

“A CATALYST FOR CHANGE”
A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON WOMEN RETURNING
TO 3RD LEVEL EDUCATION IN MIDLIFE

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Social Science degree
at DBS School of Arts, Dublin.

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April 2010

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr James Brunton for his help and guidance on this project, and for the use of his Phd thesis as additional research material for mine.

I would like to thank my husband Paul for his unfailing support, and my children Laura and Cian for their assistance and guidance at times with their expert computer skills.

Thanks too goes to the many exceptional lecturers I encountered during these four years, and to the great support from the other members of the class.

Its been a very rewarding journey!

Introduction – Literature Review

Over the last three decades there has been a worldwide increase in the number of mature students returning to education and women represent a high proportion of that increase. (Britton and Baxter, 1999). The aim of the current study focuses on women in midlife entering college to study for a third level qualification and investigates how women experience this transition. Within this investigation there is a focus on the motivation of female students in midlife to enrol in an undergraduate course and these women's subjective perceptions of the benefits to be gained from this decision at this stage of the life cycle. Developmentalists believe that identity formation continues throughout the lifespan (Belsky, 2007) and this study focused on how some women may re-evaluate their life spheres in midlife. Erikson's (1986) threat to identity principles is discussed and how women in midlife returning to higher education often experience 'entry shock'. (Brunton, 2009).

Midlife

The midlife developmental period in women's lives has been described as a critical life stage, as "a time of renewed identity crisis" (Brandenburg, 1974) when reappraisal of one's goals and commitments take place. Women have a need to bring renewed meaning into their life and future. This period has been described as the "deadline decade" a time when a crisis of identity occurs (Sheehy, 1976, p.60). This period can be more problematic than adolescence with regard to questions of personal value, worth and genuineness. (Muskat, 1978,). It is a time of conflict for many women.

A time of renewed identity crisis

Eric Erikson (1902-1994) saw the ego as developing through a series of life stages and at the end of each stage it faces a crisis which must be resolved before the individual is able to move onto the next stage. The second-last stage of Erikson's model is the middle adulthood "Generativity v. Stagnation" stage where according to Erikson the individual seeks to be productive and creative and to make a contribution to society. A new stage of life offers individuals a chance to tackle new challenges and to deal with unresolved issues from their adolescence and early adulthood. (Belsky, 2007). Each stage of Erikson's model has a favourable and unfavourable outcome. A favourable outcome for the middle adulthood stage is the ability to be concerned and caring about others and an unfavourable outcome is lack of growth, boredom and over-concern with oneself. (Berger, 2007). In this sense it has been suggested that the midlife stage may parallel adolescence in some ways, as a time of upheaval and identity crisis (C.Beckett, 2007), although other theorists say that the concept of a midlife crisis is a socially constructed myth. (Belsky, 2007). James Marcia devised four identity statuses or categories of identity formation which included identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, moratorium and identity achievement. He believed that people progress through each stage from teenage years into adulthood, passing through moratorium where an individual actively searches out various possibilities to find their path, and into achievement, an identity status in which the person decides on a definite life path. (Belsky, 2007). However critics questioned the logic of Marcia's view that an individual can be categorised as definitely being in one particular category. Many developmentalists believe that identity formation does not end in young adulthood but continues throughout the

lifespan and this desire to have goals and make plans is essential at any age (Bauer & McAdams, 2004). Revising one's identity is vital to living fully, as events like career changes, divorce, retirement, becoming widowed and children leaving the home all continue to disrupt life paths. (Belsky, 2007). The current literature suggests that these life-changing events are often a factor when women in midlife decide to return to higher education.

Issues that are commonly encountered at this stage of the life cycle include physical deterioration where an individual becomes more aware of the ageing process, greying hair, the appearance of wrinkles and a slow reduction in physical agility. (Masoro, 2006). Women's fertility reduces and a woman reaches the menopause which, although exaggerated in popular mythology is still an important life change. Children may leave home and some women experience the "empty nest" syndrome. How this impacts on women varies, women who have devoted themselves to caring for children and homemaking may find it a major adjustment while for others it may be a time to take on new challenges. (C.Beckett, 2007).

Women's career opportunities become less available at this stage in the life cycle as employers favour younger people, (Denmark & Paludi, 2007), and women may be part of a "sandwich generation" where they are still responsible for the care of their children and may also be providing care for elderly parents. (Berger, 2007). The death of a parent may result in a reappraisal of one's own position in life and an

awareness of one's own mortality. Hopes and dreams may be cast aside at this stage or conversely new plans for the future put in place. According to Beckett, more people are getting divorced at this stage in the life cycle and more people are moving house. These changes in the life cycle may impact on women's decision to return to education. (Beckett, 2000).

Re-evaluation of existing life spheres

Entering higher education is depicted in the literature on mature women students as a time of change which has psychological consequences. (Muskat, 1978). A major theme running through the existing research and literature is the relevance of identity and the contradictions and discontinuities in women's identity when they return to education, which can result in anxiety. (S. Johnson, C. Robson, 1999). The degree of disorientation, sense of foreignness or sensory overload that an individual experiences when entering a new and possibly unfamiliar context will impact on the formation of their new context-specific identity. (Brunton, 2009). This is referred to as reality shock (Hughes 1958 cited in Louis, 1980), entry stress (Wanous, 1992) and surprise (Louis, 1980). If the individual does not manage to renegotiate their role in their new environment they may decide to leave the context in order to alleviate the dissonance they are experiencing. (Louis, 1980 cited in Brunton, 2009). Women returning to college in midlife can be said to experience this entry shock, entering a new environment and trying to renegotiate their role. Women experience various events and emotional episodes throughout their lives but during the midlife stage women often experience such events and feelings with a higher awareness of ageing

and mortality. A re-evaluation of existing life spheres, family relations and work may occur. (Levinson, 1986; Oplatka, Bargal, & Inbar, 2001). According to Oplatka (2001), there is controversy among theorists regarding the major characteristics of the middle career stage. One group argues that the midlife stage is marked by a severe crisis, (Levinson, 1986), stagnation, (Hall, 1976), burnout, (Oplatka 2002), low career opportunities, (Wrightsmann, 1988) and a sense of anxiety and internal conflict (Levinson, 1996). The opposing view from other theorists is that the midlife career stage is a transition period when individuals are unlikely to undergo crisis but rather feel comfortable (Hunter & Sundel, 1989) experience personal and professional growth and may look for new opportunities for development. (Crow,1993). This middle career stage has been termed the “renewal stage” where individuals question their current life structure, create new commitments to other life structures, feel re-energised and adopt changes in work and family life. (Oplatka et al, 2001).

Researchers who have focused on the development of women in the midlife stage of the life cycle found that there is a desire in these women to change and seek new opportunities which may include the chance to return to education. (Muskat, 1978). Women assume a number of roles but the potential is there for women to assume more diverse roles as normative behaviours based on age norms, become less important (Parr, 2000). Women returning to higher education at this age have a desire to redefine at least part of their identity, to see themselves in a different way and exert a degree of control over some aspects of their lives. (Parr, 2000).

Mature women students experience a threat to identity

Breakwell (1986) identifies three main principles of identity which operate in Western industrial societies. These are “the need for continuity over time and situation; to feel personally and socially worthwhile (self esteem); and to feel unique or distinctive from others”. (Breakwell, 1986, p24). Breakwell also outlines the identity principle of self-efficacy which refers to peoples beliefs in their abilities. According to Breakwell (1986) threat occurs when one or more of these principals are perceived to have been challenged.

Many mature women students experience anxiety returning to higher education with many women describing feelings ranging from being apprehensive, nervous, overwhelmed, anxious, daunted, stressed, and lonely. (S. Johnson, C. Robson, 1999). These feelings appear to be related to the unknown and unfamiliar and could be explained in terms of a threat to identity principles, (S. Johnson, C. Robson, 1999) and entry shock (Brunton, 2009). Previous research on mature women students suggest that domestic responsibilities and demands are a key factor in creating anxiety for these women. Women have more concerns because of their social position. (S. Johnson, C. Robson, 1999).

“Adult women students live in multiple worlds, worlds of action and commitment, worlds of emotional validation and conflict, and worlds that will change both the mind and the heart”. (Kasworm 2008, p.27). Kasworm uses the analogy of adult women returning to college being on a journey, for some women it is a way of continuing a previously interrupted journey of college studies and for others it is a new journey into the unknown. They are attempting to reinvent themselves through

a new environment of people and ideas, or expanding their lives with possibilities to have a more stable future. (Brunton, 2009; Kasworm 2008).

“Whether these adults are expanding their lives, investing in a new career option or reinventing themselves, entry is often a complex and treacherous journey that supports but may also diminish their sense of identity”. (Kasworm, 2008). Mature students in midlife who are employed in a workplace enter higher education with a readily constructed identity based on their work role but this may be in conflict with their new student identity. Barnett suggests that an adult who leaves one life world to enter the intellectual world of learning faces the “existential anxiety” (Barnett, 1999, 38) of “inhabiting two discourses at once”. (Elliott 1999, 24). According to Askham there are contradictions to being both an adult and a student at the same time. “The adult identity is autonomous, responsible and mature whereas that of the student is incomplete, dependent and in deficit”. (Askham, 2008 p.90).

Adults seeking entry to higher education in midlife find it a daunting task and challenging to their identities and their sense of adult competence (Kasworm, 2000), although it may be fulfilling a long held wish to return to education these individuals often experience doubts and insecurity and may be discouraged or disheartened.

Research suggests that mature women students experience anxiety and self consciousness about their place in a college environment and their ability to perform as undergraduate students. (Kasworm, 2000). Women in midlife have competing

roles, hopes and realities and “each semester of college involvement represents either a renegotiation or adaptation of themselves and their lives” (Kasworm, 2000, p27).

Much of the data collected in the existing research is concerned with the mature female students’ perceptions of their own personal limitations, (for example, am I good enough) and for others their concern about “fitting it all in”. Many of the anxieties expressed by students prior to starting their courses related to their worry and uncertainty about returning to education, their fear of a lack of ability or not having the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed. (P. Askham, 2008).

Oplatka (2001) states that the women in midlife she interviewed for her research reached higher education from diverse starting points and experiences in life but they considered higher education to be a means “through which they are emancipated from a feminine identity that was constructed in conjunction with societal rules and stereotypes”. Higher education seems to bring them back to their authentic selves, that is it allowed them to be themselves even if that part of their identity was not necessarily compatible with their gender role but with their own traits and abilities. They became less constrained by society’s expectations of gender roles (Oplatka, 2006, p28). She found that women turn to higher education to satisfy their own desires and needs as opposed to others needs (for example, family, partner, work). (Oplatka, 2006). Oplatka’s research also found that the women’s decision was made from within a personal context of “internal thoughts, reflections on womanhood and identity, internal conflicts, and alterations in the women’s responsibilities”. (Oplatka, 2006, p. 79). It was not only a desire for self fulfilment but also a search for rediscovery “brought about by internal reflections characterising midlife of the woman’s authentic identity, which has been restricted by many gender based

stereotypes since childhood”. (Oplatka, 2006, p. 75). Oplatka concludes that it is likely that higher education plays a liberating role for women in traditional societies in terms of gender relations and contributes to their identity development and self authorship (Kegan, 1982, cited in Oplatka 2006 p. 79). The benefits of higher education are related to processes that women undergo in midlife and “to their reconstructed self” (Oplatka, 2006, p.75). Oplatka found recurring themes in her research of ‘revitalisation’, ‘increased self confidence’, ‘energy replenishment’, and ‘personal growth’. Although these are themes that have appeared in a lot of previous literature she feels that they should be looked at in the context of internal conflicts and new meanings that the women attached to their self identities. “For them, growth means a transition to a coherent self-identity, stronger belief in their potential and elements that have been referred to as “self-renewal” in midlife. (Salomone 1966; Young, 1992, Oplatka 2006 p. 67).

Why do women return to higher education in midlife

Figures released by the Higher Education Authority Publications, Facts and Figures, show there were 5,193 female fulltime enrolments age 30+ in the University sector in the year 2008/2009 and 537 female fulltime undergraduate new entrants, age 30+. There were 2,505 female fulltime enrolments 08/09, age 30+ for the Institute of Technology sector and 532 fulltime female undergraduate new entrants in the Institute of Technology sector aged 30+. There was no available statistical breakdown for the age 40+. Statistics in the U.K. indicate a similar upwards trend but mature students are still seen as ‘non-traditional’ and are of less interest to policy

makers than their younger peers. (A.Fuller, 2007). There is a growing literature focusing on the structural and identity issues that arise when people from 'non-traditional' groups including mature students participate in Higher Education (Baxter and Britton, 2001; Brine and Waller, 2004; Tett, 2004).

Most of the research in the literature was carried out using qualitative research methods and interviews with mature female students returning to higher education in midlife. (Oplatka, 2006; Parr 2000; Bernard et al, 2000). The reasons women gave for returning to higher education were both personal and practical. Many women enrolled for reasons of personal development and an interest in education for itself. (Osborn, Charnley and Withnail 1984). Some were dissatisfied with their public position and the idea of spending the rest of their lives in jobs that were unrewarding both in monetary and personal satisfaction terms. Many women linked their return to higher education as a way of getting a better paid job in order to contribute to family finances. It was felt that higher education would give them status and lend more weight to their opinions. Higher education was viewed as conferring prestige. Women spoke of status, esteem and a desire to prove ability to both themselves and others (Parr, 2000, Oplatka 2006, Bernard et al 2000).

One mature woman student spoke of becoming bored with the jobs she did and the realisation that with education she would be capable of more. (Parr, 2000). She was resentful of all the work she carried out checking deeds for her solicitor boss and felt that she was capable of doing more. She felt she did all the hard work yet he earned all the money. Another spoke of working with professionals and thinking they were

“fantastic” until she realised she was confusing education with intelligence, and that they were no more intelligent than her. (Parr, 2000). For some women returning to study was therapeutic, it gave them a goal during periods of personal difficulty. For others it gave them an identity outside the domestic arena. (Parr, 2000).

During initial first interviews Parr found women were more likely to cite economic reasons for returning to higher education, rather than personal reasons. Women with caring responsibilities felt it was more socially acceptable to say they were returning to study to help with family finances rather than they were “doing it for themselves”. She noted that women are still seen as the primary carers of children, partners and the elderly and that women with dependent children who work outside the home often work part-time. This is in order to maintain their domestic and caring responsibilities in addition to helping with the family budget. Advertisers still use women to promote washing and other domestic products and this implies that no matter what else a woman may choose to do she is still responsible for the domestic sphere. “This creates a reality that at least part of women’s identity is located in the domestic and caring role”. (Parr, 2000 p 55).

Family/Partners Support

Many women questioned in the research carried out by Merrill (1999), stated that they received little or no support from their husband/partner. Some men were obstructive or occasionally hostile. This attitude from men cut across class boundaries. The issues are therefore gender specific. (Merrill, 1999). According to

Merrill (1999), husbands perceived that their dominance within the family was under threat, wives studying for a degree undermined the status quo. Leonard (1994), Edwards (1993) and McLaren (1985) discuss the impact on relationships, “Disapproval can be particularly acute if participation is seen to threaten gender roles. Married men in particular fear that their partner’s educational endeavours will affect the relationship and that household obligations will be traded off against university obligations” (Leonard, 1994: pp.169-170). Merrill argues that the debate is about power and male hegemony within the home. Some men feared their wives involvement in studying as this could lead them to question or challenge male hegemony within the family. A number of women in the research felt that their husband’s antagonism towards their studies was due to their working class background which they felt had socialised them into accepting traditional gender roles, though as stated by Merrill (1999), this attitude from men cut across class boundaries. Education was not just threatening to the women’s relationships with their partners but somehow was threatening to their partners personally as men. According to Edwards (2004) much psychological and sociological writing on men and masculinity, point to men’s desire to have the home as an idealised separate retreat (for example, Tolson, 1987; Jackson, 1990), their demands for attention and emotional sustenance from women, while at the same time having an inability to acknowledge emotions and a fear of intimacy, and their attachment to their status as the breadwinner and fount of public world knowledge in a relationship (for example, Tolson, 1987; Seidler, 1989).

Hutchinson and Hutchinson (1986) in their study of women in education comment that women who continued on to be full-time students in higher education set

themselves apart from their contemporaries, and that relatives and friends often found their actions incomprehensible. Dahrendorf (1975) writes of the “ people who have chosen an arduous way towards improving their life chances” in his preface to Hopper and Osborn’s (1975) book on mature students. He states that “in short, they are different, and being different hurts”. (Hopper and Osborn, 1975, preface).

Conclusion

Economic, labour market and social changes have impacted on the pursuit of higher education by mature women students. Economic changes including the decline of manufacturing, the demise of certain primary industries and the spread of new information and communication technologies have seen a change in employment patterns. This has led to a rise in the number of women in the workforce and part-time employment. New divisions and inequalities between workers have been generated because of these trends. (Hutton 1995). His analysis suggests that 40% of the workforce enjoy secure fulltime employment, 30% are in temporary or part-time jobs and 30% are marginalised through unemployment, seasonal work and other unstable forms of employment. This has increased the demand for skills in the jobs market and may be a contributing factor in the numbers of women returning to higher education in order to ‘upskill’.

Education was also linked with a need for independence and a desire to take charge of at least a part of the direction of women's lives. It was associated with resistance to the power and control that others had over their identities in the public and private spheres. Parr argues that there is evidence that the identities of the students in her research had been "controlled and constrained by the overlapping and interlocking nature of the dominant patriarchal ideology in our society". (Parr, 2000, p128).

"Older women who enter higher education to study for a degree are challenging several myths". (P.Marshall, 2000, p23). Some people feel that education is only for the young and that older women should stay within their traditional roles. Some commentators have gone so far as suggest that older people should not be allowed to enter higher education. "It is questionable whether a national education system should be obliged to admit to its most expensive courses students who will never use their degrees or qualifications or who can have very little time to do so". (Laslett, 1989, p.167).

What motivates women to return to higher education in midlife?

What were these womens subjective perceptions of the benefits to be gained from the decision to return to higher education?

What barriers if any, do women in midlife face when returning to higher education?

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the motivation of women to return to higher education in midlife. This developmental period in the lives of women has gained much interest in academic literature and much research has already been carried out on this subject. This study suggests that the adult undergraduate student identity is multi-layered and evolving, the links between identity and education were made in a number of ways none of which were mutually exclusive. The majority of the women in this study saw education as a catalyst for change in their lives and a means to take charge of at least a part of the content and direction of their lives.

Method

This study was carried out using qualitative research methods. Female students in midlife were interviewed by the researcher as the aim of the study was an investigation of subjective accounts. The interview format was semi-structured and the interviewees spoke without interruption from the researcher as it was felt that this method could yield additional data for the research. The researcher met the women and interviews were conducted face to face and recorded with a dictaphone. This data was then transcribed and thematic analysis carried out.

Ethical considerations are central to a study of this nature so pseudonyms were selected for all the respondents so that anonymity could be assured in all recordings and transcribed material. All participants were assured of total confidentiality in the data collection and total anonymity in the presentation of findings.

Participants

The participants were five women in midlife who were currently studying for a degree in two Dublin colleges. The women ranged in age from 40 to 54. Two of the women were 40 years old, one woman was 41 years old, one woman was 43 and one woman was 54. Two of the women were single and had no children and three of the women were married and had children. The children of two of these women were still of school-going age. They came from various socio-economic backgrounds.

The researcher contacted a Mature Student Support Officer in one Dublin college and requested help recruiting women for the research project. A request was sent by email to 1,000 students by the Mature Student Support Officer and as a result of this the researcher made contact with 4 volunteers. One other mature student was referred to the researcher through a friend, this woman is currently studying in a Dublin university.

Procedure

The female mature students contacted the researcher and volunteered to be a part of this study. The participants for this study were chosen provided they met the criteria of age and enrolment in a degree course in a third level college. The interviews were carried out in the researcher's home on two occasions and in a Dublin college on three other occasions. The interviews were semi-structured face to face interviews. In this type of interview, the interviewer follows an interview guide yet is open to new issues that arise during the interview. It was felt that this approach could yield additional data for the research. This kind of interview has been described as a means to enable the researcher to enter into the personal perspectives of the interviewee that are meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. (Patton, 2002). The conversations were recorded with the use of a Dictaphone and then transcribed. The final part of this procedure involved the analysis of the interview data, coding and sorting codes into categories and themes. This analysis was aimed at identifying the main themes in the material by searching for recurrent experiences, feelings and attitudes among the women.

Results

A Desire for greater contentment

The major findings of this study show that women students in midlife have a desire to change the direction of their life and a desire for self fulfilment. A series of critical incidents in these women's lives were catalysts in their decision to return to higher education. Annette was a 40 year old woman from a working class Dublin suburb. She made the decision to return to education after her sister committed suicide.

Dana was a 54 year old ex bank official who returned to higher education to study for a degree after she had spent several months driving up and down from Dublin to Kerry, to look after her mother who subsequently died. Nuala was a 41 year old woman who had dropped out of a degree course in applied maths when she 20, she had subsequently travelled and lived in England and Germany and made the decision to return to study for a degree after many years of feeling unfulfilled in her job. Both Della and Jane decided to return to study after years working in jobs where they had no prospects of promotion or advancement and which they found unfulfilling.

Annette spoke movingly of her decision to return to studying. Her sister who is a poet was asked to open an exhibition in their local VEC college and asked Annette if she would like to come along. She had two very small children at the time aged 2 and 3 and was attending a counsellor after another sister had committed suicide. She described her amazement going into the VEC building.

“I wasn’t in a good place in my own life and I went into this building and it was just full of hope that the only way I can describe it, it seemed like a nice happy place, everyone was friendly” .

Annette was introduced to a member of staff who asked her if she was going to join them. Annette signed up for a taster course that they ran during the Summer and after attending this course she made the decision to return to the VEC and complete her leaving certificate. She did very well in her leaving certificate and then went on to study design and was doing a Fine Art degree at the time of the research.

Dana talked about her decision to take a redundancy package from her job as a Senior Client Relationship Manager in a financial institution.

“I was working in finance and I was a Senior Client Relationship Manager and a package came up and em my mother was ill at the time, and so it was a kind of a catalyst for me, I couldn’t keep going the way I was in work and going up and down to Kerry to see my mother and looking after the kids etc etc so I decided to take the package”.

She continued to travel up and down to Kerry to visit her mother until her death a year later. Soon after her mother’s death she decided to return to university to study for a History of Art degree.

Nuala decided to take control and change the direction of her life after many years of changing jobs and moving around from place to place. She spent eight years in England after dropping out of an applied maths degree course in University of Limerick. She returned to Ireland after eight years and stayed here for five years

before moving again to Germany for a couple of years and then back to Ireland. She has remained single and has no children which she put down to being unsure about what direction she wanted to take in life. “I was deferring a lot of things because I wanted to do something different” and “I think I always had in the back of my mind that I needed to be free to do it”. Nuala had considered buying a house in the West of Ireland as a summer retreat but changed her mind. “I was going to buy a house in the West of Ireland, I thought well the job isn’t giving me a lot of satisfaction so if I have a house then in the summer that would be nice but it was the wrong way of thinking, I needed to change what I was doing from day to day rather than buying a house”. Nuala gave up her job to return to study for a degree in Journalism at a Dublin college. She had tried to combine work and study previously but found it too difficult so is now a full-time day student and is surviving this year living on her savings.

The women in this research study had a need to bring renewed meaning into their life and future by leaving jobs to pursue further education in line with Brandenburg’s description of “a time of renewed identity crisis” (Brandenburg, 1974) when reappraisal of one’s goals and commitments take place.

The Importance of a Mature Student Peer Group

Another theme that emerged from the research was the emphasis and importance that these women put on having other mature students in their age-group, in the class. Annette when asked if she found the experience of returning to college a positive one replied that the answer would have to be ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Although she was very positive about her experience studying for her fine art degree she was far less

enthusiastic about the two year period she had spent in the same college doing a design course. The first year she applied to do the fine art course she did not get a place and so decided to do a diploma course in design in the college. She was the only person in her class who had not come directly from school and found the experience “horrendous”. “When I did two years in design and I was with a class of 18 year olds and I was the only older person so I was left over there in the corner on my own for like 95% of the time”... “I was totally outside the clique and I felt so paranoid for the two years”...”When I first went in it was like they were in college with their mammy”. She described how alienated she felt within this group and how difficult it was to make herself attend the college each day. The rest of the students had a great friendship going on and she was “like the odd one out in the corner you know literally, it made me feel completely isolated”. She was always courteous to the other students but said “ they did not give me the time of day so I eventually got fed up trying, that I found daunting and really hard”. She is much happier with the group of people she is studying with now, they set her up on Facebook which she said is something she normally would not have an interest in, but they said she needed to be able to network. The students keep in touch with each other on Facebook exchanging ideas, getting feedback about their work from each other, and keeping everybody informed about upcoming exhibitions and events. The students in this degree course are helpful to each other and a source of encouragement. Annette made the comment that she wondered if the difference between both these groups was the fact that the first group were doing a two year diploma and possibly had the attitude that it was something that had to be got over with. “The calibre of

people going into a two year programme would be like ah sure I'm two years in college you know grand, but somebody who is in there for 4 years and then probably going on to do a masters are thinking more in the long-term so theres two different types of personality you know what I mean”.

When asked how she found the whole experience of returning to study at this stage in her life Nuala was very positive but emphasised the importance of having mature students her own age in the class. “Em I am really enjoying it I think having mature students your own age is critical like if I was on my own in a class of 20 I couldn't hack it, it would just be awful, you'd feel very lonely I definitely couldn't handle it, but because there are older people my age and they have a mature student support officer and he looks after us very well, and we probably get looked after a lot better than the 'normal' students do ... he sends out emails and things that might be relevant to mature students.. we meet for coffee and cinema evenings thats all a way to meet other mature students”. Having dropped out of her applied maths degree course after a period of one and a half years she was more aware of what she needed to do this time. “For the first weeks that you are there just hang around with other people, don't go home just hang around with people who are there and get to know them and once you get through those first few weeks and you've got your friends you know just people you can hang around with and go for coffee with everything else is much easier, if you don't have that I think you're on your way out and I think you'll stop attending lectures and you drop out thats the critical thing and I knew from before thats what I had to do and I definitely made a concerted effort to do it”.

Nuala felt that the younger students in her class did not know how to relate to her and saw her as being somebody their mother's age or as an authoritative figure.

When asked how the younger and older students mix Jane said this did not apply in her case as her class were all mature students with only one or two students in their twenties. However the idea of being in a class with mainly eighteen year old students did not appeal to her, "Oh God yeah wouldn't fancy that really, (laughing) they'd probably just ignore you, the owl one in the corner".

Della found the support of the friends she had made vital, and when asked about her experience returning to college to study at this stage she said "Em it was daunting at first but I got in with a few people and then when we started this degree you know six of us were always hanging around together, so I think its easier when you are with people because if you have a wobble and you think I can't do this and freaking about something they are there to say no don't, you know that you can't leave that kinda thing, that helped".

Career Opportunities for Women in Midlife

As noted previously women's career opportunities become less available at this stage in the life cycle as employers favour younger people (Denmark & Paludi, 2007).

However when asked by the researcher if they thought it would be more difficult to find employment at this stage of the life cycle the women differed in their views.

Dana who had extensive work experience and had been in managerial positions in banks and other financial institutions felt that she had no chance of finding employment. In the past she had been employed on a contract basis within these institutions but in the current economic downturn these were no longer available. She is now in her final year doing a History of Art degree and feels that this degree will be useless to her in terms of looking for work. She has no interest in returning to her previous managerial roles and says that if she was an employer she would not employ someone her age. She says “Sure theres loads of people out there who have masters in finance whatever eh, who are unemployed now and they are 35 years of age so yeah I mean if I was an employer to be honest I would not spend a fortune training me up for 5 years and then say oh she’s gone and also to put me into a pension fund would be extremely expensive so yeah I mean the likelihood of me getting a serious job (pause) like I had is zilch pretty much” and “I don’t want to go back into finance any way I’ve done that (pause) so I’ll probably end up in a job that I’ll earn far less money but hopefully it will be enjoyable”.

Annette however feels that in her chosen career as an artist her age is an advantage. She is in her third year of a four year fine art degree and has already been offered quite a lot of work in local schools. She is travelling to China in the coming months to take part in an eco project on the ecological climate in China. She feels that she gets offered more work like this because of her maturity and age. “China are recruiting artists especially from Ireland and writers by the dozen they can’t get enough of us as such but I think they are not going to take somebody who is 22 or

23 just out of college with no life experience, I find that I get a good bit of work as it is as an artist, I get quite a lot of work in our local school and things like that but I don't think I'd get the same amount of work if I was younger".

Nuala is currently in her first year in Journalism and hopes to use her degree to find employment. She plans to freelance while studying for her degree and volunteered to become an editor on the college newspaper to gain experience. She also volunteers on a local Irish radio station and hopes that this experience will help her employment prospects. She feels that employers will want 22 year olds to do the news stories which involve a lot of running around. She says "I am too tired for that I'm just not physically able to have the energy they need to do that em and also those people will be a lot fresher and a lot more malleable I guess, they will see them as that so I think they will definitely have the advantage so what I'm doing now is the important thing which is getting involved in the college newspaper and getting a lot of editing experience because I think that although I might not be the person who runs around doing news I think I will be able to use the management experience I had before, in editing a newspaper or in broadcasting because broadcasting is not such a youth focused is not so youth focused as a newspaper would ...broadcasting and producing programmes and editing is somewhere I think age would not be seen as a negative thing". However she continues on to say that she has to do extra work to make sure that when she leaves college she has something which puts her in a different category to the younger students.

Jane is doing a business degree and is in her final year. She is optimistic about employment prospects and does not see her age of 43 as being a disadvantage in the jobs market. Her husband has his own software company and although she worked in this company before as an office manager, she has plans to start her own business when she gets her degree.

Della feels her age of nearly 41 is a disadvantage when looking for new jobs. She is currently studying Social Science and has been applying for jobs at the same time. However although she has a lot of experience as a secretary she has not been called for one interview. Although the current economic downturn is a possible reason for this she thinks it could also be related to her age.

A Positive and Worthwhile Experience

The women who took part in this research project found no barriers to their entry into third level education. They found the whole experience very positive and worthwhile. The researcher's final question to the women was 'do you think the experience has changed you in any way?' Annette answered that going back to education had changed her whole life around. She had left school after her intermediate certificate when she was fourteen and gone to work in a factory. Her mother had died when she was four years old and her father was in and out of employment. She had no choice or say in the matter about leaving school. Her sisters worked in the factory and got her a job there. She describes this as a fairly bleak time during the recession of the 1980s. "I think the actual making the decision

to return changed me because it turned my whole life around because like I said I was going into a bad place with the death of my sister and then 2 young children together em life was too busy and not worth living for at the time, you know it was just an existence but I wasn't living and I found that I was thinking of the girl that had committed suicide all the time she was constantly on my mind". The return to education lifted her spirits. "it was the first positive thing that I had done since she died and when I made the decision and said right I'm going to do this I could feel my spirit lifting and the darkness kind of going". Annette describes how now several years after her initial decision to return to studying, she passes by the house where her sister lived, almost every day on her way to the college's art studio. She says "I pass by where she lived every single day I pass by her front room ... and its like shes saying Well Done... at the end of my journey I pass by where she used to live every day so it is like she is patting you on the back saying on your way, you know its quite strange that is".

Dana found the experience of returning to college at this stage of the life cycle a positive one. She had not realised it was going to be such hard work but feels that you have to want to do it, to keep going. When asked what she felt she had gained from the experience she spoke more in terms of acquiring knowledge about the art world more so than any great feelings of personal achievement.

The other women in the research spoke of gaining in confidence and the realisation that they had more ability than they had believed.

The final word goes to Nuala who said that she is more relaxed since returning to college to study. When asked if the experience had changed her in any way she replied, "I feel a lot more hopeful yeah just hopeful about the next stage of my life I guess because I felt like I was on a treadmill but now I am feeling that I am just going to gain something new which is a more open field".

The main themes that emerged from this research were:

"A desire to gain greater contentment",

"The importance of a mature student peer group" and,

"A disinterest in having a big salary".

Discussion

The aim of the current study focused on women in midlife entering college to study for a degree and investigated how women experience this transition. What was the motivation of female students to enrol in an undergraduate course and what were their subjective perceptions of the benefits to be gained from this decision at this stage of the life cycle.

A desire to change the direction of their life/A disinterest in having a big salary

The women in this research study all had a desire to change the direction of their life and a desire for self-fulfilment. Although some of the women had a desire to educate themselves primarily as a means to changing their occupations, money was not an incentive for any of them. Three of the women had become stressed and overwhelmed by the pressures of their everyday lives and responsibilities. This together with the death of a close family member was the catalyst for two of these women to return to education. They were not content with their lives and needed a new direction and focus. Three of these women had voluntarily left well paid managerial positions to pursue their goals and a fourth woman also gave up working in her final year of college in order to give more time to her studies. Dana had grown tired of her managerial positions and stressed with the demands of being a part of the 'sandwich generation' having responsibility for both aging parents and children. She had a great interest in art and decided to study history of art in university. Dana was aware that a history of art degree on its own did not offer a lot in the way of employment opportunities and although she feels she still needs to get back to work after qualifying she is unconcerned about what type of job she may

have to take. She has considered the possibility of studying for a masters degree but again feels that this would be both expensive and self indulgent and probably would not enhance her job prospects.

Annette is an artist who worked in a managerial position before she had her two smallest children and then decided to return to study for her leaving certificate after the death of her sister. During her time on a PLC course she had carried out work experience in a drug rehabilitation centre in Dublin city. This was a centre for recovering drug addicts and they were helped by means of participating in art and design. Annette really enjoyed working with and helping the people in this centre and decided that she wants to work in a community setting like this centre, when she graduates from college. She has no desire to work in an ordinary secondary school and has no desire to earn a lot of money.

Nuala gave up a well paid job to study journalism, she is not working and is living on money she had saved which she expects to run out shortly. Nuala has a love of words and language and would have liked to study English, she referred to this as “being the full dream” but decided that she would have a better chance of earning a living with journalism.

Although the other two women in the study both hope to change the course of their careers too, money was not an incentive for either of these women either.

Gaining Greater Confidence

Adult learners are more likely to lack confidence in themselves and to underestimate their own ability (Daines, 1993) and some of the women in this research confirmed these findings. Before enrolling to do a Social Science degree Della had completed one year of a general degree. When asked by the researcher why she had decided to study that particular subject Della explained that she was not too sure how smart she was so, so she decided on a general degree as she reasoned that nobody else on that particular course would already have a degree and therefore the people in the class would be at her level.

Jane too talked about gaining confidence and a realisation that she did have ability that she had not used for a long time being at home with children but also in her previous jobs.

A lot of previous research (Shanahan, 2000; Parr, 2000) referred to mature women students as having many roles to juggle in their lives and feelings of guilt for example about serving their children chips three days in a row as they had not enough time. Although the women in this study had multiple roles too, none of them referred to this as being a problem. Most of the women felt that they had more stressful lives before they made the decision to return to studying. Similarly a lot of the literature referred to the lack of support that women received from their husbands/partners and family (Merrill, 1999; Parr, 2000). This was described by Merrill as being about power and male hegemony within the home and men being socialised into accepting traditional gender roles. (Merrill, 1999). However the women in this study reported the opposite view and felt that their husbands were

very supportive of them in their studies. Annette discussed how her husband who is self-employed, brings her two youngest children to school, (they are aged 10 and 11) collects them from school, cooks their dinner and then fits his own work around his wife's studies and lectures. He has been encouraging at times when she was flagging and she said she often feels that when she receives her degree it should be his name on the parchment. Jane too feels her husband has been very supportive helping out with household chores and being of practical assistance to her too in her business degree course. He has his own business and at times can of help to her in her studies. The only dissent was from Dana who answered 'sometimes, sometimes' when asked if she had the support of her husband. The family are supportive at exam times but her husband does get "browned off" by her spending all her free time studying. Time spent studying at home has been seen as time not available to the family (Edwards, 1993).

One major finding in previous research (Oplatka, 2006) showed that women students in midlife appear to perceive higher education as a way through which they can express their renewed self determined freedom, or their personal emancipation at this life stage. Their decision to enter higher education is likely to signal their movement away from typical family based and gender roles, to a more personal oriented one. The women are deciding to take some control over the direction of their lives. This parallels the findings of this research study where the women decided to seek new experiences. According to Erikson a new stage of life offers individuals a chance to tackle new challenges and to deal with unresolved issues from their adolescence and early adulthood. (Beckett, 2007). The women in the present study had not been given the opportunity to go and study for a degree in their early adulthood and were

doing so now perhaps as a way of dealing with unresolved issues from their early adulthood.

According to Oplatka (2007) there are four distinct interrelated benefits of higher education that emerged from her study and these were (a) a sense of energy replenishment and well-being, (b) rediscovery of their 'authentic' identity, (c) increased self-confidence and (d) self and professional growth. Nuala spoke of being more relaxed since she went back to higher education and also of being more hopeful. Annette too spoke about the great sense of hope she gained after entering the VEC building to study for her leaving certificate, and it was that great sense of hope that led her to 'continue on her journey' by studying for a fine art degree.

Della and Dana are considering continuing their studies by doing a masters degree and as mentioned Jane is hoping to set up her own business. Annette has a great sense of community spirit and a strong desire to help those who she feels have been left behind in this recession. Nuala hopes to freelance and make her career in journalism. All these women achieved a sense of great personal growth and increased confidence in line with Oplatka's interrelated benefits of higher education.

Conclusion

The research questions for this study were What motivates women to return to higher education in midlife? What were these women's subjective perceptions of the benefits to be gained from the decision to return to higher education and what barriers if any do women in midlife face when returning to higher education? As discussed women were mainly motivated by a desire to change the direction of their

life. Some of the women perceived education to be a gateway to a more fulfilling career and for others it was a chance to take a step back from a stressed and hectic life. They all found the experience to be rewarding and fulfilling and none of them felt that any barriers had been placed in their way.

This study gave an interesting and enlightening view of the lives of five women who came to higher education from very different starting points. Apart from Annette who left secondary school at 14 because of economic reasons all the women had completed their leaving certificates. All the women felt that they had not been encouraged at the time they did their leaving certs, to continue on to university to study. Dana recalled that out of her leaving cert class of thirty students no more than seven at the most continued on to university. Della also said she could not remember anyone having to fill out CAO forms when she was at school. The research results for this study seem to be in line with previous research findings in respect of women's desire to move away from expected or traditional gender roles. It is also in line with previous research findings that women have a desire to change the direction of their lives when they return to education at this stage of the life cycle. However as stated above the women in this study did not experience a lack of support or hostility from their husbands and did not encounter any barriers in their way.

Although this study gave an interesting insight into these women's lives and expectations the researcher is aware of the limitations of the study. This was a very small study in comparison to a lot of previous research where two or three interviews were carried out with much larger numbers of women. The researcher

was careful not to make any comments that could influence the responses of the interviewees.

With the increasing numbers of women returning to higher education at this stage of the life cycle, both from choice and now possibly from a need to upskill to remain in the jobs market, it would appear that the different needs and problems experienced by these 'non-traditional' students should be taken into account by all higher education institutions.

QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS ON WOMEN RETURNING TO H.E. IN
MIDLIFE

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself.
2. Have you a partner and or children?
3. Are your children still at school?
4. What was your previous level of education?
5. Did you enjoy your school days?
6. Had you thought about going on to study for a degree when you left school at 18?
7. What degree are you currently studying for?
8. Are you studying parttime or fulltime?
9. Are you working as well? If so, is that parttime or fulltime?
10. Are you managing to cope with work, family and studying?
11. Why did you decide to study that particular subject?
12. Was it difficult to get a place in the college as a mature student?
13. What was the procedure to get a place in the college?
14. How did you find the whole returning to college experience?
15. Are there many other students your age in the class?
16. How do the older students and younger students get along together?
17. Do you have the support of your partner and or family in your studies?
18. Are you hoping to use your degree to find a job?
19. Do you feel that you will be at a disadvantage looking for a job at this age?
20. Overall, was the experience of returning to college at this age a positive one?
21. What do you think you gained from the experience?
22. Do you feel the experience changed you in any way?

Use prompts like, Can you tell me a little more about that?

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