university, and insiders outside the discursive spaces within which they lived their lives outside of academia.

### OUTSIDERS WITHIN AND INSIDERS OUTSIDE

What emerged quite strongly in both the focus on gender and the focus on difference, is that for different reasons the majority of the women in the study defined themselves as students primarily in how they were different from what they believed to be 'real' students. This was the case in terms of gender (as they were tied to the discourses of the family and motherhood), and in terms of 'class', race, ethnicity and so on. I consider below how in the ways the women defined themselves, they positioned themselves, and were positioned by others, as outsiders within the discourses and knowledges of Women's Studies and the

university. I also consider how, as students they became insiders outside in the discursive spaces they have access to outside the university.

Feminists have shown that, to varying degrees and in different ways, women are outsiders within higher education (Belenky et al 1986; Bowles & Klein 1993; Grosz & deLepervanche 1988; Harding 1981; Hughes 1994; Luke & Gore 1992; Martin 1994; Pateman & Gross 1987; Spender 1981). Feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism argue that gender is not the only thing that makes some women outsiders within, but also 'class', race, ethnicity and so on (hooks 1994; Weiner 1994; Tsolidis 1993a, 1993b, 1996b). Within the study of mature age women students, the women recognised that others (both within the academic setting and outside this) see them as outsiders within. Net only were they aware that others defined them as different, how they spoke of their difference to other students suggests they thought of themselves as outsiders within.

Thus, mature age women students defined themselves in their awareness that they were different to traditional students. They were older, and had childcare responsibilities and home duties to consider which left them less time to study than young students had. They were aware that others also saw them as different. These women were also aware of the negative stereotypes attached to the term mature age women student, and were at pains to highlight how they were different to these stereotypes.

That these women were university students made them in many ways insiders outside the discursive spaces to which they had access outside academia. As university study was not a common activity for women who are mothers and/or wives, they were different to other women of their age. They were now aware, from the knowledges that they were gaining within Women's Studies, that there were different ways of being woman that were not necessarily

tied to the family and motherhood. This also set them apart from most women of their age and family positions who did not have access to academic discourses about such issues.

Similarly, studying Women's Studies had made them insiders outside in the sense that they were in some ways moving out of the traditional role of women within the family and motherhood, but they were still mothers and/or wives. Thus, they were insiders in the sense of their place within the family, but outside this, in their feminist knowledge of the family. They were looking out from the family, and also looking in to it as women with access to feminist theory about different ways of being women.

The 'working class' women felt that they were different to other students because of their 'class' positioning. They were aware that they were different to common perceptions of mature age women students, that is, they were not 'middle class' bored housewives. They were also aware that they were different not only as mature age women students, but also as 'working class' within the 'middle class' discourses of the university. Therefore, while most gave traditional definitions of 'class' (geographical location, money), it was more in the ways that they described themselves as unlike 'middle class' people in one way or another. They spoke of the 'people on the other side' (of the city), of 'people with money', of how articulate 'middle class' people were (and they were not), of how 'middle class' people were expected to go to university, how they were taller, how they look different, they wear different clothes, and so on. As 'working class' women, they were positioned as outsiders within the 'middle class' discourses of higher education.

The 'working class' women had also become insiders outside. In the discursive spaces outside academia, their 'middle class' education has made them different than their family and friends. Our identity is formed to a large degree by how we feel similar or different to others - the feeling of belonging (to a group) or not belonging defines who we are. Many feel that since

returning to study they did not fit in either amongst their 'working class' family and friends, or within the 'middle class' discourses of the university. Several of the 'working class' women spoke of feeling increasingly unsure of where they belong.

As Pratt (1984), Riley (1988) and de Lauretis (1987) discuss, it is commonly when one is different from those around one that awareness of a particular facet of identity is foregrounded. Pratt for example was aware of herself as gentile when dating a Jewish man; Protestant when planning to marry a Catholic man; white when she moved to an area that was predominantly black. From the themes that emerged within the study, it appears that awareness of oneself as in some way different than those around us leads to shifts in identities. Feeling that you are different than those around you informs how you think about who you are and where you belong. Many of the women talk about how they felt different both at university and to family and friends. Some felt that they were different in both discursive spaces – inside and outside academia. When talking about how they were different they commonly defined this in relation to others - defining themselves by what they were, or were not like as opposed to others.

## EXPLORING THE BORDERLANDS

It is clear from the previous discussion that the mature age women students were positioned as outsiders within, and as insiders outside, in the various discourses to which they had access. In the following discussion I consider how in the borderlands where they were outsiders within and insiders outside, one can read how these women made meaning about who they were and where they fit in.

### RE-CONSIDERING THE FAMILY AND MOTHERHOOD IN THE BORDERLANDS

As discussed in the previous chapter, exposure to the discourses and knowledges of Women's Studies had different effects on this group of women depending on whether these discourses and knowledges were new to them, or whether these articulated what they had long suspected.

It was on those for whom these knowledges were new that they had the most impact, as it made them aware of themselves as women, and their lives as women, in different ways.

De Lauretis (1986, 1990) suggests that exposure to new discourses can lead to a rewriting of our histories. As we consider the new knowledges and ways of being offered within new discourses we see our histories in a new light, and interpret our lives differently than in the past. As the new knowledges within Women's Studies mediate with the women's histories, many appeared to have realised new ways of being a woman.

The women spoke contradictorily about what they were learning in Women's Studies, and how they put this in practice outside Women's Studies. This suggests that, while they were being exposed to new and different ways of being women, they still defined themselves and were defined by others as women, and thus in relation to the discourses of the family and motherhood. All spoke of being expected by others to always put the family first, and how they did this themselves, despite the discourses and knowledges of Women's Studies which had given them new ways of thinking of themselves as women. For many this emerged as feeling guilty for taking time from the family, for others it was in arranging their lives in such a way their study did not in any way inconvenience their families.

Within the focus on difference presented in the previous chapter, I discussed differences amongst the women in relation to the ways they articulated the issue of juggling childcare and studying. What emerged was that the women 'unclassed/middle class' did not talk about guilt at all in relation to the time they spent on their study. Similarly, they did not experience the censure from their family and friends that was experienced by the 'working class' women in relation to their study.

It appears at first glance that the calls for education for females such as those by Woolf (1929) and Friedan (1963) for example, have been recognised as relevant amongst the 'middle class'.

It appears that, for those women who did not identify as 'working class', the people around them accepted education as a legitimate activity. That the 'working class' women spoke of others not accepting their study reflects the broader discourses of the 'working class' in which there appears to be an ambivalent relationship to education. In a number of ways it appears that 'working class' women were not 'entitled' to return to study in the way that 'middle class' women were.

What is particularly relevant to my interests here is that on the surface it appeared that it was more acceptable for some women to return to study. However, scratching the surface even slightly showed that the 'unclassed/middle class' women are also not accepted as 'real' students either within the university or outside it. So for example, while they did not speak of feeling guilty and they recognised that they had the right to do things for themselves, they spoke of going to great lengths so they did not have to feel guilty. While they said others were supportive, this was conditional, and was only in so far that their studying did not inconvenience their families. They believed that they were perceived to be 'hobby' students, both within and outside the university. While these women did not speak of feeling guilty for taking time for themselves, they went to great lengths not to inconvenience their families, in what could be seen as a less overt form of guilt.

It can be seen then that, while themselves and others defined all these women within the family, this was articulated differently depending on how the discourses of the family were 'classed'. It can be argued that the discourses of the family are so silenced amongst the 'unclassed/middle class' women as to become invisible.

It appears that, while articulated differently depending on how the family is 'classed', women were still tied in a very real way to the family, and were expected (and have expectations of themselves) to always put their families first. It is not surprising then that there are

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contradictions in how the women spoke about themselves as women in the borderlands of the discourses of Women's Studies and the discourses of the family.

That the women spoke contradictorily about the knowledges they have gained from Women's Studies, and how they appeared to still define themselves within the family demonstrates that, as de Lauretis 1986, 1990) suggests, identity is heteronomous, subject to different rules within different discourses. This emerged here in the borderlands between the discourses of Women's Studies and the discourses to which the women had access to outside the discourses of Women's Studies. The women were receiving different messages as to how they should be women. How these women spoke about Women's Studies and how they actually put this knowledge into practice was quite often contradictory because of their exposure to different ways of being woman. It appears that, as Pratt (1984) suggests:

> Each of us carries around those growing up places, the institutions, a sort of back-drop, a stage set. So often we act out the present against a backdrop of the past, within a frame of perception that is so familiar, so safe that it is terrifying to risk changing it even when we know our perceptions are distorted, limited, constricted by that old view' (p.17).

### RE-CONSIDERING 'CLASS' IN THE BORDERLANDS

For many of the women who identified themselves as 'working class' there was a shift in how they identified in relation to 'class'. For some, it was in their exposure to the 'middle class' discourses of university that they became aware of themselves as 'working class' in different ways than in the past. There were a number of differences in how 'class' was, or was not talked about amongst the women. Some spoke of issues they had, as 'working class' women within higher education, of not fitting in and of becoming increasingly aware of being 'working class'. Others who also identified themselves as 'working class' did not mention issues to do with this.

As discussed above, Riley (1988) suggests that we are not always aware of aspects of our identity until we are in situations where these are most obvious. When not the norm within a

discourse, that particular aspect of identity that is different is more apparent. This appeared to be the case with the 'working class' women. It was only when they were at universities other than VUT (those that commonly attract students from 'middle class' backgrounds, for example Melbourne University and Monash University), that they became aware that they were different, and gained a new awareness of that difference. Those who said that they were 'working class', but attended VUT, where it was not uncommon to be 'working class', did not speak of issues of 'class' in the same ways. However as noted above, even these women were aware that they were different to mature age women students from Monash University, who, they believed, were like the stereotypical mature age woman student.

However, no university can be, by the very discourses of higher education, 'working class'. Even those 'working class' women from VUT were still caught between 'middle class' university discourses and 'working class' discourses they lived within outside the university. Those who have been exposed to so called 'elite' universities were aware that VUT had little status as a university, and that its student base was more likely to be 'working class'. However, their family and friends had no awareness of this and believed that university was making their wives, daughters and friends 'middle class', and therefore different to them. As I noted in chapter one, Rita, said 'It's like drug addicts, isn't it? They hate it when one of them tries to break away?' (p. 195). Similarly, the 'working class' women in the study felt that their family and friends were concerned that they were 'breaking away'.

All the 'working class' women were the first amongst their families and friends to have gone to university. This was unlike the women from 'unclassed/middle class' backgrounds for whom it was more common to have family members and friends who had been to university. This led many of the 'working class' women to feel different to family and friends now. This was the case in a number of ways. They were better educated, which is uncommon for 'working class' people. They also felt different to 'working class' people because the new

knowledges they were gaining had made them aware of the sexism and racism and in many cases general ignorance, of their 'working class' family and friends. They have thus become insiders outside in relation to the communities within which they live. These women still identified themselves as 'working class', however had stepped out of their 'working class' communities by returning to study. They were thus, as Trinh (1991) suggests, looking both from the inside out, and looking from the outside in.

The issue of feeling increasingly alienated from family and friends amongst 'working class' women who enter higher education has become the topic of much discussion. Mahoney and Zmroczek (1996) talk about how they feel invisible as 'working class' women in higher education, but often highly visible within their 'working class' families because of their education. 'To be precise, it leaves us in confusion and uncertainty about who we are and where we fit, if indeed we do fit at all' (p. 71). Similarly, Walkerdine (1990) says:

> I felt split, fragmented... Where nobody knew what academic work was (and where it would have been better to announce that I was going to produce a baby, not a thesis). I felt, in the old place, as in the new, that if I opened my mouth it would be to say the wrong thing. Yet I desired so much, so very much, to produce utterances which, if said in one context, would not lead to read to recognition in the other (p.162)

What this exploration of the borderlands has shown is that one can not divorce one's history from one's identity. The contradictions these women felt in the borderlands of the 'middle class' discourses of university, and 'working class' discourses of life outside occurred because of the histories that these women brought with them to their study. Our earliest memories and lives are carried with us into the new discourses that we encounter. Those women who said that they are from 'working class backgrounds' evidence this (and this is where the differences of these women to the 'working class' women become important). While in many ways entrenched in 'middle class' discourses now, some attitudes (and particularly in relation to the family) indicate that their past has remained with them.

The women who identified themselves as being from 'working class backgrounds' appear to be in the borderlands of the 'working class' and 'unclassed/middle class' women, in relation to how they spoke of the family. As discussed in the previous chapter, they were like and unlike the 'working class' women in some respects, and like and unlike the 'unclassed/middle class' women. They were caught in a sense between the discursive spaces they had access to now, and those from their pasts. These women appeared to in the borderlands of not only their 'working class' families and histories, but also the discourses of higher education, and the discourses of their 'middle class' friends and/or husbands. Apparently, it is not possible to leave our histories behind. As Anzaldua (1987) suggests:

> Every time she makes 'sense' of something, she has to 'cross over', kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it. It hampers her movement in the new territory, dragging the ghost of the past with her (p. 49).

The 'working class' women within this study were torn between the 'middle class' culture of the university and education and the 'working class' culture of their family and friends within which they lived outside the university. What is clear though, is that, while these women felt torn between the 'classed' discourse to which they had access, they could not, nor did they want to, lose that part of them from the past. While they may have had issues as to where they belong in 'class' terms, their families' approval is important to them. As Pratt (1984) says, 'We don't want to lose the love of the first people who knew us; we don't want to be standing outside the circle of home, with nowhere to go' (p.48).

In exploring the borderlands of higher education and 'class' it becomes clear that exposure to new and different discourses led to shifts in the ways in which these women identified in terms of 'class'. In this approach, one can see that meaning in relation to 'class' was made and negotiated in the discourses within which they lived their everyday lives, the new and different discourses of higher education, and their histories. In the contradictions of how they spoke of

what 'class' was and what they now are in terms of 'class', one can see how they negotiated meaning within the range of discourse to which they had access.

## SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS IN THE BORDERLANDS

In a sense, the approach to the themes of the study of mature age women students in this chapter has been one in the borderlands of the two approaches offered in chapter five. I consider now how an exploration of the borderlands addresses some of the issues that emerged within the two previous foci on the themes of the study. Within an exploration of the borderlands, I argue here, many issues that have been invisible become visible.

In this exploration of the borderlands between gender identity and difference, it has become apparent that it was within the contradictions and silences that emerged within the borderlands of the discourses to which the women had access, that they negotiated meaning about who they were. It can be seen that exposure to new and different discourses has led to shifts in how these women identify in terms of their gender identity. It can also be seen how this was mediated by the ways in which their gender identity was 'classed'.

As I have noted throughout the thesis, 'class' in any form has become a silence within much mainstream feminist work. That all but one of the women in this study who did not identify as 'working class' did not appear to have defined themselves in 'class' terms at all reflects. I believe, how 'class' has become invisible in relation to much feminism more broadly.

What this approach has shown is that 'class' is visible only for those for whom it is felt as a difference. One can see from this approach how 'class' becomes invisible amongst some of the women. The 'unclassed' women in the study recognised how they were different as mature age women students (in terms of gender), and as such not the norm, but did not recognise how they are in many ways more powerful than 'working class' women were. Those women who did not identify in terms of 'class', (whom it appears from earlier discussions were

actually 'middle class') were within 'classed' discourses that corresponded to those within which they lived outside the university. Thus they were not different within the 'classed' discourses of the university, they belonged to the dominant discourses. As I discussed within the focus on difference, this reflects the ways in which binary oppositions make visible only the term that is the least powerful, and make invisible how the dominant term is defined in its relationship to the less powerful term.

That 'class' appears invisible in how the 'unclassed' women defined themselves also reflects the literature on whiteness noted in chapter two.Many writers suggest that there is a need for white feminists to critique their whiteness and the privileges that this bestows on them (Lorde 1984; Spelman 1988; McIntosh 1989; hooks 1990; Morrison1993; Ang 1995; Hurtado 1996; Moreton-Robinson 1998a; 1998b) They suggest that whiteness is a taken for granted privilege, enjoyed but not acknowledged, a way of seeing and being in the world taken for granted as the norm. While it is common for analyses and theories to be written about blackness, whiteness goes as the norm, an unrecognized privilege.

I am not suggesting that race privilege can be equated with 'class' privilege. White 'working class' women are still privileged by the whiteness. Whiteness offers more privileges in our society than 'class'. That privilege in any form often remains invisible was apparent within the study. Not only was 'class' privilege unmarked, race, whiteness, ethnic and sexual privilege was similarly invisible amongst those for whom it did not mark out as different. So for example, none of the white women spoke of how they were privileged in relation to their whiteness. Nor did any of the Anglo-Celtic women speak of how they were in many ways more powerful than women from backgrounds other than this.

Thinking about identity as defined in difference, and how this often leads to silences, offers ways to explore not only how 'class' is silenced, but also a way of investigating this silence.

While on the surface it appeared that only the 'working class' women were 'classed', as I discussed in the focus on difference 'class' (while invisible) still clearly forms an aspect of the identities of those women who did not recognise it as such.

When 'class' becomes visible the similarities and differences amongst the women become clearer. Within the borderlands of the 'working class' and 'middle class' discourses of the family and motherhood, one can see that in some ways the restraining discourses of the 'middle class' family have become less visible. Exploring the borderlands of women as they are 'classed', it becomes clear that while it appears that in some ways 'working class' women were subject to more restrictive ways of being women (particularly in relation to the family). This appears to have become invisible somewhat amongst the 'unclassed/middle class' women. Thus, as Walkerdine (1990) has argued, while women are positioned as powerful and powerless differently in different discourses, as women they are still powerless somewhat as women.

The 'unclassed/middle class' women and the women from 'working class background', while powerless in some ways because they were women within education, were in other ways more powerful than the 'working class' women because they were familiar with the 'middle class' discourses of higher education. However, by examining the 'class' differences between the women one can clearly see that, while 'middle class' women appeared to have less restrictive ways of being women than 'working class' women, this was often not the case. By contrasting the 'middle class' and 'working class' ways of being women, one can see what at first appears invisible come into view. In the borderlands of 'working class' and 'middle class' discourses of the family, one can then see how there were similarities and differences in how the women were constructed as women within the family.

In the borderlands, one can see how identity formation works. I have discussed above, identity in relation to gender and 'class' shifted with exposure to new and different discourses and knowledges. It can be seen that identity was constructed in the borderlands of the various discourses to which these women had access, and the histories they brought with them to these discourses. One can see how, because of the different rules associated with each of the discourses to which they had access that contradictions occur. An examination of these contradictions can show how meaning was made and negotiated within the borderlands.

It is clear from this approach that this group of mature age women students have, with their exposure to the new and different discourses of Women's Studies, rethought themselves as women. It is in how this fits with the discourses to which they were exposed outside Women's Studies (both within higher education in general and outside academia) that a number of contradictions emerge. That the women spoke of having new ways of being women in one sentence, and then spoke contradictorily in how they put this knowledge into practice outside the Women's Studies classroom shows how they negotiated meaning of themselves as women between the different discourses to which they had access. While it is clear that the different discourses within which they lived their lives were subject to very different rules the women negotiated meaning in between these discursive spaces.

The foci of the themes presented in the previous chapter suggested that these mature age women students were either tied to the ideology of the family, as women, with no control over this, or constructed within a multitude of discourses, again with no agency in this construction. Exploring in the borderlands between these two approaches however indicates that these women were clearly negotiating meaning in the borderlands of the discursive spaces to which they had access. The contradictions in how the women spoke of themselves as students suggests that they were negotiating meaning within the different knowledges and discourses about women, and the family to which they had access. The fact that they

continued to study even with the censure they often received suggests that they were not totally helpless, that they did not just accept that they were tied to the family but fight this to a certain degree.

This is particularly evident I believe, in the contradictions in how the women themselves talked about themselves as women, how they lived as women in the past, others' expectations of them and the knowledges they were gaining within Women's Studies. It can be seen that the women were drawing on what suits them, what made them comfortable within the various competing discourses and knowledges. They were negotiating their own meanings of what it was for them to be women. In a similar way the 'working class' women could be seen to be negotiating their identities as 'classed' women in the borderlands of the 'middle class' and 'working class' discourses they had access to.

It can be argued from an exploration of the borderlands that, as outsiders within and insiders outside the various discourses to which they have access these women negotiated meaning. As outsiders within they could see clearly the discourses to which they had access in ways that insiders could not. For insiders some issues can become invisible, as I have shown they have within the 'middle class' discourses of the family. An exploration of the borderlands of where these women were outsiders within, and insiders outside shows that these women saw clearly how they were different within the discourses higher education (as women and as 'working class'). This approach also shows that they were also different within the discourses of their communities outside higher education. As outsiders looking in, and as insiders looking out, the discourses of 'class' and gender became clear to them in ways that they had not in the past.

I have shown with this exploration within the borderlands that gender identity as it is 'classed' can be investigated. Within the focus on gender, 'class' identity was silenced by highlighting only the similarities amongst the women. The focus on difference showed the impossibility of

investigating the similarities amongst the women in relation to gender, or 'class'. Within this exploration of the borderlands it can be seen that while these women were not only gendered, but ethnicised, raced 'classed' and so on, it is possible to tease out one aspect of identity, alongside gender, and explore the effects of these on each other. Within this approach then, it has also been possible to explore the differences between and amongst the women in relation to 'class' identity as well as gender. What emerged was that, just as gender identity was negotiated between the discursive spaces of Women's Studies and the discourses outside this – 'class' identity shifts and was negotiated in a similar way. Within the contradictions that occurred in the borderlands of the 'middle class' discourses of university and the 'working class' discourses outside academia one can explore how women's meaning of 'class' and themselves in 'class' terms is negotiated.

What this exploration of the borderlands shows is that as 'classed' women this group of mature age women shared similar issues as women within their differences (particularly in relation to the family and motherhood). It also shows that there were differences within these similarities. While these women shared specific issues as women, these emerged differently because these issues were 'classed'.

In the following chapter, I consider the implications of this study of mature age women students in broader terms and question whether I have addressed the questions that I set out to answer within the thesis.

# CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS

## INTRODUCTION

In chapter one I outlined the questions that have been central to this thesis. Framing my questions within debates about identity and difference, I asked how it might be possible to investigate the identity formation processes of women as they are 'classed'. Debates about the divide between identity and difference have provided the axis on which this thesis has revolved. Throughout I have illustrated the issues associated with feminist approaches that focus on gender as the identity of the subject of feminism, and the problems with focusing too far on the differences between and amongst women. I have not suggested that these issues are new, they have in fact been a central division within feminism since the beginning of the women's movement. That they have remained somewhat unresolved reflects the difficulties inherent in debates about identity and difference.

I have suggested that answers to debates about identity and difference may be found in the work of two broad bodies of feminist literature that aims to address issues of essentialism and universalism in feminism. I have drawn on the literature of feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism and feminists who work within a broadly poststructuralist framework. I have referred to these broad bodies of work as feminists of difference, in the recognition that they are not homogenous bodies of work, that both cover a diverse range of approaches. I have argued, however, that they represent trends that have emerged within feminism that offer possible ways to address debates about identity and difference.

In chapter one I raised issues related to feminist research and theory that have formed the framework within which the thesis situated. I asked how one could be a subject of feminism, and be a feminist if one is not a white, 'middle class' woman. I also asked how reflexive one could be in one's work before it becomes an autobiographical account. In this chapter, I

discussed these questions in relation to the study of mature age women students through which I explored my concerns related to identity and difference.

## THE STUDY OF MATURE AGE WOMEN STUDENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR FEMINIST THEORISING AND RESEARCH

Throughout the thesis, I have shown the difficulties inherent in feminist debates about identity and difference. While focusing on gender risks essentialising and universalising the lives and experiences of some women, focusing on difference can risk losing gender as a category of investigation altogether. My aim within this thesis has been to explore ways to address these issues. Snitow (1990) argues that feminists must place themselves on one side or the other of the feminist divide over how much feminists want to, or can retain gender as the defining feature of their work. She argues that:

> If the divide is central to feminist history, feminists need to recognize it with more suppleness, but this enlarged perspective does not let one out of having to choose a position in the divide. On the contrary, by arguing that there is no imminent resolution, I hope to throw each reader back on the necessity of finding where her own work falls and of assessing how powerful that political decision is as a tool for undermining the dense, deeply embedded oppression of women (Snitow 1990 p. 29).

I find that I cannot place myself on either side of this divide. I want both worlds! I want to be able to talk about women (recognising the impossibility of this) and I want to be able to explore my, and others differences as women (recognising the dangers within this). That I have experienced these difficulties are reflected in feminist theorising and research. In a study of mature age women students, I have drawn on the work of feminists of difference to illustrate, and offer solutions, to these difficulties.

### AN APPROACH IN THE BORDERLANDS OF IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

I believe that mature age women students have been a particularly useful group through which to investigate issues of identity and difference. These were women who were in the process of being exposed to very different discourses than they had been in the past, and as such were in the process of re-negotiating who they were, as women, and as students within this. As mature age women students, they were outsiders within education and they were aware of how they

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were positioned as different within the discursive spaces of the university. This allowed me to investigate issues of identity that may not have been as overt in other times of these women's lives.

In chapter one of the thesis, I identified a number of issues through an examination of two fictional characters, Rita and Mira. Through this examination, I noted that both novels related to the experiences of women returning to study. However, there were a number of differences between the two characters' experiences that suggest that 'class' forms an important aspect of their gender identities. In chapter two, I noted that 'class' as an issue is often overlooked in much mainstream feminist literature. The study of mature age women students conducted for this thesis found that the differences and similarities I illustrated between Rita and Mira were present amongst the mature age women students in the study. The issues associated with how to retain gender as my central focus, while recognising the differences between and amongst these women emerged as central to how I approached the research material. By offering two very different approaches to the themes that emerged within the study, I have illustrated the difficulties inherent in having to choose one or the other approach.

In chapter six, I offered an approach to the themes that emerged within the study, that focused on similarities amongst the women. Just as both Rita and Mira experienced shifts in how they had thought about themselves as women because of their return to study, the mature age women within this study did also. Their exposure to the knowledges and discourses of Women's Studies had offered the women in this study new ways of thinking about themselves as women. However, the ways these women spoke of the effects of Women's Studies on them as women, and the ways they spoke of themselves as women outside the discursive spaces of Women's Studies were contradictory. The discourses of the family, and the ways that they had lived as women before returning to study, appeared to

mediate with the new knowledges they had gained in such a way as to diminish the empowering effects of Women's Studies.

In chapter seven I took a different approach, focusing on the differences amongst the women in relation to their experiences of returning to study. Within this approach it became clear that, while the women may have been defined through their relationship to the family both within and outside the discourses of the university, this was articulated very differently in relation to 'class', race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. What also emerged was that there were effects of returning to study on the women, that were related to how they were women of a certain race, ethnicity, 'class' and sexuality.

The two approaches offered in chapters six and seven, lead to very different conclusions about the effects of returning to study on mature age women students. In the approach that focused on the similarities amongst the women, differences amongst the women were silenced. However, in the approach offered in chapter seven, it became difficult to conclude that mature age women students could be considered a group at all, because of the myriad differences in their experiences of returning to study.

In chapter eight I offered an alternative way of approaching the themes that emerged within the study. In this approach I suggested that an exploration of the borderlands, at the interface of identity and difference, might offer ways of exploring gender identity as it is 'classed'. It became apparent that it is within the silences, contradictions and differences within the findings that identity formation could be explored in a way that allows the similarities amongst these women to be explored as well as their different 'classed' gender identities. Thus, this approach has shown that these women negotiated their sense of self in the spaces between the discourses they accessed.

Just as Rita and Mira's experiences of returning to study as mature age students were influenced by their 'classed' experiences as women, a number of differences emerged amongst the women within this study. Those women who identified as 'working class' experienced issues related to 'class' as well as gender. What is also clear from the study is that family was defined and experienced very differently depending on how the women self attributed in relation to 'class'.

The 'working class' mature age women students were aware of themselves as 'classed' women and this offered a way of exploring gender identity as it is 'classed', particularly in relation to the family. Focusing only on the similarities amongst the women would recognise how their identity as women was formed and shifted when exposed to new knowledges and discourses, but would not reflect the many differences in how this was articulated in relation to the 'classed' nature of being woman. Considering the differences within how gender identity was articulated depending on 'class' identification has allowed me to explore the 'classed' nature of gender identity, and how this played out in relation to exposure to the knowledges and discourses of the university.

Exploring the borderlands of the discursive spaces to which these women had access has shown that identity is not constructed totally within discourses, nor totally within the realm of experience, but at the interface of the two. In the borderlands of the discourses to which they have access, was a space where these women negotiated meaning as to how they were 'classed' women. This method offers a way to draw out 'class' and explore it in relation to gender, not in the materialist sense but in relation to 'classed' gender identity, while also recognising that other facets of identity also mediate this.

### REFLEXIVE RESEARCH OR AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

Michele Barrett (1988) argues that the family is central to women's oppression. Betty Friedan (1963) argues that women must gain an identity of their own that is not related to their

identity as wife and mother within the family to overcome the 'feminine mystique'. Throughout the thesis, I have explored the flaws in these arguments. I reach the end of this thesis with the conclusion that, despite the differences in how it is expressed and experienced, mature age women students were defined by themselves and others, primarily through their relationship to the family and motherhood. This is surprising to me for a number of reasons. I began this research with no interest in exploring issues related to the family. Also, throughout the thesis I have argued, and drawn on the work of feminists of difference to support my argument that broad theorisations such as those of the family are essentialist and universalist. That, within the study of mature age women students, the family emerged as such an important issue has a number of implications, particularly in relation to feminist methodologies.

The place of experience within feminist research has been hotly debated. Investigating the lived experiences of this group as women who were 'classed' as well as gendered offers some solution to the problems of drawing on experience as a form of knowledge production. This approach does not essentialise or universalise the identities and lives of all women. By focusing on a very specific group, within a specific time and place, I have not suggested that all women, or even that all mature age women students have the same experiences as women.

I aimed, within the study of mature age women students, to adhere to a reflexive and reciprocal research methodology, and adopted a number of methods that reflect this aim. The study was designed in such a way as to allow the participants as active a role within the research as was possible within the confines of doctoral research. I drew on a methodology that allowed the themes of the research to emerge largely unprompted within the interviews, rather than being pre-determined. Similarly, I offered different approaches to these themes, which indicates how differently research material can be interpreted, depending on the lens through which the researcher views it. I also, at different stages of the research, gave the

participants in the study the opportunity to give their feedback on the direction in which the research was progressing. Thus the way the research developed, and the way that the family emerged as an issue that I had not expected, reflects the methodology.

I have positioned myself within the study of mature age women students in such a way as to make the research process transparent. The reader knows that I was a mature age woman student, and thus had a personal investment in the research. She also knows that my interest in the 'classed' nature of gender identity emerged because of my own 'class' identification. Similarly, I have discussed how the power relations emerged within the interviews with the participants because of my positioning as a particular type of woman.

As I have noted a number of times within the thesis, there is a fine line between positioning oneself within one's research and degenerating into a form of reflexivity in which one can only talk about oneself. I have addressed this by positioning myself, as the researcher, in relation to the participants and feminist theorising in broader terms. While I can not deny that the research in this thesis reflects my own experiences and interests, it is framed within broader debates in feminism, and is related to the lived experiences of women who have similar, and different experiences to my own.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study has implications for future policy in relation to mature age women students within higher education. The study has shown that, as a group, mature age women students were always constructed by their families and friends, and within the university setting as outsiders within education because they were always defined in relation to the family. There is a need then for consideration of this issue when developing policy related to this group.

That there were differences amongst mature age women's definition and articulation of the family in relation to 'class' identification also has implications for educational policy

development, and indeed raises a number of pedagogical issues. That this group of mature age women students had very different experiences of the family and that this had effects on their studying is clear. Their experiences of being mature age women students were 'classed' as well as gendered. It is interesting to note that this was in a number of ways related to the discourses of the universities they attended. The 'classed' discourses of the two very different universities had different effects on the women as they were 'classed' and gendered, and thus on how they experienced study. The 'working class' women had very different experiences of studying, in relation to their 'classed' identities.

I believe that there are implications here for future research. I have explored the effects of returning to study on this group of women at the time they were studying, finding that this has had effects on how they identified as 'classed' women. It would be interesting to explore how this played out amongst this group of women in the future. So for example: where did their study lead? What did they do with the knowledges they had gained? Are there 'class' differences? Did the women who identified as 'working class' continue to have issues about their gender identity as it is 'classed'?

I have raised a number of issues related to Women's Studies. Just as there were a number of differences in how the women experienced study depending on their 'classed' identities as women, so too there were differences in their experiences of Women's Studies. While the knowledges the women were offered within Women's Studies were in many ways empowering, offering them new ways of being women, many complained that the knowledges did not always relate to their lives and experiences. A number of differences arose within this, and could be related to the ways Women's Studies was offered at the two universities.

What is particularly relevant here I believe, in relation to the pedagogy of Women's Studies, is that it was often those women who felt that feminist knowledges often excluded them who were also the most positive about the knowledges they were gaining, and the effects of this on

their lives. That this was more common amongst the women at VUT, raises a number of questions about the nature of Women's Studies and its purpose that were beyond the scope of this thesis. I believe that this is an issue that is imperative for future research. So for example, What does this say about how Women's Studies is offered at different universities and its position of significance and/or marginality? Do particular forms of the discipline attract or suit different women, or is it just the way they incorporate it into their lives depending on the discourses they bring with them to study? It also raises questions as to the role of Women's Studies in academia For example, should Women's Studies integrate with the broader discourses of the university (and this is particularly relevant in these times of the increasingly market driven universities, and the decline of the humanities)? On the other hand, should the aim of Women's Studies be to be aligned with women's movement and attempt to change the conditions under which women live?

While my focus within this thesis has been on the effects of returning to study on the 'classed' gender identities of mature age women students, I have recognised that gender identities are also raced and ethnicised. As noted in chapter three, few women from ethnic and racial minority groups chose to participate in the research project. However, as outlined in chapter seven, despite the small number of such women (three) who did participate, some interesting differences were apparent in relation to the themes that emerged within the study. Both the women who identified as being from ethnic minority groups discussed the difficulties that they had experienced in their earlier education because of their ethnic backgrounds. One woman, who identified as Brown, discussed the ways in which she believed the expectations of her, as a woman from a traditional background, were different than Australian women in relation to family responsibilities. She was also critical of mainstream feminist work that, she suggested, excluded all women who were from other than white, Western backgrounds.

There is a growing body of feminist literature that focuses on women from ethnic and racial minority groups, however such women have not been adequately investigated in terms of returning to study at a mature age. That there were differences within the current study amongst the women from racial and ethnic minority groups suggests to me that such mature age women students warrant further investigation. Such an investigation could consider the effects of higher education, and in particular Women's Studies, on the ethnicised and racialised gender identities of mature age women students. Similarly, it could consider the previous and current educational experiences of these women. In terms of Women's Studies specifically, further investigation could consider whether mature age women from such groups are attracted to Women's Studies and, when they do choose to study Women's Studies whether the curricula and pedagogy are relevant to their needs.

## CONCLUSIONS: ANSWERING (SOME) QUESTIONS IN THE BORDERLANDS

In chapter one I asked how it is possible to be a subject within feminism, and a feminist if one is different in relation to one's 'class', race, ethnicity, sexuality and so on. That I feel, as a 'working class' woman, different within academia need not be seen as a disadvantage. Some suggest that a positioning as outsiders within can be a good position from which to explore issues (Collins 1991). Thus, being an outsider within, as a 'working class' woman within the 'middle class' discourses of academia and feminist discourses and knowledges can be an advantage rather than a disadvantage. As I have noted in relation to feminist theories, outsiders within are often in a position to see more clearly the way things work within the discursive spaces they occupy, because of their very difference within these. Collins for example, argues that, 'Outsiders within occupy a special place – they become different people, and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult to established ... insiders to see' (Collins 1991 p. 53).

Feminists have always been outsiders within traditional knowledge production and academic discourses placing them in a position where they can see how women have been either excluded or constructed as 'deviant' in relation to 'men's knowledges'. They have used this position strategically to effect change within the discourses of academia. In a similar way, those who are positioned as outsiders within feminism (feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism) have done the same thing in relation to how they have been silenced within mainstream feminist knowledges and research. Drawing on this approach I have suggested that this is a useful positioning in relation to 'class'.

Within the thesis, I have positioned myself theoretically in the borderlands of the work of feminists of difference and mainstream feminism. I feel that I am positioned, as a 'working class' feminist at the interface of these two approaches. As a 'working class' woman, I am in some ways, an outsider within much mainstream feminism. This has made the work of feminists from minority racial and ethnic groups within feminism particularly attractive to me. However, as a white, western, Anglo-Celtic woman in Australia I am relatively privileged, and thus an insider. I believe that this is a particularly useful positioning. As a feminist then, I am similar, but can retain my difference. Thus, I have negotiated an identity as a woman, and as a feminist that is defined within the borderlands. Like Walkerdine (1990):

> I call myself an 'educated working-class' woman. This may be a fictional identity like all the others, but it allows something to be spoken and some things to come together: educated, working-class, and woman - three terms which I thought were hopelessly fragmented. Terms which assert my education and my power with pride and claim back my education, not as alienation and a move to another class but as part of a narrative which allows me a place from which to struggle, a sense of belonging (p.158).

I contend that notions of the borderlands offers a positioning for those who feel marginalised within mainstream feminism, as subjects and as feminists in such a way as to allow them to retain their difference. Similarly, I contend that the borderlands offers a site of investigation within which one can investigate the 'classed' nature of gender identity. In the borderlands of

identity and difference, one can retain a focus on gender, while recognising the differences amongst and between women.

# APPENDIX

Gail Paasse,
49 Shakespeare Drive,
Delahey, 3038
93674938

Dear

As a participant in my research on mature age women students I am writing to inform you of the progress of the project and to request a bit more of your time. I am currently writing up my thesis (or, more accurately, attempting to write!), and am at the moment working on the analysis chapters. I have always felt disappointed, when participating in research, that I have had no feedback as to what has been done with my 'words', nor any opportunity to comment on how they have been analysed. In an attempt to address this I am making every attempt to allow the participants of this research as active a role as possible. With this in mind, I am sending you a copy of a summary your comments. Please comment on the summary, and add anything you think may be relevant. The comments you, and the other participants make will form a section within the thesis. While I am only sending you a summary of the main points, I am happy to make the full version of the analysis available to you if you wish.

As I am hoping to finish my thesis as soon as possible I would appreciate it if you could send your comments to me ASAP (no later than 31/7/1998). Hope to hear from you soon. If you have any questions about this, please call me on 93674938.

Yours sincerely,

Gail Paasse

The aim of this analysis is to explore the effects of the discourses of higher education on the identity formation processes of mature age women students. Within this is a focus on differences amongst women as they relate to 'class' identification. Drawing on feminist theorisations of identity which conceive of it as multiple, shifting and often self contradictory, the analysis revolves around two broad questions: Does exposure to the discourses of higher education lead to changes in the ways in which this group identify, if so, what are the effects of this; Are there differences in the effects of the discourses on these women in relation to the ways they identify themselves in 'class' terms, and what does this tell us about how we can think about 'class'.

Increased confidence was the way most of the women indicated that they had changed since returning to study (many suggest that this could be a result of maturity, volunteer work, counseling and so on, as well as their return to study). They talk about confidence in relation to: being able to ask questions; having knowledge to argue issues articulately; being able to interact with professionals in a confident way. Many mentioned the joy they have at thinking of themselves as educated people. Some suggest that being able to say they are a student, rather than a 'housewife' greatly increased their confidence. Many however suggest that this newfound confidence is situational. While they are more confident in their life outside the university setting, most felt that they lack confidence in their academic ability and in the university setting in general.

The majority of the women speak of the ways that, before returning to study, they had felt different than those around them in relation to their attitudes to gender issues, a feeling of being 'out of step'. They speak of having had different opinions and feelings than others in relation to gender inequality and the role of women in society. Some speak of never feeling comfortable with the role of women that is expected of them. Returning to study (and in particular studying Women's Studies) has led to an articulation of these feelings and opinions. It has led to a feeling of belonging to a body of thought which confirms what they had always felt and thought. They now have theory which explains the gender issues which had bothered them in the past. This led to an increased confidence in their opinions, and a body of knowledge to back up their arguments.

The knowledge these women have gained through Women's Studies has led, in many cases, to a new awareness of themselves as women, and their role in society. They felt that how they had understood themselves as wives and/or mothers had been challenged by feminist theory. For some this was a painful process. Many of the women talked about guilt. While some

claimed that they refused to feel guilty about their studying, many others felt that this was taking time from family which led them to feel guilty. Most, while they admitted feeling guilty, recognised that they do have the right to time spent on themselves, and in fact should not have sole responsibility for family responsibilities.

The themes outlined above demonstrate that these women have experienced shifts in their identity in relation to gender. They have gone from feeling different than those around them (in relation to gender issues) to belonging to a body of thought which articulates their feelings and thoughts, and also the confidence to argue these. Also, their awareness of themselves as women has changed with exposure to the discourses and knowledges of Women's Studies.

The issue of guilt highlights the self contradictory nature of identity. While the women know (from their feminist studies) that they have a right to have interests and time for themselves, many still feel guilt if they take time away from their families (in particular their children). Their identity as 'women' and the rules associated with this, are at odds with their identity as a Women's Studies student, and the knowledge that goes with this. Also, Women's Studies, is a discipline often not widely accepted either within the university, nor in society at large. Many of the women speak of having to constantly justify not only the subject, but their reasons for doing it.

The women appeared well versed on common perceptions about mature age women students. They were concerned to highlight the ways that they did not fit the stereotype of the 'bored, 'middle class', housewives' returning to study to 'broaden their minds' (pointing out, quite rightly, that this is a legitimate reason for study in itself), who divorce as a result of this. Most of the women speak of how they constantly have to justify their study and had set responses to people who queried them.

Most women were particularly concerned with the common perception that a return to study leads to marriage breakdown. This study suggests that this is not the case. While two of the women did experience a marriage breakup after their return to study, both argue that their study was not the reason (although one woman's husband suggests that it is). A number of the women (6) had experienced a marriage breakup prior to returning to study, many suggesting that it was this that led to their return to study (this was the case more with women from VUT, [4]).

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It is interesting that many of the women at VUT believed that the Monash University group fit the stereotype of mature age women students, and speak of how they were different than them. The women at VUT also believed that they were different than the stereotypical mature age women students because they are not 'middle class', and not well off financially. Despite these perceptions, in fact half of the women at Monash University are on sole parent benefits, and/or said they were from 'working class backgrounds'.

The themes outlined above are those which were mentioned by the majority of the participants within the research and most responded in similar ways. These are common themes also within work on mature age women students. The focus within this work however is on differences amongst the women, in particular differences around 'class'.

The participants were not asked to assign a 'class' position to themselves, however when discussing their educational background a number of women said that they were from a 'working class background'. It is interesting that 'class' was only mentioned by those who said that their backgrounds were, or still feel that they are, 'working class', no-one speak of having a 'middle class' background.

Feeling different at university was more common with those women who speak of themselves as 'working class'. Some felt that they did not know the 'codes' that they needed to be a university student, nor know practical things about being a university student (for example, what a major is). For some it was that they did not feel articulate, or their language was not 'middle class'.

A theme which was common with the majority of the women in the study, but which elicited very different responses depending on how they identify in terms of 'class', was that of family and friends responses to their study. While almost all the women mentioned family and friends reactions to, and support (or lack of it) of their study, there were a number of differences within this. Some said that the reactions to their study were, on the whole, positive, and the people around them were supportive in a number of ways (it became clear that much of this support was only when they were not inconvenienced however!). Those women who said that they had little support, or indifference, or, in some cases, hostility, from their families were more often those women who said they were from 'working class backgrounds'.

There were however a number of differences between those women who said they were from 'working class backgrounds', and those women who still identified themselves as 'working class'. Those who did not identify themselves as 'working class' now (but say they are from 'working class backgrounds') most often had husbands (or ex-husbands) and friends who are professional and/or tertiary educated themselves. Those who identified themselves as 'working class' now were less likely to have this, and, were most likely to have problems with their husbands, families and friends over their to studying. Some suggested that their families and friends felt threatened by their study.

It is clear, when examining the interviews of women who identify as 'working class', that not only gender, but also 'class' identity shifts with exposure to the knowledges and discourses of higher education. Many mentioned that talking about being 'working class' often made those who they suggested are 'middle class' uncomfortable, and that 'middle class' people have no idea about what 'working class' people are like. They often suggested that knowledge (for example in Sociology) about 'the working class' did not reflect their lives or experiences. For many their awareness of being 'working class' had changed with exposure to these discourses.

Some speak of the problems they are experiencing with regard to their 'class' identity. As they are gaining what many would argue is a 'middle class' education, their identity is 'up in the air'. While they call themselves 'working class', they feel, in many ways alienated from their friends and families who are 'working class' because of their education. However they do not believe that they are 'middle class'. They talk about how that are different than 'middle class' students. There are a number of contradictions here.

While I have talked broadly about the 'discourses of higher education', there are differences between the discourses of VUT and Monash University, and these differences have an affect on how the women experience their return to study.

The women who said that they are 'working class' who were studying at VUT speak of feeling different than family and friends now and of not knowing practical things at university, but they did not (as a rule), feel different at university because they are 'working class'. It was the women who identified as 'working class' who had been in contact with universities other than VUT who were most aware of the differences between themselves and 'middle class' women and students. The women who are studying at VUT are less likely to have these issues, perhaps because this institution's student base is less 'middle class'.

It also appears that interest in classes other than one's own is one sided. While the women who call themselves 'working class' were quite interested in 'the women from the other side' (the 'middle class' women from Monash University), and had many (often incorrect) preconceived notions about them, the women from Monash University did not mention VUT women at all (both groups were informed that I was interviewing the other). The women at VUT were interested in how they were different than the 'women over the other side' (Monash University). This did not arise in Monash University interviews.

It would be a mistake to suggest that 'class', or 'class' and gender, are the sole facets of identity. Within the group of women who identified themselves as 'working class' there also arose issues which relate to other facets of identity which are affected by, and affect experiences of returning to study. There are a number of differences within the group of women who call themselves 'working class'. A number of different issues emerged for the women who is lesbian, and 'working class', for the woman who is from a background other than Anglo and 'working class', for the women who are Catholic and 'working class'.

Thus, while the focus here is on 'class', it is in an attempt to explore this as one facet of identity in the recognition that it is not the only one, and that simply 'adding' this to gender, does not accurately reflect the multiplicity of identity.

While most of the women who said they were from 'working class backgrounds', or identified as 'working class' now, defined this in terms of traditional definitions of 'class': parents occupation; lack of money; language ('working class'); living in a 'working class' area and so on, those who still identify as 'working class' became unclear as to why they identify as this now.

For some (and this was particularly the case with those who had been exposed to different universities), calling themselves 'working class' was almost a conscious identity choice. They talk of not wanting to give up that part of themselves, and appear concerned with pointing out the ways that they different than 'middle class' people.

*** Please note that this is still in the preliminary stages and not in any way a finished product.

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