Who do you want to be now? Over fifties re-entering the labour market

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Within the larger sample of the ESRC Learning Lives project, a group of five individuals in north London was selected in late 2004 from among clients of careers advice services who were over 50. These five are now all in their mid-fifties, with varying success in their attempts to find second, third or fourth careers. At a time in the chronological life span when many contemporaries are planning to leave work and others have despaired of getting back in, how is the situation of older job-seekers different from that of their younger counterparts? This paper explores the factors that appear to have shaped their paths, looking at what they have been learning, its impact on their sense of identity, and what this has meant for career change.

Recent government policy statements, in particular the Leitch Review of Skills (2007), have stressed the significance of older adults to the workforce, and there is a growing body of research reports around career guidance policy about what constitutes good practice in working with this group (for example, Ford, 2005). The Learning Lives project is confirming what the Challenging Age research (DfES, 2003) highlighted four years ago: firstly that decisions taken as much as twenty years before the statutory retirement age can be tinted by employers' concerns about, or individuals' expectations of, retirement, but secondly that there is huge variation between occupational sector, social group, and individual preference about when someone wants to think about retirement, and how they want it to happen.

Within this project overall, in all four research centres, there are ten women who started with us age 50 or over but before the pensionable age of 60, and 23 men over 50 but under their pension age of 65. We have thirteen more over pensionable age (five women and eight men). So we have a rich source of data about:

- decision-making about learning and work for over fifties who want to stay in the labour market
- over fifties who do not want to be in the labour market
- those who want to move in one direction or the other.

From our Leeds team, Phil and Heather Hodkinson and Geoff Ford are looking among other things at those moving from work into retirement. I am interested in the people over fifty who are out of the labour market now, but most certainly want to re-enter it. They are straightforward job-seekers. We are starting from the people we interviewed ourselves, but I am hoping to identify what I think are the key issues, and then spread out to look at the other over fifties in the project that fall into my category of job-seeker. So this paper represents work in progress, some very hesitant steps to understand the factors involved, starting with people I got to know well, and wondering where the most relevant theoretical literature might be found.

I worked with five of the Learning Lives subjects over the two and a half years of fieldwork. They were recruited through careers advisory services, so by definition they were jobseekers. That doesn't necessarily mean they weren't looking for jobs-on-the-road to retirement, but by chance mine were all in their early to mid 50s and none had retirement in their sights. One was rather different from the others – he was an asylum seeker whose appeal failed during the course of the project. I am not going to include him today, although many of the factors I am thinking about do apply to him.

The purpose of the project has been to explore formal and informal learning in connection with identity and agency, but the way this particular group was selected has allowed me to think about the way all these relate to career planning in this age group. You can see that it is hard to separate out any of these threads, but I want to look here at identity and learning in particular. We know that the issue of identity is key in understanding people's anxiety at retirement: who will I be when I stop being a plasterer or a doctor? I came to see it as equally relevant to these people who saw themselves as having one last chance to become something they had always wanted to be, or indeed at last to become the person they had always felt they were.

50 is only two thirds of the way through the four and a half decades we have between age 20 and age 65 – there are still a good 15 more years to go. Assuming an active retirement then to the age of 80, which is not so unrealistic now, there are a further 15 more years after that. One way of looking at 50 is that it is still young enough to think about re-training to become what you really want to be; and in the case of all of these four, the issue was about change of identity, not just of job.

At the time that they sought help from their guidance service, the situation and background of each of the four was as follows:

Colin Farmer, house husband

Born Scotland. Incomplete agriculture degree; period of casual labour, then carpentry TOPs course leading to self employment as carpenter until health problems made that difficult. Two daughters, early teens, wife in stressful work.

Rebecca Wright, administrator, accounts department of private hospital, left through stress-induced ill-health

Born Jamaica. Clerical qualifications acquired through evening classes, plus a one-year full-time computer course, series of administrative jobs. One son currently in college. Husband in secure employment, refurbishing second home in Jamaica.

Timothy Keane, part-time administrative work at zoo, part-time drama student

Born England. Incomplete initial HE, later taking OU courses then English Literature degree as mature student. Started but did not finish MA. Worked for a West End theatre management on front-of-house tasks. Two years group psychotherapy just completed. Never married, no children.

Jane Eddington, unemployed

Born Malta (father in forces), educated in England. Incomplete HE (two attempts), single parent, working life spent in clerical or retail jobs interrupted in late 40s by neurological problems. One adult son living independently.

By the end of the project:

- **Colin** had become a technician in the arts department of a large secondary school. This may not sound very dramatic, but his working life before his fifteen years house-husbanding had been shaped by his strong reaction against his early start in sciences.

- **Rebecca** was a qualified care assistant, planning to pursue a further specialist training in dementia care

- **Timothy** had completed his psychotherapy as well as three years drama training and had earned his first money as a professional actor

- **Jane** had benefited from a course training her to be an advocate on behalf of disabled people and was fighting some of her own battles, and at the same time has developed as a prolific and remarkable creative writer.

This all sounds very positive and easy, but in each case, of course, there have been struggles and setbacks. What can we learn from this?

I have mentioned that none was making retirement plans at the outset, and eventual retirement later became a consideration in the case of only one, Rebecca[1]. All were expecting to work for the foreseeable future. So these are jobseekers, just older than usual. There are comparisons to be made in two directions: what differentiates them from people of their same chronological age who *are* thinking about retirement? And is there anything that differentiates them from *younger* adult jobseekers, say in their thirties?

In relation to the first, it might be suggested that perhaps they also need to earn their living, and that the need for a steady income might be part of what distinguishes job-seekers from retirement planners. But in fact, I am using 'retirement planners' to include people who know they have to work for the time being, but are thinking about that in the context of transitions out of paid work, so it is not primarily a financial issue.

They had many things in common with the other over fifties, of course. All four had remarkable stories to tell, all very different. They were not selected randomly, and were probably recommended by their advice services on the grounds that *they* would sustain interest over the two to three years of the project (in fact I suspect two were probably recommended because their agencies saw them as particularly hard to place) so there is a bias of some sort there. It is also possible that everyone who is seeking advice at this stage of life is going to be remarkable in some way: thirty-plus years of adulthood gives you time to build up a lot of idiosyncrasies.

What these particular job-seekers did have in common was that they were not just looking for another job like the last one: their own particular set of experiences had imploded in such as way as to bring them to a temporary halt. They are not typical of people in their fifties, because clearly only a minority seek career advice at that age; but they may be more typical of people who seek career *changes* then.

If we want or need to make changes at that time of life, it obviously may be triggered by external (economic, social or historical) changes in the world around us which compels a change; or internal personal, changes (psychological or to our immediate social situation); or a combination of the two. What I found with these four is that it may also be linked to unfinished business, either educational, emotional or in ambition, and that in each case there was some interruption in their lives.

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[1] Although she is beginning to include retirement in her calculation it is not because she is envisaging stopping working: she will move back to Jamaica when her husband retires and she knows that there are no state-funded schemes to help people in their own homes with early dementia. She is therefore planning to carry on her vocation on a voluntary basis.

1. External changes: e.g. the economy

This was true for Rebecca, whose breakdown was precipitated by the changes in private health care – she had been working for a private hospital in the accounts department, and as that market became fiercer – changes in the wider economy – she was coming under increasing pressure to get former patients to settle their bills. One can imagine others in their fifties whose skills are obsolete because of technical changes, or because of jobs moving away from their area.

2. Changes to us

In Jane's, Colin's and Rebecca's cases health breakdowns had contributed to a career break. Health problems might account for anyone's absence from the labour market, followed by seeking advice on how to get back in, but would not necessarily result in a change of direction or of occupational identity. But in these cases, the precipitating health problem was accompanied by some release of the inhibiting and restraining factors that had kept them in inappropriate occupations. In Timothy's case, the trigger was the psychological earthquake of the death of his foster mother, which prompted him to address the mental health problems that had restrained him all his life, and it was that which released him to try to realise his ambition.

So what are the factors that are conducive to a more fundamental change?

3. An interruption long enough to take stock

Many people spend their *whole* lives in the track they fall into as a result of early, confused decisions. So another way in which this group is different is that for whatever reason the interruption in their early fifties was long enough to give them time to review their aims. This is clearly neither necessary nor sufficient: one could make a leap from one field to another, or one could endure a long break away from work and then either retire or return to the same field that one had left. But it was present in all four cases.

4. Unfinished business

This is now getting closer to issues associated with identity. There was a sense of unfinished business with all these four people, and I am hoping to explore this as a factor with the other over fifties in the wider study. While there is a wide literature on factors influencing career choice, I do not know of any which addresses this, and it seems to me to be particularly pertinent to this older group of job-seekers.

a) Interrupted education. It is possible that people who had not been able to make secure learning decisions in adolescence are more likely to turn up seeking help in their fifties to get back on track with what they would have liked to have done earlier. Neither Colin's, Jane's or Timothy's initial education had gone according to plan, and Rebecca's had been dramatically disrupted when she moved to London from Jamaica aged thirteen.

b) Disturbed childhood. In the case of Colin, Jane and Timothy, all could be said to have slithered into inappropriate work following troubled childhoods. It is hard enough for any sixteen year old to know who they are and how they should plan at least the first few decades of their adult life, but it is easy to see that psychological health and confidence, congenial and secure schooling, cultural continuity between home and school, social and cultural capital would all help what the career theorists call self-efficacy[2] or what we in this project are regarding as agency. You can make false starts even if you have those, but perhaps are more likely to do so if you do not.

- Timothy's story was complicated in the extreme: contact for a time with both birth mother and father but fostered by a family with rather severe non-conformist values. They sent him to a private school with a wide range of opportunities but then disapproved of every artistic ambition and his confidence drained away.

- Rebecca is the only one of the four who does not lament her childhood, but she had the most disrupted of all: her parents set off for England when Rebecca was 7, leaving her and her three younger brothers behind in Jamaica with an auntie. By the time the parents had made a home in London for their four children and could bring them over, they had had another baby, so after a separation of 6 years Rebecca joined an absolutely unfamiliar home, school, culture, city and family. She had never seen a telephone until the flight stopped over in Miami on the way here. She arrived on a Friday, and was at school on the Monday morning (she loved it, but she was frozen).

I was interested that although her story seems to European eyes as surely damaging, it was completely normal to everyone in her immediate and extended family. Rebecca did not grow up thinking it to be a handicap. Practically it prevented her getting the qualifications that might have opened up more options at 16, but it did not leave her with the sense of failure or resentment that others in the study had to overcome before they could move on.

c) Uncompleted ambitions. All four always had some idea of what they wanted to be, or who they really were, from an early age, that was different from what they actually did.

- Rebecca had wanted to be a nurse when she left school, but was told she was too small.

- Timothy was drawn to acting from his schooldays, but lacked the support and confidence to explore that side of himself.

- Jane's whole life has been driven by her fascination and retentive memory for anything to do with Mediterranean history.

- Colin had a creative, independent, and compassionate nature which made agricultural studies quite inappropriate, and when he dropped out he left home and went to live instead with his artistic sister.

I turned hopefully to Gottfredson's (1981) model of compromise here: she talks about the process whereby young people internalise the social expectations of those around them and gradually abandon their childhood ambitions in favour of the narrow range allowed to their gender and class. But although it could have been said to apply to the reason Rebecca made her choice of nursing, or Colin acted on his mother's ambitions for him to go into agriculture, Gottfredson does not have anything to say about the consequences when these decisions come unstuck, or of interruption or compromise later in life. Levinson et al (1978) talk about the concept of 'the Dream' to describe 'an imagined possibility that provides inspiration and energy'. In their study of American males between 35 and 45 they found that the nature of the dream, and the likelihood of achieving it, varied according to occupational sector and was helped by the existence of someone in a mentoring role. But they do not speak about the idea of a dream which goes underground and then resurfaces.

The interlude of review in their fifties gave my four respondents all the chance to look again at what they had learnt about themselves over those thirty or so intervening years, check out if that early dream was still the one, and ask if the factors that prevented them realising it when young are still insurmountable.

It is clearly of interest to wonder whether taking part in the project contributed or perhaps even created the phenomenon, and I think there is a range of answers. In Rebecca's case the change had been made before I met her, so the answer has to be no. Timothy clearly enjoyed reflecting with me on what was going on in his life: his two years of interviews in the project overlapped by a year with his two years of group psychotherapy, and from the way he described that I would say that it was the therapy which was bringing about the changes. Jane was certainly changing anyway, and I saw her rise and fall and rise again in terms of confidence and creativity. But I do think that possibly her confidence to *write* was strengthened by my interest, though paradoxically the more confident she

became the more challenging she also rightly became about our use of her life story.

I asked them all what they felt they had got, if anything, from taking part in the project and Colin did say that he had come to see there was a value and interest in the very wide range of jobs he had taken during what he called his hippy phase. So I suppose, though he did not say so, that that may have contributed to giving him the necessary confidence in the job interview. But there were many other factors in his life which were all pointing in the same direction.

The longer I spent with Colin the more sure I had become that he was what my colleague, Heather Hodkinson, has been identifying as 'stuck'. He was certain that no-one would ever want him, but equally certain that he would never see the sort of job he would want to do. It was at the very last interview he told me how he had been offered what I regarded as the most perfect job in the world for him. Not only that, but he had been offered the first job he had applied for in nearly twenty years.

What are the chances of managing this change successfully?

The focus of the research has been on learning, and we have been painstakingly noting every learning incident and every kind of formal and informal learning that our respondents can remember during their lives up till now. We are all informal learners, but some of get more involved than others in formal learning as adults. Timothy and Rebecca have been such people.

- Timothy kept up his study through the Open University, then through a full-time degree as a mature student, and then more recently through drama training. Indeed, there is a sense in which his failure to do as well as expected at A level all those years ago has driven him to try to realise what always seemed to be his true nature, in spite of the very real difficulties of confidence and concentration he had to overcome to do so.

- Rebecca worked away steadily in evening classes acquiring clerical qualifications during her first jobs, and even took a year out to get computer skills (in the days of punched cards). Once in steady office work she branched out into evening class learning for the fun of it: flower arranging, beauty skills, cookery. She also learned enthusiastically through her evangelist church, around childcare, and in organisation skills. More recently she learnt self-confidence on an intensive job-search course. Once she had made her career switch, she went on to get a Care NVQ – and now she is planning more learning.

Colin and Jane on the other hand are energetic informal learners. I am tempted to say, unusually so, but who knows? You would absolutely not suspect, if meeting either briefly, that they had such a wide interest combined with such focused expertise: I have known successful academics with less.

- Jane had a good basis in formal learning at school. She has since been hampered by a difficulty over exams, but it has not stopped her using her two unfinished degrees or her incomplete drama training as the basis for a lifetime of reading, travel, and now writing about the ancient and medieval history of Sicily. Although possessed of this real, abstruse expertise, the person you meet is a small, modest, rather frail sheltered housing tenant.

- Colin has learnt skills informally all his life, from his years in casual labour on building sites and then as a carpenter, but more recently through his fifteen years as an imaginative stay-at-home parent, experimenting in arts, crafts, technical repair, making use of the internet and the library to learn and learn.

Perhaps what strengthens all four is the energy and curiosity which led them to be such active learners, more powerful than the labels put on them by the initial educational system that our recruitment and selection systems rely on to shape, sort, bundle and package adults young and old. For these four at any rate, it seems to have played a significant part in keeping alive their dreams, and assisted their ability to adapt and retrain. Arthur *et al.* (1999: 49) talk about the role of learning in surviving in the new world of 'boundaryless careers': 'learning drives one's readiness for future learning in a virtuous cycle of new opportunities'. I have also touched on that form of learning which consists of learning about oneself; so another element is surely a habit of reflection and self-knowledge which I certainly found in all of them.

Is there anything special about older job-changers?

What differentiates them from their *contemporaries* who are also active, hungry learners but who see retirement as a way of making more time for learning? I have suggested that it may be their various forms of unfinished business which makes them want to have one more chance at 'being' the person they had always hoped to be in terms of their occupation. Arthur, *et al.* suggest grouping career behaviours in terms of 'fresh energy', 'informed direction' and 'seasoned engagement'. Their account of the last of these mostly focuses on the process by which people progress towards the end of their career, often in a sequence of steps, to retirement. But our four career changers are demonstrating decided 'fresh energy' symptoms of which:

'the essential dynamic is not just of exploration but of experiment and trial-and-error refinement. Behaviourally, career actors in this mode often display intense passion, exuberence, and creativity.' (Arthur et al.,1999: 60)

What is different about these job-changers compared to younger ones? It is fairly clear how this group could be differentiated from young people embarking on their first job, and I have suggested a difference with end-of-career retirement planners. But it is not so easy to see fundamental differences between them and career-changers in their thirties.

Turning to developmental psychologists and career theorists, one might hope for some insights relating to age and stage. But those theorists that look at development over the life-course are not helpful in relation to these individuals who break with usual patterns, and those who look at patterns around individual career changes are not so helpful in relation to age (Kidd, 2006). Super's 'career rainbow' (1980), in which the rainbow's colours represent roles arching round the trajectory of the lifespan, raises some ideas of a now-or-never kind: if we look at the colour-strand-role of parenthood, perhaps people in their fifties benefit from a short break between the end of responsibilities of child care and the greatest weight of elder care, when they can pause to review. The early-thirties adults are affected by the same role, in a different way: that they may feel they must make a career change before settling down to have children. Super's patterns notoriously were based on conventions for American males in the 1970s, patterns that are challenged by all four of the older adults in question. But his idea of the way roles survive round parts of the arch and influence the life course are nonetheless useful.

There is significant literature on what older adults want in terms of careers advice, well summarised in Ford, *et al.* (2006). There are real issues for policy and practice in understanding what those differences might be, in relation to the Leitch agenda. The features that older adults want in terms of help and opportunities are what any adult wants: flexibility in access to help and in employment, sensitivity and understanding about their needs, reliable information about rights and opportunities. The problems so far have been largely in the way it has been delivered, over issues such as discrimination (making assumptions about what work is suitable for older people) or lack of knowledge about employment opportunities or legal rights. This is not the subject of this paper, but the parallels between what is going on for younger adults and older adults may be similar – different in degree and in detail, but not necessarily in kind.

There is growing interest in changing patterns in younger adults' careers. Increasingly young people are taking more of their first decade in work to decide what they want to settle to, and in their thirties may be looking to adjust initial career decisions for the same reasons as our older changers. Many of Arthur's sample of 75 New Zealanders demonstrate this pattern (Arthur et al., 1999), following changes in the world of work, changes in themselves, enforced interruptions in their careers and unfinished business. Again, their development as learners, formal or informal, proved to be highly relevant to how effective the individuals proved in implementing change.

So the differences between young and old again seem to be a matter of degree and detail, and not kind. I have said that in the terms of the kind of help that is needed, what they want from the service is the same, but there may be a difference in that if it is not present it may make the difference between it being of some use, or of being of no use at all. In relation to job-changers, it may be that older ones are not actually different, just that there is more at stake: changes by fifty-five really may be your last chance, and no amount of age legislation is going to change some basic facts of life.

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