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LOOKING BACK –
ADULT EDUCATION AS A RITE OF PASSAGE?

Introduction

Since the 1990s, lifelong learning has been central to many political programmes (Bourdon 2014). The concept of globalisation and the notion that we live in a knowledge-based society with a knowledge-based economy have been emphasized by both politicians and businesses, supporting a significant societal discourse that education is a necessary and possible good that should extend beyond adolescence. Denmark, like other countries, has encouraged adults to further their studies, either to extend their education or to pursue a new programme of study.

This article focuses on students who enter a master's programme after earning a professional bachelor's degree as social educators and a subsequent period of working in their field. I classify these students as mature or 'adult students' (Knowles 1992; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston 1997), as all have a professional qualification and a career, and often are well-established in civic life, too. I aim to ascertain how these students regard this second phase of their education and, as representatives of late modern society (Giddens 1991), what meaning they ascribe to it.

Hence, the aim of the article is to understand how and why adult students pursue a second degree using a sociological perspective inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's work. From his perspective, adult students can be seen as social agents, each with an individual life course that originates from a position in the social space that moulds each agent's socially incorporated habitus and disposes them to understand their present lives and plan their future lives and work in specific ways (Bourdieu 1986). However, over time the social space itself also undergoes change and the possible social positions in that space adapt accordingly. To explore these processes, I examine the narratives of four different agents – telling the stories of adult students willing to share their thoughts about entering a master's programme based on a professional bachelor's degree. I present my findings as four selected cases before presenting their stories in terms of rites of passage.

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Context for the study

Adult education that aims to better-qualify the existing labour force through short-term courses has been common in Denmark for many years (Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science 2018), as has a broader, non-formal educational system rooted in the Folk High Schools that dates back to the mid-1800s (Højskolerne 2018). Nowadays, the formal educational system is also available to adult students but this opportunity is relatively new. Historically, formal education developed as extensions of independent institutions – professional guilds, state-run programmes to train administrators and the universities. This created diverse systems making it almost impossible to transfer from one educational track to another without starting over. Various initiatives to soften this sectionalised system culminated in the Bologna declaration of 1999 – which established standardised examination structures and systems of merit for bachelor's, master's and doctorate levels (European Ministers of Education 1999) – making it possible to combine short higher education programmes with university studies. This encouraged the system of higher education in Denmark to be more open than it used to be.

Currently, two parallel higher education tracks exist. Young people may enter a university immediately after completing their secondary education and enrol in a three-year bachelor's degree programme, followed by a two-year master's degree programme. Alternatively, students may register at a university college to take a professional bachelor's degree that qualifies them for vocational work. Denmark's welfare professionals follow the latter route, teachers, social educators, childcare professionals and nurses are the four largest groups. There may be many reasons why professionals decide to enter university at the master's level: applying for additional university education is, in general, owing to a combination of external circumstances and private ambitions (Bayer & Brinkkjær 2005; Johansen 2008). They may be 'wanting something more' or have a 'wish for more knowledge' but conversely, exhaustion from a physically demanding job or difficulty finding a suitable occupation in a specific job market may also be factors (Illeris 2003). Should they wish to continue their studies they may choose to pay fees of approximately EUR 12,000 in total to take a professional master's degree or they may enrol in an academic equivalent, which is fully state funded. For financial reasons many choose the latter option and, consequently, a growing percentage of master's students at Danish universities are unaccustomed to classical academic reasoning as their previous studies had a more practical focus.

Formally, all master's students are postgraduates, but knowledge-wise those with professional bachelor's degrees sit between traditional university students and those pursuing further professional studies. Therefore, when the professional graduates start a master's degree course they encounter a world that is unfamiliar to them with

regard to knowledge forms (Durkheim 1956) and knowledge sociology (Callewaert 1999). Firstly, their prior education has socialised them to work with practical and value-laden topics and this way of thinking, a complex skill, forms part of their tacit knowledge. However, the explicit academic virtues of argumentation, critique and justification are under-rehearsed. Secondly, society generally places academic over professional knowledge, yet professional students are rarely aware that their learning occupies a lower position in the social space, so they are unprepared for the personal and academic challenges they encounter.

How students experience their encounter with university life and, more relevantly, how adult students pursuing higher education cope with this, and how the university engages with these students is comprehensively addressed in the literature but most of this reveals an Anglo-centric stance. The challenge that non-traditional learners present to universities is commonly discussed (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke 2001; Crossan, Field, Gallacher, & Merrill 2013) as is how the university can best meet the needs of new students through tailored support systems and integrational curricula (Clegg 2009). It is established that non-traditional students often arrive with specific expectations but little idea of what an academic education means and that their academic background may be weak (Sulik & Keys 2013). Some students are deemed to view university attendance as a period of transition (Palmer, O'Kane, & Owens 2009), while others arrive ready to experience a change of culture (Bathmaker & Thomas 2009): yet we should consider how generally such findings apply. This study starts the process in a Danish context.

What characterises the students discussed in this article is that each holds a professional degree as a social educator. They have few to many years of work experience but want to extend their studies for the reasons noted above. They live independently, alone or with others, and some have children. With respect to their finances, most choose to live on a combination of state benefits for students and their wages, which allows them to follow lectures in the daytime. Most of the students are the first generation of their family to attend university and hence are unfamiliar with academic life either as a way of thinking or working. To describe these characteristics is mainly to identify external aspects of the student group. However, my aim is different: namely, to analyse the meaning of adults undertaking a second education from a sociological perspective and through the students' stories.

Methods

Four stories were chosen for analysis from a range of master's theses submitted to the Danish School of Education. The theses sought to answer the question: 'Why do professional bachelors choose to embark on an academic master's programme?' Their authors

carried out active interviews with members of a group of adult students, either using a semi-structured qualitative approach (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009) to look for common themes (Riessman 2008) or using biographical methods (Goodson & Sikes 2001).

From this material I have selected four individual cases that are representative of this group of adult students and carefully reread and examined the stories presented within the four theses (Jiowda 2017). Doing this, I construed the students as agents who, consciously or unconsciously, embarked on a journey that entailed moving from the known (a working situation as a professional within the welfare state) to an unknown academic space with a less specific work domain. To better understand the character and content of the journey I apply three distinct perspectives. Firstly, I consider the students as agents attempting to move between two different fields in the social space. Secondly, I analyse the students' stories remaining sensitive to possible underlying narratives that relate to their journeys. Thirdly, I discuss the outcomes of the journeys with reference to rites of passage. Before I turn to the data, I will explain the three perspectives in greater depth.

Firstly, Moving between social fields

In sociology, interest concentrates on questions related to social layers and social control (Berger 1963). Social control deals with how society and groups in society maintain their values. This refers to the State's officially sanctioned exercise of authority but also to the numerous signs and sanctions constantly applied within everyday life to ensure individuals comply with existing values. Following Marx, classical Western sociology is predicated on strong relations between State and capital. However, research in Scandinavia has shown that unions may be a significant factor in terms of power (Broady 1998), as may the technocratic–intellectual elite in former Eastern Europe (Eyal, Szelényi & Townsley 1998).

Regarding social layers, holders of a professional bachelor's degree occupy a lower position in the social space than do academics (Bourdieu 1986). Once, the social distance between the two groups was significant – the academics were fewer and possessed more social power than the welfare professionals – but today the gap has narrowed significantly. Mass education has eroded the value of university examinations (Muel-Dreyfus 1983; Williams 2013), and as we have seen, at the same time, the professionals' education has been academicised, in part due to the increasing demand for the ability to handle complex knowledge in late modernity. However, differences between the two groups' positions in the social space still exist, economically as well as culturally.

Social position is not just a matter of whose occupation has the greatest worth. Adult students who chose a professional bachelor's degree pursue a course of study

that leads to a clearly defined job (e.g. teaching or nursing). At university, however, this is not the case. Academic studies seldom lead to a specific profession but instead encourage independent thinking, the pursuit of knowledge and learning to express oneself through a specific academic language and rhetorical style (Bourdieu, Passeron, & Saint Martin 1994). There are core differences in both the work outcomes and the ways of dealing with knowledge.

Within a professional bachelor's degree social values are occupationally specific, manifesting within a field of operation with specific aims. Dealing with questions related to norms often has an academic basis, but normally, in practical professional work the job demands a redefinition of this knowledge and sometimes more pragmatic everyday problem-solving (Weber 2004). The academic element that renders 'what is observed' useful through analysis and conclusion is often omitted in professional work.

Moving from a professional to an academic field may also challenge a student's familiar life and work paths (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). For students from the upper middle class, family upbringing and schooling during childhood and youth typically set expectations for a future that includes university studies. In contrast, students from the lower middle class rarely regard higher education as a probable option and thereby encounter significant dissonance.

Secondly, Narratives and Stories

Narratives can be viewed as cultural artefacts intended to tell a story, as fundamental to understandings one's existence in the world or, combining both interpretations, as a vehicle for communicating meaning (Rankin 2002). Although narratives and stories are often perceived to be synonymous, Leitch (1986) construed stories to be a form of narrative (one having context, shape and closure) whereas the broader narrative might be open-ended and context free. Narratives hence, form a background for stories, various stories may be drawn from a narrative depending on the situation in which a story is told (Leitch 1986). However, from a sociological perspective it is the 'social' that constitutes the framework for interpreting stories, and it may be presumed that social hierarchy and social norms influence how individual agents' utterances may be understood. Therefore, stories and their underpinning narratives will be analysed with this framework in mind. According to the Bourdieusian triad of position, disposition and social positionings for understanding of the social, we should comprehend utterances as expressing positionings (prises de positions) that people's social position and associated habitual disposition have made possible (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Therefore, a story holds what may be put into words, given the agent's specific position in the social space. Consequently, although informants may use similar wording during

interviews this should be interpreted differently as they are positioned differently in the social space as their social conditions vary.

When working with interviews that aim to understand people's' stories it is also essential to recognise that the interview is a dialogue between an agent and the interviewer (Mishler 1991; Mishler 1999). The interviews related to my four cases were carried out by a fellow adult student, providing the opportunity for a more equal dialogue than if an older researcher had interviewed a younger student. When extracting the stories from the interviews the aim is to look for the well-established stories, and by interpreting the underlying narratives to dig even deeper into the understandings on which these agents draw. Regarding the individual adult students' stories as stemming from narratives related to social positions in a social space makes them more general, more than a single individual's story. In this way the narrative is not just related to the individual but also to the cultural (Somers 1994).

Thirdly, Rites of passage

Through their journey from one educational level to the next ,and hence between different positions in society, the students in this study are undergoing transition. A concept that offers an analytical tool for understanding transitions and the related phases is that of rites of passage, an idea originally presented by the French folklorist, van Gennep (1909) who suggested that from a religious and spiritual perspective the transition from child to adult may be seen as having three phases: separation, transition and incorporation. According to van Gennep, rites de passage take place within a given, traditional culture. The child leaves his previous life and status as a child to undergo specific, mythic rituals. After, the youth returns to the same culture, but as an adult, and therefore with a changed status. In 1964, the anthropologist, Turner elaborated on van Gennep's work. He focused particularly on the middle part of the phases, the liminal phase which takes place outside of ordinary society in 'a period betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life' (Turner 1967, in Zhang 2012). As a movement from one status to another, the rites de passage are not only an analytic tool for transitions in traditional societies, they are phenomena that may be studied at every level and in relation to any transition from one state to another: first, separation, then the liminal phase and finally the reinstatement.

Van Gennep's and Turner's texts have inspired research on rites of passage in modern life (e.g. Davis-Floyd 1992; Merten 2005; St. John 2008), and in education, too (e.g. Field 2012; Palmer et al., 2009). To regard university studies as a significant element of a rite of passage for traditional students in the standard educational system is clearly justified as such educational programmes involve a transition from one culture to another.

However, adult students have already undergone this transformation through engaging with professional studies. Yet they are again encountering change, so applying the perspective of the rite of passage as a tool to describe transitions makes it possible to focus on transitions in their lives when analysing their stories and to ascertain where and when these have occurred.

Analysis

The four students who are discussed in this study come from the field of social education; the lowest status group among the welfare professions according to Bourdieusian analysis (Harrits & Pedersen 2018); a group where 80% of the students are women.

The students are:

Sara – 28 years old, born in a rural area near the west coast of Denmark
Julie – 29 years old, born in a town close to the Danish capital
Maja – 34 years old, born in a town in the provinces
Lea – 32 years old, born in a wealthy area north of the Danish capital

All four reveal life paths typical of this group of students, the analysis encompasses a) their social origins, including their parents' work and family expectations with regard to the informants' future; b) the informants' previous studies and their expectations about the future, and c) the informants' strategies/dispositions with respect to adults pursuing academic studies. My point of departure is the students' stories analysed on the basis of biographical interviews (Jiowda 2017).

Social origins and life paths – to date: the stories

Sara comes from a family in rural Denmark, in a tradition she describes as 'proud'. From farming theland the family took up opportunities for industrialisation arising in the countryside since the beginning of the 1900s, becoming improvers of farming products. The family ascribe no special meaning to formal education and everyone takes care of him/herself. Any intervention from the state is regarded as an intrusion. Like most young people today, Sara undertook three additional years of secondary schooling than required, but rather than a traditional upper secondary school she chose a newer, more business-oriented school.

Initially Sara undertook unskilled work for a few years but found this work too difficult to want to continue with it. Due to her additional schooling and in accordance with family expectations that women support men's newly-established small enterprises, Sara envisaged a future working in some kind of an administration role but eventually chose another direction, qualifying as an early-childcare worker and at the same time

leaving the rural area to move to a city. Her reason for choosing a professional bachelor's programme was partly social, as she wanted to meet new people, and she believed that those who worked in the pedagogical field were nice. After a few years as a qualified early-childcare worker, she applied for a master's programme.

Sara's life extends her family's path, which in keeping with similar social positions during the last third of the 1900s ascended to lower middle class. Her move between social fields happened more directly through her master's programme where Sara re-oriented herself towards administration, possibly in the educational field.

Julie grew up in a lower-middle class family. Both her parents, in working as a teacher and a social worker, contribute to the welfare state and thereby play a role in helping to reproduce the status quo. Throughout their working lives the parents often changed jobs, as they found it was extremely important that they felt good and that they generally had meaningful working lives. However, they also worked under the State's extensive and increasingly controlling regimes (Frostenson 2015), something that they found increasingly challenging. That life should be both fun and meaningful was extremely important in Julie's family.

The Danish tradition of liberal education means that young people are customarily encouraged to investigate life's various possibilities before pursuing higher education: trying various types of jobs, travelling, attending a folk high-school course, and so on. However, this expectation is being eroded as political emphasis is economically motivated and students increasingly pushed to complete their education in order to become full taxpayers for as long as possible. Therefore, upon finishing upper secondary school Julie felt pressured to start her higher education quickly and randomly chose a university course that she did not start. She was uncertain how to choose the 'absolutely right thing' and feared committing to something that might turn out to be a wrong choice. Because the professional bachelor programme as social educator offered the opportunity to continue to an academic master's programme, she later chose to start this programme of study and thought that a master's degree, in addition to a professional bachelor BA degree, might be 'as good as' a full academic master's degree.

Julie's life path is a continuation of her family's and she does not immediately move between social fields. However, with a master's degree she will have the opportunity to occupy a better position in the social space, but she also says that she does not really have any idea of what work she wants to do. Like her parents, she is preoccupied with the idea that the things she does should be interesting, but apart from this, she likes the practical aspects of being a social educator. Julie does not reflect on economic matters and it is possible that this is due to her parents being employed in the public sector. As this has increased exponentially over the past forty years the family had had no reason to fear unemployment or hardship.

Maja's family broke up when she was a child. Her father and his side of the family had their roots in traditional agricultural society and were highly religious: contentment and modesty were valued virtues and education unwelcome. On her mother's side, the family were financially ambitious, prioritising having a good job. To have a university degree was a means to that end. After her parents divorced, Maja lived with her mother, but she left home early (at 15) and tried to provide for herself while attending upper secondary school. However, she left education without a degree, the following years were turbulent with lots of ideas and temporary jobs, until she started studying to be a social educator.

Maja chose the social educator programme as she could enrol without returning to upper secondary school. During her studies she felt that she differed from most of her fellow students whom she saw as not serious and as 'social losers'. In parallel with her studies she worked in a day care institution and found that the profession of social educator had many interesting aspects. She started questioning what she saw as the profession's poor image, and at the same time the participated in various developmental projects. Maja worked as a social educator for five years before pursuing an academic master's programme. Initially, she found her studies hard, and she missed her colleagues.

Maja's life path has its roots in two different positions and hence between two social fields between which she wavers: no education and self-reliance, or higher education and higher status. Although she oriented herself more towards the latter position, she chose a shorter higher education programme and expresses no interest in high status jobs, either.

Lea's childhood took place in a politically confident collective, situated in a wealthy area. Her parents lived there for several years before they moved to an ordinary one-family house. Both parents were academics who had a lot of books, and political discussions were a daily feature in her childhood home. During primary and lower secondary school Lea felt pressure from her parents to pursue a tertiary education, and they 'definitely expected' her to attend a university.

All Lea's friends undertook long academic university programmes, but Lea chose the shorter professional bachelor's programme for social educators. Looking back, she reflects on her childhood in the collective and the values she learned there. Lea found that the study modules were easy to complete, and she regarded being a social educator as something to fall back on. Throughout her studies she believed that after attaining her bachelor's degree she would pursue an academic master's programme, motivated to gain more knowledge rather than to qualify for a specific job market.

Lea's life path started in the upper middle class, but as a social educator she positioned herself lower, socially. However, Lea's view of education is a liberal one, echoing

the familial social habitus. It might – or might not – bring financial gain. That is not too important.

Underpinning narratives

Continuing with a Bourdieusian perspective, I will consider the narratives on which the four students draw as related to the social positions they occupy, believing that their narratives will situate them on a path that starts with their upbringing and expectations for their futures which in turn are moulded by their social position (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Following an academic programme sets students apart from society. As they share a common aim they are often regarded as a homogeneous group by the outside world although their social conditions actually differ, as their individual narratives demonstrate.

Sara's narrative revolves around earning an income, being independent and being able to support herself. For her this is important: she fears that if she fails to take control others will make decisions on her behalf, and she is concerned that earning a salary may require compliance. She describes employment in a low-status job as being a 'wage slave' and rejects such a future, prioritising financial security in a way that is especially prevalent among the lower middle classes (Bourdieu 1986). In a similar vein, Sara believes that the work one pursues, even a master's programme, must 'be useful'. That she orients herself according to norms and values which she is familiar with from her upbringing (also see Becher & Trowler 2001) is bolstered by her lack of familiarity with the academic world. Her plan for a future in administrative work in the educational sector probably stems from her upbringing. From her childhood and in her work as a social educator she knows what this kind of work involves but thinks that as an academic she will be able to earn a higher salary which makes this even better.

Julie expresses and carries forward her parents' narrative about how to understand the relationship between work and existence: what we concern ourselves with should be fun and it should make sense. Julie's elaboration on this in her own story reveals that the things she engages with should be intrinsically exciting, too. In this way, her narrative addresses the need for self-reflexivity in late modern society (Giddens 1991). However, such a requirement is ambiguous and vague, and for Julie this results in a continuous search to determine the best option. Julie expresses uncertainty about choices on several levels. With regard to her studies, she says that she finds theory exciting, but at the same time she finds it difficult to connect theory to practice. When insisting on functionality in practice she refers to her professional background and distances herself from the academic world and academic knowledge, too. As a result, Julie prefers assignments that allow her to choose what to do and from what perspective, thereby

managing to avoid what she finds difficult, tedious or unpleasant. To decide which are the right choices for her, she listens to her feelings.

In **Maja**'s story we find a narrative about acting rationally. To her, this is important but she does not look beyond her own impressions and experiences when making decisions. She seeks the fastest track to the goal she sets herself. For example, her goal is success and she believes that equates with earning an academic master's degree. Her narrative also reveals doubts about her ability to reason, she merely speculates whether or not something will lead to success. For instance, uncertain about selecting the 'right' study modules during her programme she wonders what the world beyond the university will value most, deciding to take modules she finds difficult, such as statistics to demonstrate that she is competent and not someone who only takes the easy option. She admits that she has no idea whether or not this a good strategy and has made no effort to find out in advance. She acts independently, seeking advice from neither side of the family – by doing so, she avoids hurting either side.

Lea's story mirrors a narrative related to her parents' attitude to education as essential and something to take for granted. However, when she was very young she was unable to live up to parental expectations, so this narrative also leaves Lea uncertain. She is unsure about her choice of studies, and unclear about the financial position that the 'right' education would lead to. Lea ascribes her selection of a professional bachelor's degree programme in social education to her childhood in the collective: this made her aware of the importance of good social relations. When she made her choice she found this the most attractive option, but given her educational status it was also a necessary step to higher education in general. Lea did not reject the idea of an academic degree; she chose the feasible option. Her decision to study for an academic master's is motivated by the prospect of a better job, better earnings and the opportunity to invest in herself. For Lea self-fulfilment and autonomy are important. She puts her own wishes first whilst distancing herself from professions that are subject to increasing documentation. In this way she remains in her social field.

Adult education as a rite of passage?

Within the students' narratives, I do not find (nor expect to find) expressive and symbol-laden rites, as in traditional rites of passage. Instead, a sense of having transformed from youth to adult which, on looking back, may be understood as a transition. In the literature, the rites of passage originally centred on separation from the family and one's familiar culture (Gennep 1960; Turner 1967), but recent research extends the term to cover the transition from home and family to university life with other students in a youth culture. Here, we will not find a simple thread that runs throughout

the narratives but more complex and entangled beliefs through which the agent tries to find his or her position in society. Social forces also affect the students' reasoning: in a society that is simultaneously dominated by modernity (where rationality, belief in knowledge and prosperity rule (Giddens 1991; Lyotard 1986)) and late modernity (where reflexivity and identity formation are main concerns), agents will naturally relate to both discourses. 'However, research suggests that although in the Late Modern era the individual is in many ways unrestricted, compared to individuals in earlier times when social reproduction was the rule rather than the exception, society's general structures continue to be reproduced.

To an outsider, **Sara** appears to find her adult identity early as she went immediately into unskilled work after completing upper secondary school. However, she rejected this lifestyle and actually her rite of passage was lengthy. Her initial decision to work 'outside' the home was socially acceptable in her rural setting as women were no longer needed to work on the farms and instead contributed to the family economy by earning a salary, often as day care worker, nurse or shopkeeper. Therefore, undergoing training to work with young children was a perfectly acceptable choice. Her rite of passage began when she moved to a city and had to learn ways of coping in an urban setting. Starting a professional bachelor's programme to become a social educator, and orienting herself to a future career in the welfare state were all culturally unfamiliar choices with respect to her childhood and youth.

While working as a social educator, Sara became interested in a newly-established field in the area of education: administration and management. Until recently such work was of minor significance, a job done by a part-time clerk. However, with increasing state bureaucracy this work has been professionalised to employ academics and other specialists, attracting newcomers into the field (Muel-Dreyfus 1983). It seems likely that Sara will be able to find a habitat for her habitus here (Bourdieu 2000), whilst meeting the familial cultural expectation of earning an acceptable salary. Achieving a suitable administrative job may mark the end of her rite of passage.

Julie's rite of passage differs from Sara's as her choices do not involve a break with the culture in which she was raised. Her first encounter with higher education was akin to that of her parents' so studying to be a social educator was not at all difficult. Like her family, she allows her emotions to influence her choices. However, like many of the younger generation her reasoning is also influenced by the discourse of late modernity: she wants her work to be fun and meaningful but also to develop her as a human being. Julie has confidence in her ongoing personal judgements about what to do and what to aim for. However, she is not altogether convinced that what the university offers will be of any use to her, so she has reservations about the academic practice of acquiring

knowledge for its own sake. For Julie, the importance of investing time and effort to master a way of thinking or working (Bourdieu 1986) is culturally alien.

Julie pays attention to society's expectations for the younger generation but does not question whether these are reasonable. She eagerly pursues a university degree and blends into the group of non-traditional students. However, Julie is afraid of being a failure, and to avoid this, she considers her professional bachelor's degree her security net. In this way, she acts rationally within her existing social position.

In one sense, the rite of passage that Julie underwent was traditional, as she entered the same culture in which she was bought up. If she chooses to enter the academic job market, she may, like Sara, aspire to educational administration.

Maja's rites of passage start early, as she left home at the age of 15 while still attending upper secondary school. Evidence suggests that when we look back at our life, we tend to reconstruct its events in a rational form, mainly paying attention to our mastery of the situations (Bourdieu 1987). Maja states that she worked to support herself, presumably finding State benefits insufficient, however, the interview leaves it unclear whether her departure was from choice. Maja actually left school without sitting the final exam and as a consequence subjected herself to a long and difficult rite of passage as the lack of a formal diploma seriously restricted her opportunities. Even to access higher education on the programme for social educators which has less strict entry requirements than other programmes at the same level, Maja had to re-enter upper secondary to get the necessary threshold qualifications. However, Maja had learned the value of formal qualifications, and in this she was ahead of her fellow students. Unthinkingly accepting contemporary political and business discourses she chose to study modules that she thought would best ensure her success in the labour market.

From a young age Maja has been self-motivated, not daunted by new possibilities. When she had to she conformed to the norms of the educational system aware of social discourses defining how students should behave, but generally she appreciated vague boundaries, accustomed to her parents' different lifestyles each with specific norms. She neither questions these borders nor tests their strength but acts within them.

Maja's rite of passage, like Sara's, is long. She has no intention of reverting to either of her parents' cultures, but, like Julie, turns to a newly established job market and determines to carve new paths within this field. Seeking recognition for the social educators' professional knowledge she uses the tools available to her, currently to achieve an academic master's degree.

Lea's rite of passage starts – and may end – in academic culture. However, the transition is neither linear nor progressive but a detour from the direct route. Insecurity and the fear of choosing make Lea turn to a professional bachelor's programme, as she is confident in the possibility of continuing with the academic master's programme

immediately after graduating as a social educator. She argues that by so doing she postpones her final decision, as she could leave the educational ladder at that point. She does not simply reproduce her parents' educational and career paths but decides what best suits her own needs.

Lea exemplifies late modern thinking with regard to reflection and identity formation as she considers her feelings and the opportunities society offers, finding an approach which enables her to cope with the process of becoming an adult and finding a profession, confident that there is no need to hurry as opportunities will not diminish. In doing this, she is also in line with contemporary changes to the social hierarchy around the increasing importance of professional practice. Today, institutions that previously trained their own practitioners increasingly rely on more academic input from university-trained researchers. There remains a degree of hierarchy, but practical professional knowledge is no longer seen as putting theory into practice or subordinate to academic knowledge but as a form of knowledge in its own right.

Lea acts rationally, arguing that this way is her way. Even though all her friends selected long, academic university degrees, Lea chose not to. Today's more open educational system allows her to design her higher education as she chooses, and knowing the system and being able to act within its boundaries she is able to adjust slowly to new practices. However, she may be mistaken: her route will take the same time as a full university master's degree, but she will experience academia for a shorter period so she may struggle to sufficiently hone her skills in academic reasoning.

In some ways Lea's rite of passage is straightforward, as it permits a return to the social sphere in which she was brought up. However, the route she favours is unusual and can be seen to challenge traditional ideas of social reproduction, maybe anticipating a time when formal examinations lose importance and instead individuals must prove the value of their knowledge in a competitive market.

Conclusion

My aim in this article was to inquire into how adult students understand the pursuit of a second degree and move from a professional to an academic programme of study. From a sociological perspective, I argued that the choices the adult students made, the meaning they ascribed to their studies and their social positionings (prises de position) were moulded by their family culture, the nature of the contemporary labour market and the mood of the times; late modernity being a time of greater reflection enabling choices that allow individuals to shape their own identities. I analysed the narratives behind the students' stories, and suggested that the concept of the rite of passage could shed light on the meaning of adult education for these students.

The stories of these four adult students reveal how rites of passage – from child/ youth to adult – differ according to social position and orientations towards the past and future even when the social hierarchy, social norms and labour market are common to all. They also show the degree to which individuals involved are able to navigate this important transition, partly answering my question whether the rite of passage is a useful concept for understanding how education affects adults' lives? Without a doubt the students face a transition during their master's programmes but it is not merely a simple shift from youth to adult. The re-alignment they confront is much greater and their understanding of the transition is challenged by them already being adult.

I suggested that part of the transition dealt with moving from one social position to another and this certainly seems to be the case for two of the four students (Sara, Maja), but not for the others (Julie, Lea) who will probably remain in their familiar social group. It is clear that the narratives on which the students draw have a great impact on how they understand this possible social transition: two of the students (Julie, Lea) seem to be aware of society's expectations for them as young people, and they do their best to live up to these. Yet, in the future they may learn that the requirements of a knowledge society and compliance with set rules are irreconcilable. On qualifying, the students will encounter a changing labour market, and may benefit from this, finding that new administrative jobs require both professional knowledge and a level of academic skill but one less honed than that required for traditional academic work.

I believe that the concept of rites of passage provides a useful analytic tool that can be employed at multiple levels: with regard to family, styles of upbringing, family-school relationships, choices of studies and subsequent career, and relationships with the academic world. All these factors are complex, multi-faceted and interrelated, so for analytical purposes, rites de passage may help us to more clearly understand the ramifications of being an adult student.

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LOOKING BACK – ADULT EDUCATION AS A RITE OF PASSAGE?

SUMMARY: In the Danish educational system, it is possible to enter an academic master's programme on the basis of a professional bachelor's degree combined with some years in the job market, for example as a social educator. These adult students share lectures with the younger university students but are challenged on several levels.

The aim of the article is to understand how adult students approach the pursuit of a second degree, using a sociological perspective. Based on biographic interviews with mature students at the Danish School of Education, an analysis of their backgrounds, the paths their lives' follow, and the

narratives on which they draw, it is shown how their endeavours can be construed as a rite of passage. It demonstrates how the individual students' life courses include factors that influence not only the content of their studies, but also their life expectations.

KEYWORDS: adult education, professional bachelor, life paths, rite of passage, narratives, Bourdieu.

SPOGLĄDAJĄC W PRZESZŁOŚĆ – EDUKACJA DOROSŁYCH JAKO RYTUAŁ PRZEJŚCIA?

STRESZCZENIE: W duńskim systemie edukacji możliwe jest podjęcie studiów magisterskich na podstawie licencjatu i kilkuletniego doświadczenia zawodowego np. edukatora społecznego. Dorośli studenci uczestniczą w wykładach razem z młodszymi, jednakże na wielu płaszczyznach mogą napotkać wyzwania.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zrozumienie z perspektywy socjologicznej podejścia dorosłych osób do edukacji na studiach magisterskich. Wywiady biograficzne z dojrzałymi studentami Duńskiej Szkoły Edukacji, analizy uprzednich doświadczeń tych osób, ich dróg życiowych oraz historii, do których się odwołują, pozwoliły zinterpretować ich działania jako rytuał przejścia. Autorka pokazuje też, jak drogi życiowe poszczególnych studentów wpływają nie tylko na treść ich studiów, ale także na życiowe oczekiwania.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: edukacja dorosłych, licencjat, droga życiowa, rytuał przejścia, narracje, Bourdieu.