

## Timescapes of Flexibility and Insecurity

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# **Timescapes of Flexibility and Insecurity**

## **Exploring the context of distance learners**

**Arwen Raddon**

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**ABSTRACT.** This article draws on the concept of 'timescape' (Adam, 1998) to explore the context of distance learners' stories about their reasons for studying. It examines these learners' narratives of being located in a socio-historical time and space in which there is a greater need for flexibility in relation to the times and spaces of work and how this is underpinned by a strong sense of insecurity of work. Engaging in continued learning becomes one means of coping with this timescape, by becoming more flexible and remaining employable. In exploring these micro-level narratives, this article highlights both some of the multiple, interlinked layers of time and space, the impact of macro-level discourses of flexibility, insecurity and lifelong learning, and the gendered and other power relations around these. It also reflects on the theoretical and empirical use of the concept of the timescape, arguing that the narrative or biographical approach provides a useful means through which to explore the timescapes of individuals and groups. **KEY WORDS** • distance learning • flexibility and job insecurity • gender • narrative methods • sociology of education • timescapes

### **Introduction**

This article focuses on the narratives of a small group of distance learners as they talk about their reasons for studying and how this fits with their working life. I

explore how these can be seen as reflecting the 'timescape' (Adam, 1998), or the historical time and space, in which they are located. Some of the multiple and interlinked layers of time and space in social life are highlighted. In particular, I focus on narratives that arose as respondents mapped out their reasons for studying on the distance learning programme and the backdrop against which they undertook their studies. Importantly, this timescape also highlights the wider context against which they negotiate their multiple roles as workers, carers and learners, illustrating some of the gendered and other power relations involved in access to, and control over, time and space. This timescape highlights the ways in which time and space are both embedded in and shape our lives.

The discussion is divided into three sections. Section 1 outlines the methodology for the research, including the source of the data and use of the concept of timescape. Section 2, explores learners' presentations of the current historical time and space as one in which there is a need for greater flexibility in order to survive in the labour market, but also in which they experience a high level of insecurity in relation to work. Flexibility is a dominant discourse in today's society (e.g. Edwards, 1997) and a growing 'time trend' in relation to work (Adam, 1995: 103). It is important to highlight how these stories of flexibility are intertwined with stories of insecurity since, as Edwards (1997: 30–1) reminds us, it is a sense of insecurity that makes flexibility and the 'discourse of competitiveness' possible. Moreover, as will be illustrated, insecurity is often the material result of increased flexibility in working practices (Felstead et al., 1998; Bauman, 2000).

The third section then moves on to explore related narratives of the necessity to learn, focusing on how the learners talk about undertaking their studies as a way of both enhancing their flexibility and combating a sense of insecurity by remaining employable. I consider the individualizing nature of the discourse of flexibility and the role of studying in taking responsibility for their future success in the labour market, but also the sense of power over the future that some learners feel in doing so. The article concludes with a reflection on the theoretical and empirical use of the timescape within this discussion and how this might be applied more widely.

### **Methodology**

This discussion draws on research conducted over two years, focusing on the experiences of distance learners studying on a Masters distance learning programme with a traditional UK university. As a professionally oriented distance learning programme, this fitted both with the areas in which respondents were working and/or where they hoped – or were required – to develop their careers in the future. Distance learning encompasses a number of ways of learning (e.g.

receiving materials by post, online etc.). This particular programme was primarily paper based, with most learners studying their course materials at home. I have explored elsewhere some of the advantages learners saw in undertaking their studies at a distance, as opposed to being on campus (Raddon, 2006).

The research involved a multi-method approach including a one-off survey, interviews over the duration of the two years of study (carried out in person, over the telephone and by email), observation, and learning journals. The data drawn on here come primarily from the interviews. These were conducted over time, following a small group of 11 distance learners based in the UK and Ireland through the course of their two years of studies. In-person and telephone interviews were taped and transcribed with respondents' permission. In quotations, I use *italics* to show words that were emphasized by the interviewee, a hyphen to show a broken word (becau-) or short pause (I- I- *wanted* to go), and I include some of my personal notes about physical cues or things that came to mind in this way: <we laugh>. Data drawn from these interviews are supplemented in places with quantitative data from the larger one-off survey of distance learners studying on the same programme ( $N = 64$ ). In order to ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used and identifying details such as job roles replaced with more general but indicative information about the sector in which respondents work.

### **Narratives and individual timescapes**

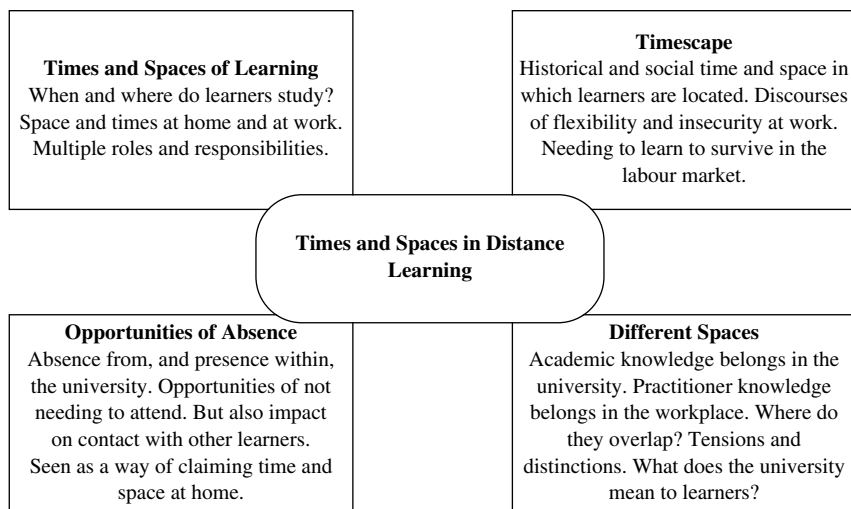
The concept of 'timescape' is drawn on here in order to reflect on the meanings of time and space in these learners' stories about their reasons for taking up their studies. Researching environmental issues and time, Adam (1998) conceptualizes the complexity and multiplicity in social life as a timescape. Starting from the idea of the landscape, Adam explains that this is a historical record of activity, including both visible patterns of 'life and dwelling' (p. 54), but also aspects which we cannot see and traces of that which has occurred before. In this way, the concept of landscape recognizes both the visible and invisible, and is subject to the interpretation of each individual. Adam maintains that this openness to simultaneity, multiplicity and unseen forces can also be extended to the different times in social life, acknowledging the links between time, space and matter and the need for an attention to context and to the role of the researcher. Indeed, time and space are neither neutral nor static facts. They are both constitutive of and constituted by social reality and are power-laden, multiple aspects of social life (Massey, 1994; Adam, 1995, 1998). In giving recognition to – or even being open to the possibility of – the visible and invisible aspects of the timescape, we can begin to uncover some of these power relations and the different, interwoven dimensions of time and space in social life. Rather than providing a model for how to capture times and spaces of social life empirically,

the timescape acts as a conceptual tool, providing a means of beginning to think about how we can bring together the two large, multiply layered and interlinked concepts of time and space. This is important since time and space are often treated as separate concepts, even where their interrelation is noted (e.g. Davies, 1990; Massey, 1994).

In terms of empirical exploration, I would argue that a narrative or biographical approach provides a useful means through which to explore the timescapes of different individuals, as well as groups. Equally, individual narratives can be in themselves considered as timescapes – stories about the location of the individual within macro structures and socio-historical context. Narrative analysis treats interviews and other data as biographical data about each participant, or ‘stories of the “self”’ (Raddon, 2002: 389). As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) note, we tell stories in all areas of our lives, providing a means of sharing ‘cultural values, meanings and personal experiences’ (p. 76). Importantly, a narrative approach highlights the subjective nature of research, the storied nature of ‘reality’, and the multiplicity of individual meanings and ‘lived realities’ (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). Thus, the intention is not to test the validity of these stories, but to gain an understanding of individual ‘lived realities’ or the ways in which individuals and groups represent reality. Sociological research has often studied society from ‘social structure “downwards” [rather than] individual “upwards”’ (Rustin, 2000: 45). However, the narrative and biographical approach starts from the perspective of the individual, shifting from the micro level outwards to wider social structures. While large-scale generalizations may not necessarily be made from these individuals’ experiences, there will be resonance with others’ experiences and issues for wider consideration.

However, it is worth noting that I did not start out with the aim of exploring the timescape or indeed time and space in this research. The initial aim of this study was to explore learners’ experiences of combining their home life, work life and studies, with a particular focus on gender. I had started out with my main focus on aspects such as how learners approached their studies, the social context of learning and individual perspectives on distance learning. However, when exploring why these individuals had signed up for this programme of learning (as opposed to their experiences on the programme which I have explored elsewhere, e.g. Raddon, 2003, 2006), it soon became apparent that interviewees were facing issues of flexibility and pressures in working life that were often more important to them than choices about how to fit higher education into their already busy lives.

Reflecting the spiralling rather than linear nature of the research process (Blaxter et al., 2001), it was in analysing the data that the concepts of time and space were highlighted as key themes within these learners’ narratives. Thus, the analysis of the data highlighted a number of dimensions of time and space as shown in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1**  
**Times and spaces in distance learning**

The concept of timescape was found to be particularly useful in making sense of learners' narratives around the historical and social time and space in which they talked about being located. Notably, wider narratives of flexibility, insecurity and personal responsibility for learning have become such an embedded part of everyday discourse that they can easily be overlooked or dismissed as rhetoric. I chose to deal with these narratives as the timescape of these learners for a number of reasons. Conceptualizing these narratives as part of the wider socio-historical timescape of these learners enabled me to both reflect critically on their meaning while recognizing the role that these discourses have in shaping individuals' ways of understanding and talking about the social world. Equally, as well as highlighting issues of historical time, learners' narratives about why they are engaging in further studies also deal with changes in where and how individuals work, and the social environment in which they combine their work, home life and studying.

As mentioned, Adam (1998) notes that the timescape includes traces not only of the current and visible context, but also of the past, invisible and immanent context. Within these learners' narratives, as will be explored in this article, the visible context is their use of the current discourses of flexibility, while the less visible context is formed by stories of the historically embedded but also changing gender relations at work and home. Indeed, the flexibility in these learners'

narratives is not only about time, but also about the spaces in which they work and the ways in which they work, including what they do as part of their job.

As Beck (1999) notes, the organization of time and space is central to flexibilization, which operates on three levels: 'work *time*, *place* of work and work *contract*' (p. 114, emphasis in the original). Some of the multiple layers of time highlighted when exploring these issues through these distance learners' stories include the past in terms of where these individuals have come from; the present in terms of where they are now and why; the future in terms of the expected outcomes of undertaking their studies; and the imaginary in terms of dreams and hopes. Some of the spaces or landscapes include the workplace and environment, the home and the imagined locations of the future. Moreover, in exploring narratives around the world of work and the necessity for learning, power relations around time, space and the negotiation of multiple roles of carer, worker and learner are also highlighted. As will be illustrated, while flexibility in relation to times and spaces of work is a very dominant narrative, it is not always clear where care work, or time and space for themselves, fits in. The timescape forms a useful conceptual framework through which to organize and make sense of these stories about the times and spaces of these learners' lives, particularly by helping us to think about the multiple layers of time and space apparent in these learners' stories, and the both visible and invisible power relations around these.

### **Socio-historical Contexts for Studying: Reflections on the Timescape**

When asked why and how they took up this programme of learning, respondents would open their response by talking about the current context of their working lives as the backdrop to their decision to engage in continuing professional development. In this way, their narratives began to paint a picture of the historical time and space in which they felt they were located. Discourses of flexibility and insecurity were prevalent from the very first interviews, particularly in relation to changes at work and how this impacted on the decision to study. As noted, such issues were not an initial focus of this research, but were identified as key themes within the responses of interviewees. Indeed, as will be noted, the narratives of flexibility and insecurity were deeply interwoven with each other, with much of the perceived insecurity involved in the labour market being linked to organizational and sectoral restructuring and flexibilization. This had brought about casualization and insecurity of employment.

I would argue that we can see these discourses and material practices of flexibility and insecurity as forming the timescape, or the social and historical background, against which these learners undertook a Masters programme alongside their multiple roles and responsibilities. When exploring adults'

reasons for studying, we often focus on motivations at the individual level, such as personal experience and growth, economic benefits or, in the case of distance learning, on the benefits for learners of the mode of study. Individual motivations are highlighted here. However, my main focus is on the wider picture within which these individuals decided to study. In terms of the macro-level context, wider issues of time and space are often overlooked in our analyses (Morrison, 1992). Moreover, as noted earlier, the concepts of space and time are rarely looked at in an interrelated way. As such, I draw on the concept of timescape here to consider how these narratives reflect the impact of the wider social and historical discourses and macro structures on the ways in which individuals talk about, and make sense of, their own experiences and motivations. This is not to deny the importance of personal motivations to study, but to explore the ways in which wider temporal and spatial discourses and structures also contribute to shaping individual meanings and actions.

Thus, interviewees talked in a number of ways about the reorganization of time and space, and facing restructuring and changes in their area of work, including times, spaces and contracts, and decisions about their future career direction.

For example, flexibility and insecurity were intricately interwoven in Rose's narratives of the contract culture and changing working practices in her area of the care sector. Rose, who was in her mid-40s, talked not only about the flexibilization and casualization of her field, but the instability of the previously strong professional culture. She emphasized that following major restructuring and years of moving employees on to short-term contracts, there was now a 'huge skills shortage'. She explained that her own short-term contract was a result of this situation which, paradoxically, came about following a further round of restructuring in response to government policy. This contract culture created insecure employment; indeed, Rose saw her own job as providing cover before someone more permanent was found. Interestingly, however, she did not find the uncertainty of where she might be in the future a particular problem; indeed, she accepted this insecurity as part of the current professional culture. Moreover, as illustrated in the following quote, this contract culture is also seen to help workers deal with the stress involved in the profession by taking short contracts:

You know one of my colleagues said that you just blink your eyelid and there's another restructuring on the way . . . So you find a lot of organizations just offering people short-term contracts. They might have made huge staff redundancy, so then they find they didn't have enough people, and you know to plan ahead, then they'll bring in people on a short-term basis . . . a lot of people that I do know, at this moment, don't take up permanent employment, they work on a short-term basis. And because of the stress factor that's involved in it as well. (Rose)



Thus, flexible employment is seen not only as a reflection of the current requirements of the labour market, but also as a means for individuals to avoid work-related stress. This mirrors popular discourses of flexibility as enabling employers to remain competitive while employees maintain a work-life balance (Adam, 1995).

Rachel, in her early 40s, held a very positive view of flexibility at work. She worked in the education sector and saw flexibility as a current trend that both provided a way of working that got results and created success but also a way of balancing work and family life. Rachel regularly identified herself as being very flexible in her capacity as a manager and a mother, and aimed to facilitate this for other women and carers. As she reflected:

The programme I manage, it's a very big programme . . . I have three full-time members of staff working for me, all women. Two of them telework . . . and I'm very, very flexible about working practices, and they- as a result I get amazing results. I mean the fact is that four full-time people doing what we do, people constantly say to me, 'I can't believe you're doing all of this'. (Rachel)

As will be seen in the following quote, these new working practices are imbued with temporal and spatial narratives, with their success relying on the individual's ability to be flexible about time and space: eschewing the 9-to-5 mentality, learning to work and live everyday life in flexible and fluid ways that transcend the traditional boundaries between public and private space and time. This narrative is one in which work can be done anywhere and at anytime, as long as it gets done:

But I put that down solely to the fact that what I say to people that work with me is, 'These are the results I want, this is when I want them. How you do it, I'm really not interested' . . . as it happens one member of staff has got- her baby's about one now, if that means she wants to work from 11 o'clock at night till 2 o'clock in the morning, that's her business. And as a result, people produce the results, because they're able to fit it in with their concerns, and they're not worrying all the time about *things*. I have a small child and I operate a similar thing myself. Um- sure I have to be *a lot* more available than the people that work for me, but I- I am much more flexible in the way I work. I work a lot in the evenings, whatever I have to do. So one of the things that *does* concern me, and I'm sure it's the same for a lot of women, is that there aren't many corporate cultures that are *yet* comfortable, *whatever* they may say, with that kind of working. (Rachel)

Thus, for Rachel, being flexible is both a necessary and desirable way of working. In one sense, these flexible practices are described as being contrary to the traditional practices of set timetables and requirements for presence in specific times and places of work which, as Foucault (1977) highlights, are used to control and discipline bodies. It could be argued that these are positive changes in the working times and spaces, since they enable carers to fit their work in around their other responsibilities without worrying about the impact on their work.

Paradoxically, however, these flexible working practices also appear to involve a greater level of commitment of private times and spaces to paid work and education, while requiring the impact of reproductive, domestic and caring roles to be minimized. As Adam (1995) reflects, the flexibilization of working time can impact significantly on individuals 'decoupling . . . work time from the time of the organization and from the collective rhythms of public and familial activities erod[ing] communal activities in both the public and the private realm' (p. 103).

Moreover, a number of power relations are evident in this discourse of flexibility around times and spaces. While Rachel uses these working practices to facilitate work-life balance for women/carers, there is an underlying suggestion in the discourse of flexibility that caring/women's work and reproduction hamper their productive work for employers. While Rachel would by no means intend it in this way, her talk reflects the gendered nature of this discourse. Thus, on the one hand, care work is talked of in terms of creating worries, claiming space and claiming clock and emotional time. On the other hand, however, being flexible about bringing work into the space of the home is seen as a way of minimizing this demand on the time and space of paid employment. Within this kind of time-space narrative, as long as women remain the primary caregivers, they are perceived and positioned as problematic and as other to the ideal worker.

Clarke (2003) comments, when writing about the links between women's caring role and engagement in education, that family responsibilities are often treated as 'an obstacle to learning, rather than as a source of knowledge' or of equal value to paid work. In the same way, caring and reproductive roles, traditionally seen as belonging within the 'private' sphere, are viewed as obstacles to a form of production that crosses the boundaries between public and private space and time. There is a clear hierarchy here in terms of giving time and space to these roles and responsibilities, with time and space for productive, paid work expected to come first.

Equally, other power relations operate around the demands that flexible working makes on employees more generally. Carrasco and Racio (2001) note that the hidden costs of flexibility and workers' lack of control over their 'spare' time remain unevaluated. Adam (1995) declares that some of these hidden costs are stress and health problems due to working long hours while trying to simultaneously juggle multiple roles. Indeed, the material impacts of this current timescape of flexibility and insecurity are clear within the respondents' stories. For example, Jane, who was in her mid-40s, had worked for 20 years in a very emotionally difficult and stressful role in the care sector:

The area that I work in is just absolutely dire at the moment. It is not- it's not- good to have worked in it 20 years, as I have, and not have a development to go forward

with because- you . . . it is such a tough area. It is very undervalued now. It doesn't have the value that it had when I entered it. The sort of professional respect really. And- I just need to- I need to have another way of thinking about my future I think. (Jane)

Jane had finally changed roles a few years previously after suffering serious anxiety attacks and stress. With taking on her studies, she worried that this would happen again due to the stress of trying to fit working, home life and studying in; as she stated, 'I almost felt like I was a bit um- like I was consciously sort of testing the waters really. If I'm going to have a mental break down, let's have it *now*! <she shouts the last word>.'

Rose had also been very ill in the past and her illness flared up again several times during the course of her studies. She put this down to years of emotionally and physically stressful work, with long hours and regular travel. After a few months off work due to health problems, Rose took up a new job and found herself once more working long hours and under very stressful conditions. As she stated, contract work was not necessarily full time or permanent, but effectively entailed being available and working 'all the time'. This highlights both the insecure and greedy nature of this flexible working regime, which was evidently impacting on Rose's health. Indeed, in our final interview, Rose told me that she had spent the previous night in the hospital. When I commented that she seemed to have little time for herself after taking up her new contract, she reflected that

I don't have any time for me. And I said I would *never* get back into this situation again. And here I am. There must be something very needy in me <laughing>. I've put myself right back into it again! And um- it's- not a good feeling, you know, because as I said, I am tired. I am- I am- really, really, very tired. And I'm looking forward as I said, in July I'm going away. (Rose)

As we can see, the dominant narrative within this current timescape is that all times and spaces of social life are effectively times and spaces for productive/paid work, transcending any idea of separated public and private spheres. While we tend to accept this way of working, there is little personal time outside of this. Nevertheless, as the last quote illustrates, Rose places responsibility for the situation on herself. She refers to herself as needy, rather than seeing this as an outcome of the greedy nature of current working practices.

Jane and Rose were both in care-related work. However, Jim who worked in a more policy- and management-related side of the public sector also felt that his health problems were related to working long hours and stress at work. Again, Jim, who was in his mid-40s, saw himself as partly responsible, considering the focus on his career when he was younger and his tendency to take work home as part of the problem. However, after finding out that he had epilepsy, he began to change his priorities and to be more protective of personal space and time

outside of work. Contrary to the earlier narratives, Jim came to see that not allowing work to permeate beyond the workplace was good time management:

Prior to developing this I spent a lot of time bringing work home – no more! (Well, I do sometimes bring documents in to skim, or physically work away from the office for a day if there's a panic on, but otherwise nothing 'original'). It is important to hit the brakes in the evening and people are reminding me that good time management means leaving work at the desk . . . my priorities really are the *family*, and surviving my health and all the rest of it. And I can get- *not* aggressive, but I can sort of dig my heels in and say, 'No! I work X hours a week. It doesn't follow me home.' (Jim)

To return to the narratives of flexibility and insecurity, Beck (2000) calls this shift towards 'discontinuity . . . diversity, unclarity and insecurity in people's work and life' (p. 1), the 'Brazilianization' of the western world. Beck refers to Brazil here because, alongside a booming capitalist economy, Brazilian workers have seemingly experienced the decline of full-time and permanent employment, and the growth of casual and informal working conditions. According to Beck, this is now a world in which 'all paid work is subject to the threat of replacement' (p. 2), and where we 'know, feel and grasp that we are all potentially unemployed or underemployed, part-time or makeshift workers without any real job security' (p. 5).

Both Jim and Ian reflected this feeling of insecurity as they considered the reasons behind their decision to study. Jim emphasized in each of our interviews that he came to the course to prepare for the future and to minimize the uncertainty in his career. Jim reflected that while he had been very career driven when he left university, his time priorities and his idea of a career had changed radically after redundancy:

. . . made redundant twice, and that sort of kicks your career path right out the window. And you really start to think, 'No, I'm not investing in a career', that 'I'm doing a job, and my job pays for my leisure time'. Um- I've got a wife, I've got pets, I've got a house, I've got guitars. Basically that's it. And that really is all that concerns me. (Jim)

He regularly talked about waiting for his job in a 'precarious' area of the public sector to come to an end. Therefore, being able to complete the course in as short a time as possible was a vital element in his decision about which course to study on: 'it looked as though we had two to three years left [before being laid off] . . . It also won out over a BSc at [another university] via distance learning as this had a more tightly scheduled process – [it] would have taken up to eight years.' Insecurity and fear of unemployment or underemployment also became a material reality for Ian, who was in his early 40s and working in the financial sector, when he was told he would be made redundant just three days before our first interview. Therefore, one of the main things he expected to gain from his

studies was to 'make myself more marketable in the longer term . . . because from next Saturday, I will be out of work . . . which I only found out about this week. So from that point of view, even though I haven't got it, it is something that will go on the CV.'

In an interview nine months later, Ian was working in temporary jobs to 'pay the bills' and get 'out and about'. He admitted that he was quite shocked when, after nine months, he had not found a full-time job. Although he remained focused on his career and emphasized that he enjoyed working, Ian had now come to recognize his experience of redundancy and insecurity as the current reality of the private sector. He also saw this as a reality he would experience again in the future. Expanding on the story of his redundancy, Ian later told me how he heard about the fate of his company 'on the news' when he got back from his holidays; news confirmed when he went into work the next day. Nevertheless, he remained hopeful of finding a new job:

I've got er- interviews tomorrow, I've had some this week and next week. So touch wood, I'm sort of *hopeful* that before the end of May, I'll have a job . . . because it's the first time I've really been out of work in over 17 years of, you know, full work . . . that's the reality of the commercial world. And it's gonna happen a few more times probably in my next 20 years of work. So, whilst I suspected it would take a few months to get a job, um- I didn't expect it to- to still be looking after nine. But various things contributed towards that. September [September the 11th 2001]. December's always quiet, and the market was very, very flat from mid-December, through to really about the third week of February. Very little to apply for. Things are picking up now, so I have to be optimistic that the right job will come along. (Ian)

This insecurity of employment and anxiety was to mark Ian's experience for over half of the duration of his studies. While continuing education is seen as one means of creating greater security and employability, a return to education is, of course, not necessarily a guarantee of greater certainty. Davey (2003) notes that relatively little has been written about redundancy, discontinuity of employment and adults' return to education. Her own survey research found that redundancy was a motivator to return to education for 18 per cent of older men and 12 per cent of older women students aged 40+ surveyed at Victoria University, New Zealand. Davey's subsequent interviews highlighted that the majority felt that gaining a qualification was very important, both in terms of status and validation in the face of ageism in the labour market. Nevertheless, re-entry into full-time and more permanent jobs in the labour market can be difficult, even after a return to education and gaining credentials (Davey, 2003).

Similarly, Janet was experiencing a period of insecurity when she decided to enrol on the Masters programme. When Janet started her studies, she was in her late 40s and approaching retirement from her current public sector profession and thinking about future opportunities in her current or other sectors. Like Jim,

she hoped to be able to flexibly transfer her skills and experience to a different area if necessary:

And so that's why I've gone into the Masters, because I've only got just over three years before I retire, so I would like to get that to be able to use that when I do retire . . . I'd like to do something a bit different, it's been a smashing time in [current career] but to do something a bit different and knowing what you can do once you've got the degree. (Janet)

It is worth noting how heavily these narratives are marked by time as the respondents reflect on their career paths; their years of service; the ups and downs of the labour market during restructuring and unemployment; the pace of change; planning for the imagined future; and the impact of world events such as 9/11 on markets and individuals. These are cyclical times, with career cycles from starting out to retirement and intertwined industrial and natural times, but with the times of the year seen in terms of the ups and downs of the labour market as opposed to the changing seasons. As well as locating our narratives within time and the chronology of our lives, this reflects the importance of time within language and how we express ourselves to others (Adam, 1990, 1995; Hughes, 2002).

Here we can see how each learner's story of how they came to be studying on this programme is located within a timescape of change, flexibility and insecurity. It was against the backdrop of these changes and insecurities in working lives, and the dominant discourse of a need for flexibility, that these learners either made the decision or were asked by employers to study on the distance learning Masters programme. Adults engage in learning for a range of personal reasons and, over the two years of interviews, these learners talked about a range of reasons and motivations. Nevertheless, this timescape was a particularly strong aspect of their stories when talking about the rationale behind taking up and keeping with their studies. Indeed, while we can explore the many personal motivations for studying, I would argue that exploring the timescape of learners is particularly useful in beginning to map out the macro social context within which personal motivations are framed. As such, this helps us to appreciate both the micro-level dimensions of learning and the macro-level structures and social discourses within which individuals act. In this context, the current timescape of flexibility and insecurity within which these individuals located themselves, with its heavy demands on public and private time and space, helps us to understand why they felt such a strong need to literally *squeeze* studying into their already extremely busy lives.

Having explored some of the socio-historical timescape against which these learners talked about taking up their studies, this now brings me to focus on how these individuals talk about responding to this timescape by learning to be flexible and maintaining their employability, emphasizing the necessity to learn.

These narratives further highlight the timescape within which there is a drive to engage in learning and to take individual responsibility for employability.

### **Responding to the Timescape: Learning to be Flexible and Employable**

As we have seen, flexibility and insecurity provide some of the personal and collective backdrop to these individuals' decision to study. As will now be explored, studying on this distance learning programme was in many ways seen as a response to the dominant timescape of flexibility and insecurity. Continuing their education by means of distance learning was regarded as an important means for these individuals to build their flexibility as workers. This meant being more flexible generally about the things that they could do by enhancing their skills. Equally, it was seen as dealing with their sense of insecurity about the future by seeming to ensure their employability. Again reflecting the timescape in which these learners/workers are located, employability is a relatively new concept, reflecting a less visible shift away from ideas of a 'job for life' and employment (e.g. having a job), towards more visible notions of the benefits of continuously developing the self to ensure that, whatever happens to our current job, we will be attractive to employers and, thus, 'employable' (for further discussion, see Brown et al., 2003).

Jane, for example, linked studying on this course with planning for the future and becoming flexible in three key ways. First, Jane saw this as a chance to develop her career outside of a highly stressful sector. Second, reflecting the entrepreneurial spirit of employability (Brown et al., 2003), it was a chance to 'be much more flexible, so that I can do some work for myself, I can think about different types of organizations to work for'. Third, it would potentially increase her earnings and enable her to adapt in order to support her family in the future when her partner's career cycle changed: 'And also at the same time incidentally, I *do* have to go on earning money, cos I've got kids and etc. etc. and especially as my partner is older than me and not earning that much longer.'

For Jim, getting a Masters qualification related to his area of work was a way of ensuring his employability by flexibly transferring his current skills to another job, something he had not been able to do in the past:

... where the first- no, the second time I was made redundant, I was out of work for a month or so. Um- and I found it incredibly difficult to convey what I'd done and what I understood and what my level of skills were to outsiders. And so when it became clear that this job may- go bad, it *will* go bad, it was suddenly a case of 'What can I use, what can I slap on the table to help show?' (Jim)

As such, qualifications will be able to 'talk' for Jim and ensure that his skills are portable from job to job. As such, learning to be flexible means reducing the insecurity that faces these individuals.

Rose, on the other hand, felt that there was a strong government pressure in her profession to undertake continuing education and professional development. This drive for learning was not confined to her own profession, however, since she had experienced a similar pressure when doing some part-time teaching, reflecting that, 'the expectations are that you continue to look at your own development'. Cruickshank (2002: 148) notes that the neo-liberal ideology of lifelong learning presents a cycle of 'continuous training and re-training' as the norm. Furthermore, within this ideal, the lifelong learner is 'an individual with the motivation and capability to continue learning throughout life in a range of social and work contexts so as to achieve personal fulfilment and maintain employability' (Kearns et al., 1999: 6). Indeed, as well as fulfilling government aims, Rose also aimed to fulfil her own hopes of flexibly transferring her knowledge and experience to undertake independent consultancy work in other areas. As she noted, 'if I'm going to be selling myself . . . the expectations are that people are going to be looking to see whether or not I've continued, you know, to develop my own learning. So it's no good me going in to do some work with a group of staff and, you know, I haven't done anything from since the year dot.' As we can see, Rose's continued participation in learning is an important part of how she would sell herself as a freelance worker. The fact that she has continued to develop herself is perceived to ensure her future employability and minimize the insecurity that contract work might hold. Again, these narratives mirror the 'training-as-panacea' discourse of lifelong learning (Cruickshank, 2002); that contrary to the realities of the labour market, lifelong learning will ensure access to better jobs and overcome insecurity.

Indeed, Liz, in her mid-30s and working in the defence sector, hoped that by engaging in this programme of study she would demonstrate her ability not only to fulfil her demanding work roles, but to fit in personal development as well. The inference is that this development will take place outside of work time. She saw this as giving her 'the edge' over her colleagues when it was time for the management to look at who was a good worker and eligible for promotion:

There are a lot of [others] out there in similar jobs to myself, who are probably doing as equal a good a job as myself. You know, why shouldn't they be? We've all got the same sort of training, and we've all got the same sort of mentoring system in place to make sure we're doing a good job. So at the end of the day when . . . [management] are looking at your folders and thinking, 'Who shall we promote?', it's like 'that person who's doing a good job? Or that person who's doing a good job, *and* developing themselves?'. (Liz)

Indeed, as noted earlier, adults can have a range of motivations for studying, and my survey data highlighted that promotion was a common motivation for studying, with 48 per cent of survey respondents agreeing, and 5 per cent strongly agreeing, that they were studying on this programme in order to 'get a promotion'. Moreover, the most common motivation for studying was 'to get



the qualification' (53% strongly agreed and 42% agreed). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that a large proportion of respondents also disagreed that promotion was a key motivation (35.7% disagreed and 10.7% strongly disagreed) and responses to open questions in the survey showed that getting the qualification could often be about proving something to themselves and others, rather than a purely instrumental focus on paper qualifications.

Jim and Ian also saw their studies as increasing their marketability and demonstrating what kind of people they are and, more importantly, that they are flexible individuals. Indeed, Ian stated that his participation in a distance learning course, as opposed to an on-campus course, would specifically add to his 'marketability' by showing his ability and willingness to juggle many responsibilities and to develop himself in relation to work:

I think it will demonstrate something else about me as an individual, my intellectual and other abilities to sort of fit study in around other work commitments. I think it will demonstrate to a prospective employer that here's someone who is wanting to be able to think and learn a bit more strategically and apply that to the workplace. It won't actually affect the sort of jobs I go for, but I'm hoping it will add value to my applications for those jobs. (Ian)

In this way, being flexible is about presenting yourself as able to cope with multiple commitments while engaging in strategic, work-related self-development. In effect, this is about being able to use one's time productively both inside and out of work. Indeed, Jim emphasized that while he encountered many set backs during his studies, he was pleased to be juggling his many roles and responsibilities.

As Field (2000) notes, 'for some, the capacity to handle the new and surf the uncertain is itself an important defining characteristic of the self' (p. 65). Thus, during the period of uncertainty while Ian was searching for a full-time job, his studies gave him structure and purpose, as well as adding to his marketability in interviews. Ian noted that being able to say he had been studying while searching for a new job showed that he had been making good use of his time while not in full-time work:

So the temporary work I'm doing gets me out and about three or four days a week. The other day or two a week I'm applying for jobs, attending interviews and doing my studies. So um- you know, it's trying to be balanced, even though I'm not in a full-time permanent role, I still have to balance working to pay the month- to pay the bills, with studying, to keep on top of that.

So, it's quite handy for me to talk about [in job interviews], not just to talk about the temporary work I've been doing, but to say, 'Well in addition to applying for jobs, I've been doing my Masters studies' . . . to demonstrate that I've been spending my time usefully. (Ian)

Indeed, there is a strong sense of morality in this participation in learning and professional development. Not only is there an individual responsibility for

constantly updating their knowledge and skills, but a responsibility to use time productively even when having been made redundant or, in terms of paid work, potentially perceived as unproductive. Thus, within this timescape, there is a suggestion here both of the Protestant work ethic, within which the ‘waste of time [is] . . . the first and in principle the deadliest of sins’ (Weber, 1930: 158), and of the dominance of the commodification of time: “‘time is money’” means that capital has a built-in clock that is constantly ticking away . . . Times when nothing happens – breaks and pauses, waiting and rest periods – are considered unproductive, wasteful, lost opportunities that need to be eliminated or at least minimized’ (Adam et al., 2002: 17–18). Equally, however, this again reflects the necessity and the norm for adults to engage in continuing education and development (Blaxter et al., 1997).

So the key story in these different learners’ narratives is of developing a level of flexibility about when, where and how they engage in paid work, and about taking personal responsibility for their development and future ability to remain in work by engaging in distance learning studies. It is important to highlight that this is not only seen as necessary for survival in the labour market, but it is also felt to be desirable by the learners themselves. For example, as well as maintaining employability and marketability, these learners often emphasize that studying is a way of gaining promotion, recognition at work, and potentially some sense of control over their future and the insecurity that they were currently – or potentially – experiencing.

Some of the dominant narratives that have been highlighted within this timescape are the necessity for flexibility, continuing development and learning, the insecurity of employment and the individual responsibility for ‘competence and employability’ (Otalá, 1997: 455–6). These stories in many ways reflect the narratives in the literature and policy of individuals bearing the burden of responsibility for their economic survival as:

- Episodic workers, ‘*bricoleur[s]*’ or tinkerers (Bauman, 2000: 139) moving from ‘camping site’ to camp site rather than co-building (or even having the opportunity to build) a long-term, shared relationship with employers (p. 149);
- ‘Portfolio’ workers, constantly updating and selling their skills, maintaining their economic survival through flexibility, planning and becoming ‘your own security’ (Handy, 1988: 21–3);
- Lifelong learners, continuously learning throughout life in order to keep up with rapid change and to ensure employability, self-fulfilment, community cohesion and national and international competitiveness (e.g. DfEE, 1998; CEC, 2001; ASEM, 2002; FÁS, 2002).

The veracity of such narratives might be questioned. Depictions of work as highly flexible and insecure within the current timescape perhaps overstress the insecurity of work today and the stability of work in the past, particularly when

considering social stratification and historical experiences of employment (Furlong and Cartmel, 1999). Ahier and Moore (1999) note that concepts such as flexibilization and globalization have now entered into everyday language and understanding through 'political debate, TV and newspapers [to become] . . . common currency . . . the touchstone for collective understandings of the "way things are today"' (p. 237). As such, this language is evident in everyday conversations: 'especially as the conditions they denote have dramatically impinged upon many lives through the impact of "delaying" and "downsizing" and radical changes in services, such as banking, at those crucial points where the public (the "global economy") transmutes into the private (the intimacy of the household)' (p. 243).

Although we might critique these narratives and question the extent to which they reflect the current timescape, they do reflect a general sense of uncertainty and personal responsibility for employability. As such, this perception is part of these individuals' lived realities in the current socio-historical time and space and, thus, their way of knowing the social world. Indeed, the individual timescapes explored here highlight that the material realities of flexibility, downsizing and casualization, as well as the personal impact of long hours and stressful working conditions, have affected these learners in one way or another. They equally led these individuals to consider undertaking their studies as a means of tackling insecurity and, potentially, of having some sense of control over the future.

## Conclusion

This article set out to explore the timescape of this group of distance learners, or the socio-historical context against which they talk about how and why they decided to take up a distance learning course. It aimed to consider the wider context against which learners' motivations for studying were shaped, and particularly the temporal and spatial context of these learners. Theoretically, the concept of the timescape provides a conceptual tool through which to consider some of the multiple layers of the times and spaces of social life, and gives us an appreciation of the visible, invisible and immanent relations within these. As such, this acts as both a heuristic device and a useful conceptual starting point from which to begin to simultaneously analyse the complex spatial and temporal relations of social life. As noted, while there is much discussion of the complex and power-laden nature of time and of space, these are often treated separately, and it can be difficult to explore time-space empirically as an inter-linked concept.

Equally, when used to make sense of empirical data, focusing on the timescape enables us to consider individual experience and perception at the

micro level within the context of the wider socio-historical time and space. I would argue that using this concept has been particularly helpful in making sense of my empirical data, or the narratives of these distance learners, and to draw out some of the wider socio-historical discourses and material structures within which these learners locate themselves.

Notably, as discourses that have entered our everyday language (Ahier and Moore, 1999), temporal narratives such as flexibility and lifelong learning can become so familiar that it is easy to overlook or neglect the ways in which these both shape and reflect individual understandings of the social world in which we are located. While some may reject these discourses as mere rhetoric, the fact that they are drawn upon by learners to talk about their working lives and their reasons for studying mean that these macro-level temporal and spatial discourses have to some extent shaped individual meanings and actions.

When looking at why adults engage in further learning, we can focus on the micro-level and individual reasons for studying without considering the wider macro-level structures and circumstances within which these kinds of decisions are made and reasons shaped. This timescape provides a picture, although necessarily limited, of the background against which they negotiate their multiple roles of carer, worker and learner. On the one hand this paints a picture of their work lives and issues of insecurity of employment, the need for flexibility, the over-work that results and the drive to undertake a programme of studies. On the other hand, this highlights some of the gendered and other power relations underpinning access to, and control over, time and space and where distance learning becomes a way of 'squeezing' studying into already busy lives and of coping with feelings of insecurity. As such, exploring these individuals' narratives as timescapes enables us to take a more holistic approach to understanding individuals' lived realities – beginning to locate their stories within the wider historical and social timescape and illustrating some of the ways in which multiple and interlinked times and spaces are embedded in and shape our lives.

The concept of timescape has been applied in this article to an exploration of distance learners' narratives. However, I would argue that it can usefully be applied or drawn upon in a range of analyses and that it can work particularly effectively with narrative research. As noted, narrative research aims to move from the individual/micro to the social/macro. This can be challenging at times, particularly when the kinds of discourses individuals draw on are part of our own everyday lives as researchers. Drawing on the concept of the timescape, however, urges us to reflect on the visible and invisible patterns of life, and the role of time within these. Thus, while the widely used discourses of flexibility and insecurity could be so embedded in our lives as to lead us not to question these within respondents' narratives, focusing on these as a socio-historical landscape/timescape or backdrop to social life enables us to conceptualize these as the macro structures/discourses that underpin the micro-level narratives of

individuals. We can then begin to draw on this to form understandings of collective representations and shared stories of the timescape in which the phenomena being examined are located – whether in ‘reality’ or in discursive terms. Indeed, one of the strengths of this approach is that, although we may question the ways in which individuals describe the timescape (e.g. is flexibility just rhetoric?), by combining it with a narrative approach – which seeks to draw out the meanings that individuals attach to an issue – we simultaneously give recognition to the material, the discursive and the imaginary aspects of the timescape. Furthermore, by considering the visible and invisible elements of this, we can also use this to problematize individual stories, drawing out the powerful, shaping discourses that underpin everyday stories.

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