

## *Research Note*

# **Integrating Gender, Faith and Learning: women's mid-life passage in the experience of some Quaker and Roman Catholic adult students [1]**

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This paper draws on interview data, extracted from a larger study on self-narratives, from 13 mature women students in full-time residential adult education, in two contrasting colleges. The interviewees were in college for one academic year and interviews were conducted at the start and end of the year. From the interview data I draw out issues relating to the construction of meaning in the interview encounter, and specifically the significance of this for the narration of faith perspectives. I show how the Quaker women's narratives of educational intent focus on gender, and are inflected by 'faith'; whereas the Catholic women narrate a faith story only partially inflected by gender. Underlying these contrasting patterns, I demonstrate a unifying strand of 'mid-life' transition present in the stories of both groups of women, which appears to transcend the factors that otherwise descriptively polarise the two groups.

One group of six women, from a Quaker college, an independent charitable foundation, consisted of (broadly speaking) relatively well educated middle-class professionals, undertaking adult education for non-vocational, explicitly personal development, reasons. I am a Quaker and a member of the tutorial staff there. The other seven women, from a

Roman Catholic college funded by the Further Education Funding Council, had all left school without qualifications (or with only minimal qualifications) and were undertaking an Access course. Most of these were hoping to proceed to Higher Education, although some had other ambitions.

All of these women are white, and all were in the age range 35-60 at the time of interview. Those at the older end of this range were Quaker women, with solid middle-class backgrounds. Although 60 may be perceived as rather late in life to be included in a 'midlife' paradigm, these particular narratives indicate that this is their lifestage - they are not yet making a transition into 'third age'. Sheehy (1977:375) suggests that middle class people see themselves as 'middle aged' for far longer, maybe up to 20 years longer, than working class people.

### Interviewing

Ribbens (1989) points out the difference between 'public' and 'private' accounts of our lives, and wonders how often in interview research we succeed in getting 'private' accounts. She insists that the interviewer is not a 'data collecting instrument' but a 'data *creating* social being', and that we must acknowledge our own presence within the accounts we give of others' lives. However, the logic of Ribbens' own position should perhaps lead us to wonder whether it is not more a matter of a 'data-creating *interaction*'; leading neither to 'public' nor 'private' accounts, but rather to an 'interview account', constructed by, in and for that specific social encounter. Josselson (1995:43) suggests:

The essential message of hermeneutics is that to be human is to *mean*, and only by investigating the multifaceted nature of human meaning can we approach the understanding of people.

So I want further to adapt Ribbens' concept, and suggest that interviewer and interviewee are engaged, not just in a data-creating interaction, but in a meaning-making interaction, especially in the particular situation of

interviewing within faith contexts. This resonates with the findings of Homan and Dandelion (1997), based on written survey questions rather than interviewing, but raising two issues that have great relevance to the interview situation. First: the language in which faith is expressed is often highly specific, and of great significance to the believer. A question phrased in 'neutral' social science terms may be perceived as hostile or irrelevant from a faith perspective; and may be perceived as not asking for a faith response, because it is not couched in religious language. Second: a perception that the researcher does not share the faith perspective of the research subject may result in a straight refusal to address a question at all.

An example of the former arose with one of my Quaker interviewees, highly articulate, very cooperative and forthcoming in the interviews. A week or so after the second interview she came back to me (possible only because she was a student in the college where I work) to say that she had been talking with a friend about the interview, and had realised from the conversation that she had not told me about some of the really important aspects of her experience at the college. I had asked what had been significant for her during the year, but because I had not specifically asked about spiritual growth she had not spoken about it: the neutrality of the question, my attempt to be open-ended and let the interviewee decide what 'significant' meant, had produced in her mind a secular framework that was antipathetic to the disclosure of a faith narrative. So the social science neutrality of the question overrode the ethos of being two Quakers in a Quaker college, where it might have been thought that one could take for granted an interest in the spiritual dimension of the college experience.

An example of the effect of the interviewer's faith perspective being different from the interviewee's may be drawn from the second interview with one of the Roman Catholic students. As I had worked with the transcripts of the initial interviews with the Catholic women, I had begun to notice hints, small pieces of evidence, that my 'outsider' status in

relation to Catholicism might be having significant effects. So I added a question to the second interview schedule, asking explicitly if my not being a Catholic had affected their answers to my questions. Here is one very full response:

*Oh yes  
definitely  
because  
with my Catholic friends at home  
you can say things to them that you - can't really say  
to my other friends  
talk about religion  
I mean you're religious  
Quaker aren't you  
I suppose I am more open  
if you were just secular you know  
didn't believe in anything  
I'd be less open with you  
I wouldn't think you'd be so sympathetic  
and the reason why I can speak to my Catholic friends better  
I mean the Catholic faith can be very very difficult to live up to  
and they're going through the same thing*

So I was clearly perceived as an outsider, even if probably a sympathetic one. And indeed, my visits to this college were the only occasions, in all my interviewing - six locations in all, in the wider study from which this is drawn - when I *felt* myself to be in the position of an anthropologist in a strange culture: a culture that had some similarities to mine, but was nevertheless quite distinct.

#### **Adult Development and Mid-Life**

Although Jung (1969 [1931]) wrote of the second half of life as a distinct phase, with its own developmental tasks, Erikson (1965 [1950]) is often credited with first articulating a developmental psychology for adult life.

He suggested a linear series of developmental stages, each building on those before, each with its 'appropriate' time in life, each with its characteristic markers of 'success' and 'failure' to achieve the designated developmental task. This, and other early work on life stages, has more recently been criticised by a number of feminist writers as being deeply androcentric; even when not explicitly only about men, such models accounted for women's life stages only in terms of their relationships to men. Gilligan (1979), for instance, suggests that in taking the lives of men as models, theorists have focused excessively on autonomy and achievement at the expense of attachment, intimacy and mutuality; while Baruch and Brooks-Gunn comment:

. . . it is commonly believed that by midlife there is no plot line left for women, or that the plot is completely predicated upon the woman's marital and parental status.(1984:29)

Recent research by Nicola Slee (1998), on Fowler's (1981) model of faith development, is making analogous points: it is androcentric and does not take account of the specificities of women's faith development through life. She has interviewed women about their faith journeys; and, amongst other features, a pattern emerges of women's spirituality as essentially relational in character, rooted in the kind of ethic of connection, care and mutual responsibility which Gilligan (1982) has described. Linear models, whether of life 'stages' or of faith 'development', carry an implicit teleology: that the life is headed somewhere, there is a goal to be

reached. Significantly, Slee's work does not focus primarily on 'stages', but identifies faith *processes* and *generative themes*.

My opening interview question asked for 'the story' of how the student came to be at that college, at that point in time - how did it come about? This left it open for the interviewee to define what for her constituted 'the story' - what counted as an explanatory account, what was relevant and what was not.

The Catholic women all had explicit faith stories to tell in response to this question, even when their expressed tangible goals for the year were highly instrumental. Two examples:

(1) *for the last eight years*

*I felt more and more strongly that*

*I'm being led*

*and I thought perhaps this is where I should be heading next*

*so - this all actually started really in earnest*

*when my youngest child went to school*

*it was the first time I'd been*

*without a small baby at home*

*and I started to go to mass every day*

*and I started to sense that*

*I was being led somewhere then*

*because it's a Catholic college*

*in coming here I feel*

*as well as gaining an education*

*I'm keeping in touch with this idea of being led*

(2) *I really felt my education was lacking*

*I still feel I'm a slow learner*

*I don't seem to - express myself very well*

*so when I found out about this place*

*I mean*

*I jumped at the chance*

*to come*

*because my faith's important to me now in the last few years*

*I wanted to really develop the faith as well*

*and find out more about it*

*I believe I'm here for a purpose*

*but you know it's up to Him up there to*

*He hasn't told me*

*I would like to know what God - sort of wants from me*

So for both these women, the instrumental goal of gaining an education was framed as religious calling.

Responding to the same opening question, the Quaker women's narratives had a different focus. Some of them mentioned their Quakerism, but no one spoke explicitly of God or of spirituality. All but one of them framed their 'transition' or 'the space in their lives' specifically in relation to features of a gendered life cycle, even if they did not explicitly name gender, or women's issues, as a salient factor. Two examples:

(1) *What I've been doing partly*

*is getting back in touch with the more feminine parts of me*

*the more traditionally feminine*

*the emotional side*

*the spiritual side*

*the 'this is me I'm not trying to be competitive and achieving in a male world'*

*I'm connecting with me*

*The 'feminine' side of me has become me*

*I don't feel that same division inside me*

*I feel a growing sense of wholeness*

(2) *It's difficult to separate my story from my husband's*

*I was beginning to wonder*

*what's next?*

*and wondering if perhaps I should be doing more about what was next for me*

*as opposed to what was next for both of us*

*it's a point of transition*

*with the necessity for me personally*

*of growing and redirecting my energies*

*into something which is personally*

*more satisfying*

*than I think most of my working life has been*

*something which gives joy to the soul  
after all the years of working to keep the home and children going  
so I'm here to discover a direction for me*

It emerges, indicatively from these short extracts, and strongly from the whole interviews, that the Quaker women made the gender/learning integration explicit, and their faith journeys were more implicit and less articulated; in some instances not explicit at all. The Catholic women were much more articulate about the faith/learning integration and very hesitant to use gender as an explanatory framework. Even when invited to reflect on 'being a woman', only one, a former nun, saw this as a significant factor in her life.

The contrasting cultures of the two institutions may contribute to shaping the relative emphasis given to gender/faith/learning by the students interviewed. Relevant factors include the expectations concerning appropriate performance of faith and of gender; and the gender distribution of the student body (the female:male ratio was 2:1 in the Quaker college, 1:2 in the Catholic one). Additionally these Quaker and Catholic colleges partake of more general Quaker and Catholic culture.

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, in common with other churches (Davie, 1994:118) has a majority of female members [2]; but, unlike churches with a wholly or predominantly male clergy, the Society of Friends, with no separate ordained ministry, also has a majority of its leadership positions, both voluntary and professionalised, in the hands of women [3]. The Society has an explicit ideology of gender equality [4], and the college was perceived as a very female-friendly environment:

*there are some good role models here  
I mean in terms of just being women  
who are capable and intelligent  
and have succeeded*

*and have got to a certain stage  
but are also able to balance that  
to look at the other side of themselves  
it's about wholeness really  
it's a good nurturing female environment here*

Whereas at the Catholic college, the opposite was felt to be the case, and the expectations of gender role were more traditional. When I arrived towards the end of the summer term to conduct second interviews, there had been a formal college debate the previous evening, which many of the women chose to speak about:

*(1) we had a debate last night  
and none of the women spoke  
and like I know there are lots of really intelligent women  
and women that I really thought  
fairly confident about speaking  
and I just feel mad with women  
me included you know  
it really amazes me that  
like younger ones  
aren't more forthcoming  
I thought that  
those sorts of things would change  
but they haven't*

*(2) there was a debate yesterday evening  
and - none of the women spoke at the debate  
of course there's like thirty women and sixty men  
and it does seem dominated  
I don't know whether that's a feature of the Catholic church  
that the women are in this position regarding men  
and this being a Catholic college  
that the women are already in that mode*

*I feel that we're a very traditional setup  
and that was sort of borne out last night*

When speaking specifically about the college experience, the Catholic women framed their instrumental learning goals within strong and explicit faith stories; whereas the Quaker women, framed their personal growth aspirations within gender narratives. However, when the story lines moved away from a specific focus on the college experience, and more into the wider areas of the interviewees' lives, a different pattern emerged. The lifestage/faith/learning dimension (the 'mid-life passage') may be seen as an integrating construction that is remarkably similar in all the women interviewed, even when the overt language frame used to express it differs.

Sheehy (1977) sets out a number of clear components to the process she names as 'setting off on the midlife passage', as well as key indicators of 'being middle aged'. I select three of these, and offer some quotations to illustrate their expression in my interviewees' narratives: it is less easy readily to identify them as belonging to one college or the other.

**1. The age 35 'crossroads' for women (Sheehy 1977:376)**

*(1) I think - it was just perhaps just a developmental maturing  
it took a long time*

*I suppose at forty and being unmarried*

*not having the focus of a family*

*that's not to say I took a decision never to have them*

*but I never felt*

*as a lot of women do*

*that need to sort of have that to fulfil myself*

*but I don't know whether this being at college*

*is a sort of replacement for family or something*

*I don't know*

*(2) when I turned thirty five  
it actually hit me  
like a - sort of brick wall  
it was something about thirty five  
and for the first time  
it was actually quite difficult  
when - other people around me  
at work  
were - going for maternity leave  
I m working through it  
at the moment  
it s not a mega-issue  
because I never have been someone who s been driven by that  
the idea of having children  
it still just feels like an option  
which may not be an option much longer  
and I think I will come to terms with that*

The first speaker was Catholic, the second Quaker.

**2. The mother's release from the nest and of the change-of-life affair (Sheehy 1977:425, 465)**

*(1) if I hadn't fallen in love*

*I think I would still be slogging along in my marriage*

*even though things weren't right*

*in one sense it's a terrible waste of a life*

*but in another sense it's brought me to where I am now*

*so my story is a reaffirmation of -*

*the power of love actually*

*like all this slog of twenty five years*

*and breaking out of that*

*and something is being sorted out*

(2) *I made a conscious decision that this time was for me  
at this time of my life  
this was probably the last chance I would get  
to change direction  
and to become clear  
about what it was I wanted to do  
I feel it's a time to move on  
from very close connections and relationships with family  
it's time for them too  
to depend on each other and not on me  
it's been very cathartic  
before I came here there was a great clearing out  
every drawer  
every cupboard  
and van-loads of rubbish went off to the tip  
it was actually a literal  
clearing out  
a process about something else had started*

The first speaker was Catholic, the second Quaker.

### 3. Groping towards authenticity (Sheehy 1977:357)

(1) *I went to a mid-life crisis retreat workshop  
and I felt that I was really in crisis  
and I decided then it was a mid-life crisis  
I think you can have a mid-life crisis anytime after thirty  
so I made this retreat  
which was very affirming of my journey  
both spiritually and psychologically  
I want to be a woman with an opinion  
grounded in my own identity  
who I am*

(2) *I feel real here  
I can be myself  
be authentic  
in contrast to work where I have to be who I believe I have to be  
a question a lot of people want to ask  
but don't like to  
is 'what about children?'  
I'm 36 and so on  
I feel as though this is my surrogate maternity leave  
I warned my husband it might take nine months  
who knows what it might bring forth*

The first speaker was Catholic, the second Quaker.

Here is an indication - no more can be claimed for these few extracts - that the psychological and spiritual experience of women's mid-life transitions may have roots which lie deeper than social class or educational background, deeper than any articulation of religious or gendered ideology; and may offer a meeting point between women whose faith journeys appear on the surface to be very different.

#### Notes

[1] An earlier version of this paper was read at the *Gender and Education 2nd International Conference: Voices in Gender and Education*, University of Warwick 29-31 March 1999, in the conference stream: 'Spiritual Voices: gender, faith and learning.'

[2] Approximately 60% of the membership at 31-12-98: percentage calculated from the 'Summary of Tabular Statements for 1998' (*Proceedings 1999*).

[3] In voluntary positions there is a small variation between local, regional and national levels, but overall about 60% of the leadership roles are held by women. At the senior management level of the central organisation, two thirds of the posts are held by women. These percentages are calculated from published lists of postholders (*Book of*

Meetings 1999).

[4] See *Quaker Faith and Practice* especially sections 6.01, 19.25, 19.31, 19.50, 23.16, 23.36, 23.39-44.

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#### Errata

On Volume 4, page 76 the reference to Grace Dodds should have been to Ruth Dodds. On page 77 the reference to George McClelland should have been to Grigor McClelland, and the reference to PoWs (prisoners of war) should have been to DPs (displaced persons).