The Lived Experience of Older University Students with Longevity in Life and Work Experience

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Abstract

This is a phenomenological study into the lived experience of university students over 45 years old. The aim of the study was to collect data on older university students, which is lacking in the existing literature. Moreover, with the recent widening participation policy agenda (Browne, 2010), there is a need to ascertain if older students have different academic needs to younger students, with much less life experience.   Three students were selected using convenience sampling from two different universities. The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format, the recordings of which were transcribed and analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Seven themes emerged from the data, which were encapsulated in three master themes; the experience of living in different worlds, self-categorisation and stereotypical discourse relating to maturity, and learning and development. An analysis of the interviews revealed a real risk of inter-group conflict arising from: a professional identity gained from living in the real world, a lack of older student/tutor relationship, teaching styles and personal attributes valued by the participants. The themes are discussed in relation to Tajfel's (1981) Social Identity Theory, and Turner's (1982) Self-categorisation Theory. In conclusion, there is an argument for specific courses that recognise and utilise the older students' past experience. Therefore, more research is needed into the needs of older university students and how to utilise their previous experience as a way of enhancing their learning.

Keywords: *Andragogy, independence, older students, Pedagogy, professionalism*

Introduction

By the 1980s, mature/non-traditional students (21+) already made up over half of the students in higher education (Woodley & Wilson, 2002). However, this group, because of its age range, has an immense diversity of students (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). Hidden within this cohort is an ever-growing group of older mature students (DiSilvestro, 2013) that needs to be catered for. Older students defined as over 40 years old by Jamieson (2007), and Woodley and Wilson (2002), accounts for 10% of all non-traditional students (Universities and College Admissions Service, 2016). Over a decade ago, Jamieson (2007) suggested there was little known about older students in contrast to a wealth of research on non-traditional students in general (Shanahan, 2000), and indeed more recent research is still scant. For example, although Sutton (2016) found two participants (40+) felt socially excluded by the younger students, this was the only qualitative data on this group and their quantitative data only revealed anxiety in the 40+ cohort about fitting in at university. Therefore, more research to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of this group is required (Chapman, 2012).

University courses were set up originally to cater for privileged under 21-year-olds (Thelin, 2011). However, with the introduction of the Browne (2010) report, implemented to encourage applications from underrepresented groups, older mature student numbers are rising (DiSilvestro, 2013). Despite this growing number of older students, university courses are still designed for school leavers and younger students under 21 years old known as traditional students (Yankelovish, 2005). Highlighting this, when commenting on the implications for students, Jones (2014) focused solely on the career path of younger students and did not account for non-traditional students with previous work experience. Older students may have different academic needs because of the life and work experience they already possess (Shanahan, 2000). For example, mature students may have already been married, have children, have mortgages, had careers and developed transferable skill such as organisation and presenting (National Union of Students, 2012), which younger students may not have acquired or experienced yet.

Trotter and Cove (2005) found in their qualitative study it is difficult to meet the needs of two very different social groups. They accept institutions are trying to accommodate the differing needs of the two groups following the widening participation agenda (see Browne, 2010). However, Trotter and Cove (2005) found frustration in the younger students towards the older students and this inter-generational frustration may have a social basis

rather than just individual conflict as outlined in Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Theory of Intergroup Conflict. This questions the need for different courses with different teaching styles for each group rather than having a one size fits all approach that tries to adopt both andragogy, which is an autonomous approach to learning, and pedagogy which means being taught (see Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000; Knowles, 1970).

A UK perspective

In Trotter and Cove's (2005) qualitative study, they found younger and older students have very different needs. In cotrast, Chapman, Parmar and Trotter (2008), in their study on mature students just starting in higher education, found that all ages have the same needs, which is to be informed and included. However, because they are all starting in a new setting, at this early stage, students will have similar concerns that may change once settled. More importantly, Trotter and Cove (2005) highlights friction between the two groups.

Jamieson (2007) points out that little is known about older adults in higher education, because there are not many of them. However, others argue institutions are not meeting the challenges of the increasing number of mature students. Briedenhann (2007) found older students are more motivated and serious towards their studies, and two thirds of them found the behaviour of younger students in class to be the most negative aspect of their studies. Findsen (2012) suggests universities need to be more proactive in accommodating this heterogeneous group of older adults (over 55).

In their quantitative study on why students go to university, McCune, Hounsell, Christie, Creeand and Tett (2010) found differences in the 30+ group compared to the younger groups. Older students' reasons for entering higher education were less about employment and more about interest in the subject and personal development. In Anderson and Thorpe's (2008) mixed methods study they found younger students benefited from learning about teamwork and professional settings, whereas, older students with professional backgrounds wanted to be with students similar to themselves. Anderson and Thorpe (2008) recommended institutions work with students with professional backgrounds and take account of the team working skills they already have.

Briedenhann (2007) found that overlooking students' prior experience by the tutor can cause issues, such as students feeling patronised or excluded, and suggests lecturers need to understand how traditional teaching methods can be a barrier to the mature student. There are difficulties in teaching traditional and non-traditional students together, because of the

prior experience of the older student; Chapman (2012) coined the term "novice academic" (pp. 44) because the mature students studied (late 20s to over 50) struggled with identifying themselves with the younger students, partly because they perceived themselves to be dedicated towards their studies. According to Tajfel's (1981) Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Turner's (1982) Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT) individuals see themselves in relation to the groups they belong too. Therefore, older students will struggle to feel belonging in a class of predominately younger students they do not identify with. This suggests the need for a different course for mature students, with one of Chapman's (2012) participants stating, "there's nothing really for older students, it's all very centred [on] the youngsters" (pp. 58).

An Australian perspective

Despite a widening participation in Australia (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler & Bereded-Samuel, 2010), there is a lack of research into students over 35 years old who have different needs to younger students (Daniel, 2012). Ellis (2013b) looked at the perceptions of university students over 55 years old and suggests the understanding of how older students learn will help develop better programs for them. Moreover, the author points out mature students have the ability to relate theory to workplace practice, which would benefit the younger students. In contrast, Ellis (2013a) found that classes containing young and older students to be positive for all concerned.

Stone's (2008) qualitative study on the impact of university on mature students found emerging themes of challenge, resilience and identity. O'Shea and Stone (2011) also pick up the theme of identity that, in line with Tajfel's (1981) SIT, will be different for younger and older students because of different life situations. However, Stone's (2008) counselling practice within the university generated this research and it is not clear if the participants are counselling clients. If so, the participants would be the most vulnerable of the cohort group and not a representative sample.

Looking at the life experience of over 55 year old students Ellis (2013a) questions the generalisability of mature students, because of the vast difference in age. Like many of the studies in this review Ellis' (2013a) rationale for studying the lived experience of older students was to provide insight for policymakers and educators. However, this study does not highlight any issues between different age groups therefore; there is no need for any different facilities for older students. Although, on closer scrutiny of participant's quotes there are issues such as; older students dominating group work and younger students talking in

lectures.

A USA perspective

Strage (2008) states, "little is known and much is assumed" (p. 1) when talking about the differences in relation to age of students in the USA. This quantitative survey of 1,310 undergraduates showed non-traditional students required a more serious professional approach from tutors as opposed to the younger students that require a more directive and less challenging tutor. Supporting this, Adams (2010) aligns more with the tutor rather than the student, in a self-reflective paper on returning to full-time study, reflecting a professional identity, which is an example of Turners (1982) Self-Categorisation Theory.

The American Council on Education (2007) recognises the need for change in a diverse and growing group of over 55-year-olds, who have different reasons for going into education. In Yankelovish's (2005) commentary on changes in higher education, he advises institutions to look into the future and provide students with better-suited facilities to meet their needs. Cruce and Hillman's (2012) quantitative study entitled "The increasing demand for higher education among older adults" was carried out to inform policymakers off the "unique enrolment" (p. 595) needs of potential students aged 55 to 79. This research highlights the necessity to address the different needs of a growing age group that universities need to attract if they want to increase their revenue.

Merriam and Bierema (2013) state as individuals get older their diverse life experience will help them in their learning, "experience is thus a resource" (p. 106). Moreover, they also note self-directed learning in adults increases with age, suggesting older adults need a more autonomous approach. A comprehensive review on teaching methods by Caruth (2014) explores a more productive andragogic way of teaching adults because of mature students' complicated lives. However, although this way of teaching sounds appealing for mature adults it has not yet been empirically proven to be better than Pedagogy (ibid).

DiSilvestro (2013) outlines programs, specifically for older adults, one of which is the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. Here the students are the inspiration for how the program will work, drawing a distinction between learning rather than being taught. This idea of students having more autonomy within their degree follows Knowles (1968) principles around andragogy and has had positive outcomes in the University of Southern Mississippi (Caruth, 2014). According to Hansen and Brady (2013), these programs have great potential and are growing despite the lack of research. Lamb and Brady (2005) also found benefits of older learning programs, which are; intellectual stimulation, experiencing a nurturing and

supportive community, enhancing self-esteem, and having opportunities for spiritual renewal. However, according to Colvin (2013) there are also barriers when returning to education, which are situational (specific circumstances), dispositional (personal psychology) and institutional (for example, the lack of information from the institution).

This literature review highlights the need for more up to date research into the experience of older adults with regards to higher education. Donaldson and Townsend (2007) found older students are being missed out in the literature that focuses on traditional students. From the literature they reviewed "only 41 (1.27 %) of the 3,219 articles were about older adult undergraduate students" (p.33). Although there is little research, the Americans are leading the way and understand the benefits of catering for older students, with programs such as the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (Hansen & Brady, 2013) with an andragogic approach (see Caruth, 2014). From the perspective of Mezirow's (1993) Transformative Learning Theory, where beliefs and assumptions about the world and integration of past experience comes to the fore in learning, older adults will assimilate new knowledge differently because of their ability to draw on wider previous experience.

For traditional students, university is about starting out in life and developing a career. However, for older students it is more about; interest in the subject, personal development (McCune et al., 2010) and identity (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). This suggests the need for a different curriculum to meet the different needs. Moreover, Wilson (1997), states "until we understand how the experience of being a mature student is lived, it is difficult, if not impossible to consider how policy and teaching practice for mature students can be developed" (pp. 347). Mathers and Parry (2010) emphasise the value of the "lived experience" (pp. 1085) of older students. The aim of this study therefore is to generate an understanding not already available about the lived experience of older university students and give voice to the needs of these students concerning their learning.

Methodology

Rationale for methodological choice

This is a study into the lived experience (Langdridge, 2007) of older university students. Therefore, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen, because it focuses on the lived experience of the participants and the meaning they take (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), rather than the underlying reason for the experience.

Research design

Method of Data Collection. The semi-structured interview was used because of its flexibility (Smith & Osborn, 2008), which is congruent to the IPA data collection method (Willig, 2013) that seeks the experience not the facts. Moreover, the questions are there for guidance only, the participant is the expert and should be able to introduce issues they see as important to the subject being studied (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Constructing the interview. The questions were formulated to capture the meaning the participant gives to their experience and how they make sense of it (Langdridge, 2007). Following guidelines set out by Willig (2013), the questions are fully congruent with the IPA ethos and data collection method. Moreover, the questions were non-specific open invitations for participants to explore their experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Sampling and participants. To answer the research question participant studying traditional degrees that are nonspecific in their career development and have a heterogeneous contrast of older students and younger students was required. Therefore, students studying a vocational placement based degree such as social work were excluded because they are training to do a specific job. Two female and one male participant were enlisted through an email request for students over 45 years old, studying a non-vocational degree with no previous experience of doing such a degree. As a quality control measure, participants were taken from different universities in order to get a better understanding of the lived experience of university, rather than a collective experience of one particular university. The names of the participants (Dave, Jan and Kay) have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Conducting the Interview. The recorded semi-structured interviews, which lasted around 60 minutes, two of which took place at the participant's university and one via Skype. The interviewer was able to ask further questions to facilitate the participants, who were free to introduce anything they felt was relevant, to talk more about issues they highlighted. To maximise the richness and depth of the data collected, Rodgers (1957) Person Centred approach was utilised to build rapport. This approach, which incorporates Congruence, Unconditional Positive Regard and Empathy, is compatible with the IPA approach (Willig, 2013).

Analytic guidelines

The first step in the IPA data analysis was to engage with the text (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Willig, 2013) and read, and re-read the interview transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The next step, as outlined by Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008), and Willig,

(2013), was to look for emerging themes within the text that could form clusters or master themes. Each transcript was analysed individually before moving to the next one as suggested by Smith and Osborn (2008) and Willig (2013). Continuing with Willig's (2013) guidelines the emergent themes from all the transcriptions were integrated into overarching master themes

Analysis

This is an IPA analysis of the participants' interviews regarding their lived experience of university. Quotes were extracted from the interview transcriptions that demonstrate the emergent themes

Master theme 1: The lived experience of different worlds

This master theme encapsulates the unconscious ideology held by the participants that university is not the real world. The real world is portrayed as the world of employment where experience is earned. Therefore, the emergent themes to be considered in this section are; (1a) the real-world discourse, (1b) the perceived relationship between students and tutors, (1c) mature student frustration leading to conflict.

Emergent theme 1a: The real-world discourse.

The first emergent theme highlights the rhetoric that suggests the world of employment is the real world, of which the participants felt younger students have no understanding.

'In the real world you would never get away with it'. **(Kay)**

In this simple statement Kay is suggesting that students at university are living in a world that is not real. Moreover, I feel she is making it clear in her real world there are rules that if broken will lead to some kind of justice, which is not apparent in the academic world.

'They [younger students] haven't lived, they haven't experienced, they haven't really seen what the professional world is like or what the workplace can be like, ...they haven't really lived, they don't really know and and to to me like having the incentive of seeing these things before and knowing that's not what I really want from my life em is the drive that makes you want to do better, these haven't lived so they haven't seen it so so they take it more casually'. **(Kay)**

I feel Kay labels her real world as that of the professional world of which younger students

may have no experience. Moreover, because they do not know of this perceived real world they have not lived. Therefore, from Kay's perspective they will not know what they want from their course and approach university in a less committed way as a result.

> 'a lot of students haven't worked or or [sic] worked in or had a career, so so [sic] understanding from a a [sic] an academic point of view is one thing, a being able to relate to what actually goes on in the real working world is another'. **(Dave)**

> 'My work experience is, a has added greatly to my, a well my attitude to to [sic] study or work, a I think it gives you more of an insight into into [sic] the real world'. **(Dave)**

In a similar fashion to Kay, Dave is connecting working and career to a perceived real world. Moreover, from Dave's point of view academic knowledge is not helpful in the real world of work. Whereas, work experience from the real world has enhanced his studies and given him a better insight into the real world.

Emergent theme 1b: Perceived relationship between students and tutors

This second emergent theme demonstrates the participants' experience of tutors not relating well to older students unless they have previously lived in this perceived real world.

> 'This is the the [sic] daily routine for the lecturers isn't it, talking to young inexperienced students so I find that sometimes it can come across that you know if they talk to you the same way it can become a bit like you're talking down to or or [sic] your being patronised…they talk to you like you're 20-year-old or an 18-year-old'. **(Kay)**

Kay is not only suggesting younger students have no experience, but also that tutors are more used to this type of student. Therefore, they treat the whole student cohort the same way resulting in her experience in the real world being unrecognised.

> 'Some of the tutors don't really relate very well to more mature student…they feel a bit awkward around you'. **(Jan)**.

> 'They [tutors] probably don't have much experience because of the number of mature students'. **(Jan)**

> 'I've had more life experience than them for sure'. **(Jan)**

Jan portrays the older student as a minority and therefore because the tutors have little experience they struggle in relating and teaching this group. This is possibly because Jan perceives herself as having more extensive lived experience. I feel Jan's and Kay's discourses reflects their categorisation of the tutors in an out-group to which they do not belong. In contrast I sensed that Dave felt a kinship with his tutors, which he agreed with.

> 'A number of lecturers also did their degrees and so forth or their higher education at an older age as well, so they understood what it was all about'.
> **(Dave)**

This is because Dave believed they had the same experience of doing a degree at an older age. Dave was able to form a professional alliance or in-group relationship with the tutors because he believed they lived in his real world when they did their degrees.

Emergent theme 1c: Mature student frustration leading to conflict

The third emergent theme considers the difficulties the participants have with the younger students who have no understanding of their perceived real world.

> '[Sharp intake of breath] …you find yourself doing all the work…constantly pushed up against people who just don't want to do the work'. **(Kay)**

> 'I think a lot don't have a professional attitude, you can see they hardly turn up for lectures, do things in the last minute'. **(Kay)**

My experience of Kay was someone who was exasperated with the younger students, taking a sharp breath when she talks about them. There seemed to be a particular issue with group work; both Kay and Jan reflected on the younger students not attending lectures or meetings and not participating generally.

> 'Younger people joining the group it used to like cause a bit of friction'.
> **(Jan)**

> 'I found a lot of the younger people actually annoyed me quite a lot…it was beginning to like P me of a little bit because…if someone was like lacking not completing a piece of work for presentation I was doing it for them'.
> **(Jan)**

When I asked if the younger students contributed to her experience Jan stated;

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'No … not a [exhales] …that's a bit cruel really, I'm trying to think'. **(Jan)**

Jan shows her frustration here when she talks about the younger students. I feel this was due to the younger cohorts' perceived lack of professionalism that comes from not living in Jan and the other participants' perceived real world. She clearly states her annoyance, but seems to feel guilty about this, trying to think of something positive, and failing. With both Kay and Jan this led to conflict whereas I do not think Dave had the same problem. I feel this is because his course was part time and he had minimal contact with younger students.

Master theme 2: Self-categorisation and stereotypical discourse relating to maturity

This master theme looks at the way the participants have categorised themselves and their preferred in-group. This includes their personal identity and their personal attributes. It reflects the stereotypical discourse regarding specific personal attributes that the older students' value, which they believe the younger student may lack, such as experience of living in the real world. The emergent themes that will examine this are; (2a) personal identity and (2b) personal attributes of independence and lived experience.

Emergent theme 2a: Personal identity

This emergent theme reflects the shared professional identity, which is gained through experience.

'I don't really identify with being a student'. **(Kay)**

'It [the course] was specifically for professionals and they tended to be older students'. **(Kay)**

Kay mentioned professionalism ten times in her interview, which is the identity I feel all the participants shared. Moreover, a "professional person" seemed to relate to age and maturity, which reflects her in-group. Here Kay is explicitly categorising herself as an older student and therefore a professional.

'I work my way up through working on the shop floor, maintenance until I became supervisor, and then I had many management jobs'. **(Dave)**

'The part-timers tended a tended to be older students…already in work'.
(Dave)

Although Dave did identify himself as a student and a family man, I feel he categorised himself as a professional through his extensive work experience. His in-group is the part-

timers, however, the part-time students from Dave's perspective were the older students.

> 'I saw myself as a trainee psychologist, and I identified myself as a
> researcher'. **(Jan)**

I felt Jan's identity was fluid, because in the early stages of her degree she felt lost and did identify as a student. However, she started with a professional identity in the NHS and went back to a professional identity this time as a psychologist in academia.

When listening to the participants I felt a strong sense of two particular groups, almost like a "them and us" mentality, where all the participants categorised themselves into the older student in-group which corresponded to a professional identity.

Emergent theme 2b: Personal attributes of independence and lived experience.

This emergent theme examines the personal attributes the participants' value such as independence and lived experience, which I feel all the participants share. Moreover, stereotypical discourse on age/maturity was heavily dispersed throughout all the interviews.

> 'I think through age and time you experience and learn that you would not
> understand or grasp at a younger age'. **(Dave)**

> 'If you haven't had a lot of life experience and you're not that mature, em
> I'm not sure you you [sic] process the information or or [sic] are able to,
> give anything back'. **(Kay)**

Dave's discourse clearly conveys he believes personal attributes are gained through experience and maturity, and therefore lacking in younger students, who in Dave's experience have nothing to contribute or give back, as he puts it. Moreover, Kay's rhetoric suggests the lack of experience in life prohibits younger students from contributing to her experience.

> **'**I'm quite self-sufficient…having to depend on someone you're working
> with and relying on their work to get you good grade, I didn't like'. **(Jan)**

> **'**I tend to try and sort things out for myself…if I can't sort it out I'm letting
> myself down…I hate to have to rely on other people'. **(Kay)**

I experienced a very high sense of needing to be independent in all the participants. I feel this personal attribute was not only valued by the participants, but essential to surviving in this perceived unreal world of academia.

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Master themes 3: Learning and development

This final master theme looks at how the participants developed, and the part their learning experience had in their development. Considered first is the transformation experienced by the participants and then the learning experience reflecting on different styles of teaching. Therefore, the emergent themes examined are; (3a) the lived experience of personal transformation and (3b) andragogy versus pedagogy.

Emergent theme 3a: The lived experience of personal transformation

This emergent theme considers the participants experience of changing within themselves.

> 'It's the broadening of your your [sic] views how you see the world, how you apply yourself to the world and and [sic] how you address ………how you approach things, it really broadens your mind ………it make you into a more aware person'. **(Dave)**

As Dave talked about his experience I felt a clear sense of movement, which prompted my intervention "it sounded transformational" to which Dave replied;

> 'Oh, believe me it is and I don't think a lot of younger students appreciate this'. **(Dave)**

Dave clearly had a transformation; starting out believing work experience was the most important thing in life, then appreciating what his academic experience can do and has given him. Moreover, he conveys how younger student may not realise this due to not living in the real world.

> 'I was re-evaluating what I want to do with my life so I'd I'd [sic], basically given up my old life'. **(Jan)**

> 'I was lost and I didn't really like I kept saying - what do I want to do, who am I'. **(Jan)**

> 'I saw myself as a trainee psychologist, and I identified myself as a researcher'. **(Jan)**

I feel Jan also made sense of her experience through the transformation metaphor, from a NHS professional to feeling lost, and finding a temporary identity as a student before finding a new identity as a professional published researcher.

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Emergent theme 3b: Andragogy versus pedagogy

This emergent theme looks at the teaching styles experienced by the participants and how they contributed to the overall experience that led to transformation within the self.

> 'I've done…numerous presentations the workplace, and, it's totally different experience, totally different, you know, it's em, it's almost like play'…it's a practice for them [younger students] but it's like play for me'. **(Jan)**

When I asked Jan if there was a focus on the younger students she said;

> 'Yeah, definitely…maybe it was the tutors are more uncomfortable with the more mature students'. **(Jan)**

I got a sense that Jan was frustrated because she did not feel stimulated intellectually by her experience of doing a degree. I believe this was compounded by her experience of the tutors struggling to know how to deal with the older students, which she perceived resulted in a focus on the younger students.

> 'I want to be involved in it, I don't just want to be spoken at'. **(Kay)**

> 'Some tutors adopt the teaching style from a school environment'. **(Jan)**

> 'It can become a bit like you're talking down to or or [sic] you're being patronised in some way because I'm not sure that there's that em understanding of ………the fact that you've probably already got you know a lot of relevant life experience and work experience'. **(Kay)**

My understanding was both Kay and Jan experienced the tutors resorting to a pedagogical approach to teaching rather than an andragogical approach that involved them. They talked about wanting to be part of the learning, rather than be treated as school children with no life or work experience. I sensed their need for their experience to be recognised and utilised in the learning experience. In contrast, Dave had no such problems because he was able to form an alliance with his tutor whom he believed lived in his real world and therefore treated him differently.

Discussion

The aim of this study is to collect data on the lived experience of older university students, which is lacking in the existing literature and to ascertain if older students have

different academic needs to younger students, with less life experience.

The experience of the participants here shows the older students were frustrated with the younger students. This frustration led to conflict when older students had to collaborate in group assignments with their younger peers. Supporting Ellis (2013a), there was underlying issues such as younger students not attending group meetings or lectures and not meeting deadlines, whereas the older students interviewed in this study suggested a total commitment to their studies. This supports Briedenhann (2007), and Chapman (2012) who found older students are dedication to their studies.

Although at times there was individual personal conflict with particular younger students, it is uncommon according to Tajfel's (1981) SIT for individuals to relate personally with no social context (Hornsey, 2008). This is sometimes referred to as the Mere Categorisation Effect demonstrated by Brewers (1979,) and Mullen, Brown and Smith (1992) where group salience develops merely by the categorisation of individuals. I felt the individual conflict served to separate the students and the issues became less personal and more stereotypical in nature, reflecting a social group identity.

The lived experience of the participants in this study suggests the older students live in a different world to the younger students who are seen stereotypically as having little or no experience in life. This I feel strengthened an unconscious in-group cognition of 'them and us' reflecting SIT's view that individuals who feel superior, in this case the older students due to their life experience, will create a positive social group identity for themselves (Sindic & Condor, 2014). In line with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Theory of Intergroup Conflict, the conflict between the two groups arose because of their identification with their in-groups rather than the individual issues that separated them into in and out-groups in the first place.

I feel this is a major concern for course designers and teaching staff. Although both young and mature students coming to university are entering a different world they are not used to and do not understand, the older students in this study came from a professional world where they have an already developed lived experience of life, work, and responsibility. Moreover, this study highlights students are more likely to form in-groups according to age; however, the group divide seems to be specific to the course assessment process. There was no negative rhetoric towards younger students in any other context, which supports part of the SCT suggesting in-group affiliation can change depending on the social context in which it arises (Turner, 1991).

Another factor compounding mature student frustration leading to conflict is the lack

of relationship Kay and Jan experienced with their tutors leading to a perceived focus on the younger students. In agreement, Dave who had a good relationship with his tutors states the tutor did not focus on the older students because they are more dedicated and could be trusted to complete tasks. This supports my belief university courses focus on the younger students at the expense of the older more mature students as Jones (2014) did in discourse following the tuition fees rises in 2012.

This focus on the younger students is a major issue; according to Mezirow's (1993) Transformative Learning Theory adults use their past experience to help them assimilate their learning. However, if the tutors are not able to relate to the older students then they will not be able to utilise their past experience in the classroom. Therefore, experience which is seen by Merriam and Bierema (2013) as a vital resource in learning that increases with age is not exploited as it could be. This is disappointing in light of the National Union of Students (2012) recognition that older students have transferable skills.

In contrast, I felt Dave experienced a kinship with his tutors, which seemed to be a catalyst for his positive experience. The reason for this difference was Dave perceived his tutors as similar to him because they had similar previous experience of attending university as mature students. The likelihood that all Dave's tutors had this experience is small, however, it was enough that he believed it to allow him to form an alliance or in-group that enhanced his learning experience. I believe the reason Dave's lived experience was so positive compared to the other participants was because, in line with Tajfel's (1981) SIT, he saw his tutors as being part of his in-group (part-timers/older students). In contrast, Kay and Jan experienced the tutors as part of an out-group comprising of younger students.

As with O'Shea and Stone (2011), and Stone (2008) the theme of personal identity was prevalent in this study. Although Jan's and Dave's identities were more fluid and multi-dimensional than Kay's, I felt all the participants portrayed a very strong professional identity similar to Adams (2010). This supports Strage's (2008) findings that older students need a professional and less directive approach to their learning. Jan's lived experience supports Chapman et al. (2008), who found all students at the beginning of their degree have similar needs; however, as they predicted, these needs changed quickly. Once Jan found her way she reverted back to her previous identity of a professional and categorised herself as part of the older student in-group.

This seemed to be what separated the participants from the younger students, which resulted in the participants categorising themselves as professionals and older students (in

Dave's case part timers), and therefore forming their in-group. In line with Turner's (1982) SCT, the older students will struggle to integrate into a class of mainly young students with very different identities and little experience of what the participants called the real world. This is compounded by the participants' need for independence and Jan's belief that the younger students added nothing positive to her experience of university. However, Jan's experience mirrored Anderson and Thorpe's (2008) findings that the younger student can benefit from group work with older students.

There was little rhetoric in the interviews regarding employability strategies deemed to be important by Watts (2006). In line with McCune et al. (2010) I felt other factors were more important to the participants. The discourse reflected values of independence and professionalism; attributes the participants perceived the younger students have not developed yet, because they had not lived in their real world.

I feel both Dave and Jan experienced a profound life changing transformation. Dave's transformation from being sceptical of academia and rating work experience over a degree, to finding a passion for learning came from his ability to collaborate on an equal basis with his tutors. In contrast, Jan's experience of transformation from a professional NHS worker to a professional researcher seems to have come from her ability to connect with one particular tutor. This highlights the importance of good relationships between the tutors and the older students to enhance their learning experience.

Jan and Kay struggled with the teaching style, which from their perceived experience appeared to be pedagogical in approach. In their lived experience of doing a degree they felt patronised and not a part of their learning as Briedenhann (2007) also found can happen to students with previous experience. This is not equality in the teaching environment, an andragogic approach (Knowles, 1968), advocated by Bye et al. (2007). Moreover, it contravenes the UK's social inclusion ideology, supposedly underpinned by Social Justice (equal rights for all), outlined in the Browne (2010) report.

Although Kay wanted to be part of the process, which is recommended by Anderson and Thorpe (2008) she felt left out due to the tutors favouring the younger students. Moreover, I felt Jan did not feel stretched intellectually on her course. These issues can be rectified using an andragogical approach in courses designed specifically for older students, such as the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute course in the USA (Lamb & Brady, 2005).

If the participants lived experiences in this study are indicative of the majority of older students in the UK more needs to be done to emulate the USA in regard to catering for

older university students. A significant issue highlighted in this study is the importance of good relationships between the older students and the teaching staff. This relationship can be developed in part by an understanding and acceptance of previously gain lived experience in a different world where independence and professionalism are highly valued.

Traditional students aged 21+ are heterogeneous in nature (Findsen, 2012; Jamieson, 2007) therefore it would be prudent to develop degree courses specifically for the older students. This could be a contentious issue because this would produce a two-tier system. However, universities may be doing both the younger and the older cohorts a disservice by trying to fit all their needs into one course using a process that is designed for younger students just starting out in life (Yankelovish, 2005). Moreover, institutions run the risk of producing disappointed graduates who are less likely to recommend their course or sign up to postgraduate courses.

Following the widening participation strategies outlined in the Browne (2010) report, institutions are now seeing their students as customers (Bates & Kaye, 2014). Therefore, a positive business marketing strategy for institutions might be; finding out what their customers need rather than producing one product for a widely diverse consumer base that may not be meeting the needs of the older student.

Qualitative research like this has been criticised in the past because of its subjective nature. However, to counteract this I have followed Yardley's (2008) core principles in qualitative research of Sensitivity to context, Commitment and rigour, Coherence and transparency, and Impact and importance. For example, by adhering to set guidelines for IPA by Smith et al. (2008) and Willig (2013) I have demonstrated commitment and procedural rigour, particularly in the analysis, which relates to the theory. Additionally, I have been consistent and clear throughout regarding the aim of the study, which came from the literature.

Moreover, having a theoretical grounding in the philosophy of IPA, as demonstrated in the methodology section, gave me the ability to develop themes in a flexible way, but still congruent to the IPA ethos. I have also been clear and transparent about my part in the development of a new understanding of the needs of older students with a transparent and consistent coding system across all the transcriptions. Continuing with Yardley's (2008) principals, the questions that were formulated through the literature were open-ended and participants were given the opportunity to introduce their own line of inquiry. Moreover, because I was effectively an insider (older student) this helped the participants to express

their views in a more congruent way, which I feel is reflected in the discourse. Additionally, although the analysis is my interpretation of the data, it gives a strong voice to the participant in a way that distinguishes between the researcher and the participants.

However, more research on older students is required to verify whether the lived experiences of the participants in this study is indicative of the older student cohort in general. Based on this research there are interesting themes that signpost future research particularly; perceived relationship between students and tutors, mature student frustration leading to conflict, and personal attributes of independence and lived experience.

It is important that future research into the relationship between tutor and student not only provides a more in-depth understanding of the subject, but also aims to find solutions to rectify the problem. Research into the conflict between the younger and older students should be conducted in the specific context of working together, because in line with Turner's (1991) SCT, there was no conflict in any other area. Additionally, research into the personal attributes held by older students, particularly independence and their lived experience is needed. This future research needs to look at how these attributes and experience can be incorporated into the delivery of the degree courses. Moreover, although andragogy has not yet been empirically proven as a better teaching method for older students (Caruth, 2014), this current analysis provides a good rationale for more research into andragogy and older students over 45 years old.

Because this research was instigated by the lack of research into older students at university, one of the limitations of this study is the balancing voice of the younger student is missing. Moreover, I found the analysis process difficult due to the similarities between my own personal views and that of my participants. This study may therefore have been enhanced if I had not been an older student myself. Alternatively, this could reflect the accuracy of the issues I feel older students are facing today, that prompted this research project.

In conclusion, based on the lived experiences of the participants in this study new courses should adopt a more andragogical approach where students are not only challenged intellectually but also involved in their learning experience. I believe the courses need to focus more on personal transformation and, although also important, less on employability or career transition. Moreover, institutions should engage older students in a way that incorporates their life and work experience (Merriam & Bierema, 2013), which this paper highlights as a major resource for older students.

Reflecting Yardley's (2008) final principal, this study has provided important new understanding of the needs of older university students. Therefore, this study has the potential, because of its transparency and rigor, to change the perspective of policy makers and course designers to rethink their rationale on what is the best way to deliver a degree course for older adults.

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