

MATURE STUDENTS AT McMASTER UNIVERSITY

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By

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the social worlds of mature students. Data was collected through participant observation in campus settings and in-depth interviews with mature students. The focus is on their experiences as they navigated the passage to student status. A variety of constraints to the progress of the passage are documented, as well as mature students' negotiation strategies used to overcome these constraints. Attention is then paid to how mature students adjust to the new realities that university life poses. Dealing with university administration, learning new skills, and renegotiation processes are analysed. The status passage to mature student is viewed as problematic for the individual, as a new set of meanings must be negotiated with significant others for the passage to be successful. This study suggests that the case of mature students offers explanation into the nature of status passage in later life, and contributes new knowledge to the nature of generic social processes.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an ethnographic account of the lives of mature students¹ and the social processes involved in their status passage. Its central focus is on the various negotiations that mature students engage in to complete the passage successfully. Such negotiations are necessary because the transition may meet with opposition from significant others². Indeed potential mature students may even keep themselves back as they contemplate returning to school.

The transition from working adult to mature student can be viewed as comparable to other transitions people make. It is a status passage involving a series of generic social processes³ (Prus 1987). Using symbolic interactionism as its orientation, the thesis examines the various stages involved in this "status passage" for the actor. The transition to mature student is conceived here as a social act rather than an isolated experience. Among the concepts I use to elucidate the transition are **process and **meaning**. I explore the stages that actors (mature students) typically spoke of moving through when they became students, **developed** skills, **negotiated** interactions and relationships, and **learned** to cope with or avoid consequences of the decision to return to school.**

The thesis is organized as follows. Chapter Two is an exposition of the thesis' theoretical and methodological underpinnings. It is premised on the assumption that

qualitative method and theory are interrelated concepts in social research.

Chapter Three provides a critical overview of the literature on mature students. It also surveys studies on regular, graduate school, and professional students that are relevant to the mature student experience. I show that the sociological literature to date has not adequately addressed the mature student experience and offers little insight into this status passage.

Chapter Four discusses the decision to go back to school, a decision fraught with conflict as a result of traditional views of appropriate roles for adults. I demonstrate that the career of a mature student often begins several years prior to entering university.

Chapter Five describes the various administrative hurdles the mature student encounters once enrolled at McMaster University. One of the major problems students face in the socialization experience is that of learning a new set of institutional meanings. I explore the strategies mature students use to overcome such difficulties.

The next chapter, Chapter Six, takes a look at how mature students acquire the skills required for a university education. Mature students must improve their reading skills and learn how to write exams and essays. The various negotiations that occur in mastering these skills are documented.

Chapter Seven discusses the social dilemmas that mature students confront when they begin school. Informants' experiences regarding relations with significant

others, forming subcultures, and making friends with younger students are reported and analysed. Ultimately, as this chapter shows, transversing this status passage often calls for re-negotiating the meanings attached to it with friends and partners.

Chapter Eight looks at the inner changes that take place in the student. One consequence of returning to school is that the mature student becomes better aware of him/her self, and of those around them. The end product of the passage, the degree, is almost secondary when this personal transformation is taken into account. Informants report a marked change in themselves and in how they interact with others.

To summarize, the thesis first examines the life history of mature students and how it influences the initiation of the status passage. It then examines how problems are successfully negotiated at various points in the status passage. Finally, it shows how self-identity changes as a result of the status passage.

The contributions of this project I believe, is significant. It serves as a case study adding to our insight into the nature of generic social processes and our understanding of group life as a socially-constructed activity.

1. The term 'mature student' has nothing to do with age, but is a category decided by the university. According to McMaster's 1993-1994 undergraduate calendar, there are several types of students at McMaster. People can have grade 13 (O.A.C.) credits and register as either a regular level one student with full-time status, they can enter in level one on a part-time basis. Most mature students don't have grade 13, so they enter university by writing an entrance exam or by being on probation for the first 12 units of work completed at McMaster.

People are classified as mature students if they are over 21 years old, and have been out of high school for at least two years. If admitted, an applicants register as mature students to take level one courses, one course at a time. If students achieve a 'B-' for the first six units, then they can petition the faculty to be allowed to take two courses at a time. After at least 12 units scholastic performance is reviewed. If students achieve an average of 'C-', they are allowed to register full-time. If they have less than a 'C-' average, with no more than six units of failure, they are allowed to register for another six units. The next review takes place after 18 units. If students have a 'C-' average, then they can register full-time. If students have less than 'C-', they are asked to withdraw.

I mature students are successful, they obtain a 'C-' the first time, and are able to register either full-time, or stay at part-time status. Most choose the later due to outside commitments.,

2. Significant others include parents, siblings, aunts, uncles; and later in socialization, teachers and peers.

3. Generic social processes refers to "the transsituational elements of interaction....generic social processes highlight the emergent, interpretive features of association; they focus on the activities involved in the 'doing' or accomplishment of group life" (Prus 1987: 251).

CHAPTER TWO—THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the reader to the theoretical framework and methodology used in my study of mature students. The section on theory summarizes the basic tenets of interaction theory, and the benefits of its use in the study of human group life; the section on methodology outlines how the research is actually carried out.

THEORY

Symbolic interaction theory was chosen over other theories because this paradigm best fits group life as I encountered it: as a dynamic process involving a constant re-negotiation of meanings. Furthermore, I see social group life as essential to the individual's well being. Self-identity, self-esteem, friendship, and role-conflict resolution are salient issues in all of our lives, and symbolic interactionism addresses them appropriately.

Symbolic interactionism originates with the work of George Herbert Mead, which was further elaborated on by Herbert Blumer. Based on Mead's formulation

of social life in Mind, Self, and Society (1934), the theory rests on 5 premises, which

I summarize as follows:

PREMISE 1) People live in a symbolic and physical environment and can be "stimulated" to act by symbols as well as by physical stimuli.

PREMISE 2) Through symbols, people have the capacity to stimulate others in ways other than those in which they themselves are stimulated.

PREMISE 3) Through communication of symbols, individuals can master enormous numbers of meanings, values and hence, ways of acting.

PREMISE 4) Symbols and their meanings and values do not occur only in isolation, but often in clusters, sometimes large and complex, as well.

PREMISE 5) Thinking is the process by which possible symbolic solutions and potential courses of action are examined and assessed for their relative advantages and disadvantages in terms of the values of the individual making the assessment, and one option is chosen for action.

(Rose 1962: 5-12)

Using these five premises, Rose deduces two "general propositions":

GENERAL PROPOSITION 1. Through the learning of a culture (and subcultures, which are the specialized cultures found in particular segments of society) individuals are able to predict each other's behaviour most of the time and gauge their own behaviour with respect to the predicted behaviour of others.

GENERAL PROPOSITION 2. The individual defines and has significance for him/her self as well as other objects, actions and characteristics (1962: 9-11).

Herbert Blumer, who actually coined the term "symbolic interactionism," argues that symbolic interaction rests on three premises:

1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings the things have for them.

2) The meaning of such things arises out of the social interaction one has with one's fellows.

3) Meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process applied by the individual in dealing with the world. (Blumer 1969: 2)

Symbolic interactionism has evolved considerably since the pioneering work of Mead, Rose, and Blumer (Goffman 1959b; Garfinkel 1967 and Stryker 1980). The fundamental assumption of symbolic interactionism is that we live in a world of symbolic meanings, and react to objects and events based upon the meanings we attribute to them. The theory asserts that we interact as beings via verbal and non-verbal symbols. Linguistic communication is the most popular form of interaction. Symbolic interactionists assert that the individual is not an a priori phenomenon, we realize ourselves through social interaction. The process of socialization¹ begins in childhood but is ongoing, for we never terminate the socialization process, even as adults. Interactionists recognize that we interact selectively, primarily with "significant others" (Mead 1934), and interactions with such persons are structured and based upon expectations of how they and other actors will respond. Such structural expectations are called "roles".

Group Life as Socially Constructed Activity

The interactionist paradigm sees group life as a socially constructed activity (Prus

1989: 33-41). Just as in other aspects of group life, we construct events, meanings, and definitions out of social interaction. Mature students constitute a group like any other, one whose meanings are socially constructed.

Adopting the work of symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934, Blumer 1969), phenomenology (Berger and Luckmann 1966), and dramaturgy (Goffman 1959), social group life can be viewed from these premises: the world can have multiple meanings; people have the capacity to take themselves and others into account in planning courses of action; meanings are shaped by interpersonal interactions; and human group life has an emergent nature. Using these premises, Prus (1989a: 33-41) characterizes social group life as perspectival, reflective, negotiable, relational, and processual.

Interaction as Perspectival

The perspectival nature of group life refers to the fact that all individuals use multiple realities (Schutz 1971) to construct their activities. People attribute to objects meanings which reflect the perspectives (world-views, viewpoints, frames of reference) to which group members have been exposed. Thus meanings attributed to objects vary. Objects become meaningful when we consider them as part of a symbolic order. Politics and education impact on the perspectives through which objects are viewed.

Objects have specific meanings for actors, but can have multiple meanings depending on the groups with which he/she is associated. Because we are dependent on others' interpretations for confirmation of our reality, objects can mean different things to people over time. For example, music that is popular today may be viewed negatively years later by the same individual or group of people.

Interaction as Reflective

Once perspectives are learned, they become what Shibutani (1961) calls "frames of reference" for an individual's future behaviour. We develop as people by interacting with fellow group members. We learn perspectives in order to interpret our social world competently.

In the process of acquiring perspectives, people define themselves as objects (Mead 1934). That is, according to Mead, people have the capacity to be self-reflective. They can analyse their self-identity--i.e., reflect on what it means for them to be themselves. They can then both interpret the perspectives others have, and plan for the future by defining and assessing what is happening to them. This makes it possible for actors to manipulate their actions to suit their own self-interests (Goffman 1959b).

Interaction as Negotiable

People thus possess the capacity to adopt or reject the meanings commonly attributed to objects (whether visible or invisible) in daily life. By depicting objects in different ways, actors can alter meanings attached to those objects. This requires negotiation which may involve a wide range of strategies as individuals attempt to exchange meanings of objects.

Interaction as Relational

People work together to form various associations with one another, and take these into account when developing plans of action. Actors are able to engage in multiple relationships at the same time, and their degree of involvement in these relationships may change over time. Time-spans of relationships are also varied--individuals may be involved for decades or for a few months (like a marriage or friendship). Since people take these associations into account in developing future plans, relationships become a central feature of human interaction. Further, the quality and significance of relationships changes over time, and may vacillate: relationships can be intermittently precarious.

Interaction as Processual

To gain a better understanding of what the perspectival, reflective, negotiable, and relational concepts mean for interaction, it is useful to focus on the processual character of human group life. By focusing on the processes through which interaction emerges, it becomes evident that exchanges do not occur spontaneously, but are constructed over time, with actors continually involved in interpreting other people, themselves, and objects in the course of situated interaction.

Because outcomes are predictable from prior experience, situations that occur frequently are defined by actors as routine events. Over time, individuals come to know how others will act in particular situations. As patterning of behaviour occurs, participants in a situation may assume that others will continue to perform as they have previously. Actors depend on others for validation of what reality actually is. However, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) note, reality tends to be precarious. Generally as a practice becomes more long-standing, vulnerability to challenge lessens. The longer practices following accepted perspectives continue, the more they reaffirm the consensual definition of reality.

Mature Student Life as Socially Constructed Activity

Prus's (1989a) characterization of human interaction as perspectival, reflective, negotiable, relational, and processual has implications for the study of mature students. Mature students are part of a culture whereby they learn, through socialization, to attach meanings to objects. Upon entering into university life, mature students gain perspectives on objects that are shared with fellow students. Through student subcultures, the student acquires a shared meaning--bestowing perspectives and definitions. The meanings of objects (such as an exam) vary as the student becomes better acquainted with what it means to encounter such an object (as in writing an exam), and exchanges more meanings (e.g., exam trivia) with other mature students.

The view of social life as reflective also has implications for the mature student. Because the student has the ability to be an object to him/herself, he/she can develop an identity as a mature student. Mature students also decide on individual plans and goals based on their self-reflection. They then interpret and reinterpret their situations on an ongoing basis, and can present themselves (Goffman 1959b) to others in a manner as they wish to be known (Levy 1990).

Interaction among mature students also has a negotiable quality. In negotiating, mature students invoke a series of strategies to enhance interaction and further their own interests. For instance, a mature student can choose to reveal

secrets of obtaining 'A' grades to other students, and negotiate levels of social intimacy with younger students. Mature students are also in a constant state of negotiation with administration, professors and teaching assistants about how to best comply with assigned course requirements. For example, mature students may inquire about what lines of action are appropriate to achieve more, or enhance their graduate school prospects.

The fact that mature students have various affiliations on as well as off campus illustrates that mature student life is relational. Mature students are involved in multiple relationships as spouse, parent, worker, and university student. For the purpose of this study, it is useful to examine the fragility of these relationships. Mature students may find marriages or friendships in jeopardy after coming to university. Examining stability, upheaval and even termination of relationships in the lives of mature students enables the researcher to understand the social implications of returning to university.

Finally, mature students are clearly involved in processes of emergent interaction. The mature student builds up and truncates relations with others over time, interpreting objects, him/her self, and others on an ongoing basis. As the activities associated with being a mature student (such as tutorial presentations) are performed continuously, routines where the student knows what to expect are generated. The student's sense of the "reality" of university can therefore be based on and adjusted in accordance with the continued occurrence of predictable events.

The Theory of Status Passage

One theoretical way to view the process of entering into the role of 'mature student' is to see this as an act of status passage. The concept of status passage was formulated in Arnold van Gennep's Rites of Passage (1960). In this work, the author describes individuals taking on new roles, with a state of "liminality" in between such roles. Van Gennep believes this liminal state is the key to our understanding of social life.

Van Gennep (1960: 10-11) divides rites of passage into three subcategories: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation. Rites of separation include for example funerals and wakes; marriages exemplify rites of incorporation; and transition rites include such passages as pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation. Rites can be re-classified as preliminal (rites of separation); liminal (rites of transition); and postliminal (rites of incorporation).

Glaser and Strauss's (1971) orientation builds on individuals making choices in their life course that result in new "statuses." In marrying or bearing a child, i.e., becoming a spouse and parent, various life choices are made, choices which alter one's conception of the world and generate emergent conceptions. This framework proves important as an explanatory tool, since it can be used together with symbolic interaction theory to analyse the various interactive processes that

occur in the "in-between" and "during" phases of statuses.

The transition to the status of mature student is a classic example of such a status passage. First, the individual must come to the decision to change roles, followed by a process of becoming a student, then by maintaining status as a mature student, negotiating with significant others to accommodate this new status, and possibly terminating old statuses (i.e., wife) for the sake of facilitating the newly acquired status.

Glaser and Strauss (1971) discuss the various modalities of passages between statuses, identifying thirteen properties of such passages:

- 1) A passage may be desired or unwanted by the person or persons making the passage.
- 2) A passage may or may not be inevitable.
- 3) A passage may be reversible to some degree.
- 4) A passage may be repeatable or non-repeatable.
- 5) Individuals going through a passage collectively, may or may not be aware they are going through it together.
- 6) There are passages where those being "processed" cannot communicate with others undergoing the same status change.
- 7) The person making the passage may do so voluntarily or have no choice in the matter.
- 8) Various agents--including the person undergoing the passage--have various degrees of control over aspects of the passage.
- 9) The passage may or may not require special legitimation by one or more agents.

10) The clarity of the signs of passage-for the various parties-may vary from great to negligible.

11) The signs of passage may be clear enough, but can also be disguised by the relevant parties involved.

12) The centrality of the passage to the person (how much a difference it makes to him/her).

13) The length of time in passage, that is, the liminality period between statuses.

(Glaser and Strauss 1971: 4-5)

The following premises about the of status passages involved in being a mature student will be discussed. First, the passage to student status is a desired change. Informants clearly indicated that they were tired of their old lives and wanted a change. I also contend that the status passage is inevitable for some women. Female informants state they knew they wanted to return shortly after high school, and that they were drawn to the university by some part of themselves they hadn't previously been aware of. This unconscious motivation allows the passage in question to be classified as inevitable.

Though mature students may develop friendships in university, initially there seems to be a feeling that they are all alone in the act of status passage. The realization that there are others in a similar predicament emerges after a short while. Friendships and subcultures among mature students develop, as this realization that they are not alone is strengthened by encounters with others.

The degree of student control over the passage may affect the progress of the

passage. Both external factors, such as finances, sabotage by misguided family members, in addition to the student's own inhibitions, may hinder/facilitate the student's realizing his/her goals.

Another component of status passage has to do with its centrality to the individual involved. Finally, length of time in passage is important, because there is a liminal stage in the career of the mature student--what I call the "pre-student phase"--wherein he/she thinks about going back to school over a period of several years. Studenthood constitutes a liminal stage in one's life.

My contention is that mature students experience conflict in the transition to their new status. Status passage also has implications for the life style, and frequently requires major adjustments. The remainder of this thesis will examine the dynamics of the status passages confronted by mature students.

It will become apparent that the adoption of a status involves both changes in one's interpersonal relationships and self-change. Indeed, becoming a mature student brings with it an understanding of the self that couldn't otherwise be realized. Students grasp the fact that they can learn new things at their age, and that the myth that education is just for young people need not keep them back. Furthermore, students learn the importance of support from family and friends as they go through the status passage. Mature students also negotiate new relationships with others as they become comfortable with their status, and they make long-lasting friendships. This thesis is a study of life changes and consequences accompanying

the decision to become a mature student.

Envisioning a Mature Student Career

The concept of career is important for the analysis of mature students. Seeing the role of student as processual, we can envision the mature student as having a "career". This doesn't refer to a vocation, but rather to the pathways people take in their history of involvement in an activity. Used in the context of occupations, the term career refers to "the sequence of movements from one position to another in an occupational system made by an individual who works in the system" (Becker 1963: 24). Becker (1970: 165) defines career as "the patterned series of adjustments made by the individual to the network of institutions, formal organizations, and informal networks" in which activity is performed. Related to this is the concept of 'career contingencies' which include "both the objective facts of social structure and changes in the perspectives, motivations, and desires of the individual" (Becker 1963: 24).

The thesis will cover the central adjustment processes experienced by the mature student. The "career" of the adult student begins after high school, even before enrolment in university. I argue that the key to the "career" of a student is the mind set that enables the student to think about returning to school. The career of a mature student is processual (Blumer 1969), involving a continuous change in

personal identity (Becker 1970: 259). Viewing the changing status to mature student as part of a "career" in the adult's life, allows the researcher to better understand the interplay of persons, objects, actions and beliefs involved in the life course.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This project utilizes qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology in its broadest sense refers to "research that produces descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior" (Taylor and Bogdan 1984: 5).

As noted above symbolic interaction theory asserts that to understand human behaviour one must take the role, or perspective, of the other(s) (Mead 1934). By experiencing another's world, the researcher is able to gain a "definition of the situation"² (Thomas 1923: 42) and a culturally-based "construction of reality" (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The use of qualitative methods allows researchers to experience reality as others experience it. Herbert Blumer viewed qualitative methods as the **only** way one could achieve awareness of the workings of human group life. Blumer explains this position in the following passage:

...the position of symbolic interaction requires the student to catch the

process of interpretation through which they construct their actions. The process is not to be caught merely by turning to conditions which are antecedent to the process. Such antecedent conditions are helpful in understanding the process insofar as they enter into it, but as mentioned previously they do not constitute the process. Nor can one catch the process merely by inferring its nature from the overt action which is its product. To catch the process, the student must take the role of the acting unit whose behavior he is studying. Since the interpretation is being made by the acting unit in terms of objects designated and appraised, meanings acquired, and decisions made, the process has to be seen from the standpoint of the acting unit. It is the recognition of this fact that makes the research work of such scholars as R.E. Park and W.I. Thomas so notable. To try catch the interpretive process by remaining aloof as a so-called "objective" observer and refusing to take the role of the acting unit is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism--the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it. (1969: 86)

The use of quantitative methods would have meant that this interpretive process could not have been observed. Instead, data would have sacrificed validity for the sake of reliable sociological results.

Grounded Theory: Canons and Procedures

The use of qualitative methods allows the researcher to explore the social world from the perspective of actors in it. It was the desire to capture a fuller understanding of group life that led Glaser and Strauss (1967) to develop a **grounded theory** approach to qualitative research.

Grounded theory originates from pragmatism (Mead 1934) and symbolic

interactionism (Blumer 1969). As Corbin and Strauss explain, important principles of grounded theory are drawn from both traditions:

The first pertains to change. Since phenomena are not conceived of as static but as continually changing in response to evolving conditions, an important component of the method is to build change, through process, into the method. The second principle pertains to a clear stand on the issue of "determinism." Strict determinism is rejected, as is nondeterminism. Actors are seen as having, though not always utilizing, the means of controlling their destinies by their responses to conditions. They are able to make choices according to their perceptions, which are often accurate, about the options they encounter. (1990: 5)

The intellectual traditions of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism share these beliefs. The goal of the grounded theory approach is to discover the conditions of group life and explore how actors react to the changing conditions they face, as well as the consequences of their actions.

Like any other analytic approach, grounded theory has a set of procedures for data collection and analysis. Corbin and Strauss (1990) explain the importance of these procedures in devising and carrying out grounded theory research. Their procedures can be summarized as follows:

- 1. Data Collection and Analysis are Interrelated Processes. In grounded theory, analysis starts with the first collected item of data. The logic behind this rule is that it allows the researcher to direct the next interview and observations. Cues from important data must be incorporated into future sets of interviews and field observations.**

2. Concepts are the Basic Units of Analysis. In grounded theory research, the theorist works with various conceptualizations of data rather than raw data itself: namely, the events or activities observed. If the frequency of activities fits prior conceptual labels, the researcher can draw conclusions as to the value of those conceptualizations.

3. Categories must be Developed and Related. Concepts that show similarity to a specific phenomenon can be grouped together into categories. Over time categories become interrelated to form a theory of group life.

4. Sampling in Grounded Theory Proceeds on Theoretical Grounds. Sampling in grounded theory links concepts and their properties, dimensions and variations. If a researcher wants to study university professors' work, he or she goes to places where professors are to be found--the university classroom, office, faculty club--to observe what they do. After some observations the researcher would note the incidents and events that denote what university professors do, the conditions that facilitate or prevent their work, the interactions that constitute the work, and their consequences. After initial analysis, the term "work" is much better understood in terms of meanings than it was at the outset of the study.

5. Analysis Makes Use of Constant Comparisons. As an incident occurs, it is

noted by the researcher, and compared with other incidents for similarities and differences. Such comparisons allows the researcher to avoid bias, for concepts are continually being challenged with fresh data.

6. Patterns and Variations must be Accounted for. In grounded theory, data must be examined for regularity. Even where such regularity is not apparent, patterns can be detected. Variations in data occur often, and it is the patterns of social interaction that give order to the data.

7. Process Must Be Built into the Theory. In grounded theory, the notions of belief that human group life is processual in character influences the way in which the researcher forms his or her analysis. The belief in process allows the researcher to note the changes actors make in response to prevailing conditions.

8. Hypotheses about Relationships among Categories should be Developed and Verified as Much as Possible during the Research Process. As the researcher develops hypotheses about relationships among categories, they should be tested out in the field, and modified if necessary. Grounded theory rests on the premise that hypotheses remain unverified, but that hypotheses are continually under revision in the course of the study until they hold true for the evidence concerning the phenomena.

Grounded theory was chosen as an apparatus here due to its suitability for social analysis of dynamic processes such as status passages. As interviews and informal conversations occurred, various themes emerged, pointing to concepts important in the eyes of the mature student. The theory developed in this thesis emerged from a grounded theory approach.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was used in this study to ascertain the meanings that actors (mature students) attribute to seminal features of student life. In addition, extensive interviewing was used to get an in-depth understanding of their concept of "reality".

There is considerable literature on participant observation (Johnson 1975; Cicourel 1964; Filstead 1970; Douglas 1976; Wax 1971; Denzin 1978; Spradley 1980; Spradley and McCurdy 1972; Lofland and Lofland 1984; Bogdan and Taylor 1984; Corbin and Strauss 1990; Marshall and Roseman 1989; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990). It details the problematics of doing field work. Qualitative sociologists stress that direct observation of human action is necessary to understand human group life. Theories about human interaction can only be generated by living and experiencing daily interaction among the group in question (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Adopting a similar strategy, I initiated the research with no pre-conceived ideas about mature students--who they were, what they were like and so on, and learned their world-view largely through direct observation of their activities on campus.

I began my study in July 1992 by sitting in on an undergraduate psychology summer course. In the course of two lectures I acquired some information on what my approach to the study should be. For instance, during breaks older students in the class sat together in small groups. This was my first introduction to the mature student subcultures that form in the course of obtaining an education. Conversations with mature students during breaks and at lunch led to a better understanding of their situation and the difficulties they faced in returning to school.

Field Settings

I embarked on fieldwork that ultimately became 60 hours of time in the field settings. The bulk of my time was spent in the Phoenix, a campus pub, where I met students for drinks and meals. A key feature of this setting was its relaxed atmosphere, allowing students to open up about their lives. Settings such as classrooms or the library would likely have prevented such candour.

In September 1992 I attended an one-day seminar offered by the director of counselling services (David Palmer) and the coordinator of part-time degree studies

(Gord Raymond) at the student counselling services in Hamilton Hall. The purpose of the forum was to orient first year students to the obstacles that lay ahead. It included a library tour, workshops on writing essays and time management, and discussion of concerns mature students experience. I met a number of mature students who agreed to be interviewed at this forum.

I also attended three 'cafe nights' held at the end of September 1992 under the sponsorship of MAPS (McMaster Association of Part-Time Students). Here I gathered more data from talking with both faculty and students about what being a mature student entailed. Twenty people were interviewed in the course of the three evenings.

I spent many hours in a centrally located campus cafeteria during the fall, 1992, conversing with mature students about the problems they were experiencing getting a degree, studying for exams, and getting their written work in on time. Many students told of anxiety on writing exams or tests, and how they sometimes feared "blinking out" just as they opened the exam booklet. I spoke with about 15 people in this setting.

Access to Informants

The field settings naturally led to contact with other mature students at McMaster. Many of my contacts were made simply by word-of-mouth. As I was interviewing

someone, he/she would mention someone else in the same situation. I also found names from sign-up sheets for undergraduate evening classes, summer courses, and orientation day. In my initial explanation, I introduced myself as a graduate student doing a thesis on mature students. The fact that the students [informants] in question were genuinely enthusiastic about my research into their situation facilitated the recruitment of informants. All formal interviews were conducted in my office to minimize outside distractions. 26 in-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted, lasting 90 minutes to 2 1/2 hours each, were conducted.

Although the thesis was originally planned as a study on mature part-time students, I soon extended its purview to mature day students as well. This was due to the fact that the mature student population at McMaster reflects a trend in recent years for mature adults to enrol as day students.

The Interview Sample

I interviewed 26 individuals in-depth, on tape. Each interview lasted at least 90 minutes. All of those interviewed were in degree programs at McMaster University. 19 informants were women, 7 were men. Ages ranged from 25 to 62 years. 5 men and 7 women were full-time day students; 2 men and 12 women were night students, or "part-timers". Day students see it as advantageous to get an honours degree in four years instead of the seven years it usually takes as a part-timer. Evening

students tend to take a lot longer to get a degree, spending an average of 6 years for a three year pass B.A. and 8 years for an honours degree. The small percentage of the sample that was male (27%) was not intended, but interestingly, it reflects the actual male-female ratio. In a conversation with Bruce Misch (director of the McMaster Association for Part-Time Students), he related how in the 1992-1993 year, 75% of mature students were in fact women (fieldnotes, September 1992).

Students were recruited from three second-year sociology courses, and one summer course in psychology. I made a presentation to each class, explaining the nature of the project, and what would be required of them. I assured them that confidentiality would be respected, and passed around a sign up sheet. I also recruited students by referral, and from participant observation settings. My only selection criteria were that volunteer informants be 25 years of age and older and enrolled in a degree program. the rationale for the age criterion was that the 7 year post-high school period enabled personal growth among my informants. I wanted adults who were independent, mature, and had a set of life experiences that set them apart from the younger students. Many informants had travelled, married, raised children, and worked for some time before returning to school.

The Interview

In line with the qualitative approach to social research (Strauss 1987) interviews

were unstructured and open-ended, so that questions and themes could emerge from the data themselves. Interviews were taped to allow for accurate recall of the interview later. The tapes were transcribed onto disk shortly after each interview.

The techniques of non-direct questions and in-depth interviewing entails:

...repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words.

(Taylor and Bogdan 1984: 77)

I chose the setting of my office both for its convenience and for its lack of distractions. Not using standardized questionnaires allowed for expression of personal recollections and emotions, which the private setting, as opposed to a more public setting such as cafeteria or pub, facilitated. Taping allowed me to capture vocal inflections and changes in emotion as informants recounted their experiences at McMaster. I tried to capture the feelings that reflect the essence of the 'back to school' experience which would have largely been lost had I relied on fieldnotes alone. Taping also meant that I was better able to locate themes in the data, since verbatim text was recorded. This decreased the number of interviews necessary, and allowed me to extract the essential information, as opposed to the peripheral, about mature students, much more effectively.

The use of unstructured interviews did not entail a total lack of control over eliciting what I wanted to know. Initially I formulated themes I hoped to explore, such as social support and negotiation of meanings to accomplish the challenges

faced at university. Much of this information did emerge through informal conversations. As my encounters with mature students increased, various themes and concepts that were important in understanding their world-view were expressed. For example, at the outset I had no clue where to start the interview with informants. During the very first interview, I encountered an informant who explained a lot of the ideas I had thought of as important, without my having to ask. Upon further questioning, I decided that in fact some of the issues I had initially thought of as important were not relevant at all. For instance, I originally thought that housework would be an issue. The fact was that both women and men said that this had already been negotiated in the home prior to coming to university. The real problems were money and acclimatizing--learning the ropes of student life. Another issue was that of fatigue. Originally I felt that if one worked all day, attended to family responsibilities, and then came to school, an obvious lack of energy would be felt by the student at the end of day. Fatigue came up, but only briefly. Most informants said that they organized their time so as to be able to accomplish all the required duties, especially if they had a supportive family at home. Without such support, the student's success was in any event unlikely. Fatigue thus was not an overriding issue for informants in the study.

Problematics of the Interview Process

During the interview, I attempted to put the informant at ease. I initially gave each one a letter specifying their right to drop out of the study if they so desired. As well, it stated that all data generated would be kept confidential. This introduction left informants more at ease, and willing to share intimate personal feelings and experiences. I also made clear to my informants what to expect from me, and explained that our conversation would be informal in nature. The fact that I had an easy chair put in my office for the interviewee's use made for a relaxed atmosphere, as if they were sitting in my living room. Taylor and Bogdan relate a similar sentiment:

The interviewer must create an atmosphere in which people feel comfortable to talk freely about themselves....In qualitative interviewing the researcher attempts to construct a situation that resembles those in which people naturally talk to each other about important things. The interview is relaxed and conversational, since this is how people normally interact. The interviewer relates to informants on a personal level (1984: 93).

One problem that arose was the emotion of anxiety generated by discussion of basic life status issues. As I argue in this thesis, mature students are very anxious early on in their "career". One example of this anxiety is an interview I had with a female informant. Nervous from the onset, she remained so for the duration of the 90 minute interview. The tape from the interview clearly showed how her trepidation inhibited her responses to my questions. An excerpt from my notes written up later that night reflected my frustration as well as the informant's performance in the interview:

I had a genuinely poor interview tonight. The woman was so nervous that she was constantly having to repeat answers to me and I had to likewise repeat or rephrase my questions because she said she really couldn't understand what I was asking. Writing this afterwards, I think I have learned a lesson. Mature students can be nervous anytime they're on campus, not just in the classroom or the exam hall setting. Listening to the taped conversation on playback leads me to the conclusion that it wasn't anything on my part, but just something inherent in the psyche of this one informant. One interesting point is that when I met her at the MAPS cafe night last week she was charming, witty, and a very nice person. In that case she seemed very comfortable talking to me. But there was some reason for tonight's disaster, one that I will never know.

(fieldnotes, October 5, 1992)

Such problems are perhaps unavoidable in the interview process. Informants may have had a bad day, contributing to high anxiety levels. The best way to offset such problems is to develop a personal rapport with informants prior to the interview. This is where participant observation gives the researcher an advantage, for prior rapport between researcher and informant means that more searching questions can be asked during the interview session. Most interviewees met me in person or talked to me over the phone prior to the interview. This strengthened the rapport and led to a more successful interview.

During the initial meetings, when prospective informants decided whether or not to talk to me, I stated that I had taken some time off as well before attending school, and that this was a family tradition, for my mother had been a mature student. In effect, what I was doing was stressing an empathetic approach to the methodology. This is advantageous, for when we use qualitative methods:

...we get to know them [our informants] personally and experience what they experience in their daily struggles in society. We learn about concepts such as beauty, pain, faith, suffering, frustration, and love whose essence is lost through other research approaches.

(Taylor and Bogdan 1984: 7)

To explore meanings from the personal experiences of others, the sociologist can gain more insight than would have been forthcoming with quantitative methods. The end product is a better understanding of the social dynamics of the life of a mature student.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has justified my choice of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework for this thesis. As a microsociological theory, interactionism focuses on the processual character of group life. In the case of mature students, symbolic interactionism can explain the evolving nature of their status passage to the role of mature student.

The methodology used in the study allowed me to arrive at well-informed conclusions about the dynamics of social group life. Grounded theory sees theory as arising from social inquiry, and not the reverse. The task of the researcher is to "catch the process of interpretation" (Blumer 1969: 86) through which group members operate. Rigorous testing in the field yields data that generate meaningful research results.

To recapitulate, the research question I undertook to explore was how adults become students, develop appropriate skills, negotiate interactions and relationships, and learn to cope with or avoid negative consequences of, their decision to return to school. This discussion of theory and method along with the following literature review constitutes the background that makes it possible to understand and appreciate the account of the mature student experience that unfolds in the body of this thesis.

1. The ability to assume a role is dependent on the process of socialization. We develop a sense of world-view through the process of socialization. Socialization is a lifelong process, where we gain a sense of self-identity.

Socialization involves a process of 'taking the attitude of the other' (Mead 1934), a term meaning taking on someone else's beliefs as your own. We as children are taught to tie our shoes, learned mathematics at school, and gained a sense of family history from people around us. These people involved in our socialization are called 'significant others' (Mead 1934).

2. When the self can take itself as an object, we are able to 'define the situation'. We communicate with one another (usually by language) in a series of definitions and expectation that are implied in the process. These define the meaning of the situation, or comprise what W.I. Thomas (1923: 42) calls the 'definition of the situation'. This act of defining the situation is dependent on our ability to 'take the role of the generalized other' (Mead 1934: 3-25). Such role taking involves the person adopting the generalized perspective of the group, community, or society as a whole. Such role-taking is a process whereby we envision the perspectives of others prior to our course of action.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

The past three decades have seen vastly increased enrolment of part-time students in university programs. In the fall of 1990, over 700,000 mature students were enrolled in post-secondary institutions in Canada (Hagggar-Guenette 1992: 26). Yet little research into this phenomenon has been carried out, and the literature on it is sparse. This chapter surveys a number of studies on the socialization process in education; the populations covered include undergraduate students, mature students, graduate students, and those enrolled in professional programs such as medical students, law students, and master's of business administration (MBA) students.

Literature on Mature Students

Selman and Dampier (1991: 86-87) argue that from a psychological standpoint, mature students are 'geared towards' acquiring a solid education. From a life developmental viewpoint, Havighurst (1972: 44-45) states that priorities change for adults in stages of their life, making a return to school seem more feasible at certain life stages than at others. During early adulthood (ages 18-30), most people marry, start families, begin their occupational career, and build their first home. In middle

age (30-55), adults develop leisure time activities, in addition to maintaining previous family and work responsibilities. In later life (55 years old and up), adults adjust to changing physical constraints and retirement.

The activities associated with these higher stages in life point to various explanations for pursuing education in later life. It makes sense that student status would become a viable life option when: (a) leisure time becomes available; (b) relationships are relatively stable; (c) children are old enough to be supportive of a parent's decision to return to school; and (d) and to make appropriate child-minding arrangements feasible.

Being a mature student calls for a strong motivation to return to school. Rubenson's cross-national survey of adult university students found that:

- 1) The strongest motives cited were employment and personal satisfaction.
- 2) One third gave satisfaction as their main reason for going back to school.
- 3) Interest in job-related goals began to decline after age 30.
- 4) Women who were full-time homemakers stated they came to school to "get out of the rut" and "see new faces".
- 5) Personal satisfaction was a stronger motive among those of higher socio-economic status than it was among those of lower socio-economic status.

(Rubenson 1984: 9)

Rubenson also found that mature students faced a number of obstacles, including:

- 1) OSAP and other financial aid policies unfavourable to mature students;

- 2) lack of support systems, such as orientation, counselling, child care and tutoring;
 - 3) lack of information on available courses;
 - 4) fatigue experienced by part-time learners who have other activities;
 - 5) lack of time due to employment and family obligations;
 - 6) fees and other costs;
 - 7) Inconvenient and erratic scheduling;
 - 8) residency requirements for degree programs;
 - 9) reluctance of institutions to recognize life experience as partial fulfilment of entrance requirements;
 - 10) curriculum and learning are often organized with recent high school graduates, rather than mature student, in mind.
- (Rubenson 1984: 10-23)

Many university systems are organized in a matter uncondusive to the interests of mature students. Campbell (1984: 89) argues that, as currently offered and taught, degree courses indicate little acceptance of the mature adult learner.

Few studies of the interpersonal experiences of mature students have been done. Michael Moffatt's (1989) ethnography of student culture at Rutgers University focused on interaction between a 30 year old "student" and 18-22 year-old students. As a mature student, Moffatt had to negotiate with others on his dorm floor and was continuously centred out due to his 'peculiar' status. Moffatt's analysis shows that while a mature student can fit in with young students, such interaction is limited at best. When ideologies conflict, and meanings attributed to events differ, acceptance

tends to decline.

Joan Carr's (1989) study of mature female students at the University of New Brunswick revealed little about the dynamics of status passage to the role of student; instead, its focus was on arguing against "patriarchy" and women's traditional job choices. Carr found that:

1) Women were inculcated with traditional views on women's positions in patriarchal society during their earlier education and within the family framework.

2) Mature women attend university for work related reasons, in the expectation that their position in the labour force and their economic position will improve.

Carr found that women do very well academically as students and find the educational experience highly fulfilling. Her central finding was that the majority of mature women students at U.N.B. enrolled in programs that prepared them for occupations traditionally filled by women. Carr argues that higher education thus perpetuates rather than challenges the traditional position of women in society.

Carr's findings, like my own, indicate that women experience conflict at home as a result of their decision to return to school. However, Carr ignores the interpersonal dynamics I focus on in my thesis, hence her work does not provide an adequate picture of the mature student experience.

Joan Lyons's (1985) work on older mature students at the University of Waterloo is gerontologically oriented, defining mature students primarily as over 40 years of age. Based on 40 interviews and 480 questionnaires, it is statistical in

quantitative in nature. Lyons found that for adults in later life, family members have more influence than friends in shaping role expectations. Further, choosing family over friends as the preferred reference group for role expectations is positively related to the individual's self-happiness. Thus, Lyons found that reference groups play a key role in the initiation of status passage later in life. However, the quantitative approach did not allow for exploration of the meanings attached to status passage that could have been carried out had the author used a grounded theory approach.

Judith Levy's (1990) work on "re-entry women" is an excellent account of the social dilemmas faced by mature women students in their 30's. It also examines the friendships entered into by mature students on campus. As Levy maintains, "the returning woman faces the problem of finding a place for herself within an established order where there are no clear roles for her to play" (1990: 144).

Many of the women in Levy's study felt they were out of place, getting degrees when many people thought they should be raising children. As one of her informants' observed:

I have a real thing about being old in classes with young students. Very often I feel out of place, I feel old, and uncomfortable. I think, my God, what an ass, sitting here among all these kids. (1990: 145)

Often, this self-consciousness acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as mature students tend to act out as they believe others expect them to. In fact, however, it is not the obvious age difference that annoys young students, but rather the adult learners'

inappropriate behaviours. Asking too many questions in class, "sucking up" to the professors, and seeming too eager in class are perceived by the younger students as inappropriate behaviours; as a result the mature student manifesting them may be ostracized by the younger students (Levy 1990: 145).

Levy also discusses how mature students make friends with younger students on campus. Many older women disclose biographical information selectively so as to appear younger than they actually are. For instance, they would claim to have one child, rather than three, or say their children were in school, without saying the school was high school. Levy also found that outside commitments were an obstacle to friendships developing between young and older students.

However, she found that friendships between mature women students can occur if "the other party can understand and accept a relationship based upon limited time and personal resources" (1990: 165). In fact, such friendships only prospered if both parties had similar goals and interests.

Patricia Campbell's (1993) study of mature women students at the University College of Cape Breton covers some of the same ground I do. Campbell interviewed 25 women enrolled in arts and science programs, interviewing them formally with a set of pre-set questions. She wanted to know "why they came to university; to what extent their motive was economic; their objective vocational; and what part other needs and purposes might have played in their decision to take courses" (Campbell 1993: 3). She also looked at how the students adjusted to their new role, how they

changed, their relations with their families, and their friendships on campus.

While the areas Campbell covers are similar to those I explore here, her approach is far less rigorous. She cites no references in the text itself, and overall, the work is more impressionistic than analytical. In her introduction, Campbell states that she had her informants write down their thoughts and experience of coming to school in the form of a "reflexive essay" (1993: 2).

However, Campbell's book is a rich source of data, and a good resource for anyone interested in how women experience higher education. She quotes at length from interviews and seems to capture the challenge returning to school in later years presents for women.

Like Carr (1989), Campbell does not include men in her study. Her justification is not presented clearly, and the reader is left speculating as to the reasons for this. As I see it, exclusion of one sex distorts any account of social life and status passage, and hence does not serve the interests of sociological research. Only by studying both men and women can the differences in experience of men and women be verified. In my case, it was only by interviewing both sexes that I discovered that the "thinking period" for women was greater than for men. I would have thus forfeited this insight into the pre-student phase of student life had I excluded males from the study.

Undergraduate Students

In contrast to the relative dearth of studies on mature students, there is considerable research on undergraduate students and their adjustment to student life. Adult students face considerable anxiety when entering the university system; this, and other experiences have clear parallels in the socialization of undergraduates in general. Transitions are problematic for undergraduates as well as for the mature student. They are entering a whole new world with a fresh set of rules and meanings. Komarovsky (1985) studied women college students at four northeastern state colleges in the early 1980's, focusing on students entering university in their later teens and the problems associated with the accompanying identity change. Young students Komarovsky found, experience changes in self-esteem, friendship dilemmas, exposure to a different culture, and intense anxiety about completing school work. Informants in Komarovsky's study reported that they had to negotiate the new role with family and friends, and also reported concern about how they as newcomers to university would fit into the student subculture. All of these findings reflect concerns found in studies of mature students, including my own.

Becker et al.'s (1968) study of undergraduate student life revealed that younger students also make collective assessments. Like mature students, undergraduates were found to: make judgements on faculty performance (1968: 110), be pragmatic in their concerns over workload and course requirements (1968:

116), and attempt to develop a strong student subculture (1968: 116).

Albas and Albas (1988a, 1988b, 1989) explored the experience of taking exams and the negotiation of emotions it entails. Like mature students, undergraduates are highly anxious prior to exams. They fear they have not studied enough, "blinking out", and misunderstanding the instructions on the exam sheet.

Grills's (1985, 1987) study of the social process of undergraduate essay construction reveals further similarities between younger and mature students. Grills' found that younger undergraduates devise strategies to complete the tasks involved in essay writing. Simply, students want to do the least amount of work in return for the highest grade. Mature students, my work shows, also accomplish problematic tasks pragmatically, seeking to perform the least amount of work possible. For example, informants told me that they choose topics that involve few references, little research, and topics most unlikely to be chosen by their peers, so that the professor would not be able to compare the paper with better-written essays.

Martin (1976) discusses the concept of negotiated order. Martin explores the methods in which problematic areas are negotiated between student and teacher. Mature students also report such negotiation, often incurring the dislike of younger students. Adult learners at McMaster are not afraid to clarify instructors' statements in lectures, consult teaching assistants after class or in their offices, and about the way class is being run. Furthermore, informants in my study will deal

directly with university administrators.

Graduate Students

There are a number of studies of graduate student culture (Mechanic 1962; Kleinman 1983; Katz and Hartnett 1976). Each reveals similarities between graduate students and mature students.

Kleinman's (1983) work on graduate students shows that a subculture forms among graduate students as a means of social support. Graduate students develop an identity early on in their "careers." Like mature students, much of the work required of graduate students such as writing essays, proposals, theses and dissertations, must be carried out by each one on his/her own (1983: 210). In addition, comprehensive exams and teaching have to be performed on an individual basis. Mature students, too, must perform academic tasks, such as writing essays, studying, and research, on their own.

Kleinman also discusses the culture that forms among graduate students enrolled in seminars (1983: 220). In the seminar framework, graduate students gain a sense of community. Mature students, too, collaborate in defining tasks that have to be performed for successful completion of a course.

Mechanic's work (1962) shows how this type of student culture exists only as long as there is a common interest. When graduate students start specializing in

their "areas" and are intensely involved in research, the diminution of such common ground results in a weakening of social relations. Like graduate students, mature students construct an informal subculture. Their sense community is more pronounced than in the case of graduate students, however, because they spend more time in the classroom than at research or written work.

Katz and Hartnett's (1976) work on graduate and professional students shows that emotions can run high in the process of getting a degree. Like mature students, graduate students have made a firm commitment (Becker 1970) to achieve a status passage. In both cases the achievement means far more to them than the actual degree. Unlike graduate students, who are committed to becoming specialists in their fields, mature students are operating at substantially lower levels of learning. Nevertheless, they do experience the same commitment and emotional involvement. Both groups undergo stress as they attempt to prove themselves to others. Both mature students and graduate students want to show relatives that they are not wasting time, and that the effort invested in getting the degree is worth it.

Katz and Hartnett's work also covers the process of acclimatization to a new social world, with the accompanying sense of unfamiliarity with surroundings. Katz and Harnett report:

A number of graduate students have few opportunities to meet people...the graduate school environment provides obstacles to finding intimacy...[going] to a new school...they are in a situation similar to that of entering freshmen....They are in a strange place, they don't know the rules, and they don't know many people.

(1976: 169)

Here too there is a clear parallel between the mature student and the graduate student. The former, too, is in a new environment, and does not know his/her way around campus. Further, mature students may not know anyone on campus, and develop subcultures to gain a sense of belonging.

Studies of Professionalization

Much work has also been done on professional schools such as medicine (Becker and Geer 1958; Becker et al. 1961; Bucher and Stelling 1977; Haas 1989; Haas and Shaffir 1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1991), law (Granfield 1986, 1991; Granfield and Koenig 1990, 1992a, 1992b), and business administration (Henry 1983). Haas and Shaffir's Becoming Doctors (1991) deals with the process of negotiating an identity as a physician. Medical school is professionalization process, involving the "successful taking of a symbolic role that meets other's expectations" (1991: 35).

Anxiety plays a large part in the medical student's education, for students are anxious about meeting their critical medical responsibilities, the lack of progress markers (tests) in problem based schools featuring 'problem-based' learning, and discerning about what they should know. While mature students do not have the responsibility of saving lives, nonetheless, there are still parallels between their situation and that of the medical student.

Mature students worry initially about what should they study. Are they supposed to absorb all the information presented in readings and lectures, or just a fraction of it? Do they have to master suggested reading material to be successful in the course, or need they only read what is required? Such dilemmas cause mature students anxiety to and, like medical students (Haas and Shaffir 1991: 46), they become anxious with worry.

Becker et al.'s Boys in White (1961) explores what happens to medical students beyond acquisition of technical knowledge. Freshman medical students--like mature students--are concerned with workload, "how much to study and to what end" (1961: 93). Further, medical students have to juggle outside commitments with heavy school work loads. Mature students have similar concerns, for they must work, raise a family, and still meet school commitments. In both cases, one's new role into life must be negotiated to accomplish the tasks entailed by the academic program.

Medical students develop close ties to one another. They eat together, study together, and share a sense of commonality and purpose engendered by similar goals, workloads and schedules (Becker et al. 1961: 312). Medical students cope by helping one another out. Mature students help one another out too, for example, by telephoning each other at home to clarify assignments, study for tests, or decipher lecture notes. This proximity and sameness of purpose in both cases encourages the development of subcultures.

Studies of law and MBA students also reveals collective negotiation of situations and a developed collective subculture within which students help one another with case studies, often working in groups. Here too subcultures emerge in response to stress. The development of a subculture dispels the feeling that the student is going through the status passage alone.

Law students, like other groups surveyed in the literature, use impression management strategies (Goffman 1959b) to appear as if they fit into the law school environment. For example, students from working class environments, uncomfortable with fellow students of higher socio-economic status, attempt to manage their identity in order to "blend in." They engage in a process of constantly downplaying their social class (Granfield and Koenig 1990: 68-70) by mastering elite behaviour and mannerisms.

MBA students also adopt similar strategies in order to appear professional. In her study of Harvard's business school, Henry (1983) reveals how students downplay their working class roots with impression management strategies. Soon after entering business school, the MBA students develop a strong subculture whereby problems encountered in the course of the program are dealt with informally. For instance, to cope with heavy course loads, students network and work in groups to lessen the time spent on each assignment. MBA students also experience great anxiety as they enter their new social world, with its new set of meanings to learn. The subculture helps alleviate such anxiety through support mechanisms that help them through the

socialization process. Like law and medical students, they too undergo status passage collectively, gaining a sense of identity through collective definition of the situation.

Conclusion

As this literature review has indicated, research into mature student education is clearly in its infancy, and much work remains to be done. However, extensive research on the socialization processes experienced by other groups of students has been carried out. Study of the literature reveals similarities between the experiences of mature students and those of other groups. Further, concepts I use in my study, such as "status passage" have parallels in this literature on other student groups.

However, these studies are not rigorous enough to translate in to the experiences of mature students. I attempt to show how returning to school is in fact a problematic social act. By examining male and female students from a life history approach, we come to a better understanding of why they put off university after high school graduation. Also, the process of entering, and socialization into campus life will offer sociology a better grasp of what it means to enter a role that is reserved for a lower age group. What will be interesting is to see what happens when university policy is not geared to adult learners, and how makes sense of that reality.

The generic concept of socialization can be best understood by focusing on the

transition experienced by specific populations who have been rarely studied by sociologists. The case of mature students attempts to further our understanding of the process of socialization.

CHAPTER FOUR: DECIDING TO RETURN

Introduction

This chapter explores what I call the 'pre-student' phase, or the stage where men and women think about returning to school. It is thus a pivotal phase in their lives. The individuals in question graduated from high school but often went no further in their educational careers. Rather, they joined the workforce and remained there for many years. At some point in this period, the roles they had aspired to proved inadequate, and they came to the realization that these roles did not allow for self-fulfilment. They then began a search for 'a better song to sing.' As Glaser and Strauss point out, the decision to make the passage "may take a long time to evolve" (1971: 108).

The desire for change comes from within the individual and is a process that takes several years to complete. Various life choices can affect one's educational plans. Getting married, taking a job, having children--all affect or delay attaining educational goals.

Cultural background can also discourage higher education. Many returning students recall being told that university is for other people and not for them. Family and societal expectations make it difficult to go further when one is expected

to work, marry, and have children after high school. This opinion may seem an outdated view, but it still holds sway in many working-class and immigrant families whose children are taught that a university education is not a positive thing.

I will argue that future students have to go through a 'pre-student' phase before a return to school is possible. The key to understanding the return to school as a status passage lies in appreciating the dynamics of this pre-student phase, with its attendant negotiations between self and others.

Role Expectations

To understand why one chooses a role, we must turn to societal perceptions of that role. Heiss (1981:95) views roles as expectations. A major component of the mature student's decision to resume his/her education lies in expectations--those of society's, of the student's significant others, and of the student him/herself. This thesis will show that it is the student's expectations that eventually dominate. Usually there is agreement as to what others expect, but disagreement may be present. To understand why mature students choose to undergo this status passage, we must understand the "definition of the situation" held by adults contemplating a return to school.

High school graduates may feel that they are not expected to continue their studies. Many of the students I interviewed claimed that they were expected to work

or stay at home and raise a family. These normative expectations influenced their subsequent life decisions. This pattern was related by two informants as follows:

My dad would always tell me to get my high school diploma, because I was going to have children in a few years after I graduated. In those days that was the status quo. That's what women did, they didn't go to work, unless they felt they had to. My parents very seldom at all mentioned my education in our house. Education in their eyes for me was not important.

(female student--#13)

It wasn't so much society in a macro sense as it was my society, my own individual family. I didn't know how to say NO. It was expected of me....I was supposed to get married right out of high school.

(female student--#16)

As these show, family norms were a major early influence on the informants' views as to formal education. The individuals so influenced did indeed fulfil role expectations of their families--many went to work after high school. In their own words:

I went to RN training at community college. I later became a secretary, again a 'woman's job', and later quit to raise a family. (female, classics/anthro--#6)

When I was 18 and finished grade 12, I was 2 units shy of grade 13. At 18 in all my wisdom, I decided I didn't need school anymore, so I left school and tried working. And I did that and ended up marrying.

(female, English/history--#2)

These students internalized their families' cultural expectations, and implemented them by terminating their educations and electing to seek employment:

I did the famous 'I'm going to work for a year' trip. And I got caught up in making money, buying a car, enjoying the finer things in life.

(male, hons. history--#24)

**I decided from past experience with summer jobs that this is great, with all the money coming in...it was like summer camp every day.
(female, social work/anthro.--#17)**

Notice that in addition to family pressures to work, the idea of earning money was also appealing to many of the students.

Motivations to Change

Understanding why adults decide to resume their formal education by being mature students is easier if we look at the relationship between motivation and change in an individual's life. Sociologists frequently see motivation as the key to understanding life change. Motivation can be defined as: (1) a state of the organism that energizes action; (2) that which facilitates responses; (3) that which gives direction to action; and (4) that which gives intensity and persistence to the directed action (Cofer and Appley 1967: 7-17).

Traditionally, symbolic interactionists did not take a clear stand on motivation. Dewey (1896) disputed the claim of reflex-arc theorists that the stimulus was the beginning of action. Dewey argued that "the organism is an active organism, the activity is already there and requires no explanation, and the problem of the stimulus concerns the way in which it redirects an ongoing action and not how it starts a line of action" (1896: 362). Mead had a more formal view of action. He conceived of the action stream as divisible into the abstract acts, in which "the act

is seen as beginning with motivation and ending with a consummatory response" (1938: 3-25).

Contemporary interactionists have explored the matter at length, however Shibutani (1968) defines motivation as that which determines the direction of behaviour. He sees direction of behaviour as determined by a cybernetic pattern: "(1) the person acts in response to impulse; (2) a feedback response to the action by environment or from others occurs; (3) the person interprets the feedback; and (4) the interpretation becomes a guide towards adjustment of further actions" (1968: 336).

Gecas (1991) critiques symbolic interactionists for preferring the concept of "motive" to that of "motivation" (Lindesmith et al. 1977: 246; Stone and Farberman 1970: 467). Interactionists use the concept of motive similar to Mill's (1940) notion of "vocabularies of motive", to describe justifications for action. Ignoring the concept of "motivation" as Gecas feels, led to two prominent theories of the direction of behaviour in the work of symbolic interactionists: "(1) an emphasis on the indeterminacy of action, associated with the unpredictable, spontaneous 'I' aspect of the self; and (2) an emphasis on the multiplicity of motivations in the form of goals, purposes, intentions, identities, and so on" (1991: 173).

Motivation has also been examined by non-interactionists, but not adequately. Parsons (1955) used Freudian personality theory in his discussion of motivation in human action, and the social exchange theorists (Homans 1961; Blau 1964) speak of

economic bases of motivation. Both these attempts fail to adequately account for decisions to acquire new statuses through the life course.

John Hewitt (1991) sees a link between conduct and motivation. For Hewitt, motivation refers to the "subjective 'springs of conduct'--forces, drives, urges, and other states of the organism that impel, move, push, or otherwise direct its behaviour" (1991: 131). Hewitt agrees with Gecas (1991) that sociology uses motive to explain behaviour.

For my thesis, I have chosen to link motivation to self-concept. Gecas and Schwalbe (1983) argue that "efficacy-based" self-esteem (the positive sense of the self that one derives from effective action) is the key to understanding motivation. When one does something one considers important at a given point in life, one is strongly motivated to perform that action. For the mature student, traditional roles will be maintained as long as the actions associated with such roles are satisfying. Adults most often start to consider resuming their education when satisfaction with other roles--whether assigned through socio-economic background or adopted by choice--has waned.

But how do adults make major status changes later in life, when they have fulfilled roles expected of them since leaving high school? Selman and Dampier (1991) argue that motivations change throughout the life course. Havighurst (1972), Houle (1961) and Knox (1981) see an inherent willingness to learn in adults as the key to understanding mature students' motivation. Mature students tend to be

motivated to change because their self-image and their willingness to learn change over time. There must also be a desire to adopt the student status. Glaser and Strauss (1971: 89-115) see the desirability of a status change as providing the motivational basis for actions shaping such a passage. When, at some point in the life course, an adult's desire to return to school peaks, the concrete status passage is initiated.

The Initial Stages of Change

For some, contemplation of a return to school begins when their usual routines become a bore, perhaps only a few years before they apply. For others, the idea of returning some day starts at high school graduation. As three informants related:

I found myself at home with my children, and then I felt, gee, there's got to be something else....And I thought, well, it means I don't have to be someone's employee. (female, history/geography--#19)

I wasn't happy about what I was doing. And I couldn't get any further, unless I wanted to transfer....I was at K-mart, and so it was a dead end deal....I was bored to death. (female, English/history--#2)


I started to think about it really after high school. I thought I could do it all those years, but something kept me back. I got married, then kids, you know, the usual baggage that weighs your dreams down.
(male, hons. history--#24)

For many, thinking about resuming their education is prompted by a desire

for promotion in their job, or for a change of occupation, as the following quotes indicate:

**When I started as a teacher's aid, I found out that you needed a B.A. and a B.Ed. to get a teacher's job. I figured why not be a teacher?
(female, English/sociology--#9)**

**As an RN you're just a floor nurse, doing bedside nursing. With a B.Sc.N., there's more satisfaction--a chance to use your brain a little more.
(female, post-RN--#18)**

** I was a mechanic for 18 years before coming here. You can get tired of doing oil changes after that long. I started asking a lot of questions and I didn't have the answers for them. After a while I decided to become a lawyer. So that was probably the reason for returning.
(male, hons. history--#23)**

The decision to return to school is not reached suddenly. Most students think about returning to school for many years. In my study, I found gender differences regarding the time spent thinking about returning to school. Women reported thinking about it for a much longer time than men did, about 6-10 years more. By contrast, the men claimed they thought about returning to school for no longer than two years before applying.

In comparison with the women, the men interviewed seemed relatively settled in their choices. They reached their decisions more quickly if their rationale was career- based. For example:

I don't believe that anyone decides 'oh, I want to go back to school.' Usually, they have to have a reason for wanting to do this...it's too much of a hassle to do it for fun. (male student--#20)

I got laid off, and couldn't get a job. I thought about coming back maybe 6 months before I applied here. (male, hons. history--#24)

Women spent more time contemplating the idea of going back to school. My research suggests that part of the reason for this stems from lower self-esteem, or commitment to marriages where support was minimal. Such sentiments were related by a number of informants:

It was in the back of my mind, but I was 35 when I applied. So I really thought about it for 17 years.

(female, sociology--#3)

Probably I was out of high school for 9 years. Thought about it, discussed it for a year, didn't do anything, next year got the applications, but didn't mail them in. And it probably took three years after that to get up enough nerve to apply for admission. You see, you build up the nerve, and in the back of your mind you think they won't take you, and all the dreams you ever had will be dashed. It's like everything that people told you when you were little about university as not a place for women, would be validated by the registrar's office. (female student--#13)

I had been thinking of it for a number of years....At 30 I thought about it, and then applied 5 years later.

(female student--#5)

At age 30 I first thought of it. After my husband died, I was 38 and all alone. School seemed the logical thing to do so I applied. So probably it was an 8 year process. (female, sociology/gerontology--#5)

For women then, even the act of applying is problematic. While they desire to attend, they hold back. Social factors inhibit this life choice. Women who graduated high school twenty years ago or more were often discouraged from going to university, and expected to work and/or marry. Traditional family settings do not welcome the role of university student and university was often perceived as

inaccessible and only for "the rich." This applies to male mature students too. The following comment illustrate this point:

I saw the university a rich kids place, where the frat boys made their connections. I never saw myself there, because it was a place foreign to me. I never knew anyone in my neighbourhood or family that went to university. So that was a place I could never see myself when I was a kid. (male, psychology--#20)

One explanation of this liminal period has to do with role expectations. Women live vicariously through significant others in their daily lives (Carr 1989), often to the point where others' desires can take precedence over their own. For instance:

My feeling with a lot of women is that it's like we're finally getting the chance to do what we didn't have before. And trying to find ourself--something other than the wife or mother role.
(female, sociology/gerontology--16)

I lived through my husband's success at work. If he got promoted, then I was happy. If my children got straight 'A's on their report card, then I was happy. But in all of that, there was no room for what I wanted. The decision to return to school was one step towards finding that something.
(female sociology student, September 21, 1992)

Living through others and not allowing for development of the self keeps women from realizing their goals.

A significant consideration influencing the act of applying to university is socio-economic status. Family often has decisive impact on both men and women. After high school many were expected to find employment and raise families. Socialization has taught many adults that family responsibilities come first, and

personal decisions which may not immediately benefit the family ought to follow later or never at all.

Pure financial considerations are another factor. Women who married following high school often found themselves divorced with children years later. Clearly, such women are in no position to return to school. Further, for working class men and women, life is often a precarious struggle from paycheck to the next. In this situation, aspirations to upgrade one's education have to be set aside.

The upshot of the decision-making process that extends over several years is, for the most part, a genuine desire on the part of the individual towards change. Basically, the decision to return to school is contingent both on conditions imposed by the outer world and on how crises and dilemmas of the inner self are resolved.

Turning Points¹

Turning points in life can have significant ramifications for the individual, and provide the impetus to engage in the processes leading to status change. Dramatic events can affect our attitudes to change. For the students in this study, often, some feature of life pushed them in the direction of the admissions office at McMaster. For some it was the loss of a job, for others a divorce, and for yet others a tragic life event initiated the decision to change their life courses. The following excerpts

from the data reflect this phenomenon:

I got Chrono's disease and was in the hospital. I was tired of my job already, and the bills were piling up. And so I thought this was a good time to make the move. (female, social work/anthropology--#17)

**I think that in therapy (for alcoholism) I learned that I had to do things for myself. That nobody was going to do them for me. And the only way I was going to get what I wanted was to go out and do them.
(female, sociology--#3)**

Now there's another person in my life, and we did end up getting married. There's now a need to get my life straightened around, so that's why I applied.

(male, hons. music--#22)

I divorced. I knew that I wanted to be self-supportive for the rest of my life, so I came to the decision to come back. (female student--#6)

**My husband died of cancer. that cinched it for me. I had to do something with my life and fast. Not only because of the money, but for my self worth.
(female, sociology/gerontology--#5)**

I spent a year out of work, with no prospects in sight. I was miserable, but with the backing of my wife, I was able to enrol here and make a change in my life.

(male, hons. history--#24)

What is apparent in all these statements is that the status passage is initiated by some external consideration that propels the individual towards change. In retrospect, the students studied viewed the passage to studenthood as inevitable following the occurrence of some major life event. Students claimed to feel a sort of "destiny" to resume school, and felt that returning to school was highly fulfilling.

The status passage can be experienced collectively but is transversed most often alone. However, Glaser and Strauss state that "when people go through a passage

collectively, or in aggregate, they may not be aware that they are all going through it together or at least not aware of all the aspects of their similar passages" (1971: 4). Mature students go through similar experiences in their status passage, but may not be aware of this fact. I explore this point more fully below.

Conclusion

This chapter has sketched the pre-student phase of the career of the mature student. The fact that students contemplate a return to formal studies for an extensive period before actually deciding to do so is noteworthy. I suggest that both social and economic constraints impact on, and in the case of most of these students, delay the concrete decision to return to school. However, even when the decision has been made, the mature student still has problems to cope with. The following chapters focus on the problems encountered by mature students after they enroll in university.

1. Turning points are incidents in life that force individuals to initiate status passage. Strauss (1959) explains the nature of turning points in individuals' lives. Turning points, says Strauss, can be defined as:

points in development when an individual has to take stock, to re-evaluate, revise, resee, and rejudge. Although stock-taking goes on within the single individual, it is obviously both a socialized and a resocializing process. Moreover, the same kinds of incidents that precipitate the revision of identity are extremely likely to befall and to be equally significant to other persons of the same generation, occupation, and social class. This is the equivalent to saying that insofar as experiences and interpretations are socially patterned, so also will be the development of personal identities. (1959: 100)

CHAPTER FIVE: ADMINISTRATIVE HURDLES

Introduction

Mature students enrolling at McMaster face a number of administrative problems. While the university has arranged a number of services to meet some of the needs of mature students, such as the MAPS¹ office, Counselling services, and the office of part-time degree studies, overall, it has not yet adequately addressed the special needs of mature students. In this chapter, I take a look at how students negotiate the defining parameters of the situation, and attempt to come to terms with the university administration's policy on mature students. Among the areas covered are financial problems, access to campus resources, and the student's perception that they are merely 'statistics' in the eyes of the administration. Finally I take up the question of why students do not make full use of those services that are offered.

Monetary Concerns

Financing a university education can be costly in terms of both time and money. Apart from the time invested, the emotional negotiations at home, and the anxiety

felt in accommodating their new role, there is also the expense--hundreds of dollars per course for tuition, plus books, parking, xeroxing, meals, babysitters, and transportation to and from the campus.

To handle this financial burden, family finances must be re-negotiated to accommodate the additional expense, or loans obtained. One such source of student loans is the government. Here, my discussion is limited to financial issues arising from relations between the university and the mature student.²

Accessing the OSAP Program

Clearly, the mature student's access to funds is of great significance in determining whether he/she can successfully return to school. When money is not there, the student turns to the government for financial aid. Although the Ontario Student Assistance Plan (OSAP) is the agency that provides students with loans and bursaries, all loans and grants are administered through the financial aid office on campus.

Bursaries geared to part-timers were first granted by MAPS (McMaster Association of Part-Time Students) in 1988 to help alleviate the cost of schooling. Non-repayable, they range from up to \$350 for a one semester course, to up to \$700 for a full year course. The bursary is designed to cover fees, books, and child care. However, bursaries are one-time awards, and hence, while very welcome, they are

basically supplementary and do not 'finance' the return to school.

Loans are another possible route for financing higher education. The financial aid office grants part-timers long-term loans, which need not to be paid back until six months after graduation, and do not accumulate interest while the student is in school. The amount of money awarded in this form depends on income, marital status, number of dependents and so on. However, the problem for mature students is that OSAP loans are granted on the basis of ownership of assets, and hence older students are at a clear disadvantage in qualifying for these loans.

Indeed, most of my informants complained that OSAP loans were very difficult for them to obtain. Students are expected to declare all valuable assets, including house, car, cottage, and savings. In addition, applicants must give permission for OSAP to examine their tax records. Policy thus effectively mandates that mature students either divest their assets or borrow against them through a bank, incurring significant debt. The government's failure to adjust the loan system to make it more sensitive to their needs is a major source of disappointment to mature students. As one informant states:

Yes, I have assets, and I find that very discriminatory. Why should my husband give up everything that we have worked for, so that I can go back to school? I don't want a handout, just a loan that I can pay back once I finish school....I only want 50, 30%--some sort of a loan would be wonderful....I know one undergrad who made \$6000 last summer, and still got a \$7000 loan from OSAP. And she doesn't have children to raise either, clothe and feed, and entertain....just because I'm 33 doesn't mean I'm less deserving. (female, history/geography--#19)

To give up all they have worked for is not an option for most mature students. Even applying for the loan and having their financial situation scrutinized, is often a humiliating experience. One informant reveals how frustrating the process of dealing with an administration that seems oblivious to his situation can be:

It [the administration] is a pain in the ass...this year I am on OSAP, and what a screw around. It's almost worth selling the hog [Harley-Davidson]. No, I do find the bureaucracy of OSAP a bitch. I find the counsellors can be a little judgmental. I had one person who said: 'I have a wife and kids and I drive a minivan.' And I said: 'Well good for you, I do too, and I choose to ride a Harley, and if you don't like what I do, that's not your call, so don't pass judgement on me like that'. That's just one of the problems when you talk assets. Because the bike is worth \$30000.

(male, hons. history--#23)

One option for mature students was to return to school full-time (i.e., give up their jobs). One woman, whose husband was also a full-time mature student, said that besides finishing in four years, says there was a lot more money to be awarded from the government if one was willing came back in the daytime:

We're both on loans through OSAP, but our living expenses come through family benefits....We make do, but normally run ourselves into the hole. It's a never-ending battle...the rent for the three-bedroom townhouse is \$211 per month....I got grants until I married, and they...gave me a loan. I did end up with \$2000 more though by marrying.

(female, English/history--#2)

However, pursuit of higher education on a full-time basis is not possible for most mature students, who have responsibilities that must be met in prior roles to which they are committed

Another area in which OSAP is perceived as not taking into consideration

mature students, has to do with costs that are not recoverable through insurance.

One student relates:

There are a number of expenses that you don't anticipate along the way. Dentist bills last year, and some drugs aren't covered under my drug plan--like the medications I take for chronic migraines. All that has to come out my own pocket.

(male, hors. history--#23)

To a large degree, then a major problem for mature students is simply access to financial aid. However, not only is money difficult to obtain, so is the information. One has to navigate a daunting bureaucratic maze to get straight answers on these issues. One informant related this story:

Internally, I get hopping mad sometimes. Last year I went through hell with OSAP....They put me through the hoops. I applied, got accepted, they screwed up. So I had to get reassessed. That meant that I didn't get my funds, which I had properly been assessed, until February or March. And everywhere you went, it was like go somewhere else. It was a real bureaucracy. I really resented being a number. I didn't realize how much of a number you could be at this stage of the game in university. Very little effort was made in that bureaucracy for me. So I turned around and forced them to. They ended up knowing my first name, and speaking to me as Paul.
(male, hors. history--#24)

The frustration often builds up to a point whereby students act on this frustration. As the above example shows, one technique is to nag the administrators constantly. While this will not solve the problem, often the clerical staff begin acknowledging the applicant as an individual, and the student at least perceives that he/she is being treated with some degree of civility.

The problem of paying for school is thus a quandary for mature students.

When they reluctantly seek financial aid, they are faced with bureaucratic hurdles. While many mature students are used to dealing with red tape in their daily lives, they resent the fact that the university seems to treat them like it is bestowing a favour on them by allowing them to attend. Students feel that if the university is a business, the customer should be treated well. This is true not only of financial aid, but also of other services.

Access to Student Services

The mature student must learn how to access services available to the student body. However, these services can rarely be fully utilized by mature students due to hours of operation. A mature student needing to see humanities guidance counsellors for instance, cannot do so, since the office closes at 4:30 pm. Students taking courses in the evening can't see faculty counsellors, get help at the registrar's office, pay fees at the business office, or get help with OSAP after 4:30 pm. This causes mature students a lot of frustration. As one student puts it:

I was very upset with McMaster's bureaucracy. I mean it's one thing that really ticks me off. They want all this money from part-time students, and they have all these part-time students, but they don't open their offices to part-time students with hours that are conducive to them...and their parking office. That is the stupidest place, because they close at lunch time, when I have the opportunity to phone. And they close at 4:00 pm. (female, English/sociology--#9)

Thus utilizing a system where the hours are geared to day students is a

problem for the mature student.

The best solution to the problem is to extend the service's hours of operation remain for the benefit of evening students. For example, counselling services remains open late one evening per week to accommodate the needs of evening students, and MAPS remains open four nights per week. Those examples are exceptions. Most services do not accommodate evening students. Two informants say:

**With me, one solution was to extend a lunch hour. But that was rushed. A lot of students here pay book store bills, tuition, and parking through the mail. But with the other services, I think that's where myself and other students get ticked off. We just can't get here before 4:30 pm, so we miss out on counselling at our faculty, can't see anybody about transcripts, because the registrar is closed, and some of the library services are cut back in evenings, like interlibrary loan. And OSAP too, for those of us that need it.
(female, hons. sociology--#16)**

I'm here in the day, but hours of operation are even bad sometimes. You know Scott, its too bad McMaster couldn't bend a little. We do after all account for one third of the student body. As for little things, I can call to the humanities office. But sometimes, it would be nice to talk to someone in person about the problems with academics I have. That I can do, but only if my classes and home life schedules don't conflict, which isn't often. (female, hons. geography/history--#19)

As a result, many students feel they are not valued as students by the university administration. This feeling is reinforced by the perception that the university sees them merely as numbers or statistics.

Being a Number

It is a fact of university life that every student is identified by a number. When registering, students are given a student card with an identification number. Students use this card to purchase books, as a recreation card, to get into examination halls, and when dealing with any arm of the university. The student number in a sense constitutes the student's new identity on campus.

Mature students resent this system, seeing it as impersonal and mechanical.

Mature students own homes, work and raise families. Of the registration process, for example, one student said:

Last year, it (registration) was horrific. You feel like you're being shepherded along. You're meant to feel stupid actually. That's one way for them to control you. After a while, I felt that I pay my money, or at least a portion of my tuition. And if this is a business, that makes me a customer, and I'm not going to be treated like I'm doing them a favour. Once I got past that stage, I was fine.

(male, hons. history--#24)

Adopting an aggressive stance, such as that illustrated by this remark, is a common response. When they want something, mature students tend to be somewhat more aggressive than their fellow younger undergraduates, who seem less bothered by the impersonal nature of the university.³ Although these problems are serious, certain solutions from the mature student's perspective are possible. I now turn to such solutions.

Techniques of Neutralization

Adjusting to impersonality requires patience on the part of the mature student. Three techniques they use to cope with the impersonal nature of the university are: changing the impersonal to personal; sharing definitions of the situation with other students and collectively deciding what their response should be; and formally appealing to services on campus, such as MAPS and counselling services for help. These techniques of neutralizing the impersonality problem are vividly reflected in my field notes.

The first method, that of making the environment personal, requires the mature student to make the effort to approach staff members and introduce him/herself by name. Mature students' accounts of how this is done are helpful in understanding the dynamics of this coping mechanism. This is well-illustrated in the following excerpt from my fieldnotes:

Tonight I had dinner with eight students. In the course of the meal they discussed how they all use to go to the prof. first thing in the course. That way they wouldn't be just a number. That got the ball rolling, and Paul said with the OSAP office, he just kept going to John Edwards (the director of student financial aid) and the Mary the receptionist. As he kept bugging them and telling them his life story every time he went there, he said a funny thing happened. They actually started to recognize him in the halls, and recite things from his file. Another woman stated that she found that the same thing held for the registrar's office. (fieldnotes, October 15, 1992)

Here, we see how students overcome the problem by interacting with staff members rather than trying to change the system. While not all are successful, those with

persistence usually end up, in their minds at least, avoiding the worst aspects of the impersonal nature of the university administration.

Another technique is to **collectively define the situation**. As Glaser and Strauss (1971: 4) state, inherent in all status passages, people go through them collectively. For the mature student, getting through university entails membership in a student subculture⁴. Learning or bestowing meanings informally means sitting in the pub, cafeteria or lounge and anecdotally finding solutions to various problems. The following passage illustrates this informal collective conflict resolution:

I sat and had a Coke with about eight students tonight. Along with talking about who was the best prof for a history course, we also talked about early experiences with the school's administration. Then students anecdotally shared their experiences. I think what I gained was a sense that what students know isn't always gained by going to the source, like their faculty counsellor or the registrar's office. In fact a lot of information is learned from people who have had prior experience with the same problem. An example is a problem one second year student was having with getting second year courses. She felt that the answers she needed from humanities weren't clear. So the English type students and the history people at the table told her how to get around the situation. The point is that using informal networks often alleviates the problem of impersonality.

(fieldnotes, September 20, 1992)

We can see here that the informal nature of subcultures is what allows for open communication between students. Like Levy (1990), I found that friendships formed on campus are a means of alleviating both the alienation engendered by the impersonal nature of the university, and a method of acquiring accurate information about how to shape the status passage.

A third technique is **utilization of formal university mechanisms** to overcome

problems. The two organizations available are MAPS and counselling services. Often the best way to deal with the impersonal environment is simply for the mature student to seek a sympathetic ear. Most of those I spoke to use MAPS as a resource because they feel it is the only organization truly sympathetic to the special needs of mature students, as an excerpt from my field data illustrates:

I had a conversation with five women and three men that was interesting. They said that MAPS was the only university office that was personal enough for their needs. Other offices they said were not treating students right who needed help. For instance, going to MAPS for advice was easier because you didn't need an appointment to see a counsellor, and you got the straight facts, and not the run around.

(fieldnotes, November 12, 1992)

Services such as MAPS can be highly beneficial for the mature student. However, clearly the problem of impersonality in the university will never be fully resolved, because by nature institutions serve their own interests, not necessarily those of their clients. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a survey of three resource organizations available to the mature student: MAPS, Counselling Services, and the Office of Part-time Degree Studies.

MAPS (McMaster Association of Part-Time Students)

MAPS is an organization with a mandate to cater to the needs of mature students. MAPS was created in 1979, and has become a high profile representative for the

mature student body, particularly part-timers.

One of the key features of MAPS is its central location on campus. Students are greeted a receptionist as they enter the office. The office has a lounge area where students can socialize. The lounge also provides cheap coffee for students on breaks from class. Significant is that the MAPS office is designed to look like a living room to encourage mature students to feel free to use the premises. The office of the MAPS director, Bruce Misch, is behind a partition. Here, students can talk over any problems they have with the university system. I believe the comfortable atmosphere of the MAPS office/lounge increases its utilization by mature students.

MAPS strives to be accessible. In addition to staying open late, each course has a MAPS representative who keeps part-timers up to date. MAPS representatives inform students of events, of any disputes MAPS has with the administration, and upcoming events for mature students such as cafe nights or barbecues. During registration in the fall, MAPS has information booths at different places on campus, where new students can get directions to class, or hear straight talk on how to survive campus life. Each September, MAPS sponsors four Cafe Nights, a forum where part-timers can meet professors from all disciplines. MAPS lobbies for longer hours for the book store, cafeterias, and various campus services.

Concerns of mature students are addressed in a monthly newsletter called LINK. The LINK is written by MAPS staff, and updates students on upcoming events, bursaries, and registration deadlines. The LINK acts as a vehicle for

solidarity between mature students. While the newsletter is usually small (6-8 pages in length), nonetheless it gives mature students a feeling of solidarity with each other.

In general, students felt that MAPS was a valuable resource for part-timers. Informants who had heard of MAPS, utilized it frequently. However, some had either never heard of MAPS or said they really didn't know much about MAPS and what it could do for them. This can largely be explained by the large number of mature students on campus and their lack of contact with anything besides the formal academic frameworks of the university, such as the library and the classroom. Two informants related this shared sentiment:

I have enough to worry about without having to do the MAPS events. I never hear that much at all about it from the prof. I miss a lot of events because they're not advertised over in my psych classes that much.

(males, psychology student--#20)

I hear about these events like cafe nights, but largely I didn't know until my third year here that MAPS was an advocacy group that help me out. I think that we're in a different mindset here, because we are only on campus a few hours per week. So we don't hear a lot about stuff like the day students.

(female, English/sociology, #9)

Another reason many mature students make little use of MAPS is simply lack of time. Mature students do not have the time to get involved with MAPS related activities such as attending events or sitting on committees. My informants put it as follows:

I don't have the time for that stuff. I come here straight from work, and have to eat, get reserve readings, go to class, and then a tutorial. I then have

to make it home in time to pay the baby sitter, and put the last kid to bed. I am then exhausted, and can't think of doing anything related to school, work, or the house. So I guess what I'm telling you Scott is that I simply don't have the time available to devote to extra things here on campus. That goes for social things as well. (female, sociology--#3)

So many part-timers don't feel they have the time to get involved. To them, just getting here, taking the classes, is all they can handle.
(female, sociology/gerontology--#16)

Along with time constraints and lack of information, informants also said that mature students tend to be rather independent in terms of their personalities. When they encounter problems with the administration, mature students try to resolve them on their own. As one mature student related:

When I came here Scott I honestly felt like the biggest clutz on earth (laughs). I had no idea for instance that I didn't have to get admission every year. The reality was that I only had to register. That was a difference. Had I gone to MAPS or that guy across from the registrar...Gord Raymond, then I would know. And also problems with getting answers to taking courses in the summer. I was getting the run around at the registrar's office, and had I gone to MAPS or Gord it would have been resolved a lot quicker I guess. It's just that you're always told to solve problems, whether at work or whatever. And if you want that respect of your peers, then you bloody well get things done without running to others every five minutes for help. I think these other students here are a lot like me. They don't want to screw up, and they feel that they have to do it on their own for this school thing to really mean something.

(female, hons. hist/geog--#19)

And it may be that mature students simply do not feel that they require the services offered. It is instructive to compare the use, by mature students, of MAPS, with utilization of counselling services, to which I now turn.

Counselling Services

Counselling Services provides resources to part-timers, but, as noted, it is accessible only at limited hours of the day. In September, I attended an all-day seminar for first-year mature students. Students were taken on a library tour, sat in on essay writing workshops, and participated in talks on stress management and reading skills. I discovered that this event was highly appreciated by those who attended, who saw the areas covered as relevant to their immediate concerns. An excerpt from my fieldnotes illustrates this:

Today I spent all day at counselling services for an orientation workshop for mature students. It was a very insightful day, with people relating their experiences in an open forum. This put the twenty or so who attended at ease. Topics for the day included essay writing, a library tour, and coming to terms with this new identity of student. What was impressive I felt was that by day's end, we all knew each other's name, and more importantly students felt that they weren't alone in their struggles here on campus. For novice mature students, the session meant that they were more at ease about taking classes for the first time in twenty years. (fieldnotes, September 27, 1992)

Similar services are offered throughout the first semester on Tuesday evenings. A mature woman's support group meets on Mondays at noon. With an increasing number of mature women on campus getting their degrees in the day, it has become popular. Members of the group go on library tours, attend stress management workshops, and acquire skills that help them to juggle the various roles they have taken upon themselves. Informants told me that the group was a favoured

alternative to eating in loud cafeterias with younger students, where they often feel out of place. In their own words:

When I came here, I used to eat in the car. I could not relate well to all those young thin girls who would gab their lunch hours away in the Togo cafeteria. I felt that there was no place I could fit. The support group for women was a God send. I can now socialize with people my own age, and relate you know because all the problems I have they have too.

(female, sociology--#3)

Sometimes it's career counselling, or we plan trips to the library to learn the CD-ROM. Other times she (Debbie Nefrancas, psychologist) has stress management talks. Other times, it's career planning. We did a relaxation hour one day...It's really great to talk to other people who are in the same boat.

(female, sociology--#6)

However, the counselling services are not utilized by many mature students.

Here, as with MAPS student were ambiguous about use of the help offered by counselling services. For example, I was told:

Many mature students come in here thinking they've been in the real world long enough not to need help...it's like coming in new here...they're embarrassed and self conscious about needing help. You think like I did, that because you have all this life experience that maybe you're perceived as not supposed to need help. In the work force, you can't run to you're boss every time where there is a problem. In a way, to do so, means you're weak. People who are weak are also perceived in the workforce as incompetent. And that means you won't work very long. So these adults come here like I did, and keep that attitude. To ask for help at counselling services for many students would mean that they don't belong here, because they're a failure.

(female, classics--#14)

In the job market, you're expected to think on your own two feet--use your own initiative. If I asked for help from co-workers each time I had a problematic client, then I wouldn't last long. So it translates to adult students--they feel they're supposed to fit in here at MAC, when they don't

have a clue. They think they should be able to do the work, because if they admit failure, then they are stupider than the 20 year olds in their class. That I think would be an embarrassment. You have all this great life experience, and fail that first test, while the 19 year old next to you pulls a 90%. (female, social work/anthropology--#17)

The tendency then is for the majority of mature students not to utilize such services, because of the shared belief that one ought to be self-sufficient in negotiating this status passage.

The Office of Part-Time Degree Studies⁵

A third service created to address the concerns of mature students is that of the office of part-time degree studies. Gord Raymond, its director, oversees all degree program evening courses offered on campus. People inquiring about attending McMaster on a part-time basis are often referred to him for counselling about which areas they should pursue. Of the 26 informants in my study, only one had utilized this service prior to coming to McMaster. Again, it is likely that mature students either do not feel the need for help in selecting courses, or, as in the cases of MAPS and counselling services, believe that they should be able to accomplish the status passage without any outside help.

Conclusion

Many mature students feel ill-equipped to deal with the bureaucracy inherent in the university system. One technique they use to overcome alienation fostered by the impersonal university environment is to form more intimate subcultures, and thus add a personal element to school life. They find further social contact through MAPS and other services offered to mature students. Overall, it seems to them that the university is not sensitive to the needs of mature students, as reflected in its policies. However, the mature students are pragmatic and realize that since they cannot 'change the system', their main focus should be coping as best they can to facilitate their academic success.

- 1. MAPS, or The McMaster Association of Part-time Students.**
- 2. I discuss the role of financial negotiations in "Social Dilemmas" below.**
- 3. One explanation for this phenomenon has to do with the traditional views and media-induced misconceptions mature students bring with them to the university. The media and works of fiction tend to portray university life in an idealized way which misleads people into thinking their own university experience will be like the films "The Paper Chase" or "Educating Rita."**
- 4. For a detailed exploration of the mature student subculture, see "Social dilemmas" below.**
- 5. I have not tried to present a thorough study of the Office of Part-time Degree Studies, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.**

CHAPTER SIX: LEARNING THE ROPES

Introduction

Returning to school can be a frightening experience for someone who has not opened a textbook for 20 years. Nevertheless, once admitted, the mature student experiences various socialization and interpersonal processes in which he/she becomes accustomed to this status of being a university student.

In this chapter I describe the various problems that arise when mature students find themselves attending an institution designed for 20-year olds. Particular emphasis is placed on 'learning the ropes' of student life--acquiring skills such as completing assigned readings, writing essays, and passing exams.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the experiences of mature students as they embark on their careers (Becker 1963, 1970) as a university student. I then consider the importance of mastering meanings in this new social environment. There is a whole new terminology that students must understand in order to be fully socialized into university life. Then I discuss how mature students deal with readings, writing essays, and taking exams. I discuss the importance of time

management in finishing a degree, then briefly address recurring claim that returning to school later in life is a juggling act where side bets (Becker 1970) must be continuously considered when scheduling university related activity.

The First Class

All informants reported anxiety about their first night of class. They also report being overwhelmed by the class size and age difference between themselves and the other students was the primary shock. Although this initial shock wore off as they adjusted to their surroundings, the first night of class remains engraved in their memories. Here are some recollections of the experience:

I was scared to death. Increased heartbeat, sweaty palms. I didn't know what to expect....you hear so many horror stories from people of what it's like to go to university. And I was really nervous, not knowing what to expect. (male, psychology student--#21)

It was a nightmare. The professor was wonderful; she said one third would fail. She didn't help my anxiety at all by saying the class would be so difficult. (female, English--#4)

I cried the first night. It was tough, because I think I expected more of myself. I thought kids who went to university were much more intelligent and much more self-confident than I was. (female, post-RN--13)

I couldn't believe the size of the hall. And what surprised me was that the person teaching English, didn't speak English well at all. So I was taken aback by that....then we had a tutorial after class. And that was another thing that confused me, because I didn't know what tutorials were. (female, socio/English--#9)

Learning their way around the campus also often proved difficult for mature students, who suffered anxiety about getting lost and not knowing where to go in addition to their nervousness about how they would cope with the content of the class. One student says:

I can remember being highly anxious--all the time. So anxious that I didn't take all the information in....A lot of that is connected to finding your way around. I'd never been in these halls before...in health sciences...you've got the blue, red sections as areas. And they'll give you a classroom called 3M25--and you end up like a mouse in a maze looking for it.

(female, post-RN--#18)

Faced with a new role a new set of meanings to master, students become anxious. The perspectival (Prus 1989a) nature of group life requires that we quickly adopt the attitude of the generalized other (Mead 1934), or shared meanings, if we are to be successful in the activities we do. It is imperative for mature students to adjust to the new surroundings for their status passage to be successful. Informants said that this early part of the passage was probably unavoidable, and in retrospect, not overly traumatic. At the same time, however, it was indeed anxiety-provoking.

Terminology

Just as new surroundings can be intimidating to the uninitiated, in this case, mature students in their first few weeks at university encounter university terminology. This terminology is confusing for a lot of mature students¹ (fieldnotes, July 15, 1992).

This confusion is reflected in the following remarks:

To tell you the truth, I didn't know what the difference was between a class and a tutorial. The building layout also was a drag. They tell on the timetable where a course is by code, you know, like LS or BSB. And then they throw all these numbers, like in health sciences. You get some god awful room like 4N3ZL. That gets confusing. The absolute worst Scott is when all these words are thrown at you. You have departments within faculties, but you see I didn't know that when I started here. I think the phrases used by Mac are foreign to us mature students, and so it just takes some time before we can used to it all. (female, geog./hist.--#19)

The terms that got me confused were things like the difference between admission and registration. Like I ended all the hell down the hall in admissions the second year because that's where I thought I had to go every year. Nobody told me that I could just hand in the forms to the registrar's office when signing up for courses. (male, hors. history--#24)

With me I guess the terminology is just part of being here. But when you race over here from work to get information before a night class, and some staff member asks you a question, it can go over your head, because you are in a different environment. It just takes time to get used to things like area average, cumulative average, and the grade point system. But in the end it all worked out. (female, sociology--4)

Indeed, learning all the terms involved in university life can be a lengthy process.

One doesn't simply begin university and automatically acquire perspectives that come with being a student. Learning the perspectives (Prus 1989a) associated with a student's career means sharing with others the nature of the objects (tangible or intangible) in the university environment. Mastering these perspectives is the key to successfully navigating the status passage from working adult to university student.

Learning to Perform Tasks

Essays

Grills' (1985; 1987) work on essay writing demonstrates that the writing process can be troublesome to all students. However, for someone who has not written an essay in twenty years, it can be fraught with anxiety. In all probability, this anxiety will diminish with each essay completed, but initially, it does cause considerable stress to the mature student.

Generally, mature students don't have as many problems with the actual writing as younger students do. Many mature students have been part of the workforce, where they had to write coherent reports for submission to their superiors (fieldnotes, July 23, 1992). The problem thus is not writing per se, but rather, knowing what the teaching assistant or professor wants in terms of marking.

My informants explained it as follows:

Yeah, all of us in this study group work. We know how to write essays, but what the prof. wants may be ambiguous. So the content of what we say may be off.

(fieldnotes, July 6, 1992)

A lot of people learn quickly that it's the prof. that's a hard marker. I'd stay away from Geagan in History or Aziz in English because they're known as toughies with essays. (fieldnotes, October 13, 1992)

Often, early papers receive with poor grades. This seems to be almost a routine

of going back to school. It becomes a serious problem however, when enthusiastic students expect a high grade. As one informant related:

I was devastated when I got my first paper back. I cried all the way home. I got a 'C-'...

(female, hons. English/sociol--#9)

Such disappointment is greater for the mature student because of the emotional background behind his/her decision to go back to school. Implicit in the decision to return to school is admission of inadequacy. Having made this admission, mature students fear further failure. Strategies to avoid such letdowns are generally based on utilization of constructive criticism when writing subsequent papers. Such solutions are mentioned in the following passages:

The t.a. I first had wrote a lot of comments on the paper....The t.a. was also helpful when I talked to her. The next paper for that course was a 'B-'. And then the next two were 'A' papers. So I think that accepting criticism can work for the better.

(female, hons. english/sociology--#9)

I didn't have a clue how to write an essay....I bombed my first one here....But I had a good t.a. He helped a lot. My next essay for Classics was a 'B+', so I guess I got the hang of it by getting help.

(female, classics/anthro.--#14)

Essay writing, then, takes time to learn, and involves continual negotiation with instructors to achieve a sense of what is expected in concrete terms, and any idiosyncratic requirements for particular classes.

Exams

The social process of exam writing has been thoroughly documented in the work of Daniel and Cheryl Albas (1985; 1988a; 1988b; 1989a; 1989b). The exam-writing experience can be nerve wracking for the mature student. The very act of writing an exam generates intense anxiety, precisely at the time the student must answer questions correctly in a limited time.

There is considerable pressure not to fail because of all the time, money, and emotion spent on the decision to go back to school. Students were quite emotional when this came up in the interviews:

It was really bad in the beginning. I panicked....All I studied went out of my head. I took a couple of deep breaths, and I was fine. (female, soc./soc. wk.--#10)

I think that one of the biggest problems that I've been having is that I get tremendously worked up before the test. I tend to say that I won't let myself down. I get stressed out and nervous, and I find that when I sit down and write it, I think I have forgotten some things...but it comes back once I start to write. (male, psychology student--#21)

Part of the anxiety is self-induced. Whenever we are tested fear of the unexpected is only natural. In addition to fear of failure, students often fear not remembering information, or 'blinking out'. One informant expressed this sentiment as follows:

Just the fear of failing....You think all of your friends and family are watching you, expecting you to fail...You start to think that they will say 'I told you so' if you fail. (male, psychology--#21)

Generally, success on exams is perceived by mature students as the result of

sufficient studying. Activities centred around studying include readings, notes, and making summaries. The exam format also influences performance. One student put it as follows:

I do better on essay questions. Multiple choice are too concrete; the real world doesn't go that way. I know this is the case with other mature students I know because they too do poorer on multiple choice than on essay style exams. (male, hons. history--#23)

Ultimately, students said there was no alternative to taking exams. Fear of being tested makes most people in society apprehensive, and the mature student is not exceptional in this. Most mature students accept the necessity of writing examinations.

Readings

The thought of 200 pages of readings a week per course is often a daunting prospect for the mature student. Many students expressed a desire to read only what was essential. This pragmatic attitude stems from a lack of time to devote to school. To read ten books and 25 articles on reserve for a one term course is almost impossible for mature students, so they avoid courses with very heavy loads. Furthermore, mature students become proficient in discerning what is important to read, and what is not.

Mature students devise strategies for finding the time to read. As one

informant says:

Weekends are study time. I put all my books over the coffee table in the family room. That means that is my territory for those two days. But I clean it up at the end of the weekend. (female, sociology--12)

Learning to read is not a mechanical skill, but one which requires judgement. The judgement problem came up in an interview:

The initial shock was like, what do I read? What I am I supposed to be picking up out of my reading? I soon learned from others who took the course before me that text A was not as important as text B. And I got old exams from the reserve reading room at Mills to see what the prof. expected in terms of reading in the exam. (female, sociology--#12)

Having chosen a course with reasonable reading requirements, the problem then becomes reading quickly and absorbing as much information as possible. Most informants reported that they read everything for the first term, and then became more pragmatic--i.e., selective--in their reading habits. Learning the 'basics' seems to be the most common strategy for getting through a course reading list. Each student develops his/her own technique:

I go through the handbook, highlight the main points of that, and go through the Gleitman book to expand on the point from the lecture notes. So what I'm saying I guess is how I do the readings ties in with what's going on in the lectures. (male, psychology student--#20)

Readings, then, are managed pragmatically. Mature students won't read what they don't have to, and because of this they engage in a process of figuring out what's important.

Time Management

Perhaps the biggest problem for mature students is the issue of time management. The student role adds to the time demands already made on them. Fitting the new role into one's life is crucial to success in university. Other commitments--work, family, leisure--have to be re-calculated to accommodate it.

For the most part, mature students said that although the school-related tasks required of them were demanding, performing them was not as hard as overcoming time constraints. One strategy used is to be well planned and get the work done ahead of time. My informants addressed this problem:

I start ahead at the beginning of term. I'll tell you Scott, if you leave it until the last minute, something in your personal life gets in the way. I start the research early in the term so that I don't scramble the weekend before the due date. That way, I'm well ahead of the game. (male, hon. history--fieldnotes, July 16, 1992)

Right now, I'm off to the library to get started on this paper. It's not due for two months, but this way I'll get all the books I need before other students take them out. It's this kind of organization that's the key to essay success. You can't do it two days before, because your personal life takes too much time. (female, sociology--#13)

For a mature student, the key to success seems to lie in their ability to schedule written work successfully. All informants said they set aside time for school each week, and stuck to this schedule every week during the semester. Students frequently expressed sentiments like "there's a lot riding on this education, and I can't afford to screw up" to account for their attentiveness to their studies

(fieldnotes, Sept. 21, 29; October 5, 17, 1992).

Another technique used to bring a sense of order into the lives of mature students is **compartmentalization**, the technique of displacing or shelving university-related activities when other roles are being enacted. It is apparent that one of the differences between younger and mature students is the inability of younger students to compartmentalize, because their lives revolve around school. Friendships, love relationships, and daily activities are all centred on the campus, and the younger student's identities follow from their student role.

For the adult student it is different. Outside role commitments, such as being a worker, spouse, and parent must be met. Because of the varying demands of these other roles, mature students most often cannot live the life of a regular student. There is then a tendency to compartmentalize one aspect of life when another role is being performed, as related in the following:

As a rule I don't bring up school at home, because that is one area of my life that I see as important, but not more important than my family.

(male, BA/BSW student--#25)

I like to do other things, like go on vacation, and other leisure activities. I find that I have to remain very structured during the week. By doing that, I don't have to touch school work on the weekend.

(female, hist/soc.--#13)

We have a lot of music friends, because my husband is in the business. We do music-related things that are off-campus. So my priorities are not the same as younger students, who I know go to the Downstairs John for social activity. (female, hons. soc.--#1)

When I leave campus, that's it. I mean this is important to me, but I have

a life too. I have the kids to worry about, and the house payments, and family stuff we do together. So I try to not let school interfere with the rest of my life.

(male, psychology--#20)

Compartmentalization is problematic when the mature student attends university full-time. Here, his/her circle of friends are largely fellow students during the day. While these students may hope to keep up outside commitments, since a lot more time is spent on studies and in the university atmosphere, outside commitments become more marginal. The mature students virtually become regular students with all that entails. Informants put the dilemma as follows:

School is always in the back of my mind. The kids are hard, because I have the idea that I should be there for them. (male, hon. history--#23)

Well I can come home, but it is hard to drop it. That's simply due to the fact that you can't finish all the work that has to be accomplished in 8 hours here at school. (female, English/history--#2)

I can't relax like I used to. There's always something in the back of my mind. I wander off into something about school. I just can't turn it off....when you go to school full-time, you realize that it becomes a big part of your life. I feel guilty if I'm skipping off.

(male, hon. music--#22)

The act of compartmentalization is easier for part-timers than for full-timers. The importance of time management becomes even more apparent when seasonal aspects of academic life (exams, mid-terms, etc.) are taken into account.

Coping with school involves role juggling. School has to be fit in with other roles played at home or at work. The mature student has to be a cook, nurturer, house cleaner, and taxi driver to the kids, and at the same time a friend and lover

to his/her spouse, hold down a job, and of course, do the work necessary to get a university degree. This is certainly a taxing agenda.

One way of coping is to put off duties or prioritize them, especially when school work piles up. Periods in which the student is sitting for exams or writing essays highlight the need for discrimination of role duties, however, it is felt throughout the academic year. Many of my informants mentioned this:

My house cleaning takes second priority after school. I have to set time for myself, so other things can be left until later. Like vacuuming. If my friends drop by, they should be stopping to see me, not my house. And laundry can pile up, especially around exams. (female, history/geography--#19)

I have a great bulletin board for organization. And every weekend they go to their Dad's so I have those 2 days to work on school. Housework can be done early in mornings, after the kids go to school. (female, sociology--#6)

As long as my kids aren't being neglected, it's okay. Housework and cooking are low on the priority list. I had to give up a lot of free time; and time for friends has softened. (female, post-RN--#18)

Juggling means sacrifices are inevitable in the course of attaining a university education. Family members have to be persuaded to help out, if they are not doing so already.

Conclusion

The socialization of mature students is a difficult process that takes time and patience. School-related activity is largely learned through repeated attempts. As the

student internalizes a common definition of the situation, of what it means to write exams, essays, or do readings, such activity becomes less problematic. Mature students undergo a whole new socialization experience as they pursue their degree, through which they gain a better understanding of themselves and others in their social world.

- 1. The terminology the mature student must learn upon entering McMaster can**

seem like a whole new language. A glossary explaining some of these terms is appended to the thesis.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SOCIAL DILEMMAS

Introduction

This chapter addresses the social problems mature students face after enrolling in university. Entering a new social world where there are new norms to learn, and new friendships to be made can be a daunting experience. In addition, family, friends, and co-workers may discourage the mature student from attending school and pursuing a university education out of a misguided belief that adults should do 'normal' things such as parenting, working, and being a good spouse. Further, side bets (Becker 1970) connected with leisure time--hobbies, sports, and spending time with one's family--have to be accommodated.

Student subcultures that form in response to a need for social acceptance and unity are an integral part of the social nature of university life. In the process of the status passage to student, mature students begin to realize that they are not alone (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 4). They meet others who are also attending university under similar circumstances, and soon begin to seek each other out, whether in class, in the cafeteria, or in the MAPS office¹. Indeed, for mature students, as for any student, the friendships formed in the course of one's studies add to the richness

of the university experience.

The importance of the generic social state of relatedness to the lives of mature students becomes evident when we consider the friendship dilemmas mature students face as they encounter a student body composed largely of co-students under age 23. Whether mature students respond by distancing themselves from establishing friendships with this younger group of students or by paying no attention to the age gap remains to be explored.

In this chapter I discuss the various negotiations with significant others that must occur if the passage to student is to be successful. Here I discuss family finances, personal support, and negotiations with non-student friends. I then explore the dynamics of mature student subcultures, and their contribution to socialization. Finally, I discuss relations between mature students and younger students showing how the age at which one transverses a status passage impacts on the actor's perception and definition of the passage.

Negotiations with Significant Others

When a student is accepted for study at a university, negotiations with significant others to ensure their support are entered into as well. The needed support is not always forthcoming. What happens when social support necessary to carry out the transition to student is not forthcoming? In this section of the chapter I explain the

negotiation processes that occur off campus, and examine how money, family relations, and friendships are affected when an adult goes back to school.

Money

Initially, the mature student has to negotiate accommodation of the new role with family members. Part of the negotiation involves finding the money to pay for it. Most informants related that there had to be a common definition of the situation accepted by all members of the immediate family before students could devote family earnings to the costly venture of attending university. It had to be understood collectively that the family had to cut back on spending to accommodate the new expense of going to university. Because financial questions must be resolved, the mature student is involved in a relational and negotiable (Prus 1989a) process with significant others as the student works out a family budget with other family members. One informant states:

We had a big family discussion around the kitchen table, and the 16-year-old didn't like the idea at first, because the financial costs of education she felt was eating away at what she wanted to do with that money. But we talked and resolved it.

(female, English/sociology--#9)

For others, the decision to set aside money from the tight to begin with family budget was not so easy:

My husband wasn't very supportive at first. Financially he would say things

like 'we need your money to put food on the table, so why quit your job to go to school?' But he straightened out soon after he realized it was what I wanted to do.

(female, gerontology--#7)

For some, there is no money put aside to spend on school. This entails some degree of cutting back on the part of the family as a whole. This can require careful planning, especially if one returns to school on a full-time basis. One informant relates the implications of such a move:

I have government grants. They covered my tuition and my books. Money wise, school is nothing. But it could have been had I not planned well. Part of the house is rented out, and that pays the mortgage. Interest is 7% on the house, and my payments are now half of what they were when I bought the house a few years ago....And I saved a lot in RSPs before I came here...I just planned well, and was lucky. (male, social work/sociology--#25)

Such planning allows the mature student to accomplish goals he/she has set for the future. As one informant states:

You just try to keep three stages ahead of everything...you have to remember you've laid out a fair amount of money, I mean you face for the average course over \$400....Plus books, at the average of \$100-125 per course. Plus parking, and the gas back and forth...and I realize that I keep talking about money, but that is one of the real big problems that mature students I've met here have, just handling the money. It tends to run away from you...we have an extras budget, and out of my regular pay, I take a certain percentage of it and that goes into an account called my educational fund. And if I need money for books or gas, that comes out of the regular fund.

(male, psychology--#20)

Another solution besides budgeting involves arranging for relatives to help out with the expenses of going back to school. This too requires negotiation of meanings so as to reach a common definition of the situation--an acknowledgement that the

mature student's education is an important activity worthy of pursuit. informants put it as follows:

My dad is proud of what I am doing here, so he willing to pay for my schooling. Coming from a poor village in the old country, he always wanted me to attend university. I married and had a kid, so that was the end of that. But today, I think he is the only family member that gives support both financially as well as verbally. (male, hons. history--#24)

My father's paying for everything. I couldn't do it otherwise. As a single parent with two children, it's hard enough already. So without him, I wouldn't be here at university. As far as loans go, OSAP wouldn't even give me a loan. (female, hons. sociology--#4)

Relatives then, are often major sources of support, primarily financial, for the mature student.

Support from Significant Others

In addition to monetary support, all informants report that there had to be social support at home for the mature student to succeed. In fact, informants said that it would be virtually impossible to get through seven or more years of school without some support from immediate family members. In this study support was manifested by most of informants' families. It takes a variety of forms:

My husband is supportive. He takes the kids away when I have an upcoming exam. My kids are young, aged 5 and 6. So they know to keep quiet when mommy is working.

(female, history/geography--#19)

My husband and I share household duties--like cleaning and cooking. And he's a great of the kids. It's great to know that you can count on him to come through, because I know some women whose husbands aren't as supportive. I think if I couldn't count on him, I wouldn't be able to go to school.

(female, post-RN--#18)

Social support, then, involves both emotional and physical acts on the part of the student's partner or children. However, for many informants, it is the physical acts of doing household chores that best symbolize emotional support.

In spite of such support, however family members often can't fully comprehend what it means to attend university, and thus, cannot relate to the student's new perspectives. Hence, they are unable to fully support the mature student. This feeling was expressed by a number of my informants:

My wife can't relate to this school stuff. She's English, came over here when she was five. Working-class background, but she comes from a dysfunctional family with a lot of emotional problems. So it's not the environment for tolerance, or new ideas, or discussions. It's very frustrating when I can't start any sort of discussion on anything other than the baseball game. (male, hons. history--#24)

My parents were very supportive. They had no idea what I was taking, and I could explain it a hundred times and they still had no idea what I was doing here.

(female, psych./soc.wk.--#11)

My father thought it was great and bragged to all his buddies....Everyone else in my family felt I had survived this long without university, so why start now?....I guess when I would tell them the problems I had, they just couldn't relate. It's not just what I learn here. That television show "It's a Different World" is a good example. This really is foreign to a lot of people. (female, hons. sociology--#16)

As the above excerpts show, many significant others are unable to relate to what the

mature student is doing in university.

When a mature student does not get the needed support from family members, relationships can become tenuous. The pre-existing character of social group life can become threatened whenever expectations of relationships are not met (Prus 1989a). If the mature student's spouse does not respect the wishes of the mature student, the relationship can be threatened. One informant explains what her situation was like as follows:

He never paid for anything. Never paid for my courses, books, or parking. I had to have babysitters until he would get home from work, and had to pay for everything myself...he was a total obstacle. Because he would complain 'do you have to study all the time?'...It was his idea that I should quit McMaster, and I couldn't do that...so the marriage broke up.

(female, sociol/geron.--#16)

But for the most part, families do adjust to the additional role that the parent or partner has opted for. In all but two cases in my study, the mature student's family adjusted to the new side bet (Becker 1970) the student had made in attending university. In the other two cases, the stalemate in the relationship was resolved by divorce.

Most verbal opposition took the form of criticism from extended family members. This lack of moral support is reflected in these statements:

My parents are so stupid. They're weiners. They didn't even know what I was doing....They don't see any intrinsic value in higher education...why I would take all the time, energy, and money when I could be out getting a job. (female, geography/history--#19)

My parents seldom mention me going to school. They don't understand that

where I am today is because I've come back to school. (female, post-RN--#13)

My parents were very supportive....But my in-laws hadn't a clue what a university was. Their attitude was 'why would a woman need a university education? Aren't you going to have a family?'.
(female, soc wk/psych-#11)

However, the extended family's failure to be supportive is less problematic than an unsupportive spouse or children. In the end, it is support in the home that is essential for the mature student to succeed at getting the degree.

Friends

Often those with whom we interact closely do not understand our other roles and occupations. Just as family members do not fully understand what the status passage means to the student, so too friendships can be affected by the decision to return to school. Misunderstanding creates confusion over what social group life ought to be as shared perspectives (Prus 1989a) are lost. Friends may view partying as the preferred choice goal for the weekend, while students see finishing their psychology term paper as more important. Friends of mature students may react unfavourably to differing perspectives, and perceive see the student as snobbish, or trying to be better than his/her friends.

To resolve the problem, re-negotiation of the meanings of the relationship is necessary. Some friends may be jealous of their friend's new identity, and these

relationships may wind down. Other friendships may be supportive. Often, friends actively encourage the student to get the degree. However, it is frequently the case that the end resolution is limited support, because the non-student is unfamiliar with what the mature student is actually doing in university. For instance, non-students can't really understand what it means to learn French at forty years of age, or to study geomorphic processes in geography class. The inability of mature students to explain what university entails to non-students is often a factor too. This was expressed in the following comments by my informants:

I'm taking a physical geography course right now. And when you tell friends of the wonderful types of rock formation you see when you look at the escarpment, they just get this glaze over their eyes....It's like you are talking a different language. (female, hist/geog--#19)

I remember saying once at a bar with friends that 'when we drink, this is what's happening to our brain', and they said, 'who cares, let's get another beer.' So I don't spout it off....Some of my co-workers make jokes like 'so, are you going to analyze all of our students next?' So telling too much to friends turns them off.

(male, psychology--#20)

My one friend is still into partying seven nights a week. So we grew apart. She couldn't understand why I'd study so much...some friends make you feel like you make them feel stupid. So they're moody around you....One friend kept asking why I taped lectures. I explained what I did at school, and then he got defensive. He said he could've gone to university, but chose to do other things. His reaction was so negative to me. (female, social work/anthropology--#17)

One strategy for avoiding tension is for friends not to talk directly about school when they are together:

It's not really common to sit down and talk about 14th century counterpoints

**with someone...but I can talk to some of my musician friends about it.
(male, hons. music--#22)**

What is shared is more anecdotal information:

**Whatever the amusing aspects of it all are, or of course if there's a test or paper I did well on, I'll brag about it. If it comes up, I'll talk, but generally, I don't stand up and chant.
(male, sociology/social work--#25)**

This compromise means that one's university career doesn't have to be entirely excluded from conversation, as long as the actual subject matter of courses is downplayed.

Generally when the new role upsets the shared meanings which form the basis of the friendship, there will be conflict in the relationship. This often causes insecurity on the part of the non-student who cannot deal with their friend's new status, and become agitated when talk turns to the university.

The relationship dilemmas encountered by the mature student, whether with friends or family, are resolved by negotiation. Although these negotiations are largely successful, nevertheless, the very fact that friends and significant others do not universally act in a supportive way, but exhibit jealousy and contempt, indicates that such relationships are fragile and uncertain.

Mature Student Subcultures and Practical Accomplishment

Mature students quickly learn they are not alone. Glaser and Strauss (1967) see people as going through status passages in the life course collectively. Although mature students may not initially be aware that they are going through the passage with others, they soon realize that they are entering a world with a new set of meanings together with others in the same situation. They realize that they belong to a group with shared values about what it means to be a university student.

The creation of a mature student subculture is only natural given that student group life has a relational character (Prus 1989a). The dynamics of university student subcultures have been discussed in the literature (Becker et al: 1961; Fine and Kleinman 1979; Kleinman 1983; Granfield and Koenig 1992a; Mechanic 1962; Levy 1990).

Adults returning to school share many difficulties. This situation generates an 'attitude of the generalized other' (Mead 1934) upon which their interaction is based. Social networks form among mature students to share information, for example, about what courses are like, and which professors are the strictest markers. These friendships provide needed support to mature students when the status passage becomes difficult, and previously established relationships with family and friends fail to, or simply cannot, provide such support. Mature student subcultures form to provide an avenue for social interaction with others who

understand the pressures involved in university life. Because the relational character of group life demands sharing common definitions of the situation for successful interaction to occur (Prus 1989a), individuals seek out informal support networks to fill the void.

Friendships are not usually made through formal networks such as MAPS. Instead, students meet and make friends on campus: in the cafeteria, in class, in the smoking areas and in the library. Because they have little extra time mature students cannot form deep friendships with these fellow students, but relationships exist in the context of the subcultural concerns. These social groups get together for dinner before class, go for the odd drink after class, and study with each other on a regular basis (fieldnotes, July 26, 1992; November 24, 1992; December 14, 1992).

The creation of subcultures occurs almost spontaneously at break time in the evening class. Mature students tend to group together from the start of term, drinking coffee and smoking together. Over time, they develop closer ties, eating together in the cafeterias, drinking in the pub, and studying together at the library. These activities act as a forum for informal discussion of meanings, which in turn allows the mature student to act on the basis of these shared definitions of the situation.

These networks are social, but not for 'partying'. Mature students are generally past the 'partying' stage, and thus campus social culture holds little appeal for them. What the networks provide is a source of information on university rules,

requirements and short-cuts. Mature students thus have an instrumental motive for establishing friendships on campus, unlike the relationships formed among younger students, where the friendship experience is an end in itself. The following comments illustrate some of the benefits of student subcultures:

It gives you a sense of group unity. You tend to gravitate as a group together, and if you hear something, you tell another person, because as a part-timer chances are you won't hear about something unless someone in the group tells you about it...and if there's something in class you don't understand, you can call one another for help.

(male, psychology student--#20)

What I feel is social may not be what others call social. Meaning the study groups, that was social. Studying with others and sharing a common ground--that's social. A lot of part-timers don't do this for reasons of time constraints...I see time spent there at MAC as my social life. (female, geront./sociology-#16)

Another benefit of these relationships is that students can share the exciting knowledge they are acquiring with someone who cares. The importance of shared knowledge is reflected in this passage:

I don't see as many of them this year, because they took away our smoking cafeteria...there was a group that just started eating together. Sitting together for lunch...it was in the cafeteria, with an open invitation to sit and talk. You tended to meet because you were in similar classes, at least one. So if there was something you wanted to go over, there was always at least someone there.

(female, day student, English/history--#2)

Friendships develop out of being in class and sharing a common ground, a sense of group unity. Sometimes romance results from such interaction. For one of my

informants, it led to marriage:

We were friends all last year, and she relied on me heavily for the two courses we took together. She needed someone who was widely read...and who had heard of some of these authors she hadn't heard of...early last spring she started coming over socially. And then we had talked about just everything, so we decided to tie the knot. (male, hons. history--#23)

Friendships can be influenced by whether a mature student takes courses in the daytime or in the evening. For evening students, all available time is needed for academic purposes, and the common interest of school forms the basis of any friendships that develop (Levy 1990). Mature students taking classes in the daytime on the other hand, have more time for social activities if they are so inclined.

Several informants make this point:

I'm here in the days, so I can go to the women's support group over at Hamilton Hall. They meet every lunch hour on Mondays. (female, day student, anthro.--#6)

**We [friends] go to the Phoenix once in a while. And I meet a fellow student once a week for supper.
(female, day student, gerontology--#7)**

**In this environment where you're pressed to succeed and do well, you better have some social relationships to fall back on. And to know that there are others in the same boat as you...so yeah, you do have to have a social net.
(male, day student, hons. history--#24)**

Activities such as eating lunch together, or just calling, tend to be the best method for maintaining these relationships.

One characteristic of mature student subculture is its dynamic nature. Students meet over coffee, and over time this original group can grow to about twenty

students or more. One student related the following anecdote:

The history cohorts you met tonight all started out as small groups of two or three that would have coffee in between breaks. Soon we all found that we knew each other from other classes we had taken. Us old fogies had sought each other out. So now it's like we're all a cohort of twelve people. We just kept on bumping into one another. (from fieldnotes, September 20, 1992)

Mature/Regular Student Relationship Dilemmas

The social implications of mixing mature students with regular students have been studied by both Judith Levy (1990) and Michael Moffatt (1989). While age gaps make social interaction unlikely, this is not always the case. Many mature students enjoyed interacting with younger students:

I just sit down and talk to people. I don't care if they're 50 or 20, it doesn't really matter...I have never had a bad reaction from kids. In fact one of them is coming over for dinner tonight. (female, geron-#7)

Maybe it's just my own personality, my way of living, but I get along with all of them. I mean they treat me like one of their own....I've made a lot of friends who've helped me out by being there for me.

(male, hons. history--#24)

Due to time constraints, however, many students do not interact with day students. Schedules, worldviews and outside commitments simply do not allow for it. Still, other substantive factors militate against friendships.

Mature students perceive many young people as rude and inattentive to class lectures. The lack of attentiveness on the part of many regular students causes

mature students to limit contact with younger students, indeed some adults are repulsed by the behaviour of the younger student body. As two informants explain:

I go to my sociology theory course which is a second year required day course. I think these people (kids) take this course thinking it's going to be a bird course....I feel very frustrated because some of the people are so rude and inconsiderate...sometimes they talk so loudly, and it's like I have to tell them to shut up. (female, hons. sociol.--#1)

It's like they're thinking 'oh, it's those old folks again. Geez, don't they have old folk classes or something?' Some will sort of hint at why you're here. (female, history/geography--#19)

On the other hand, mature students may be perceived by young students as 'brown nosers' because adults ask too many questions:

I don't think I'm afraid to voice an opinion, be it right or wrong. A lot of the kids sit there absolutely silent, scared shitless...I'm too old for that nonsense, so I speak out. But then they resent me for that. (male, hons. history--#23)

The impressions of mature students held by younger students may impact negatively to some extent, but generally, poor relations have more to do with the reasons why the mature student returned to school. Because conflicting perspectives (1989a) create tenuous relationships, mature students do not interact much with regular students. Regular students are often focused to the social character of university life, while mature students have returned to school with the intention of learning. Mature students are past the time when partying was a dominant goal in their lives, and seek an academic experience, while less mature students are at school for both academic and social reasons.

Mature students have a more serious attitude to and more appreciation for the material they are studying than younger students. The best part of university for a mature student is not the social element, but instead the learning aspect. Mature students value what they are learning. These remarks illustrate this point:

I love learning. It's true, it sounds like a cliché, and there are other reasons but that's definitely the biggest one. And I love finishing a course and feeling like, wow, look at all the stuff I learned from this course that I wouldn't have found on my own.

(female, sociology--#8)

Maybe it's because I'm so unstimulated at work that I need some brain exercise, but I see using my brain as such a treat....I don't know if that's something you get in high school. (female, hons. sociology--#1)

However, mature students do not feel this attitude is shared by the younger students:

My impression of full-timers and especially first year students is let's get this over with. They just want to get out and get a job. (female, hist/geog--#19)

I think a lot of them are just playing the game. How can we manoeuvre this prof. or that prof; this t.a. or that t.a. to get a better grade. Frankly it makes me sick--they want the essay way out, but they haven't lived in the real world yet, where anything worth having takes a lot of work to get. This degree is one such thing that for me is worth all the sweat I have to go through. (male, hons. history--#23)

Such perceptions tend to create social distance between mature students and their much younger classmates.

Conclusion

Relations with friends, family, and younger students do not always constitute an adequate source of social support. Mature student subcultures emerge partly in response to this lack of support, and, of course, partly in response to simple proximity and the shared experience.

We have seen that various negotiations take place at home to accommodate the new role of student. While such negotiations can be problematic, they are absolutely essential. The student must share his or her new status with nuclear and extended family members and friends, and invite them to join in negotiating meanings and schedules. Opposition is often dealt with by minimizing information sharing to avoid conflict. If however, these negotiations are unsuccessful, the mature student will have to either renegotiate, terminate the relationship, or maintain the relationship by minimizing information sharing and downplaying the university experience to avoid conflict.

Mature students uncover a whole new world of relationships as they pursue their degree. As the various hurdles of the socialization process are overcome, the student is able to focus more on the academic program and assure its success.

NOTES:

- 1. MAPS, or the McMaster Association of Part-Time Students, is a student advocacy group that the university has established to deal with the special of that mature students taking evening courses. MAPS has an office centrally located on campus where students can get inexpensive coffee and relax in a lounge. A receptionist is available during the evening to answer questions.**

CHAPTER EIGHT: SELF CHANGE

Introduction

Probably the most significant effect of returning to school for the mature student is the marked change in the self. Informants reported a high degree of change in the self as a result of the status passage, almost a radical change, and a distinct feeling they are fulfilling their potential. Self-esteem increases and mature students have a better sense of their relation to others. Through the socialization process, and the accompanying self-growth involved in going back to school, adult students experience a marked change in their dealings with others. Furthermore, most informants said that they felt that coming to school had helped them in other facets of their life: they could handle their children better, they had enhanced relationships with partners, and were more assertive in their relations with co-workers. This chapter examines outcomes effects of mature student socialization.

Identities

According to Hewitt (1991: 126-130), three concepts useful for analysis of the self

are self-identity, self-image, and self-esteem. A discussion of these concepts will illuminate the process of self-change in the mature student.

Identity refers to a person's location in the world. Some identities are collective. Stone and Farberman (1981) define identity as a "coincidence of placements and announcements". When someone has an identity, they are "situated, that is, cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgement of their participation or membership in social relations" (1970: 188). Burke and Reitzes (1991: 242) see three central features of identities:

First, identities are social products that are formed, maintained, and confirmed through the processes of 1) naming or locating the self in social categories; 2) interacting with others in terms of these categories; and 3) engaging in self-presentation and altercasting to negotiate and confirm the meanings and behavioral implications of the social categories. Second, identities are self-meanings that are acquired in particular situations and are based on the similarities and differences of a role in relation to its counter roles. Third, identities are symbolic, calling up in one person the same responses as are called up in others. Finally, identities are reflexive. Persons can use their identities as reference points to assess the implications of their own behavior as well as of other people's behaviors; this assessment is part of the reflected appraisals process. We now add that identities are a source of motivation for action, particular actions that result in the social confirmation of the identity. (1991: 244)

Identities are important since they dictate the lines of conduct in specific situations.

Acquiring an identity as a mature student is a social and a processual phenomenon. Adults enter the university without an identity of "mature student". Identity is not something that can be acquired on one's own, for identities are "formed, maintained, and reinforced on a daily basis during and as a result of

interaction with other people" (Haas and Shaffir 1978: 11). Mead (1934) saw identity as a process through which people are able to be the objects of their own actions.

One's self-identity can be challenged by the very idea of attending university. This inner conflict arises from a difference in social worlds if one comes from a background where the idea of attending university is foreign to the accepted worldview, for example. One informant, related the following experience:

I think that for a long time in terms of my self-identity it (student role) was a problem. Because I would explain to people that it felt as though I had one foot in one world, and one foot in the other. It's partly social class, but it's also that the whole world of academia is different from the real world....I had this life, marriage, family, friends that weren't involved in it (academia). So often I felt really torn because I felt sometimes I didn't fit anywhere.
(female, social wk./psych.--#11)

These conflicting social worlds often result in inner conflict for the mature student, and in the end, something has to give. To resolve the inner tension, the old self has to evolve. One mature student relates:

My old self was based on my husband's identity. If he was happy, I was happy. I lived through his goals and accomplishments. When I came to this university, my husband realized I was changing. He realized that the kind of person I was becoming was not what he wanted...He realized that I had gained self-confidence...he wanted to take this new sense of self away from me, and I wouldn't let him.
(female, hon. sociology--#16)

If significant others refuse to accommodate the mature student's new self, the relationships cannot be maintained. The new identity that the self enjoys upon entering the university system can be addictive--often, the mature student becomes

more and more involved, more and more enthusiastic.

For the most part, however, there is an accommodation of the new self-identity, rather than termination of relationships built on the old one. As one informant explains:

Your identity is changing, and that was a lot of stress....And you know it's interesting because often I wouldn't know what the norms are here....I can be very loud...it took me a long time to realize that was just my personality. (female, social wk./psych.--#11)

Mature students embrace a new identity that allows for personal growth, and in so doing gain a better sense of what they can accomplish. Their self-image and self-esteem grow.

Self-Image

Self-image refers to "the qualities, attributes, and characteristics the person attributes to himself or herself" (Hewitt 1991: 129). According to Hewitt:

People develop images of themselves and of one another in relation to those qualities and attributes that are important to their social roles and their sense of both identification with and difference from one another. (1991: 129)

Mature students seek reinforcement for the decision to go back to school. They seek acceptance and acknowledgement that what they are doing is not a waste of time.

As one woman stated:

I think for me I wondered what the family thought I was doing here. I mean,

here I was a forty two year old starting back at school. And they thought I should be at home being a mom and good wife. I had the acceptance before from my family you know. I mean I did everything right, all for the family, because that was the role I chose to play. But when I left that by the wayside to come to MAC, something changed. The respect that I got from the family wasn't the same. After all, I wasn't the good housewife like they thought I should be; I was now the overaged university student shirking her responsibilities at home.

(female, hons. soc.--#16)

Self-image can be socially determined. Because we depend so much on others' opinions of ourselves, we tend to be hard on ourselves when the expectations others have of us are not fulfilled.

Students push themselves hard to succeed, for they believe that if they fail in their chosen course, significant others will think less of them, which will in turn, devastate their own self-image.

Self-Esteem

Self Esteem is a linked to self-image, because people's feelings about themselves are directly linked to others' perceptions. Self-esteem is self-evaluation, but as we saw, this is tied to others' evaluations. Our state of mind and emotions are directly related to our self-esteem.

Motivation and Self-Esteem

One explanation for self-change in the mature student is the link between motivation and self-esteem. According to Hewitt, "self-esteem provides a major motivational link between the person and the social order" (1991: 141). Groups that we belong to give us our identities. What others think of us in terms of our performance in these roles gives us our self-image. We then gain a strong sense of self-esteem by our attachment to the social world. Gecas and Schwalbe (1983), showed how self-esteem is linked to accomplishment. This is true in the case of mature students, who gain a positive sense of self-esteem by successfully completing problematic tasks they have taken upon themselves.

Self-esteem then, is a product of our social interaction with others. Self-esteem is a motivational state because "self-esteem affects the way we are sensitive to others in situations in which we encounter them. Whether our customary level of self-regard is high or low it shapes the way in which we pay attention and respond to the activities of other people" (Hewitt 1991: 142).

People seek to be well-regarded by others. If they perceive themselves as deficient in the eyes of others, they experience anxiety. Theoretically, this anxiety should serve as a motivating force, because, sensitive to others' perceptions, they will attempt to improve their image by improving their performance (Hewitt 1991: 143). However, if satisfactory performance is not rewarded by promotion, social

recognition and respect, the anxiety will not be alleviated. This is often true of incoming mature students.

For mature students with lower self-esteem, the motivational state of anxiety results in a situation where although performance of tasks is adequate, they are unable to perceive or present to others a self that generates positive images.

As a result of going back to school, mature students change as individuals. Self-esteem changes as a result of the learning/socialization process. Women show great changes in evaluating their self-worth; men less marked differences. For example:

When I was at home, I was very introverted, very shy. Being here at school, you meet people, you pass exams, give presentations, and soon you realize that you can do this. (female, geography--#10)

I had no self-esteem. Part of that too is that in a marriage breakup you have none, it's obliterated. I started university at the same time so it was a double whammy. I think of university as a ladder, and I make it to the first run, and then I shoot for second. So it just seems that every success I have on an essay, a test whatever--my self-esteem just goes up with that. I realize I'm not so dumb....I am shocked at how much I am capable of. (female, sociology--#4)

Most students stated that going to university made them more confident than they were before. This self-confidence arose out of the realization that problematic tasks could be accomplished, and new problems, such as essays and exams, could be solved. The ability to successfully perform tasks clearly brings about a rise in self-esteem. The greatest fear informants experienced when starting university was fear of inadequacy, and fear of failure. There was a misconception on the part of the

mature students that they were stupid, and that the younger students were more competent. As one student puts it:

I came here with the wrong attitude. I had a lot of misconceptions about what university is. Especially I thought that I would have to work real hard to get where I am; harder in fact than the regular teenaged first year students. I had a diminished intelligence complex I guess. I figured these kids are smarter than me, but that wasn't the case at all. I am as smart, because I can do the assignments the prof gives, sometimes even better than these kids I was so worried about.

(female student, #12)

As their first year came to a close, most of these fears abated. The students had achieved the goals they set for themselves, such as writing essays, finding their way around campus, and getting work done in light of all their outside commitments. This gave them a strong sense of self-esteem. An informant reinforces this point:

I can see my results now. I now see that I really am worth something. I am not stupid, because I work hard and see good results. I can now set my goals, and see high payback. My grades are higher each year I've been here at MAC. That makes me feel great; to get an 'A' on a paper I busted my butt on for 3 weeks.

(female, psych/soc. wk. student, #11)

Good grades are important for self-esteem. The acknowledgement of significant others that what the mature student was doing was worthwhile after all is also important. Praise from respected mentors and teachers also reinforces self-esteem.

Two mature students put it as follows:

It wasn't until early on in year two that I said 'heh, I can do this'. Also some people whose opinion I respected, like a poli. sci. prof I had last year said 'you're quite an bright person; you make some good observations' on a term paper I did. That coming from a Ph.D. made me feel like a million bucks.

(female, sociology, #4)

A prof I had in history suggested a couple weeks ago that I seriously think of grad. school. I never thought of myself as the scholarly type, but that got me thinking. I felt that maybe I can do this school thing. My family can't relate to this school thing I'm doing, especially my wife. But when someone of high standing here tells you to apply for grad. school, that gives you such confidence, and the ability to go.

(male, hons. history, #24)

Doing well at school is a clear indicator of self-esteem. But the process of learning itself is also a factor in building up self-esteem. The following interview excerpt illustrates this:

Doing well on exams gave me the confidence that I really needed at the time. And it really made me feel good about myself. I never thought I could handle anything like that. And it is reflected in other areas of my life. My family and friends know I'm much more outspoken than before. (female, anthro.-- #6)

Higher self-esteem is the payoff for all the work and sacrifice involved in being a mature student. It spills over into other areas of life, leading to enhanced performance at work and family roles.

Outside Improvement

Mature students reported that skills apparently unrelated to school improved as their studies progressed. Informants related that their relationships with family, spouses, and coworkers were clearly enhanced. These changes appear to be closely related to the changes that occurred as a result of returning to school. As my

informants state:

I think my social skills have definitely changed since coming here. At work, I guess I'm very aggressive now. I am no longer the doormat that I was to my superiors. I received a promotion because of this. At home, my kids started to work on homework more, because I valued what I was doing, and so education has become a higher priority. It also makes me a stricter disciplinarian, at least somewhat. I don't want to give you the impression that I'm a task master with the kids, but it does make a difference. (female, English/history #2)

My relationship with my husband is better now. He is more willing to pitch in with the housework. My aggressive, self-confident side must be rubbing off--because he doesn't take me for granted anymore. It's like I have my own identity, and he can accept that.

(female, post-RN, #18)

Relations in the workplace changed too. Along with improved school-related skills, such as reading and writing, informants stated how university socialization helped them in the workplace. As one informant stated:

My writing skills have definitely improved in a big way. So I can write up a sales report better than before. And my reading skills help at work too. I can read stuff and comprehend it better than before I started at McMaster. I can also handle criticism at work now. Before I was not so thick-skinned in that respect. Here [university] you are critiqued on essays and exams all the time. This performance evaluation is similar to what you get in the workforce. I now get positive written and oral evaluations of my performance. And I don't shudder like I used to when review time came up. (female, sociology--#12)

In terms of one's career, many informants said that they grew to appreciate it more as a result of attending university. Often this appreciation involves seeing career-related activities as opportunities to excel, and not tasks to be performed grudgingly.

In the words of my informants:

Doing my job is not a big thing anymore. I do the same job I did a year ago, but now I find myself wanting to get to work each day and do all the chores associated with the job. I used to hate doing the inventory Scott. And I'll tell you, it's a bitch. But now I see it as a challenge, one I gladly welcome.

(male, psychology--#21)

I tend to see what I actually do at work for more than what is on the surface. I'm a bank teller, and that job pays alright, but involves dealing with the public. There's this guy who always gives the tellers a rough time, and we'd bitch whenever the asshole came in. I now will take that hard customer because he's a challenge to me. I guess university had a part of this because I learn tolerance here, and see the psychology of why people act the way they do. I couldn't get that had I not come back to school.

(female, English/sociology--#9)

Others describe their outer growth in terms of abstract conversation skills that were developed after returning to school. As one informant states:

I now can think clearly in my head as to what my line of argument will be. Like if I am discussing a murder trial that's in the news. With most people, they get their tails in a fluster come talk of religion, aborting, or other hot topics. Now I can think clearly through the issues, without letting the emotional side of things cloud my thoughts. People have said that I don't go sounding off like an idiot when such issues are raised. I'm more calmer and can state what I mean.

(male, psychology--#20)

Many mature students stated that in addition to learning self-control and how to develop a logical argument, they also became better informed. Informants stated that course material provided insight into why they had made the choices they did in life. Equipped with this knowledge, the mature students interviewed said that they had become more observant, more aware, and better able to control how events shaped their lives, and more articulate. As one informant says:

I guess the biggest change for me Scott was that I am more aware of what's going on in the world. I began to be able to acquire the words to put to ideas that I couldn't relate to others before. I can now use words to influence others' thoughts and beliefs.

(male, sociol/soc. wk.--#25)

Perhaps the greatest reward of returning to university was that competence in sharing meanings (Prus 1989a) breeds confidence. As confidence rises, other aspects of sociability are enhanced, including those encountered outside the classroom. As one student puts it:

I now can converse with people more freely. I can mingle with people similar to me more better now. Before I just couldn't follow what some people were talking about. I couldn't play Trivia Pursuit because I was ignorant of what the facts were. But now things have changed. (female, anthropology/social work--#17)

Furthermore confidence breeds assertiveness. As a result of the university socialization experience, mature students come to see themselves as confident, proud individuals. Such confidence means that mature students begin to view their relationships more seriously. As one informant said:

I am not a doormat any more. The men in my life before treated me like garbage, and that left me devastated in terms of self-esteem. But now I don't take shit from any guy. They learn quickly that if they want to keep me, they better treat me right. (female, sociol.--#6)

Many informants reported that to criticism became easier to take. Relations with partners and spouses improved as result of returning to school. Some examples of such improvement include:

In fights with my husband I can now quickly decide what the best way is to resolve the divide. I finish arguments we have quicker, and we better

understand one another. (female, hons. English/sociology--#9)

**I'm not a little girl anymore in the marriage. I've never felt better about the marriage Rick and I have. We now have better communication than before.
(female, psych/social wk--#11)**

A further benefit of returning to school is the growth of tolerance and acceptance of diversity. As one informant puts it:

I am tolerant to racial and ethnic differences now. I am also more open to the abortion issue, where before my Catholic upbringing meant I was against it. I also try not to be judgemental. My husband's a cop, and so he's the opposite. Always seeing people as either victims or as suspects. That is not for me. I can't stand that tunnel vision. I now look at a story in the news and see why people commit crimes, instead of saying that they're plain sick in the head.

(female, geog./hist--#19)

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to convey the extent of the change that the mature student undergoes. Identity, self-image, and self-esteem are interconnected concepts. As the mature student identifies with this new role, and succeeds at school, his/her self-image and self-esteem grow. Although the transition is problematic initially, as the student successfully adopts a new self, accommodating both the new status and other existing roles, the return to school yields higher self-esteem and improved relations with others.

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

Attending to university later in life can be viewed as a status passage for the adult. Often, this passage is not completed smoothly, for returning to school created various problems that must be dealt with, both before the passage begins and throughout its duration. Few adults return to school in later life, but for those who do decide to return, the rewards are many.

As the mature student navigates the status passage, numerous negotiations have to be transacted. Students must negotiate their changing roles and identities with family members and friends. Sometimes considerable tension develops in these relationships because the mature student is not living up to expected standards of behaviour for persons in that point of the life course. The precarious nature of adult relationships is evident in the conflicts that arise when an adult decides to return to school.

At the same time, there is also tension within the mature student him/herself as socialization into the perspectives of the university proceeds. Adults who return to school after a long absence must learn to perform tasks such as writing essays, taking examinations, and completing vast amounts of reading quickly. The student

must also learn to participate in tutorials, do library research, and so on.

Returning to school in later years is also an act of self-change. Mature students experience a marked change in self-esteem and self-confidence, which impacts on other areas of their lives, including family and spousal relations; and also a general increase in assertiveness. Indeed, the ramifications of successfully navigating the status passage far exceed self-change, for the mature student's significant others also change as a result of the return to school. Informants report better relationships with their spouses or partners, and an improvement in their children's grades in school.

The decision to return to university is not one taken lightly. Women take much longer to decide to return to university than men do; the average period over which mature student thoughts about returning was seven years for women and one year for men. This suggests that the "career" of a mature student requires a long process of personal reflection before the individuals in question are ready to actively set out on the status passage. There are, however, turning points in life that facilitate the desire to change. A divorce, loss of a job, or death of a loved one can be catalysts for the change.

Once the decision has been reached, ensuring the availability of sufficient fund to pay for tuition and expenses must be attended to. A negotiation process wherein the student and significant others decide where the money to pay for school is to be found must take place. If money cannot be found within the family budget, it must

be borrowed from the government. But accessing student loans is a problem, since mature students often don't meet the qualifying requirements. Once that hurdle is overcome, students must adjust to school.

The university has set up offices to address the special needs of mature students. Both the McMaster Association of Part-Time Students and Counselling Services offer help to those who actively seek it out. These constitute the formal networks students can turn to for advice, information, and support.

However, often informal support proves more effective in dealing with issues relating to the situation of the mature student. When students return, they face dilemmas in how to deal with unsupportive friends or family who cannot lend the support needed for the passage. Under these circumstances, the need for student subcultures emerges. Subcultures form to take care of needs unmet by formal university organizations and significant others. One such need is to inform the students about various aspects of student life, such as university policies, course and professors. Another need is for support and empathy. Subcultures also allow the student to share perspectives with other mature students, and develop the relational aspect of social group life.

The study of mature students reveals similarities and differences with other student populations. Sociological research into the world of the mature student has been insufficient to date. Most work has focused on women students, and little attention has been paid to mature students in general. Work done on graduate and

professional students indicates clear parallels between the mature student population and other student populations if serious role-commitment is present.

This study has revealed that the status passage in question is a social act, and is not accomplished alone. Mastering the meanings and learning the new language of higher education are tasks that must be carried out collectively. The mature student must engage in ongoing renegotiation of roles and definitions. In fact, this study has revealed that the navigation of the status passage to mature studenthood takes place in accordance with theories of generic social process in human group life. It also revealed that the socialization experience involved in the status passage in question greatly enriched the lives of those who underwent it, and enhanced their self-understanding and functioning in the world at large.

GLOSSARY¹

Antirequisite - is a course which cannot be taken for credit before, after, or at the same time as the course with which it is listed.

Continuing Student - is a university graduate who is not proceeding to an advanced degree, but wishes to take one or more undergraduate courses.

Course Numbers - (e.g. 1AO3) can be interpreted as follows: the initial digit indicates the Level of the course; the letter(s) in the middle identifies the specific courses within the Level; and the final digit(s) defines the number of units of credit associated with the course.

Cumulative Average (CA) - is a weighted average based on the grades obtained in all courses taken.

Degree - is conferred when a student completes a programme of study (e.g. Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Physical Education, Master of Science, Doctor of Philosophy).

Department - is a subdivision of a Faculty, responsible for a particular subject or group of subjects (e.g. Department of Chemistry, Department of Modern Languages).

Elective Courses - are those courses which are not Required Courses, and which a student has a choice in selecting. These courses form part of the total number of units required for the degree programme.

Faculty - is a major administrative and teaching unit of the University responsible for programmes and courses relating to common fields of study or academic disciplines (e.g. faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Engineering).

Full-time Student - is an undergraduate student who is registered in at least 24 units in the Fall/Winter session, including Extra Courses.

Level - is used to describe a student's progression through the programme.

Mature Student - is a least 21 years old prior to his or her first day of classes; has not attended secondary school for at least two years; and has not previously attended university.

Part-time Student - is an undergraduate student who is registered in fewer than 24 units in the Fall/Winter session, including Extra Courses.

Prerequisite - is a requirement to be fulfilled before registration in a course is permitted. This is usually the successful completion of another course.

Programme - is a specific combination of courses that fulfills the requirement for a degree.

Registration - is the process whereby a student enrolls in a programme of study and/or courses and pays, or makes acceptable arrangements to pay, all fees.

Required Courses - are those courses which are specifically designated for inclusion in a programme.

Term - is a period of study within a session. The Fall/Winter session, for example, contains three terms. Term 1 runs from September to December; Term 2 runs from January to April; Term 3 runs from September to April.

Transcript - is an official document summarizing the entire academic record of a student at a particular educational institution.

Undergraduate Student - is a student enrolled in a programme of study leading to a bachelor's degree or to the degree Doctor of Medicine.

Units - define the number of credits associated with a course. Three-unit courses are usually one term in length. Six-unit courses are usually two terms, or one session.

Weighted Average - is calculated taking into account the grade and the unit value of each course.

1. Source: quoted directly from McMaster University's 1993-1994 Undergraduate Calendar, page six.

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