**Introduction**

In this essay, I explore the epistemological issues which arise in, and are fundamental to, examining how mature students in the UK experience their full-time Foundation Degree in Childhood (FDC) which is my research focus. The key issues centre on how gender, the student experience and emotions are conceptualised and theoretically described. I will argue that Bourdieu offers/provides a conceptual framework through which my research question can be illuminated, that may minimize the dichotomies of the dualistic argument of male/female, mind/body, rational/irrational. I will argue for a feminist/post-structuralist standpoint and show that it is consistent with embracing Narrative Inquiry (NI) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In practical terms, this involves using interviews and reflective tasks as research instruments. My proposed research question is **‘What is the role of gender in mature students’ emotional lives as a result of attending/finishing a higher education professional course?’**

I will began with a brief contextualisation of why it is important to address the role of gender when researching mature student emotion (positive and negative) within the care industry and why it may be an issue for social justice. This is followed by a discussion of the work of Reay (2000; 2004) and Zembylas’s (2007) elaboration of Bourdieu’s ‘capitals’ framework. By researching how emotion is captured/capitalized and how this ‘emotional capital’ manifests in mature students’ professional and personal lives because of higher education, the meaning of emotion and the contextualisation of emotion within higher education will be addressed. The research methods will be justified in the second part of this essay.

**The context of the research question**

Since the end of the 1980s there has been a rapid expansion of Nurseries (DfES, 2000). Alongside this expansion has come an awareness of the need for the employment of a larger but skilled early years (EY) workforce as both the quality and quantity of child care services depend in large measure on the workforce. Since 1997, public policy has, for the ﬁrst time during the post-war period, been actively committed to support working parents (DfES, 2007). The Labour Government strategy was “paid employment for all” including women with children; this was underlined in policies such as the New Deal and the National Childcare Strategy (DfES, 2007). The formal acceptance of what previous early years pioneers had argued for and what the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project proved (BIS, 2004), that qualification improves quality, by the Labour Government elicited a commitment to support the workforce by subsidising the FDC course fee and to support financially those EY provisions supporting their staff with their study (CWDC, 2009). Since the Coalition Government gained power in 2010, not only higher education but the whole early years sector has undergone some major changes. Cameron et al. (2002) suggest these changes raise a number of issues about child care work, such as low payment, a highly gendered industry and low social value. Not only is the child care workforce gender segregated, but compared with other occupations (social work for example), the workforce has a low level of educational qualiﬁcation (Rolfe et al., 2003). Therefore for the purpose of this research it is important to consider the current political and economic situation in which higher education is currently functioning and with its mature students too, because it is not only the emotion which is hard to define but also the changing nature of higher education. For example, in the past universities were an ‘environment governed by rules of power and authority’ (Boler, 1999, p. 4) but in the rise (and slight decline) of therapeutic education (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Furedi, 2004), the marketization of higher education and the push for a vocational emphasis on degree courses, the social and educational benefits of learning are being neglected by governments and policy-makers (Field et al. 2010; Ball, 2013). One of its manifestations is in the mode of the delivery of the FDC course which was once nationally offered as part-time but now is condensed into full-time although with the same expectation to meet ‘quality’. In another words, students on the course before the educational policy and funding changes enjoyed full bursaries for their higher education and employers’ support to attend lessons (CWDC, 2008); they now face high tuition fees and a shorter timescale (by one year) to fulfil the same university workload.

Therefore the rationale to focus on mature students as opposed to other kinds is entirely connected with the population of the FDC, which mainly attracts female mature students due to the occupation in which they work. Applicants are predominantly 21 years old or older which is a benchmark for calling a student ‘mature’ (DfES, 2006). Therefore the rationale for exploring the role played by the gender of mature students lies in the highly gendered care industry. As the research of Cameron et al. (2001b) shows, more than 98 per cent of those employed in childcare are female. This relates to the rationale for examining their emotional experience of the two year full-time FDC. Many researchers, such as Hoult (2006), suggest that mature students, especially when talking about their emotional involvement in HE, have complex issues due to their family commitments. Carney (2001) and Leibowitz (2009) also suggest that one area of particular salience for mature students is the stress of balancing the multiple demands of work, academic requirements and personal life. However none of these researches specifically addresses the gender issue. On the other hand, Osgood (2010) has extensively discussed the gender construction on EY female practitioners and argued for their professional recognition, but she has not debated this through the lens of ‘emotional capitals’ which this essay will address. It is also important to acknowledge that nowadays one third of undergraduate students are working adults (Giancola et al., 2008) so not only mature students need to balance their time effectively but ‘traditional’ students too, while Basit and Tomlinson (2012) suggest that to date there has been limited focus on what happens to the mature students emotionally once they are in the institutions and what inequalities they may face there. The originality of this proposal is not only to explore how mature students benefit (or not) from their emotional experience but also in addressing the gendered nature of the research.

My own rationale is that I have been involved for many years in the kind of classroom environment where I have observed that many female mature students lack confidence in their academic ability, something that is often attributed to repeated experiences and difficulties in understanding and meeting the rigorous and unfamiliar bureaucratic environment of higher education. They often combined their professional work and family responsibilities with their studies, and it was therefore not surprising that a large number of such students have heightened emotional responses to their personal situations, which is often detrimental to their academic studies. It is also generally accepted that stereotypically women are defined as being more emotional than men (Stets and Turner, 2007; Giancola et al., 2008). Women are portrayed as being more emotionally volatile although the accuracy of this portrayal may have no scientific basis. This complex relationship between gender and emotional expressiveness was extensively studied by Brody (2009) who also states that stereotypes about gender and emotional expression tend to be imprecise and misleading, especially when expressing emotional intensity and frequency. They fail to acknowledge situational, individual, and cultural variations in the emotional expressiveness of both males and females. Brody furthermore argues that when gender differences in emotional expression do occur, they can be traced to social processes such as dissimilar gender roles and status with power imbalances. Therefore by addressing gender, especially when analysing both negative and positive emotions that infuse the learning and professional working experience and with it their social experience too, this research proposal may contribute to this under-researched field.

It is also important to define what the term ‘emotion’ means because emotion is very much dependent on which discipline is represented as to the meaning of emotion itself. There are many definitions of emotion in the scientific literature, for example, in psychology Plutchik (2001) suggests that emotion is considered from the individual and private viewpoint, which reduces emotion to a very internal and personal part of human life. In contrast, from the sociological perspective the concept of emotion has been theorised in a cultural and social context (Williams, 2001). Stets and Turner (2005) support and build on the above theory emphasising that cultural factors are dominant when theorising emotions. Although all the above mentioned approaches are mainly based around general human feelings and wellbeing, Burkitt (1999) suggest that emotion cannot be separated from social, cultural, and individual factors. Therefore, I adopted a definition from Burkitt, who suggest that:

…emotions cannot be reduced to language alone, nor can it be said what the words are… the idea of emotions is complex constituted in relations… (it is) multidimensional and cannot be reduced to biology, relations or discourse alone, but belongs to all these dimensions as they are constituted through ongoing relational practices (1999, p. 115)

My specific interest lies in the second part of this definition, which suggests that emotion is something which is fluid and transformative because of the relational practices. In the context of this essay it refers to the mature students’ emotional experience and relational practices with HE, professional work and private life.

The following chart summarises the focus of the research in terms of methods/instrument, who will be the participants and which theoretical framework is proposed:

**Bourdieu’s conceptual framework**

Bourdieu has written extensively about education and introduced the idea of habitus, field and capitals to explain educational inequalities, although some of his interest lies in social differentiation and class reproduction which he related to the hierarchy of power (Bourdieu 1990 in Jenkins, 1992). Although this essay is not going to address the issue social class and does not intend to examine from which social class these mature students come, the findings of this research may also highlight some relationship between emotion and social class. Nevertheless, Bourdieu (1986) has developed a framework emphasising how the embodied agent is shaped by a society and ‘vice versa’. Furthermore Bourdieu suggests that ‘social actions are dependent on habitus, capital and the social ﬁeld, where the habitus can be considered:

as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class constituting the precondition for all objectiﬁcation and apperception. (1986, p. 101)

The group of people in this research are the mature students from the care industry, so according to this quotation it is not necessarily meant that all members of a group/cohort of students would act or think or perceive their emotional experience in the same way while studying FDC. Interestingly, Bourdieu (1986) also writes that ‘habitus is created and reproduced unconsciously, without any deliberate pursuit of coherence… without any conscious concentration’ (cited in Richardson p. 241). It can be understood that each academic year the group of mature students on the FDC reproduce unconsciously and perhaps accumulate or capitalise similar emotional experience. Taking into account the rapid change in HE especially, and considering the financial side and the marketization element of it, inequality between the group/cohort of students can be recognised not only in terms of finance (high tuition fee) but the timescale in which the FDC is now delivered (full- as opposed to part-time). As a consequence, students’ emotional experience may be different and with it the chain of the reproduction of the same habitus may be broken.

A second important concept introduced by Bourdieu is that of ‘capital’, which he extends beyond the notion of material assets to social, cultural or symbolic. These capitals are, like economic capital, ‘unequally distributed in society and the dominating classes are deriving proﬁts from them at the expense of others’ (Bourdieu, 1986 p. 248). Since this research examines emotion my plan is to adopt the term ‘emotional capital’. The term emotional capital according to Zembylas (2007) was first used by Nowotny (1981, in Zembylas, 2007) stating that the concept of emotional capital ‘offers a tool for thinking about the ways in which emotional practices are regulated within an educational context’ (p. 444). The concept of emotional capital has been used by Reay (2000) who explored the class and gender processes in parental involvement in their children’s education and investigated the link between educational success and emotional capital. Reay also suggests that although Bourdieu deals with gender differences in his work, but far less space is given to the emotions. Furthermore, in her work about emotional capital, women and social class, Reay (2004b) built on to her previous research – claiming that within current education “market class and gender continue to infuse attitudes and actions” (p. 71), and highlights that emotional capital reveals some of the class-specific details. Zembylas (2007) draws on this stating that emotional capital in education is realised in the uneven ways between groups or individuals, and highlights Nowotny’s (1981) argument of seeing the “emotional capital as a resource women have in greater abundance than men” (in Zembylas, 2007, p.451). Therefore examining the notion of emotion within female mature students and within educational context by using Bourdieu’s framework of capital (‘social capital/emotional capital’) may be well suited for exploring not only how emotional capital manifests or distributes within mature students’ lives but also addresses gender issues.

It can be argued then how emotional capital is viewed, as a ‘profit’ which can be used at the expense of others, or the opposite, to help others. For understanding the distribution of this capital, a third concept of Bourdieu’s theory will be used, the idea of ‘fields’. Fields, as Bourdieu (1989) described them, are the various social and institutional arenas in which people express and reproduce their dispositions and where they compete for the distribution of different kinds of capital. He warns us, however, about the contradictions that may arise when people are challenged about their perceptions by different contexts; in this case, mature students’ emotions may manifest differently within the field. Therefore the field itself in the context of this research is located in three main arenas, (1) HE where the teaching happens, (2) the home where the mature student lives and (3) the workplace, where the mature student works. The question is now how the ‘emotional capital’ is distributed within these three fields? Who benefits (or not) the most from it? Is it equally shared? The answer lies in the application of appropriate research methods for collecting lived stories from the mature students’ point of view.

**The proposed approach is feminist post-structuralist**

Given the complex nature of the multi-layered emotion and within the gender, I am arguing for the feminist post-structuralist position in which I recount and reflect upon embracing NI of mature students studying FDC. According to Maynard and Purvis (1994) post-structuralist focuses more on the speaker who is operating within the structure than on the structure itself, therefore this approach allows me to focus on what mature students are telling me about their experience on their full time FDC. Alvesson (2002) suggests that a post-structuralist approach recognizes the power of discourse to shape reality, which means that the description of ‘social reality’ is viewed at the given moment and with particular theoretical understanding. In the context of this research ‘social reality’ means how mature students perceive their experience under the current political and economic environment, and how it fits within Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. By using his framework and by taking into consideration the current eco/political situation in the UK and its influence on HE, the role of gender and emotions will be examined under this lens with the hope that the findings will make sense as the:

…difficulty of a sociology, … is to produce a precise science of an imprecise, fuzzy, woolly reality. For this it is better that its concepts be polymorphic, supple and adaptable, rather than defined, calibrated and used rigidly.

(Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992 in Reay, 2000, p.569)

This quotation indicates that the development of what is termed ‘post-structuralism’ is linked to what philosophers regarded as the limitations that a structuralism held for human relationships (Wright, 2003). Human relationship in term of this research means the relationship between mature students and HE and with their workplace, with the emphasis on emotion. As the definition of emotion is ‘multi’ layered/structured/dimensional, the post-structuralist view is suited to examining the plurality of its meaning because it doubts the existence of reality and ‘truth’. At this point it is important to note Plummer’s (1995) view on ‘honesty’ as it has a direct link with the post-structuralist stance of ‘truth’. He would say that the researcher cannot ascertain ‘honesty’ in research because all that research will give you is the respondent’s ‘stories’ or versions or current narratives. They may appear ‘honest’ at the time, but honesty is not fixed or static and the ‘story’ that respondents give you about their experiences may be shaped by their current identity, their current view of their past history and their hopes for a future identity. In addition, all these factors can change over time, so the changeability of the ‘truth’ is likely.

Since feminist influence started to have more voice in the field of emotion in education, for example in the work of Leathwood and Hey (2009) and Leathwood and Read (2009), according to Fisher (2000) emotion has been ‘re-discovered as a social phenomenon which manifested in new emphasis on the interest of emotion and gender’ (p.6). So, recent feminist - poststructuralist researchers disprove the possibility of conducting research without presumptions or bias, and emphasise the importance of making it clear how interpretations and meanings have been placed on findings (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007). Alvesson and Deetz (2000) argue that “no research can be free from the taint of the researchers’ own knowledge” (p.113) and that the data is affected by the construction of the researcher. While Alvesson and Deetz write about the subjectivity of the researcher, in my opinion it is important to mention the subjectivity of the reader too, because understanding of the data happens through the reader’s own interpretation/subjectivity. Given that the research proposes the strictly interpretive approach, it is really important to consider my potential biases such as my background of being a mature student myself and being employed within a professional field, consequently I may have similar emotional experiences. Does it mean that I am restricted in carrying out research within these parameters? The feminist standpoint in regard to this issue stresses the importance of reflexivity and potential bias. For example, according to Maynard and Purvis (1994) and Harding (1992), reflexivity lies at the heart of the research which also acknowledges the critical role the researcher plays in interpreting and theorising the research data. This is in line with Mauthner and Doucet’s (1998) view stating that reflection and understanding means ‘I’ as a researcher, ‘making explicit where we are (I am) located in relation to our (my) research respondents’ (p. 1). In other words it means that it is clear what the researcher’s cultural, personal, political and intellectual standpoint is. Feminist discussions furthermore question the nature of the researcher relationship with the participants (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007), for example, the similarities or differences between researcher and researched such as age, gender, cultural background, etc. For the purpose of this research proposal I will ‘try’ to act as a researcher only; however as I explained earlier, there are some similarities between the participants and me. The argument to adopt a feminist/post-structuralist position can be associated with Bourdieu’s (1990 in Navarro, 2006, p.11) proposal of a ‘reflexive sociology’ in which, as Navarro states, “one recognises one’s biases, beliefs and assumptions in the act of sense-making long before reflexivity became fashionable”.

While it is important to address the researcher standpoint and while investigating phenomena often happens from a subjective perspective, there is an argument about the validity of the research. For example, Ritchie and Lewis (2011) suggest that the subjectivity could limit the ‘truth’. Berrol also warns that no matter the form of data collection, ‘the investigator is the instrument of, as well as, the interpreter of the results’ (2000, p.4). Therefore, as Patton (1990, p. 23) suggests, its real weakness is in being so heavily dependent on the researcher’s ‘skill, training, intellect, discipline, and creativity’ because conducting a research exercise which looks intensely into the personal life of others and which places its emphasis and value on the human, is a complex task.

**Researching emotion – emotionalism**

Researchers who want to investigate emotions must either depend on outward signs of emotion in others (or on the ways that others describe their emotions), or rely on their own experience as a source of data, according to Parkinson (1995). For example, the researcher’s response in each case is inevitably shaped by their assumptions about the nature of emotion, such as the belief that it is essentially an individual experience. One may rightly ask the question to what extent can the researcher know what others feel through their reflection. Also, how to make a consistent link between an apparently private experience and a linguistic term to describe it? In order to get the desired information, I argue that this research is to be conducted in a way where the mature student’s story can be listened to; a story about their experience in HE with a specific focus on emotion. Therefore the feminist/post-structuralist standpoint is consistent with embracing Narrative Inquiry (NI) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which the desire to illuminate gender differences is connected with. Although these two methods are similar in exploring the ‘lived experience’, there are some differences; while the NI is chronological and based on human stories (Riessman, 1993; Bold, 2012), IPA, on the other hand, is concerned with the understanding and interpretation of these stories by the individuals (Smith et al. 2009).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a relatively recent qualitative approach developed specifically within psychology; however it is now being used in social sciences too (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is concerned with trying to understand ‘lived experience’ and with how participants themselves make sense of their experiences; concerned with the meanings which those experiences hold for the participants. On the other hand NI is concerned with the individual’s experience in the world, an experience that was storied both in the living and telling and that could be studied by listening, observing, living alongside, writing and interpreting texts (Bold, 2012). Therefore I argue that for the purpose of this research collecting reflective text/journal material from participants followed by qualitative interviews is the best way to gather data. Because I am particularly interested in studying emotion and how emotion shaped the life of mature students, my intention through thematic analysis is to concentrate on the content of the reflective text, “what” is said more than “how” it is said, the “told” rather than the “telling” (Reissman, 1993). This approach is in line with Maynard and Purvis’s (1994) suggestion, mentioned earlier, that it is important to highlight how language is used within the research. Furthermore, when investigating emotion, Gubrium and Holstein (2003) suggest that ‘I’ as a researcher “should provide an atmosphere conducive to open and undistorted communication” (p. 116). The key to this is to avoid manipulation; therefore I will follow the guidelines underlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011).

**Participants and the research instruments**

Ideally, the research will focus on small groups (about eight) of male and female mature students who have recently studied or are currently studying at Higher Education level in the UK and who combined their study with their professional work. The aim is to have participants from the field of Early Years despite that I might face difficulty in finding male participants. But if the research objective is to explore differences between male and female stories/themes, then finding male participants is vital. Following the guidelines of BERA (2011) participants will be informed that their anonymity would be preserved and their names will not be used and they can withdraw from the research at any point.

Since the IPA claims that it is phenomenological in that it wishes to explore an individual’s personal perception or account of an event, in this case the event will be attending or finishing a HE degree, as opposed to attempting to produce an objective record of the event (Smith et al., 2009), which means that the research itself does not focus on the chronology of the event that took place, or on the description of the experience, but on HOW emotional experience manifests in their personal and professional lives. The best way to examine this question is to collect reflective texts /journals and to carry out the qualitative interview. Although Cohen et al. (2011) state, that the contribution of ‘text’ has often been overlooked in educational research in general, especially in using a qualitative method because of the linguistic aspect of the text, Hendy and Ross (2005) argues that written text provides invaluable data and in-depth information about personal experiences. They believe that analysing the text is easier than analysing transcripts from interviews, as they are self-reflective and highly focused on the subject matter. However, it could be argued that asking participants to write a story or a self-reflective piece of work may not suit those who are not comfortable using written language. Cohen et al. (2011) also argue that texts are an important way to collecting data for research; Atkinson and Hammersley, however, argue that data collected from texts cannot be accepted automatically, as they may not be accurate, since data were constructed within a social context; therefore, ‘participants’ views are more likely to be influenced by social factors’ (1994, p.101) hence it is important to conduct an interview as a different method of data collection because it multiple perspectives on the concept of emotion. Although Silverman (2011) argues that interviewees may want to please the researcher with their answer and tends to carry a problem of ‘social desirability bias’ (p. 7), qualitative interviews can give participants an element of freedom during the research process and, at the same time, provide rich data (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003). Similarly, according to Bryman (2009) qualitative interviewing has the capacity to provide a researcher with the depth and complexity of data that is not available with other survey-based approaches, especially when sensitive issues are broached. At the same time, while trying to get close to the participant's personal world, IPA considers that it may not be achievable in full because of the researcher’s own conceptions – it requires making sense of that ‘Other’ personal world through a process of interpretative activity (Cohen et al., 2011).

There is also a concern around the number of samples among the critiques. For example, Roberts-Holmes (2005) argues that every small study is limited because often the findings cannot be generalised outside the context of the research. Ritchie and Lewis (2011) explain that if the sample size is increased, it is a common misunderstanding that the results should thereby be statistically reliable. This is another reason why I argue to conduct the qualitative research under the feminist/post-structuralist lens, because by analysing the text and the data collected from the interviews the information which they proved is rich which may not be the case if the research is carried out under the quantitative approach.

**In summary**

In this essay I have emphasised Bourdieu’s work in relevance to the notion of ‘emotional capital’ and tried to outline its relationship with habitus and field in a way that it is suitable to use as a tool to examine mature students emotional lives which have been shaped as a result of their HE experience. Using emotional capital as a tool ensures not only that emotionality and the work of emotion is acknowledged in education, but also allows the research to become broader in terms of its socio-political implications which is linked to social justice. I also argued that the best way to research emotion is to use Narrative Inquiry (NI) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which involves using reflective texts/journal and qualitative interviews as research instruments. With the slight worry over the project to find male participants I am determined to carry out this research to contribute to an existing research in terms of emotion and gender.

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