

**‘A FISH OUT OF WATER’  
THE MIDDLE-CLASS EXPERIENCE OF OVER-INDEBTEDNESS  
AND  
THE ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As a Money Adviser with the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), I noticed a new cohort of clientele seeking the advice of MABS. Traditionally the MABS client base was confined to those from disadvantaged backgrounds but this new cohort are educated and middle-class. They present to the service in states of high anxiety and bewilderment, akin to a 'fish out of water'. This study documents the previously undocumented experience of these over-indebted, educated, middle-class MABS clients. It asked why, despite their education, these clients did not have the capacity to manage their crisis alone. It found they were incapacitated by the extent of their crisis which goes deeper than income reduction and material poverty alone. It found the dispositions of their middle-class habitus and a lack of critical reflection limited their capacity to imagine alternatives to deal with their circumstances. The research recommends that a critical pedagogy should underpin all MABS education policy with a view to facilitating transformative learning for clients. It is hoped this will give clients a sense of control over their situation and possibly lead to social activism for a more equal society.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

‘A fish out of water’, is how I describe over-indebted, educated, middle-class Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) clients. I observe this phenomenon in the course of my work as a MABS Money Adviser. From my perspective as a researcher, grounded in a critical thinking paradigm, this phenomenon cannot go unquestioned, it must be contextualised, hence this thesis.

This chapter sets out the research question and explains how this study fills the gaps in existing research. It explains the remit of MABS, defines the aim of the research and maps the structure of the thesis. It is my understanding that being educated equates to having the capacity to be an independent, competent actor in society. This premise is supported by the National Adult Literacy Association’s (2012, p.3) assertion that literacy involves more than the ability to read and write. It increases the ability to reflect, to explore new possibilities and to initiate change. This understanding has been challenged by my observations.

#### *Research Question*

This research seeks to contextualise the lived experience of over-indebted, educated, middle-class individuals. The research question asks;

*Why educated, middle-class, over-indebted individuals are like a ‘fish out of water’, unable to manage alone, requiring the assistance of MABS.*

This research is underpinned by a phenomenological, social constructionist paradigm, which contends that all experiences are interpreted through socially and culturally constructed lenses (Crotty, 2003). Therefore, it is the complexities of the lived experience of the middle-class research participants that is important in this research.

In the interest of clarity, a brief history of MABS, its foundation, its remit as defined in legislation and the original MABS target group are included.

#### *MABS History and Remit*

MABS was established in 1992, funded by the allocation of €260,000 in the 1992 budget for the set-up of five pilot projects. Today there are over sixty offices nationwide. MABS is a free and confidential service, it aims to help people deal with debts and provides money management skills. The MABS Helpline - 0761 07 2000, operates Monday to Friday from 9am to 8pm and online information is available at [www.mabs.ie](http://www.mabs.ie).

The Money Advice and Budgeting Service Bill 2002 specified the setup, target group and role of the MABS service.

The 2002 Bill listed the principal objectives of the service as:

- (a) to provide confidential, free and independent advice and assistance to individuals for the purpose of managing, reducing and discharging consumer debt;



(b) to identify sources of credit suitable for individuals who have experienced consumer debt and to facilitate those individuals in availing of those sources of credit;

(c) to conduct or arrange for the conducting of programmes for the dissemination of information relating to the management, reduction and discharge of consumer debt;

(d) to enter into arrangements with any other persons that it considers necessary for the furtherance of its objects under this Act.

Money Advice and Budgeting Bill (2002, p.7)

The Explanatory Memorandum of the 2002 Bill identified the target group of the service as families and individuals having problems with debt and money lending. It states one of the key features of the MABS is to provide “a general money advice and education element for the local Community” (2002, p.1).

Brady (2002) asserts that typically the MABS client was in poverty, from a disadvantaged background and often had literacy difficulties. I argue that post-Celtic Tiger, the MABS client base has expanded to all socio-economic groups. Carra’s (2010) research looked at the effect of the over-indebtedness crisis on MABS’ ability to meet its service goals. She noted that the MABS client base is no longer confined to those from

disadvantaged backgrounds. She interviewed MABS Money Advisers who made the following comments about a new cohort of MABS clientele:

*Many are very well educated, even professionals.*

*There are a lot of clients who have never used a free service before and the process is very strange for them. It's a problem in itself for them to sit with you when they feel like they're eating 'humble pie.*

*It's very hard to gauge the capacity of the clients these days. The self-help model is used because people appear to be capable, but they are so destroyed that they come back in a worse situation than before.*

Carra's (2010) study confirms that MABS now deals with clientele outside of the original target group and confirms my observations that the experience of over-indebtedness often incapacitates educated, middle-class MABS clients to manage their situation alone. The aim of this research is to explore why this is the case. The research will document previously undocumented experiences of living with over-indebtedness from a middle-class perspective and make policy recommendations to the education department of MABS.

### *Structure of Thesis*

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the research question, MABS, the new cohort of MABS clientele, the aim of the study and the structure of the thesis. Chapter Two reviews existing research on the topic and presents existing knowledge to contextualise the crisis of over-indebtedness in Ireland. It links the durable dispositions and meaning schemes of the middle-class habitus with the crisis experienced when the conditions to which the habitus is suited suddenly change. It looks at the

potential of adult education and MABS as facilitator of transformative learning to alleviate some of the distress. Chapter Three outlines the researcher's ontological and epistemological stance. It discusses the methodology and methods used in the collection and analysis of data. Chapter Four presents the findings from the research with quotations from participants. It analyses the findings with reference to the literature and makes sense of the findings in relation to the theories employed. Chapter Five discusses the main conclusions from the findings chapter.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter set out the background to the research question. It looked at how this study fills the gaps in existing research. It defined the aim of the research, and why it is worth doing. The next chapter presents literature to place this research question in the context of existing knowledge.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review commences with the research question this study wishes to explore:

*Why educated, middle-class, over-indebted individuals are like a 'fish out of water', unable to manage alone, requiring the assistance of MABS.*

The chapter is divided into four sections. Section One gives a review of existing research in relation to the research topic and identifies how this research fills the void left by previous studies. Section Two looks at literature to give an overview of the context of the current crisis of over-indebtedness. It demonstrates the over-indebtedness crisis developed as part of a socially constructed Celtic Tiger culture, underpinned by neo-liberal policies. Section Three examines how the middle-class perceives their over-indebtedness through the socially constructed lens of their habitus which makes their experience of over-indebtedness a uniquely middle-class experience. Section Four explores the crisis from an education perspective. It explores the failures of mainstream education to develop a capacity for critical reflection in students. It examines theories of adult education and MABS' role as facilitator of transformative learning. These sections combine to present existing literature which demonstrates the general concepts that underpin the research question. The next section reviews existing research and suggests how this study fills the gaps.

## **Section One: Current Research**

There is no shortage of research on over-indebtedness, poverty and social exclusion in Ireland, including some research from a MABS perspective. For example, Harris (2005) conducted a study of fuel poverty among clients of Finglas/Cabra MABS. Conroy and O’Leary (2005) produced a report commissioned by One Parent Family Exchange Network (OPEN) supported by MABS and Saint Vincent de Paul which concentrated on lone parents and over-indebtedness. A joint report produced by The Women’s Health Council and MABS (2007) investigated the link between women’s health and over-indebtedness. Carra’s (2010) research “*Weathering the Storm*” explored the impact of the recession on the MABS service and its ability to deliver on its aims and objectives. More recently Norris and Brooke (2011) from Waterford MABS produced “*Lifting the Load*” a project supported by the Citizens Information Board and MABS. It investigated the experience of MABS clients, specifically in relation mortgage arrears. No previous study was found to explore why educated, middle-class over-indebted individuals are like a ‘fish out of water’ and unable to manage alone. To be more specific, no previous research examined the middle-class experience of over-indebtedness grounded in education and from a MABS perspective, this research seeks to fill that gap.

## **Section Two: Context**

The crisis of over-indebtedness in Irish society did not take place in a vacuum; it belongs in the context of what was happening in society and the economy during the Celtic Tiger era. This section commences with an exploration of the concepts of habitus and middle-class to be used throughout this research. It then reviews literature that locates the crisis

in the context of powerful neo-liberal policies which further develop the socially constructed habitus of the middle-class research participants. It explores the notion that the Celtic Tiger culture was socially constructed by dominant discourse initiated by supporters of neo-liberal policies, a discourse that was disseminated through the media. These policies encouraged consumption as a marker of identity, entrepreneurship and social mobility. It examines how lenders eagerly sought to provide the credit to keep the cycle in motion. The following sub-section defines the concepts of habitus and middle-class.

#### *Habitus and Middle-class*

These two concepts will be used as a framework to explore how the research participants perceive their experience of over-indebtedness.

Bourdieu (1984, 1992, 1998) defines habitus as embodied history which is internalised by the individual as second nature. An individual feels like a “fish in water” in the comfort zone of the habitus. (Bourdieu and Wacquant,1992). It informs the mental structures through which we see and act in the world, it is durable but not eternal. The habitus is the lens through which we view the world, it is class and culture specific.

The Social Science Dictionary defines middle-class as middle wage earners, white-collar workers in lower managerial positions. According to Parsons (1947), Weber contends economics, status and power are elements in the stratification of social class and these three elements often coincide. A quotation from Bernstein (2012) serves to define my understanding of the middle-class habitus.

Middle class families and those aspiring to be part of the middle class want economic stability, a home and a secure retirement. They want to protect their children's health and send them to college. They also want to own cars and take family vacations. However, aspirations alone are not enough; middle class families know that to achieve these goals they must work hard and save.

(Bernstein, 2012)

The terms habitus and middle-class are used extensively in this thesis, this brief explanation will serve to inform the reader of how they are interpreted for the purpose of the research.

The next sub-section explores the notion that the middle-class habitus has been further constructed by its merger with a Celtic Tiger culture, a culture underpinned by neo-liberal policies that conspire to meet the needs of capitalism and support corporate power.

### *Neo-liberalism*

From the 1990s until 2007 (approximately), Ireland underwent major economic, social and cultural transformation. Coulter (2003, p.3) says Ireland's economic transformation was compared to the sudden take-off of 'Asian Tiger' economies and in 1994 Kevin Gardiner, a UK economist coined the phrase 'Celtic Tiger'. According to Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin (2002) the Celtic Tiger economy was based on neo-liberal policies which encouraged "individualism, entrepreneurship, mobility, flexibility, innovation, competitiveness" (p.13). Harvey(1990) says the struggle to maintain profits in a neo-liberal society forces capitalists to be innovative in the creation of product lines and

“redouble their efforts to create new needs in others, thus emphasizing the cultivation of imaginary appetites and the role of fantasy, caprice and whim” (p.106). Lee (1999) contends that in a neo-liberal economy “people exist only as producers and consumers...it is an economy, not a society” (p.80).

Limond says a neo-liberal economy is committed to promoting growth through consumption.

Neo-liberalism assumes that we always are, always have been and always will be consumed by the desire to consume, and values work (and hence preparation for work in and through education) only as a means to this end.

(Limond, 2007, p.171)

Like Lee (1999), Connolly (2007) suggests neo-liberalism in Ireland “supports corporate power, at the expense of the poor, and pushed the privatization of all kinds of services, such as the health service, to the detriment of the public service” (p.110).

The next sub-section looks at how power elites have the ability to disseminate discourse favourable to their neo-liberal ideology, a discourse which ultimately influences how society thinks and acts.



*Dominant Discourse: the power to socially construct*

Foucault (1980a) contends that the effect of power is widespread throughout society, “power reaches into the very grain of the individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” ( p.39).

This research contends that dominant discourses have the ability to covertly socially construct the habitus to meet the needs of those who perpetuate it. It argues that the dominant discourse of the Celtic Tiger era contributed to an ‘inflated’ sense of well-being and encouraged a sizable portion of the population to take increased risks, engage in entrepreneurial speculation, and increase consumption and borrowing.

Ryan (2011, p.2) contends the term discourse is a synonym for conversation, debate, talk or dialogue, but it is neither neutral nor innocuous, it has the power to socially construct reality. Ryan (2003) claims discourses inform our commonsense understanding of things and contributes to the formation of the habitus.

They ‘invite’ us to be human in certain ways, or to respond to others in certain ways. They produce certain assumptions (about, for example, women, men, economics, work, childcare, or money) and they provide subject positions and emotional attachments from which people speak and act. [...] Discourse, language and visual imagery do not simply reflect or describe reality. They play an integral role in constructing reality and experience, in the ways that we know and understand the world, and in what we assume to be natural or normal.

(Ryan, 2003, p.3)

Ryan (2003, 2011) is in agreement with Foucault's (1980a) understanding of discourse as a powerful entity which serves in the social construction of society, manifested in everyday life.

Bourdieu (1989, p.21) adds to the concept of discourse as a source of power. He contends there is a hierarchical system of discourses and some are more powerful than others. He says not all judgments, knowledge or opinions are viewed as authentic or influential.

Not all judgments have the same weight, and holders of large amounts of symbolic capital. The *nobiles* (etymologically, those who are well-known and recognised), are in a position to impose the scale of values most favourable to their products – notably because, in our societies, they hold a practical *de facto* monopoly over institutions.

(Bourdieu 1989, p.21)

Foucault (1981) argues that there are multiple discourses and each comes into play when required, as part of a strategy on behalf of the institution putting it forward. In essence, discourses are politically motivated and must be deconstructed to recognize their true meaning.

It is this distribution that we must re-construct, with the things said, and those concealed, the enunciations required and those forbidden, that it comprises, with the variant and different effects-according to who is speaking, his position of power, the institutional context in which he happens to be situated.

(Foucault, 1981, p.100)

Kirby et al. (2002) provides an example of how discourses change to meet the needs of those in power. They contend that the discourse prior to the Celtic Tiger prioritised

“national development, national identity, family, self-sacrifice, self-sufficiency and nationalism” (p.13). However, these were replaced by a Celtic Tiger discourse of neo-liberalism promoting globalization and capitalist values. A discourse which endorsed:

Individualism, entrepreneurship, mobility, flexibility, innovation, competitiveness both as personal attributes to be cultivated by the individual (and which educational institutions are expected to play a central role in facilitating) and as dominant social values.

(Kirby et al., 2002, p.13)

Devereux (2003) contends that the “mass media are important agents of socialization in that they reproduce dominant (and other) social norms, beliefs, discourses, ideologies and value” (p10).

[D]ominant discourses, many of which are ideological in orientation, are part and parcel of everyday mainstream media content. These media frames or discursive formations were shown to have a power in the social construction of reality of audience members.

(Devereux, 2003, p.138)

This research is interested in the discourse that encouraged consumption funded by credit and as Devereux contends:

The mainstream media industries - many of which in their own right are examples *par excellence* of global capitalist organizations - play a pivotal role in the continued spread of a consumer culture that drives and perpetuates global capitalism.

(Devereux, 2003, p.9)

According to Arnould & Thompson (2005) not everyone becomes passive dupes of the capitalist culture industry (p.875). Devereux (2003) reminds us that we have choices. He contends “you can resist or reject the ‘script’ as laid out. (p.77). Arguably, there is a

constant battle between structure and agency. Although we are constrained by our socially constructed habitus we can activate the capacity to be reflective agents we have the potential to make choices and take control of our own lives.

This sub-section examined the power of dominant discourse to socially construct how society thinks and acts in everyday life but leaves room for critical reflection to enable agency. The next sub-section explores the discourse of positive economic growth put forward by the financial institutions and backed by economic statistics (scientific knowledge), a discourse with the power to influence how society thinks and acts (Ryan, 2003, 2011 and Foucault 1980a).

### *Financial Institution*

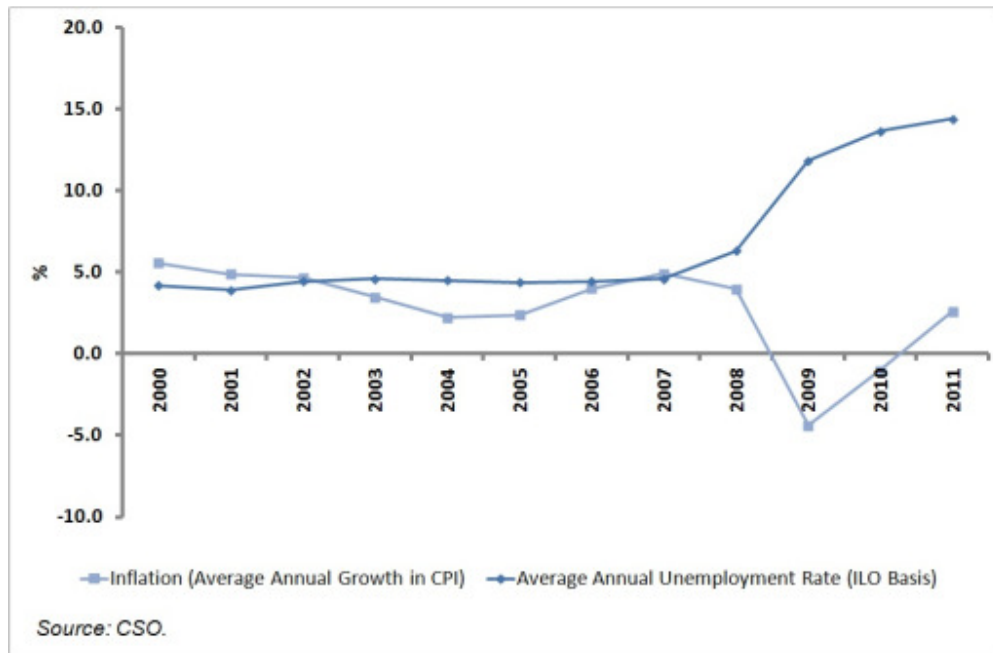
The dominant discourse of a booming economy was evident at the launch of a new branch of Bank of Ireland in Ballsbridge, Dublin. Dan McLaughlin, Chief Economist with Bank of Ireland suggested:

For the first time you have a generation that's now going to be inheriting wealth. A lot of people owning property, which has obviously risen significantly in value, passing that on to a next generation [...] we have a massive amount of capital in terms of you can borrow endless amounts, but where the shortage is now, paradoxically, labour.

(McLaughlin, 2007)

Confidence in the economy was boosted by statistics demonstrating that by 2008 hourly wage rates were 36% higher in Ireland than in competitor countries (Honohan 2009, p.6). This message of optimism socially constructed a positive economic reality and people borrowed because they felt confident they would have employment and an income to

repay their debts. The following graph demonstrates the low unemployment and inflation rates which were indicative of the booming Celtic Tiger economy during the years, 2000 to 2007.



Annual Inflation and Unemployment Rates: 2000 – 2011  
Source: [http://www.esri.ie/irish\\_economy/](http://www.esri.ie/irish_economy/)

Statistical data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) published by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) backed up the dominant discourse of both the Government and the financial institutions. This statistical data provided a sense of validity to the dominant discourse and by extension gave it the power to influence how Irish society interpreted their world.

Ryan (2004) asserts that “Foucault’s work suggests the elaboration of meaning involves conflict and power and the power to control meaning in a particular field resides in claims to (scientific) knowledge” (p.5). Therefore, those who control scientific

knowledge and the institutes that produce this knowledge can maintain a supremely powerful position. Arguably, positive statistics demonstrating low inflation and high employment instigated a sense of security and society acted accordingly by spending up to and beyond, their means.

This exploration of dominant discourse examined the power it holds to influence meaning schemes, construct reality and ultimately inform the habitus. It posited that some discourses are more powerful than others and the power elites of society have the capacity to disseminate values that favour their own agenda. It demonstrated that the content of the dominant discourse can change depending on the political agenda of the power elites. For example, the pre Celtic Tiger discourse prioritized self-sacrifice and self-sufficiency while the dominant discourse of a neo-liberal Celtic Tiger economy prioritized consumption.

### *Consumption*

This sub-section looks at the transition from a traditional economy to a Celtic Tiger economy and the influences this had on consumption patterns. It looks at consumption as a vehicle for communicating identity, lifestyle and status.

Rostow (1990, p.5) contends that in the traditional societies, identities were assigned and the scope for “vertical mobility” was limited. He claims “the range of possibilities opened for one’s grandchildren would be just about what it had been for one’s grandparents” (p.5). Beck (2001), argues in today’s society “boundaries cease to be

givens and instead become choices” (p.266). Individuals can now choose to create an identity. Miles, Meethan and Anderson (2002) suggest consumption allows the opportunity to create a ‘new self’ (p.3). However, in a contested social world, the perceived ‘freedom’ to create an identity rather than having one assigned comes with social and economic pressures, as outlined by Bourdieu (1992).

Bourdieu (1992) contends that it is a struggle to maintain a chosen identity in a hierarchical social space. He argues we live in a “universe in which everything is classified, and therefore classifies - the places to be seen, smart restaurants, horse shows ...the sights and shows one has to have seen” (p.137). He adds that these prestigious consumables can fall out of fashion very quickly if they become too common adding to the pressure on some individuals to constantly re-evaluate their consumption patterns to maintain their identity and status. Bourdieu (1992) maintains it is “a permanent struggle to keep up with and identify with the group immediately above ...and to distinguish oneself from the group immediately below” (p.36).

According to Canton and Roy (2003), who discuss Habermas’ (1971) concept of practical or communicative knowledge, “as a society, we come to agree on how things should be and in reference to standards and values, moral and political issues, educational and social systems, and government actions” (p.89). In other words, we share a socially constructed culture. Unfortunately, the Celtic Tiger culture defines the individual in terms of consumption patterns and an inability to consume defines a flawed individual, not a flawed society and a flawed economy.

Bauman (2005) highlights the personal suffering that accompanies unemployment, reduced income and an inability to sustain established consumption patterns.

Being 'poor' once derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of being a flawed consumer. This is one difference which truly makes a difference to the way living in poverty is experienced and to the chances and prospects of redemption from its misery.

(Bauman, 2005, p.1-2)

However, in the case of this research, MABS clients are not just experiencing the suffering of being a "flawed consumer", they are also suffering the consequences of over-indebtedness.

### *Opting Out*

Ryan (2004) noted there was a lack of a discourse in opposition to the dominant discourse promoting consumption. She contends "many discussions of spending and lifestyle are limited by the absence of discourse that distinguishes between needs and wants" (p.6). Arguably, any discourse which broached the thorny question of needs and wants would not be profitable for a neo-liberal economy that promotes consumption.

The former Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly (2004) attracted huge media attention when she challenged the dominant discourse and cast doubt on the merits of our new found wealth and the pastime of shopping and the materialism it ignited.

Those of us who grew up in the 60s and 70s and who were educated in Catholic schools, will have been reared with the notion that happiness is not something to be



attained in this life. With the passing of that era, and the coincidental massive increase in personal wealth, we are now awash in the notion that not alone can happiness be attained this side of paradise, but that the more money you have, the more of the happiness stuff you can buy.

(O'Reilly, 2004, p.4)

She warned people that the materialism of modern Ireland and the Celtic Tiger culture in particular should be recognised for its faults.

Ryan (2009) posits that material goods should be “dethroned as humanity’s economic gods and become strictly means to the end” (p.154). She contends that “letting go of the pressure to create an identity [...] may be a humbling thing to do. But it can also be liberating because it releases us from the cultural pressures to conform” (p.153).

Perhaps the forced reduction in consumption habits and the freedom it brings is the ‘silver lining’ in the cloud of the economic bust, except for the fallout of over-indebtedness and distress it has affected. The next sub-section looks at the use of credit in Celtic Tiger Ireland.

### *Credit*

Inglis (2006) provides a theory for the current crisis of over-indebtedness. He argues there is “a clash between the traditional culture of self-denial, humility and self-deprecation and the culture of the Celtic Tiger that revolves around ambition, success, getting and spending, going places” (p.38). He posits that “the rapid movement from a culture of self-denial to one of self-indulgence may have led to people not being able to

cope with greater money and freedom and that this has led to uncontrolled over indulgence” (p.41).

Inglis (2006), Kearns (2004), Conroy and O’Leary (2005b) highlight overspending as one of the hazards of trying to maintain an identity and keep up with or above ‘the Jones’. Kearns (2004) suggests Ireland has undergone a cultural change in relation to personal indebtedness, Irish people are now more comfortable with a higher level of personal debt than their peers of the last decade. Conroy and O’Leary (2005b) contend that peer pressure influences individual and family consumption patterns, even to the point of indebtedness. “The pressure on all families, regardless of income, to consume at a rate equal to that of their peers, may be leading some individuals and households into debt” (p.15). The Law Reform Commission (2009) links debt and middle-class lifestyle, it suggests “largely, though not exclusively, middle-class borrowers incur debt in order to sustain a certain lifestyle” (1:43 p.26). Sugrue (2004) uses the term “turbo-capitalism” to describe the phenomenon of a culture of conspicuous Celtic Tiger consumers, subject to market forces and materialism.

Although the foregone research explains the background to the over-indebtedness crisis it fails to put individual borrowing in the context of the economic climate of the time which was underpinned by neo-liberal values promoting competition and upward mobility. The next sub-section looks at the difference between indebtedness and over-indebtedness.

### *Indebtedness and Over-indebtedness*

According to Joyce (2003) “indebtedness relates to frequent use of credit which is now part of the common currency of society, whereas over-indebtedness relates to the imbalance or shortfall between income and expenditure” (p.12). Stamp (2009) expands Joyce’s (2003) meaning of over-indebtedness. He posits over-indebtedness is not simply a shortfall between income and expenditure, it is a persistent shortfall. He claims, “people are over-indebted if their net resources (income and realisable assets) render them persistently unable to meet essential living expenses and debt repayments as they fall due” (p.7).

An Oireachtas Report (No.3, 2010) indicates the extent of over-indebtedness in Irish society. It claims “in 1995, the ratio of household debt to disposable income in Ireland stood at 48% (for every €48 borrowed, €100 was being earned); this is in sharp contrast with 2010 where €176 was owed for every €100 earned” (p.4).

Taoiseach, Enda Kenny (2012) speaking at the World Economic Forum, claimed Ireland’s problems of indebtedness were caused because “people simply went mad borrowing”. Lunn (2012) agrees that poor financial reasoning was evident during Ireland’s boom years but unlike Kenny, he doesn’t blame it all on the individual. He says “because household decisions were not based on accurate information, it appears that many took on far too much risk unwittingly” (p.7). Likewise Walker (2011) contends over-indebtedness cannot simply be attributed to being overly concerned with materialism or “fecklessness, financial incompetence or an inability to delay

gratification” (3). He claims other factors such as “persistent disparity between income and expenditure, insecure labour market experiences and the financial impact of normal life events” (p.3), also contribute to over-indebtedness. Wang’s (2010) research is in agreement with Walker (2011) that over-indebtedness can be linked to circumstances outside of the individual’s control. Lunn (2012), Walker (2011) and Wang (2010) take over-indebtedness out of the realm of individual failure and into the context of society.

Predatory lending practices are a contributory factor in the crisis of over-indebtedness. Although Hill and Kozup (2007) studied vulnerable consumers as opposed to the educated middle-class participants of this research, their findings are useful to understand that predatory lending was not unique to Celtic Tiger Ireland. Hill and Kozup (2007) contend that borrowers were treated with courtesy which made them feel empowered. They described the lender as “always friendly and nice” (p.35). Borrowers said, “[T]hey always sent me ads with my bills. If you needed more money, all you had to do was call so-and-so” (p.35). One of Hill and Kozup’s (2007) interviewees said “I was in a hurry to get the money and they [were] in a hurry to give it to me” (p.36).

Jacoby (2002) claims that when a credit transaction takes place in a rush it doesn’t allow time for scrutiny of terms and conditions nor the chance to truly engage in the transaction.

Highly routinized lending enables contractual obligations to be created very quickly. This means that borrowers bind themselves without necessarily having a great level of comprehension about the loan deal (particularly when phrased in terms of “points”, finance charges, and annual percentage rates).

(Jacoby, 2002, p,564).

Aggressive lending was also a feature of Celtic Tiger Ireland and arguably this contributed to the over-indebtedness currently being experienced. Tierney (2012) reported on the proceedings at Tuam Court, Co. Galway. He reported that a Galway man was told by the Judge to repay his loan of €83,000 at the rate of €5 per week, it will take four hundred years to repay the debt. The defendant said, “[U]p to 2009 I didn’t owe a bob to anyone. Then the banks pursued me and pushed me into borrowing about €4.6 million. I still owe €3.5 million.” This example provides an indication of the predatory lending practices which fuelled the Celtic Tiger ‘boom’.

During the Celtic Tiger when Ireland had almost full employment, people were confident to borrow (based on dominant discourse of a booming economy) in the knowledge that they could repay their debts as agreed with creditors. However, unemployment and income reduction has forced many into over-indebtedness, meaning they are “persistently unable to meet essential living expenses and debt repayments as they fall due” (Stamp 2009, p.7). Lunn (2012) sums up how many over-indebted individuals currently feel. “It is obvious that in the years prior to 2008 many consumers in Ireland made decisions that, knowing what they know now, they would not have made” (p.4).

### *Conclusion*

Section Two examined how neo-liberal policies underpinned the current crisis of over-indebtedness. It looked at how powerful elites can create a discourse to favour their goals and explored how these discourses can socially construct the realities of society. It examined the media as a vehicle to disseminate dominant discourse. It explored how

financial institutions have the power to influence discourse and when this discourse is backed-up by statistics (scientific knowledge) it becomes even more powerful. It examined consumption patterns as markers of identity and suggested that maintaining a chosen lifestyle can incur over-spending which is often funded by credit. The option to opt out of a lifestyle of consumption was also discussed. The literature suggests that neo-liberal policies promoting consumerism, contributed to the social construction of a society comfortable with debt and an environment conducive to predatory lending. Unfortunately the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy plunged people into an unfamiliar environment causing a crisis of the habitus. This crisis will be discussed in the next section.

### **Section Three: Hysteresis**

This research is interested in the subjective experience of the over-indebted middle-class forced to live on a low income, a phenomenon foreign to their habitus. Based on Bourdieu's lens of habitus we can posit that the habitus of the middle-class, Celtic Tiger society, its perceptions, consumption patterns and behaviours are structured and durable but can be re-structured by new experiences and "countertraining" (Bourdieu, 2000, p.172). Unfortunately, the sudden collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy didn't allow time for "countertraining" and plunged individuals into a situation which caused a crisis for their habitus and rendered them akin to a 'fish out of water'. Bourdieu (1977) calls this crisis of the habitus "hysteresis" (p. 78). Reed-Donahay (2004) says Bourdieu's notion of hysteresis describes the subjective experience of individuals who find that there is "no longer harmony between structure and habitus" (p.130). Siisiäinen (2000) contends that

in times of rapid change individuals “can find that their expectations and ways of living are suddenly out of step with the new social position they find themselves in” (p.10).

The next sub-section will examine how harassment by creditors and loss of status impacts on those who are over-indebted.

### *Creditor Harassment and Intimidation*

During a Prime Time programme on RTE (5<sup>th</sup> June, 2012), Michael Culloty from MABS said “we see people in deep emotional trauma, basically they don’t see a way out, the problem is too big.” He said clients are “like a boxer in the ring, they react to each punch from each creditor.”

People do not plan, they are frightened of where they are, they don’t see the wood from the trees because of their depression, their fear, they have no planning capacity, and this is the very time when creditors are putting more pressure on them.

(Culloty, 2012)

Hill and Kozup (2007) found “consumers experienced a significant change in treatment and status by employees soon after payments were missed. This resulted in an escalation of tension between borrowers and lenders’ personnel” (p.39). It also resulted in creditors bombarding debtors with calls, visits and threats.

Borrowers regularly were told that they would lose their homes or other precious possessions or that their credit records would be damaged. This nonstop contact and disparaging language led consumers to endure a great degree of stress.

(Hill and Kozup, 2007, p.41)

Nettelton and Burrows (1999) contend that when individuals are over-indebted their situation is made worse by not knowing their fate and by not having control over their future circumstances (p.470). They say that “the feeling of not being in control left some people with an emotional legacy of enduring insecurity” (Nettelton and Burrows, 2000, p.473).

Stability is a characteristic of the middle-class habitus, therefore loss of control and feeling uncertain about one’s future is particularly stressful for the middle-class. Wang (2010) recognised that social pressures and moral convictions impact on debtor’s ability to cope when they become over-indebted. He says there is an “emotional and social malaise that accompanies the state of indebtedness” (p.47).

When over-indebtedness becomes apparent to others the esteem in which debtors perceive themselves to be held is threatened (Goffman, 1951). Goffman (1967) contends there is an emotional value attached to esteem and status and when one falls out of “face” one becomes shamefaced, feels inferior and embarrassed. This is the emotional and social malaise referred to by Wang (2010) it goes deeper than material poverty alone.

Lazarus (1993) defines stress as “an unfavourable person-environment relationship, its essence is process and change rather than structure or stasis” (p.8).

Stressful conditions did not produce dependable effects; for some persons the stress aroused by a given condition was great, while for others it was small; and under stress conditions, depending on the task, the performance for some was markedly impaired,



for others it was improved, and for still others there was no demonstrable effect (eg. Lazarus and Eriksen 1952).

(Lazarus, 1993, p.3)

Lazarus (1993) claims stress is particular to an individual, and in order to understand how stress affects people we must take into account “*individual difference in motivational and cognitive variables, which intervene between the stressor and the reaction (Lazarus et al 1952)*” (p.3). He claims that stressful emotions are not just caused by external constraints or demands but in juxtaposition with one’s motives and beliefs, “what causes the stress reactions is not the environmental “stressor” alone but also its significance as appraised by the person who encounters it” (p.13). Bourdieu (1991) locates susceptibility to stress and intimidation in the pre-dispositions of the habitus. He says intimidation “[...] can only be exerted on a person predisposed (in his habitus) to feel it, whereas others will ignore it” (ibid, p.51). Likewise Crotty (2003) locates our meaning schemes in our social and cultural upbringing. He asserts: “our culture brings things into view for us and endows them with meaning and by the same token, leads us to ignore other things” (p.54). Lazarus (1993), Bourdieu (1991) and Crotty (2003) contend that not everyone succumbs to the pressure of stress. Arguably, one’s tolerance or intolerance of stress is located in the habitus.

Both Culloty (2012) and Lazarus (1993) contend that when stress becomes distress, it impairs mental functioning. However, contact with an advocate can alleviate some distress as outlined by Wang (2010, p.58). He found that debtors see advocates with statutory and nationwide recognition as having the power to influence creditors in their favour, and they feel more hopeful and confident when they have the support of such an

agency. Arguably debtors see MABS, a statutory body, as an advocate that can help them to cope.

This sub-section located the crisis experienced by people who are over-indebted within the frame work of habitus and hysteresis. Hysteresis is the crisis which ensues when the environment to which the habitus is suited suddenly changes. It examined the stress and intimidation exerted by creditors demanding repayment of debts and located this distress to the durability of the habitus. It looked at the embarrassment of losing ones status in society. The literature reviewed thus far relates to the context of the over-indebtedness crisis and the experience of being middle-class and over-indebted, but it has failed to situate the crisis in education. The next sub-section explores education in relation to the research question.

#### **Section Four: Education**

This section is divided into four sub-sections. Sub-section One explores financial literacy and the middle-class. Sub-section Two looks at adult learning theories of Jarvis (2005), Mezirow (1991), Knowles (1984, 1973) and Brookfield (1987) and their contention that a life crisis can be a catalyst for learning. Sub-section Three explores mainstream education's lack of a critical pedagogy. Sub-section Four examines theories of adult education. Sub-section Five looks at MABS as facilitator of transformative learning.

### *Financial Literacy*

Lunn's (2012) ESRI report on financial literacy in Ireland between 2007-2008 showed that a "strikingly high proportion of consumers were completely unaware of basic details of their own finances" (p.6). The report contends that "financial literacy is correlated with educational attainment and income" (p.6). It makes the assumption that the educated middle-class has good literacy skills. However, research by Conroy and O'Leary found no such correlation between class and financial literacy.

Thirty nine per cent of Irish adults in a surveyed population lacked the ability to identify a common financial term. Difficulties understanding financial terms are not confined to disadvantaged groups, but extend into the middle classes and so are a 'whole population' problem for society".

(Conroy and O'Leary, 2005a, p.vi)

Conroy and O'Leary (2005a) also found that "many middle class adults appear to have difficulties understanding everyday financial terms and words" (p.vii). Kubin concurs and posits that financial literacy is not just an issue for the poor and financially excluded.

Financial education is not only for the poor or the unbanked. Those who already use financial services can also benefit. Research has shown that people tend to think they know more about managing finances and financial services than they actually do. As the financial market becomes more diverse and complex, this lack of knowledge can have serious consequences for even stable household budgets, which fall risk to bankruptcy.

(Kubin, 2008, p.15)

Despite the educational qualifications of the research group the literature indicates that poor financial literacy could have contributed to poor decision making in the past. The

next sub-section examines how theories of adult learning have the potential to assist individuals experiencing a crisis.

### *Readiness to learn*

Learning theorists such as Jarvis (2005), Mezirow (1991), Knowles (1984, 1973) and Brookfield (1987), claim that people are ready to learn when they have encountered a life changing experience. Due to the sudden collapse of the Celtic Tiger, the research participants have encountered a serious disruption to their habitus. Jarvis (2005) uses the term “disjuncture” to describe this phenomenon. Jarvis says disjuncture:

Occurs when individuals cannot take the situation for granted, when they do not know what to say, what to do, what to think, and so on, that is when their perception of the situation is foreign to their biography or the sum of their previous experiences.

(Jarvis, 2005, p.53)

Knowles (1973) contends that adults are motivated to learn when they have encountered difficulty coping with a particular problem. Knowles (1984) says the adult becomes “self directing” (p.9), taking responsibility to learn the new skills required to cope with the situation.

Jarvis (2005), Mezirow (1991), Knowles (1984, 1973) and Brookfield (1987) contend that when individuals encounter a crisis they seek to learn new ways of coping with their situation.

I argue that coping skills are merely alleviating the symptoms of the ‘fish out of water’, they are not solving the underlying problem. The underlying problem can only be addressed by empowering the individual to contextualize their situation and imagine alternatives by engaging in the practice of critical reflection and transformative learning. If learners are unaware of this skill how can it be requested? This is the paradox of education as posited by Socrates.

A person can only learn that which he doesn’t know, but if he doesn’t know it, how does he know what he is seeking to learn?

(Socrates)

The next sub-section explores literature that puts forward theories to explain why there is a lack of critically reflective agents in society.

### *Mainstream education, a critique*

This chapter thus far has examined the notion that neo-liberal policies contributed to the Celtic Tiger culture and socially constructed the habitus of society. According to Limond (2007) these policies extend into education. Limond (2007) says that “one of the express routes to appreciating any society's values, priorities, assumptions and beliefs is to examine what that society (or that society's leadership class) deems most important to preserve, communicate and perpetuate generation to generation” (p.170).

Limond (2007, p.170) is critical of contemporary education that is underpinned with the “hidden hand” of neo-liberal policies. He contends that education with a neo-liberal agenda merely values education as a means of increasing Ireland’s competitiveness and economic wealth, it produces consumers not citizens or intellectuals. He contends “the

gloss of preparation for citizenship and awakening the mind to the merits of learning” is merely a “gloss” (ibid., p.172), and a critical pedagogy in contemporary education is not a real priority.

Connolly (2007) also identifies the lack of a critical pedagogy in contemporary education, she claims “in Ireland, mainstream pedagogy is based on what Freire calls ‘the banking system’ (p.112). She says Friere’s notion of the ‘banking system’ involves the teacher as ‘all knowing’ given the task to ‘fill’ their passive student with their knowledge. .Freire (1972) contends mainstream school does not educate people to anticipate or deal with change instead “the teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable” (p.45).

According to McEwen (2004) and Beck (2001) today’s world is uncertain rather than stable. Despite this McEwen (2004) contends that students are “taught certainty at the expense of a subject’s creative uncertainty” (p.150). Cosgrave and Hanrahan (2008) claim the current system of education trains students to “ask for the answer to every question, as opposed to training them to question every answer. McEwen (2004), Lynch (1989) and Cosgrave and Hanrahan (2008) argue that lack of a critical pedagogy is as a result of exam pressures and published school league tables.

Cosgrave and Hanrahan (2008) claim it is naive to expect creative thinking to be turned on like a switch when students enter college or indeed in life. Arguably it is equally

naïve to think that the educated middle-class will have the capacity to imagine alternative approaches to deal with their over-indebtedness.

Another theory suggests that the education system maintains the status-quo of existing power structures by contriving to stifle critical reflection. Inglis (1997, p.10) contends that schooling does not encourage students to critically analyse social and political structures because the teachers and the education system are elements in the neo-liberal power structures of society. Therefore in the interest of self-preservation they avoid critical analysis.

Teachers do not encourage students to analyse the social and political structures that informs their realities because they (the teachers) are the power structure that students encounter.

(Inglis, 1997, p.10)

Arguably in defence of teachers, they are so embroiled in the structure they may never have been educated to be critically reflective agents themselves, therefore as teachers they do not have the capacity to operate within a critical pedagogy. Giroux (2006) proposes to resolve this issue by training teachers in a critical pedagogy.

We need a new vision of what constitutes educational leadership and social agency so that we can educate teachers to think critically, locate themselves in their own histories, and exercise moral and public responsibility in their role as engaged critics and transformative intellectuals.

(Giroux, 2006, p.4)

While Giroux (2006) proposal has the potential to amend the situation for the future, it is of little use to the participants of this research. The next subsection examines literature

on adult education. It locates a position for MABS as a facilitator of adult education with the potential to facilitate clients to become critically reflective agents.

### *Adult Education*

A distorted assumption or premise is one that leads the learner to view reality in a way that arbitrarily limits what is included, impedes differentiation, lacks permeability or openness to other ways of seeing, or does not facilitate an integration of experience.

(Mezirow, 1991, p.118)

Mezirow (2000) claims that when previously held assumptions no longer seem to fit, because they are too narrow or too limiting to explain current experiences they must be reconsidered. Mezirow (1997) claims it is often a disorienting dilemma, such as unemployment, illness or death that can act as a catalyst for critical reflection and transformative learning. In this case the interviewees disorienting dilemma is unemployment, income reduction and over-indebtedness.

Transformative Theory's focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meaning rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers.

(Mezirow, 2000, p.8)

We can suggest that transformative learning can assist MABS clients to overcome the constraints of their habitus by re-evaluating their dispositions and clearing mental blockages to imagine alternatives.



Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has been criticised for concentrating on personal empowerment as opposed to emancipation or social transformation. Inglis (1997) contends that "without an analysis of power there is a danger that transformative learning, instead of being emancipatory, could operate as a subtle form of self-control" (p.5). Mezirow (1989) responds to such criticisms by arguing the choice for social action resides with the learner. It is not that he doesn't recognise social transformation, but he sees it as separate from individual transformation.

Connolly (1999) is in agreement with Inglis (1997) in relation to the confines of merely teaching for empowerment. Connolly (1999, 2003) contends that adult and community education has the potential to move beyond empowerment to emancipation, it can be a site of critical debates on the nature of Irish society and can be emancipatory by enabling people to become active agents in shaping their own future. From Thompson's (2007) perspective, knowledge only becomes "really useful knowledge" when it gives the "confidence to challenge what is generally taken for granted as inevitable." (p.31). Connolly (1999, 2003), Thompson (2007) and Inglis (1997) contend that radical education has the potential to empower individuals to change the environment to suit their needs, rather than changing themselves to suit the environment. To use the fish analogy, radical education seeks to change the water to suit the fish.

### *Ethical considerations*

Despite the potential for positive outcomes from critical reflection and transformative learning, Hunt and West (2006, p.166) contend that reflexivity can be disturbing.

Dirkx (2006, p.16) goes further by saying that reflexivity which challenges long held meaning schemes can cause guilt, fear, shame and a sense of loss. Mezirow (1991, p.168) contends that when deeply held values are questioned it can threaten ones 'sense of self'. Bearing this in mind Brookfield (1987, p.74) contends that when facilitating critical reflection, facilitators must be mindful of maintaining a sense of equilibrium to prevent learners from being unduly disturbed. MABS clients are already disturbed by their over-indebtedness therefore money advisers must be mindful of their money advice training and maintain equilibrium when facilitating clients to be critically reflective.

This sub-section explored the lack of a critical pedagogy in mainstream education which fails to teach students to be critically reflective and creative agents, thus hampering creativity to deal with a crisis and critically reflect on the context of their situation. It examined transformative learning as a means of developing critical thinking in adults leading to personal empowerment, with the possibility of extending this to social emancipation, while bearing in mind that critical reflection can be a disturbing process. The next sub-section examines the role of the MABS Money Adviser as a facilitator of transformative learning.

#### *MABS Money Adviser as facilitator of transformative learning*

According to Brookfield (1986) it is inadequate to simply meet expressed educational needs of adults coming from a narrow paradigm where they are possibly unaware of "belief systems, bodies of knowledge, or behavioral possibilities other than those they have uncritically assimilated since childhood. He claims to do this is to condemn such

adults to remaining within existing paradigms of thought and action” (ibid, p.124). The discussion that follows is based on the understanding that the expressed needs of clients should not be the only factor to determine the educational focus of MABS.

### *The setting*

The setting of learning and critical thinking is usually associated with the classroom environment and the money adviser/client relationship is not typically nor explicitly designated as an environment to foster critical thinking. However Brookfield (1987) contends “critical thinking is an activity that can be observed in settings and domains very far removed from the school or college classroom” (p.4). He (ibid) claims concepts of critical thinking, analysis, and reflection can be removed from the classroom and placed in “the contexts of adults’ lives-in their relationships, at their workplaces, in their political involvements, and in their relations to mass media of communication” (p.12). This research contends the money adviser/client interaction provides an ideal opportunity and an under-exploited site for adult education and in particular a site where socially constructed norms can be deconstructed to benefit the client.

Mezirow (1991, p.168-169) contends that transformative learning takes place in phases, and the process can commence with a disorienting dilemma such as a death, an illness or a change of job. When this crisis situation cannot be resolved by strategies which proved effective in the past, therefore new learning is sought.

This makes the case for money advisors to actively engage with the client who is arguably at a teachable moment on their journey. It is an opportunity to assist them to engage in critical thinking in an effort to put their situation in context and deconstruct the socially constructed norms, values and expectations of the habitus. Mezirow and Brookfield believe that individuals should understand the social constructs that have shaped their view of the world and critically question who controls power. Brookfield (1987) contends that “when we become critical thinkers we develop an awareness of the assumptions under which we, and others, think and act [...]. We also become open to alternative ways of looking at, and behaving in, the world” (p.ix).

Brookfield (1987) contends that critical awareness of context is important.

What we regard as appropriate ways of organizing the workplace, of behaving toward our intimates, of acting politically, and of viewing television reflect the culture and time in which we live. In realizing this, critical thinkers are contextually aware.

(Brookfield, 1987, p.8)

Brookfield (1987, p.8) suggests that once the individual realizes that their ways of thinking and acting are inappropriate for their lives they have the ability to explore alternative ways of thinking and living. This ability is central to the process of critical thinking and allows the possibility of change. Once it is realized that there are alternatives to fixed belief systems one becomes skeptical of universal truths. More importantly, people who have developed as critical thinkers, no longer take things for granted. “Simply because a practice or structure has existed for a long time does not

mean that it is the most appropriate for *all* time, or even for this moment” (Brookfield, 1987, p.9).

Mezirow (1991) sees individuals as the product of social construction which is not always in their best interest.

We operate within horizons set by ways of seeing and understanding what we have acquired through prior learning. This formative learning occurs in childhood both through socialization (informal or tacit learning norms from parents, friends, and mentors that allow us to fit into society) and through our schooling.

(Mezirow, 1991, p.11)

Mezirow (1991, p.118) argues; that if a frame of reference or meaning perspective confines the possibilities achievable and lacks openness alternative ways of seeing then this frame of reference is distorted. He (Mezirow, 2000) believes that transformative learning can adjust distorted frames of reference, “to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (p. 8).

Arguably the ability to develop a contextual awareness of the powerful influences which contributed to the Celtic Tiger culture and shaped experiences of over-indebtedness, can go some way towards assisting people to deal with their current difficulties, and the money adviser can be a helper in this regard.

Central to developing critical thinkers must be some minimal level of consent on the part of those involved. Trying to force people to analyze critically the assumptions

under which they have been thinking and living is likely to serve no function other than intimidating them to the point where resistance builds up against this process. We can, however, try to awaken, prompt, nurture, and encourage this process without making people feel threatened or patronized. These are the skills of critical helpers.

(Brookfield, 1987, p.11)

This section argued that the application of adult education theories in the money advice situation can assist clients to re-evaluate and change their meaning schemes. As Brookfield (1987) contends “thinking critically involves our recognizing the assumptions underlying our beliefs and behaviors. It means we can give justification for our ideas and actions” (p.13). From the clients perspective this arguably provides validation for previous and future action and may help alleviate suffering and empower them to negotiate their own way out of over-indebtedness.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter outlined the current research relating to the research topic and identified gaps that this study fills. It explored the social and economical context of the neo-liberal consumer culture. It looked at the power of dominant discourse in the construction of social reality. It examined the neo-liberal consumer culture and the option to opt out. It looked at predatory lending and defined over-indebtedness. It explored the crisis using Bourdieu’s framework of hysteresis. It looked at creditor harassment and intimidation stress linked to the pre-dispositions of the habitus. Finally it located over-indebtedness in an educational context. It viewed research to indicate financial literacy and education do not always coincide. It then looked at the readiness to learn when one is faced with a life-crisis. It explored the lack of a critical pedagogy in mainstream education and the

opportunity for this to be redressed by adult education. It explored the difference between education for empowerment versus education for emancipation. It examined transformative learning as a vehicle to facilitate MABS clients to critically evaluate meaning schemes and values so that they become contextually aware. The next chapter looks at the methodology and methods used to collect the research data.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This research investigates why educated, middle-class, over-indebted individuals require the services of MABS. Why are they like a ‘fish out of water’ unable to manage their over-indebtedness alone.

The researcher’s philosophy influences the research subject, the research approach and the interpretation of findings and analysis. This chapter commences with an exploration of my philosophy under the headings ontological and epistemological perspective. It then looks at the methodologies and methods that best fit me as a researcher and the nature of the research. (Mason (2002) suggests that the research should be conducted in a way that is consistent with the researcher’s philosophy). The process of choosing the research participants is examined. The ethics section of this chapter outlines the ethical considerations for the participants and the ethical considerations for the validity of the research.

#### *Ontological Perspective*

My ontological view comes from my life experience, my education and my work as a MABS Money Adviser. If I had not had the opportunity of participating in adult education my narrow world view would have confined me to accepting the socially constructed realities of my gender, class and culture. However, my horizons have been



broadened and I now have the capacity to contextualise my experiences and imagine alternative realities. This reflective capacity is not only confined to my experiences in the world, I am also interested in how others experience their world through socially constructed lenses. I believe nothing is as simple as it seems, it must always be put in context.

This research investigates the reality that educated, middle-class people do not have the capacity to manage their over-indebtedness alone. This reality is apparent to me in my work as a MABS Money Adviser. The research is interested in the subjective experiences of over-indebted, educated, middle-class individuals. My ontological perspective is grounded in the understanding that there is not one truth but many and each person will have a different interpretation depending on their socially constructed lens.

When the social world is seen as 'socially constructed' it opens up the possibility that different groups of people might 'see things differently'. There is the prospect of alternative realities – realities that vary from situation to situation, culture to culture.

(Denscombe, 2003, p.97)

### *Epistemological Perspective*

My epistemological stance is based in the phenomenological, social constructionist paradigm from which I operate. According to Crotty, (2003) “meaning is not discovered but constructed” (p.4). Therefore the meaning we give our experiences is dependant on the socially constructed lenses through which we view. Crotty (2003) defines constructionism as:

The view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.

(Crotty, 2003, p.42)

In keeping with this paradigm I believe that evidence of beliefs and perceptions are knowable by exploration of the lived-experience of individuals and this epistemological stance informs how I conduct this research.

### *Methodology*

Research should not be methodologically led, rather that methodological choice should be consequential to the researcher's philosophical stance and the social science phenomenon to be investigated.

(Holden & Lynch, 2004, p.2)

This research demands a research methodology and a method that will allow an in-depth exploration of the complexity and meaning that underpin the interpretations, perceptions, truths or realities of the participants. To collect this data I used a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach allows for understanding the individual's perception of their lived experience (Bell, 2005, p.7). It also allows scope for clarification of issues under discussion (Wilkinson, 2000, p.47).

Although I took a qualitative approach I am mindful that it has been problematised by Silverman (2000, p.2), he claims that in contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research requires interpretation and therefore leaves itself open to criticism of its flexibility, subjectivity and bias. On the other hand Le Compte (1987) posits that "qualitative or interpretive researchers are not held to mathematical explanations of bias. Rather, they are held to the highest form of discipline honesty" (p.43). Bearing this in

mind and with a view to validating the research, a section on ethics is included after a discussion on semi-structured interviews in this chapter.

### *Method*

This research seeks to investigate and capture how the participants experience and interpret the world through what I determine as socially constructed lens, it is interested in their subjective experience. A shared-understanding model using semi-structured interviews was used to collect this research data as Ryan (2006) contends the shared-understanding model allows the researcher to engage in the interview process.

During which meanings and insights are not only brought forth or uncovered, but also sometimes produced or generated. [...] The aim of this kind of interviewing is to obtain rich, nuanced, descriptive material that reflects the interviewee's understanding of her/his life-world (or part of it) and lends itself to qualitative analysis in one or more modes, for example, the identification and categorisation of central themes, or the extraction of core narratives.

(Ryan, 2006, p.77)

Scope for unexpected themes to emerge is an important component of the semi-structured interview. Despite the best efforts of the researcher it is unlikely that all possible themes or topics can be anticipated. Mason (2002) suggests, "most qualitative interviews are designed to have a fluid and flexible structure, and to allow researcher and interviewee(s) to develop unexpected themes" (p.62). He describes semi-structured interviews as a "conversation with a purpose" (p.67). In this case the purpose of the conversation is to uncover how the interviewee's view of the world is socially and culturally constructed and in turn affects how they interpret or perceive their experiences of over-indebtedness.

### *Selection of Participants*

The participants were chosen from my client base. They are middle-class, educated and over-indebted. Ryan (2006) contends, “the researcher initially goes to where the answers to research questions are most likely to be found” (p.85). However, choosing research participants warranted both logical and ethical considerations as some middle-class, educated, over-indebted clients are so distressed by their situation they are too vulnerable to be interviewed for research purposes. This is explored further in the ethics section of this chapter.

The method I used to choose the participants is called purposive sampling. Purposive sampling chooses participants because their knowledge is relevant to the research question. Guest, Brunce and Johnson (2006) contend that most purposive samples “share common experiences, and these experiences comprise truths” (p.75). Likewise Richie, Lewis and Elam (2003, p.78) posit that purposive samples share particular features or characteristics which allow exploration and understanding of the themes the researcher wants to study. In other words purposive sampling chooses participants who are in a position to provide information relevant to the research.

### *The participants*

The purposive sampling method used identified five participants who are educated, middle-class, MABS clients. These clients were not too distressed to discuss their over-indebtedness.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i> <i>(approximate)</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Professional</i>
<i>Anonymized</i>				
Sam	Male	Forties	Third level	Economics & Finance
Pat	Female	Fifties	Professional	Medical-Manager
Fran	Female	Forties	Professional	Administrator-Manager
Phil	Female	Forties	Third level	Teacher
Vic	Female	Forties	Professional	Banking & Finance
Ger (anonymized name) is a MABS Money Adviser, she was interviewed as part of the triangulation process to help validate my research. She works in a MABS service 200km away from the location of my work place.				

#### *Interview venue*

Creswell (2007, p.37) contends that qualitative researchers use a place that is sensitive to those being studied. Therefore, each participant was given the option of doing the interviews in the MABS office or in any suitable location which was more convenient or more comfortable for them. All participants chose to be interviewed in the MABS office. Interviews were face-to-face and taped.

#### *Difficulties encountered*

Vic was uncomfortable with the tape recorder and in an effort to put her at ease I moved the tape recorder to an inconspicuous place and forgot to press the record button. As soon as the error was discovered I documented this interview from memory. Therefore,

this interview will be referenced but it is not possible to quote the interviewee directly. All other interviews were transcribed from recordings.

### *Semi-structured interviews*

Ryan (2006) argues “the interview should be semi-structured, following a guide, rather than a predetermined set of questions; the interviewer is thus free to pursue lines of thinking introduced by the interviewee” (p.77). Considering the advice of Ryan (2006) the prompts/questions used for the semi-structured interviews were informed by my ontological and epistemological stance and the theory from the literature review.

### *Ethics*

A qualitative research method aims to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of participant’s perceptions including reasons for their beliefs and actions. Using this method of data collection with participants who are stressed by their over-indebtedness poses a risk of causing them further stress. Richards and Schwartz (2002) contend that “the questions which lead to anxiety and distress depend on the personal biography and experience of the individual participants and cannot always be predicted accurately (p.136). Three steps were taken as counter measures to protect participants from the potential of stress related to the research. Firstly, I used my personal judgement based on my ongoing relationship with clients to choose participants who, in my opinion, were currently not distressed by their over-indebtedness. Secondly, as a MABS Money Adviser I am trained to be an active listener, to observe what is said and unsaid, and identify signs of distress. My professional experience equips me to deal with clients who

present in very distressed conditions, this experience is transferable to my role as researcher and any signs of distress observable during face-to-face interviews could be acted upon immediately. Thirdly, informed consent was on-going and participants were supplied with a photocopy of their signed consent form which contained contact details for support services in the area.

### *Power*

Generally there is an imbalance of power in the researcher/participant relationship. Seidman (2006) contends “the interviewing relationship is fraught with issues of power – who controls the direction of the interview, who controls the results, who benefits” (p.99). I feel the use of semi-structured interviews helped to redress the balance of power in regard to control over the direction of the interview. Ultimately, the power lies with the researcher, but the nature of semi-structured interviews allows the participant the freedom to introduce new themes into the conversation. Thus, the interviewees have some sense of power.

Conflict of interest was a more serious issue. It was difficult to separate the role of money adviser from researcher. I had concerns that my clients would feel pressurised to participate in the research out of a sense of duty or because they depend on the service of MABS. However I also had concerns that by agreeing to participate in the research my clients were doing me a favour and somehow I would feel under a compliment to work even harder on their case. While this is a difficult situation, informed consent provided an opportunity to discuss boundaries. Participants were assured at every stage that

participation was entirely voluntary and their acceptance or refusal of the invitation to participate had no bearing on the money adviser/client relationship.

### *Consent*

The research required two forms of consent, the consent of my employer and the informed consent of the participants. My employer's consent was required prior to making my research proposal as the research involved clients of the MABS service. I outlined my proposal and received verbal consent. Informed client consent is a prerequisite of all research where participants can be identified. (Richards and Schwartz 2002, p.137). Miller and Boulton (2007) contend that "informed consent is a concept which attempts to capture and convey what is regarded as the appropriate relationship between researcher and research participant" (p.2199).

Richards & Schwartz (2002, p.137) posit that participants can be asked for their consent on just one occasion at the beginning of the research or consent can be treated as an on-going process. They argue that consent sought only at the beginning of the process diminishes the value of the consent, however on-going consent also has its drawbacks. For example, Richards and Schwartz (2002) contend that "repeat contacting of participants may in some circumstances, be regarded as unnecessary harassment" (p.138). In the interest of clarity I viewed on-going consent as the most appropriate approach. Clients were informed of the research initially either by phone or face-to-face and asked to consider participating. They were then phoned to arrange the interview and again consent was sought. At the interview all participants were once again informed about the



research and they were asked to sign the consent form. An effort was made at every stage to assure the participants their consent to be interviewed was entirely voluntary and their acceptance or refusal of the invitation had no bearing on the money adviser/client relationship.

### *Confidentiality*

Qualitative research using semi-structured interviews collects a large amount of personal data about the participants. In this case the data is particularly sensitive as it relates to over-indebtedness. This information must be safely stored while it is being used by the researcher. Unfortunately, interviewees can be recognised by their voice on taped conversations and some of the information provided may give clues to their identity. Participants can also be identified through text. Analysing the data sometimes warrants contextualisation which can potentially reveal the identity of the interviewee (Richards and Schwartz, 2002). In an effort to address these concerns and maintain confidentiality, the participants were requested not to use names during the interviews. Taped interviews were erased after the research and contextualisation was carefully applied to preserve the confidentiality of the participants. At the writing up stage interviewee names were changed and geographical locations were not used.

### *Personal bias, subjectivity, misrepresentation and validity*

As discussed earlier in this chapter qualitative research has been criticised for its subjectivity and bias (Silverman, 2000). Le Compte (1987) contends that “identifying the sources of bias and subjectivity in the researcher's own makeup is critical to the quality of

the work done” (p. 43). Honesty and validity in this research is a primary goal but I cannot negate the fact that the ‘filter’ I use has been informed through the social and cultural norms that exist in my everyday life, in other words, my lens is “socially constructed” (Creswell 2007, p.22). My personal lens has been developed through my experiences, my studies in adult and community education, my professional training as an adult educator and my role as a MABS Money Adviser. I call this subjectivity, ‘personal baggage’ but Le Compte (1987) calls it “bias in the biography” (p. 44). By making the bias in my biography explicit I am exposing my personal lens. This information allows the reader to judge the research for bias and subjectivity.

### *Triangulation*

Mason (2002) contends that triangulation is a method used by researchers to validate the data collected. Advocates of triangulation hold that “you can use different methods, or data sources to investigate the same phenomena, and that in the process you can judge the efficacy or validity of the different methods and sources by comparing the products” (p.190).

Initially, triangulation appealed to me as way of validating my research, however on reflection it conflicted with my epistemological stance and I considered abandoning the idea. Firstly, I believe all experiences are filtered through a personal, socially and culturally constructed lenses, therefore there are many truths and all of them are valid for the individual holding the lens. Secondly, I validate the research by applying critical

analysis to all aspects of the research. I do not take everything said in literature or by participants at face-value.

We must not be anymore naïve about deception and self-deception in research interaction than we are in interaction with our family, our lovers, our superiors, our partners, our children, our parents.

(Wengraf, 2001, p.28).

However, when I consulted my supervisor and further literature, I reconsidered triangulation, but from a different perspective. I still contend that the interviewee's interpretations are valid truths and my interpretation and analysis of the data is equally valid. However, a question arises about the validity of the research data outside of my MABS client base, the geographical area where the research took place, or the age group of the interviewees. Therefore in hindsight, I decided triangulation was necessary to add trustworthiness to the research.

For the purpose of triangulation I interviewed Ger, a money adviser colleague, to check if she is observing educated, middle-class MABS clients presenting like a “fish out of water” in need of assistance.

Ger's observations are similar to those found in this research. This provided evidence that the new MABS cohort and their issues, experiences and perceptions are not unique to my research. Quotes from this interview are included in the Findings and Analysis chapter.

### *Limitations*

The research was limited by the fact that it only looked at one group of middle-class clientele, from one MABS office and one money adviser. However, triangulation helped validate the data. The pool of clients to be interviewed was limited as some educated, middle-class clients were excluded from interviews because they were deemed too stressed and an invitation to participate would be akin to harassment of these vulnerable clients.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter established that my philosophical stance and/or my world view is located in a phenomenological, social constructivist paradigm. My world view understands that people view the world and interpret their experiences subjectively, through lenses which are socially and culturally constructed. With this in mind, I chose a qualitative research approach. It discussed the selection of participants and ethical considerations such as stress, power, informed consent and confidentiality. It also discussed the ethical considerations for the research such as subjectivity, bias and validity. The next chapter will examine the findings and analysis of the research in relation to the literature.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

*“Power is invisible to those who have not developed “social mindfulness.”*

*(Schwalbe, 2005, p.24)*

This chapter outlines the findings of the research and analyses them with reference to the theories and ideas in the literature. The chapter is organised in three sections. Section One presents findings to set the background to the current crisis of over-indebtedness. It contextualises the crisis in the power of neo-liberal policies to socially construct the habitus. Section Two presents findings and analyses the lived-experience of the over-indebted, middle-class person. It is framed in Bourdieu’s (1989) notion of hysteresis. Section Three introduces findings and analyses them in relation to education. It presents findings in relation to financial literacy. The discussion explores the lack of critical reflection exhibited by participants and the shortfall in mainstream education to practice a critical pedagogy, thereby failing to educate students to become critically reflective agents. It discusses the potential for adult education to facilitate transformative learning which incorporates critical reflection. Finally it discusses the role of MABS as facilitator of transformative learning and the potential benefits of transformative learning for the client.

The research question asks “why educated, middle-class, over-indebted individuals require the services of MABS. Why are they like a ‘fish out of water’, unable to manage alone.” No other research has combined the parameters of education, middle-class, over-indebtedness and MABS. No other research has documented the lived-experience of middle-class and over-indebtedness,. his research fills that gap.

Five clients of MABS were interviewed, one man and four women. Interviewees range in age from late thirties to mid-fifties, all are educated and middle-class. For the purpose of triangulation a MABS MoneyAdviser colleague was also interviewed.

This research is interested in the lived experience of over-indebtedness through the socially constructed lens of the educated middle-class. The research is underpinned by a phenomenological, social constructionist approach. Denscombe (2003) contends “phenomenology focuses on how the processes of interpretation are shared and ‘socially constructed’” (p.100).

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, which was transcribed, analysed and presented in themes, to illustrate interviewees’ experiences of over-indebtedness.

### **Section One: Context**

This section looks at the context in which the current crisis of over-indebtedness took place. The crisis was spawned during the Celtic Tiger boom, in an economy based on neo-liberal policies. The literature review explored the power of discourses promoting

neo-liberal values to socially construct the habitus, thereby informing the thoughts and actions of a whole society. The findings in this section demonstrate how this phenomenon was manifested in the everyday life of the research participants under the sub-headings entrepreneurship, consumption, education and credit.

### *Entrepreneurship*

As already discussed in the literature Celtic Tiger Ireland was characterised by a dominant discourse of neo-liberalism, a discourse to promote competition, mobility and entrepreneurship (Kirby et al., 2002). Goodbody Economic Consultants (2002) define entrepreneurs as, “those who create and grow new enterprises and demonstrate characteristics of risk-taking and innovation” (p.i).

Dominant discourse was evident in Pat’s testimony. She had entrepreneurial aspirations, she worked fulltime and her husband had a business. They borrowed to invest in two properties for the private rental market, they also traded up to a larger more expensive home. When the Celtic Tiger economy collapsed their business ceased trading and Pat lost her job. Now they regret borrowing to invest.

I would just love the three houses to be gone, totally gone. I’d live in a tent or a caravan. I’d live anywhere just to get the pressure off us. I know it is not an option to hand them back to KBC (bank). But we would like to downsize, maybe sell the big one and move into one of the rented properties that we have, and just make that our family home. That’s the plan but if that doesn’t happen then we will sell the three and just go.

(Pat)

Sam said he purchased a home but he was also indicates that he was making a property investment.

When I was renting I was paying €1,200 and the mortgage was similar to that, so I think, “why pay the landlord when we can buy this house? When we decide to leave the landlord we don’t get anything, but if you own your house that is different”. Before the Celtic Tiger I would have been the cautious one, I would say “we live within our means”, but during the Celtic Tiger we all think “that things cannot go down they are only going up”.

(Sam)

I asked Sam why he thought his property would only appreciate in value. He indicates his understanding was socially constructed by the dominant discourse.

It came from TV, from everything, you know you buy a house for 220K and next year it is 280K, you make 60K in a year so you say, “what can I do”, so people said “you get a mortgage, do it, make a profit”. So society and friends, back then when you got a mortgage, people said “you have a mortgage you are going to thread the path of a millionaire”. Everyone agreed it was like a money machine, the trend went that way. That was the way it was then it was going to appreciate.

(Sam)

Pat and Sam indicate they were being entrepreneurial by investing in property which they assumed would appreciate in value. Sam’s prime motivation was to purchase a home but he also contemplated the possibility of making a profit. Pat demonstrates a more focused entrepreneurial attitude, they had a business and two properties available for private rent. These findings concur with Kirby (2002) and Harvey’s (2007) claim that the neo-liberal Celtic Tiger culture valued entrepreneurship, competition and aspirations of upward-mobility.

Sam indicates that the positive discourse of a booming economy was evident in the media and in discussions with peers. He admits this discourse had the power to influence his



'commonsense' (thoughts) and his actions, he thought that by purchasing a house he would "thread the path of a millionaire". This is in keeping with Foucault's (1980a) notion that discourse has the power to dictate thoughts and actions.

It is worth noting that Sam and Pat's middle-class background gave them the option to purchase property with a view to making a profit, while those less fortunate were homeless. Focus Ireland's 2006 Report suggest up to 5,000 people in Ireland were homeless at the peak of Celtic Tiger boom in 2006 (p.2), but this was a less dominant discourse as it didn't serve the needs of the powerful property tycoons.

### *Consumption*

Arguably, Celtic Tiger Ireland was defined by materialism and consumerism, Sugrue (2004) describes this as "turbo capitalism" (p.1).

Phil spoke of lifestyle and perceived norms for a middle-class family in Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Oh yes the patio, the B&Q 10% loyalty card, the Woodies. Yes and the two cars, I'm coming in from a middle class background. It was part of the lifestyle. Part and parcel of the lifestyle.

(Phil)

The findings indicate that Phil defines her identity and class by her consumption. This is in keeping with Beck's (2001, p.266) notion that identity and lifestyle are now chosen

rather than assigned and Miles' (2003) suggestion that the chosen identity is typically defined by consumption.

However, a deeper analysis of Phil's narrative suggests her understanding of a normal middle-class lifestyle has been socially constructed by a dominant discourse promoting consumption. Bourdieu (1992, p.137) says it is a struggle to maintain one's identity in the hierarchy of social space. Arguably, credit is often used to fund the chosen lifestyle and it is mainly but not exclusively the middle-class who borrow to maintain their lifestyle (The Law Commission Report 2009). According to Joyce (2003) the use of credit is everyday practice, but when income is suddenly and drastically reduced to the point where debt becomes over-indebtedness it becomes problematic.

#### *Honourable debts*

The findings indicate that all of the interviewees appeared to feel responsible for incurring their debts, but they suggested these debts were justifiable and honourable. They didn't indicate that they "simply went mad borrowing" as ironically posited by Kenny (2012).

Fran emphasises their debts were not incurred by frivolous spending. She claims their debt was incurred by borrowing to fund their business. Arguably their actions are located in their neo-liberal informed habitus, they aspired to being upwardly mobile by being entrepreneurial in their business venture, and they used credit to fund this aspiration.

We would have tried to be careful with money and we would never have gone and bought a lot of property or gone on foreign holidays.

(Fran)

This finding agrees with Wang's (2010) findings that when debtors compare themselves to people who borrowed for extravagant lifestyles they feel their debts are honourable. This suggests Fran feels the debt incurred was based on a cognitive, rational decision. Their business was supporting themselves and the economy, they were active participants in a neo-liberal economy. Her actions are located in her habitus which is socially constructed by a neo-liberal discourse that values entrepreneurship. As Bourdieu (1991) contends she acts "without consciousness" (p.51) and with "a socially constituted sense of the game" (Bourdieu, 1989, p42). Fran fails to see the corporate power structure she has been subsumed into, a corporate power that maintains a cycle of production, consumption, credit and more production, so the cycle starts again.

Phil's middle-class aspiration to provide her children with a good education, justifies her borrowing.

When you live in a society, especially in my little area, the kids go to the Gaeltacht for three weeks every year, you know it's no problem for €1,000, €2,000 for Coláiste Cholumba. This is the cost and this is what is done, it's for the good of the child. That's the way we were and I'd do it again tomorrow, my son is on his honours engineering degree course now. And I don't regret it for one minute. It was great to have it at the time and they were the kinds of loans we were getting.

(Phil)

Phil indicates sending children for grinds to the Gaeltacht was part of the Celtic Tiger culture but also part of her middle-class habitus. These findings epitomize Lynch and

Moran's (2006) assertion that economic capital allows middle-class parents to maintain the educational aspirations of their class, and schools collude. In Phil's case she borrowed the capital to fund her children's education because it was for the good of the child. Phil's comments don't clearly indicate if she values education for the sake of education or education for employment.

Pat's testimony depicts more explicit neo-liberal influence.

I was trying to keep a child in college, a young adult in college because I felt her career was more important because she would be a viable employee of Ireland, and that she would be staying here and that she would help the State.

(Pat)

Pat exhibits the influences of a middle-class habitus where education is valued (see Bernstein, 2012), but this aspiration has also been informed by neo-liberalism, "she would be a viable employee". Limond (2007, p.172) contends that neo-liberalism sees the primary function of education as a means of producing employable individuals, who passively accept their role in society, individuals who will ultimately become 'good' citizens, 'good' workers and avid consumers. "The educated population was the better disciplined population and the better disciplined population would work harder, consume more and so work harder again the next day to pay the bills from the day before" (Limond 2007, p.170). The next sub-section looks at the use of credit to fund the cycle of production, consumption and production.

### *Credit*

Maintaining a cycle of credit in society is an important aspect of neo-liberal ideologies, it allows capitalists (corporate power) to make and maintain profits. Harvey (2010) suggests capitalists are innovative, they encourage consumption and when income levels are insufficient to meet consumption, credit is promoted. Therefore it is prudent to examine the lending and borrowing practices of the Celtic Tiger epoch. This section will also serve to demonstrate the contrast between the alluring treatment people received as potential borrowers and the harassment doled out to those same people when they defaulted on credit agreements.

Phil already indicated consumption defines her lifestyle and identity as middle-class. When the question of funding consumption by credit arose, Phil suggests credit was an accepted part of her lifestyle.

I think they were used to it (*credit*). It's like a running tap you don't miss it till it's turned off. You set up the direct debits, the money is taken out, you can top up, as you did, and that is it. If I couldn't afford it I wouldn't have got it.

(Phil)

Phil's apparent comfort with using credit to fund her lifestyle concurs with the findings in the Law Reform Commission Report (2009) that the middle-class use credit to fund their lifestyle. It also agrees with Kearns' (2004) suggestion that Irish people became more comfortable with debt during the Celtic Tiger era and Conroy and O'Leary's (2005b) findings that individuals often over-spent to keep up with the consumption patterns of their peers.

Sam spoke of how easy it was to get credit to fund a lifestyle of consumption which was part of the Celtic Tiger culture.

We went to the garage and said “that is a lovely car”, a Quashqai, they were only coming out in Ireland in 2007, “we would like that”. The garage said “we will give you a call”, I was opening the door into my house when I got the call, “Oh! the car is yours”.

(Sam)

Sam had no problems accessing credit, he had loan approval faster than he expected. Sam’s experience is reflected in Hill and Kozup’s (2007, p.36) findings that people were in a hurry to get credit and banks were in a hurry to lend it.

Ger (Money Adviser) agrees that lenders aggressively encouraged borrowing, to the point where it became irresponsible lending.

Yes. The clients who are coming in, a lot of them are saying look, I went in for a car loan and they kept asking me about my property portfolio. I had a man in only a couple of days ago, I think it was a car loan again, they asked him where he had his mortgage, and he said they rang him every day for a fortnight to try and get him to switch his mortgage over to them and as a kind of a sweetener, they offered to up the mortgage by forty grand in cash, so you know, they were pursued.

(Ger)

These findings indicate that interviewees sought and accepted lenders offers of credit without any sense of reflection on the process or the possible consequences of incurring debt. The findings give rise to questions in relation to the financial literacy of interviewees, especially Phil’s reference to affordability. She said, “if I couldn’t afford it I wouldn’t have got it” and “you can top up, as you did”. This poses the question, what

role financial literacy and reflexivity had to play during the Celtic Tiger era? Financial literacy will be discussed at a later stage in this chapter.

### *Conclusion*

This section examined the findings in relation the context of the current crisis of over-indebtedness and in particular to the lived experience of the research participants. Interviewees indicated they became embroiled in a culture where they aspired to be entrepreneurial and upwardly mobile, a culture where symbolic consumption defined identity and maintaining an identity was fuelled by easy access to credit. Interviewees don't perceive they went mad borrowing as posited by Kenny (2012). They indicate their debt is honourable debt, incurred in good faith and justified as normal practice for their social-class during the Celtic Tiger epoch.

This research is not saying these debts or borrowing were dishonourable. It is saying the neo-liberal ideologies disseminated via dominant discourse had the power to manipulate the meaning repertoires of society and create the desire to consume in a manner to suit a neo-liberal agenda. It is saying that irresponsible borrowing and lending were part of the neo-liberal constructed Celtic Tiger culture and an over-indebted society is its legacy. The findings indicate interviewees acted in accordance with their socially constructed habitus and their "sense of the game" (Bourdieu, 1989, p.42).

## **Section Two: Hysteresis**

The previous section explored the context to the crisis of over-indebtedness. This section applies Bourdieu's notion of hysteresis (1977) or social suffering (1999) as a framework to help understand the experience of over-indebtedness as experienced through the lens of middle-class interviewees. An experience which is alien to their habitus and renders them akin to 'a fish out of water' in need of assistance from MABS.

### *Initial Crisis Experience*

These findings serve to demonstrate the extent of the crisis and trauma felt by interviewees in the initial stages of over-indebtedness.

Pat compared her situation to the *Alice in Wonderland* novel *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*.

Absolutely devastated. I felt where am I going to go with this [...] it was like seeing through a looking glass and seeing where I could start.

(Pat)

After the interview when the tape was not running Pat again made reference to *Alice in Wonderland*, this time she said she felt like Alice, she felt like she had fallen down a rabbit hole and was somewhere she didn't belong.

Pat's narrative is an accurate reflection of Nettelton and Burrows (1999) findings on the effect of over-indebtedness. One of their interviewees said "it's like a great big, heavy weight that was just winding me down constantly, I just didn't know, you know, which way to turn [...]" (p.467).



Fran explicitly indicates this experience is very new to her habitus.

It was very difficult because you are very vulnerable when you have never experienced debt like that before.

(Fran)

Jarvis (2005) uses the term “disjuncture” to describe these disorientating experiences, he says “when they do not know what to say, what to do, what to think, and so on, that is when their perception of the situation is foreign to their biography or the sum of their previous experiences” (p.53). The findings are also in keeping with Connolly’s (2008) assessment. She draws on Seligman’s (2004) analysis to demonstrate how negative social forces can impact on the mental capacity and the coping ability of individuals or whole groups of people. She contends “social forces, such as unemployment, poverty, patriarchy or whatever, take control of their lives” (2008, p.45).

These findings indicate that the hysteresis experienced by interviewees leaves them feeling like ‘a fish out of water’, not knowing what to do, where to turn, therefore they seek the assistance of MABS. The next sub-section examines how harassment by creditors distresses the situation further.

#### *Creditor Harassment and Intimidation*

The findings indicate that creditor harassment is stressful and intimidating for interviewees and dispositions of a middle-class habitus exasperate the crisis.

Pat provides an example of the contrast between the bank’s alluring attentions of the past with the uncooperative treatment she received as a defaulted debtor.

The banks offered us all this money, they gave us an umbrella when we didn't really need it and they took it away when it rained.

(Pat)

They weren't very co-operative with me, they asked me had I any jewellery to sell and I took umbrage to that.

(Pat)

Pat was emotional as she described the pressure applied by the credit union.

There was one occasion just before Christmas, November, I was actually heading to them to pay the money, I had it in my purse, I was literally about 5 min away from them (Credit Union), I had to wait because I don't bring the car into [local town] that often. So I said "I will be in on Saturday morning, I will bring you the money", and then I got a call, "where are you", and this was at quarter to ten in the morning. To be honest I thought the pressure was too much and I felt stressed and under pressure and I felt a heaviness on my chest and I said "I actually have to stop this". So I spoke to them, made an appointment with them again.

(Pat)

Pat's negative experience with her creditors is in accordance with findings by Nettelton and Burrows (2000, p.471) that debtors were being 'hounded' by creditors. The findings are also in agreement with Hill and Kozup's (2007) findings that when lenders were lending they were "always friendly and nice"(p.35), but when debtors default the relationship gets tense and debtors are bombarded with telephone calls, letters and visits. Likewise, Wang's (2010, p.62) research found that debtors were being harassed and afraid to answer their phones because of creditor demands. Wang (2010) suggests that debtors can suffer depression and see no way out of their indebtedness. Arguably, this is a motivator for seeking the assistance of MABS.

Fran said creditors contacted them by phone, they were demanding and applied pressure for payment. Fran found this harassment stressful when they were struggling to provide the basic needs of food and electricity.

I actually feel there was an awful lot of pressure and it was quiet, you know it was coming on a daily basis, definitely weekly basis and it was difficult to deal with. There was a lot of demands being put on you, they were certainly putting on the demands. In the sense that you are trying to cope, how are you going to pay for food, the electricity, the basics and then you have these calls coming, Like for instance, asking what can you actually ... what can you give us this week, you know and can we make an agreement now that this is going to be the actual amount that you are going to be paying for the next 'x' amount of weeks, or amount of months that is what we found. So it was just constantly, constantly...I found that you know, you were bombarded with calls and they all wanted money. If you are receiving letters and phone calls on a daily basis it is very hard to think of other things on that day.

(Fran)

The findings are in agreement with Nettelton and Burrows (1999) findings that borrowers were, 'hounded' for debts by people that they had no previous contact with. Some people told how they were 'rung up' at all times of the day (p.471).

Ger (Money Adviser) concurs that creditors harass debtors and this motivates them (debtors) to seek the assistance of MABS.

They (debtors) are dealing individually with their debts and their creditors are pushing them for 'x' amount of money. They (debtor) will agree to anything to get them (creditor) off the phone, then what happens after that as you know, they end up not being able to keep up all the payments, so they have to come to MABS.

(Ger)

Sam talked about the fear of opening letters and the threat of legal action.

When letters come to the door, the post, we would get scared. Yah, scared to open them. We were scared, you know sometimes we were afraid to open it, afraid of a warning.

(Sam)

Creditors said “we understand that you are homeowners, so if you decide to default we have something to fall back on”. They have security so they have something to fall back on.

(Sam)

Sam indicated that he felt threatened by creditors. He understands that his home is an asset which ultimately could be liquidated to repay his mortgage and other debts. Sam’s experience of being ‘scared’ is echoed by Michael Culloty of MABS. He says when clients come to MABS they are frightened.

People do leave it too late, they wait until the solicitors letter comes or whatever and then they react to it like a boxer in the ring, they react to each punch from each creditor if I could put it in that way. [...] so people do not plan, they are frightened where they are, they don’t see the ‘wood from the trees’ because of their depression, their fear, they have no planning capacity, and this is the very time when creditors are putting more pressure on them.

(Culloty, 2012)

Superficially we can say stress negates a client’s ability to manage their over-indebtedness. But if we dig deeper the stress can be linked to the disposition of the middle-class habitus. Lazarus (1993) asserts that it is not the stressor alone that causes stress but it is how it is “appraised by the person who encounters it” (p.13). Bourdieu (1991) concurs, he claims the meaning schemes of habitus determine how we perceive experiences and we either succumb to intimidation or not. Intimidation “can only be

exerted on a person predisposed (in his habitus) to feel it, whereas others will ignore it” (Bourdieu, 1991, p.51). The middle-class habitus is characterised by stability and home ownership therefore threats of legal action or repossession of one’s home is experienced as a threat to the conditions of the habitus and a threat to the individual’s sense of self.

Lazarus (1993) claims “threat is an unpleasant state of mind that may seriously block mental operations and impair functioning” (p.5). We can posit the habitus of these middle-class interviewees makes them particularly susceptible to intimidation and stress, blocking their mental capacity and motivating them to seek the assistance of MABS.

Further evidence of the constraints of the habitus is provided by Sam and his reluctance to offer a payment of €2 weekly to a creditor.

Well it’s just natural, if someone owes me money and they pay me €2 per week that is not even half what they promised to pay you cannot accept because it is too much to expect, and the durability, the length, the term of the loan gets too spread out.

(Sam)

The findings indicate that Sam’s background in economics socially constructed his habitus and constrains him from negotiating on his own behalf. This is in agreement with Canton and Roy’s (2003) assertion which they base on Habermas’ (1971) contention that we agree as a society how things should be in “relation to standards and values, moral and political issues, educational and social systems, and government actions” (p.89), basically we are socially constructed. Sam’s habitus has given him a “feel for the game” which Bourdieu (1998, p.25) contends equips him with the ability to anticipate the moves

and the future of the “game”. Based on Sam’s previous experience he anticipates €2 weekly is not an acceptable payment, he indicates that it is too small to be accepted by his creditors. Sam is constrained by his socially constructed habitus and appears to lack the capacity to imagine alternatives. Sam’s disposition, his attitude and his commonsense understanding (habitus) is not helping him in this foreign environment of over-indebtedness, in fact it is a constraint, exasperating his crisis.

During the Celtic Tiger creditors actively encouraged people to use credit, they gave potential borrowers the sense of an elevated status. These creditors now harass defaulted debtors who sense their status has been lowered (status will be discussed more fully in the next sub-section.). The findings also indicate that middle-class interviewees are particularly susceptible to intimidation by creditor’s threats to their stability, especially repossession of the home. The findings indicate the dispositions of the habitus can limit individual’s ability to see alternatives and hamper agents from actively engaging in managing their own over-indebtedness. The next sub-section examines how interviewees perceive their over-indebtedness damages their status.

### *Status*

According to Goffman (1951, p.294) esteem is the established scale for status and individuals rate themselves based on the level of esteem in which they perceive themselves to be held.

Pat talked about her family living on a reduced income and how they perceived this affected their status.

So my family then couldn't figure out why we couldn't hand them out money, especially the youngest, she was quite mmm, annoyed at the fact that we were poor and she was in [*college*] and all her friends were quiet wealthy. She had her taste of private education. She had her set of friends and she felt embarrassed, the fact that our status had changed, that we couldn't pay our phone and this, that and the other. The children were coming home, they were bringing their friends with them, and I might not have enough food in the house. I might be down to the last bit of milk or bread and I'd feel embarrassed, totally embarrassed, they were coming to a fabulous house and very little in it, and I was trying to make the ends meet.

(Pat)

Pat also spoke of her husband's embarrassment at not being able to pay his golf club membership.

(*Husband*) was so well known around [*town*] because of the business and he was embarrassed because he couldn't pay his membership in the golf club, he lost his self esteem and he had to be carried for a bit.

(Pat)

Pat indicates they had established a certain status by having the income to maintain a child in private education, afford a "fabulous house", and pay golf membership fees. Pat perceived their status will be damaged by their inability to maintain these socially constructed status symbols. These findings are in keeping with Goffman's (1959, 1967, 1951) concept of status, he says status is a social position in a hierarchical society. Goffman suggests individuals can fall 'out of face' when it is no longer possible to maintain status symbols. He claims embarrassment and shame are an emotional response to one's fall from status.

Sam mentioned status in relation to the potential of creditors to bring legal proceedings against him and the threat of losing his home.

It is the legal procedure, afraid that I am going to be thrown out of the home, and my children are going to have to live with that, the status, are we going to be a laughing stock, and all of that. (Sam)

These findings are in keeping with Wang's (2010, p.54-55) findings that debtors are embarrassed and experience a loss of status when it becomes apparent to others that they are in debt. Manning (1992) says Goffman (1967) contends that individuals endeavour to project an image of the self that has a "positive social value" (p.38). When this image can no longer be maintained it causes embarrassment. Manning (1992) says "embarrassment occurs whenever a projected self cannot be sustained" (p.39).

Ger (Money Adviser) also finds that clients are embarrassed and experience a sense of lost status when it becomes apparent to others that they are over-indebted.

The middle-class, high debt, high income, these people have always paid their debts. They have never had to negotiate their debts, as I said if they couldn't pay they just went for some kind of a consolidated loan, or go to the credit union or whatever, and because they had the big income they could borrow whatever they wanted. They were never in this place where they had to say to the creditor I can't pay, until now. So a good lot of the work I do with these people is about helping people down the social ladder[...] I think what has happened to people is the shame of it all has just left them helpless.

(Ger)

As Calhoun (2003) claims, Bourdieu's concept of habitus incorporates a sense of knowing what "we can 'reasonably' expect" (p.276). Being middle-class also comes



with aspirations, expectations and a sense of status in a contested social space. When this status is threatened by over-indebtedness, it causes stress. As Ger contends the fear of coming down the hierarchical social ladder can intimidate people, negate their capacity and leave them helpless, needing the assistance of MABS.

Section two looked at how the interviewees experienced the initial crisis, creditor harassment and loss of status. It found the initial shock of over-indebtedness left interviewees not knowing where to turn or what to do, Bourdieu (1977) describes this as hysteresis, Jarvis (2005) describes it as disjuncture, I describe it as ‘a fish out of water’. The findings also indicate the crisis was exasperated by creditor’s demands for payment. The expectations of the middle-class habitus for stability, educational attainment and the security of a home contributed to their distress and made interviewees more susceptible to creditors’ harassment, intimidation and threats. The shame and embarrassment of coming down the social ladder, when upward mobility is the desired value of a neo-liberal society also contributed to their “social suffering” (Bourdieu, 1999). The findings indicate that the culmination of these factors negated the capacity of interviewees to manage their situation and therefore motivated them to seek the assistance of MABS.

The next section presents findings to indicate education played a role in this crisis.

### **Section Three: Education**

This section presents findings to indicate that interviewees lack financial literacy and seek the services of MABS to learn the skills to cope with their over-indebtedness. It includes a discussion on the failure of mainstream education to equip students with the

skills to be critically reflective practitioners. Finally it looks the possibility for transformative learning to ease the suffering of clients and at the potential for MABS Money Advisers to facilitate transformative learning.

### *Financial literacy*

Interviewees are middle-class and educated, yet the findings indicate that despite their education they may not be financially literate. The findings also demonstrate interviewees come to MABS to learn practical skills to cope with their over-indebtedness.

Fran explained that they didn't read the small print and were not familiar with lease agreements.

When it comes to drawing down money I would have read the small print a little more, to see exactly what interest rate it was being give at and what the terms and conditions are, particularly with the term loan. We wouldn't have been familiar with leases because we would never have had a lease, and it was advised to us to go on a lease for tax purposes. We have learned from that, we wouldn't be as gullible now.

(Fran)

The research findings agree with Hill and Kozup's (2007, p.36) findings that lenders and borrowers were in a hurry to complete financial transactions and borrowers didn't always take time to become fully informed about the credit agreements they signed. The findings also concur with Jocoby's (2002) findings that "highly routinized lending enables contractual obligations to be created very quickly" (p.564). Unfortunately, borrowers didn't always fully understand or take time to fully assess the contracts to which they committed.

Pat implied that she wasn't confident about her financial knowledge so she informed herself by reading Eddie Hobbs' book.

I was going to come to MABS anyway, because I read it in Eddie Hobbs' book. Just to get an appointment, just to see where you are at, just to get the guidance that you need.  
(Pat)

I felt where am I going to go with this? I was waiting for my turn to come to MABS so that I could get the proper advice and see how to write the letters correctly to see will somebody ever listen to me, I felt I wasn't telling lies, I was telling the truth, and I felt that I needed help.  
(Pat)

Pat felt powerless, because creditors were not listening to her. She was telling creditors that she could not meet agreed repayments but they still harassed her daily. She came to MABS because she wanted to learn how to deal with creditors and her over-indebtedness. These findings are in keeping with research by Conroy and O'Leary (2005a) and Kubin (2008). They found that it cannot be assumed that financial literacy is present in the educated middle-class.

Sam indicated he was aware of MABS but he didn't need assistance while his income was able to service his debts. He realised he needed help when his income was reduced and he was unable to meet his repayments as they fell due (over-indebtedness).

I had been hearing MABS, MABS, MABS, but I was OK, so I didn't think I needed anything to do with MABS. But then I realized I couldn't pay, so I Googled MABS. We were struggling so I went to MABS and I asked how do we pay these debts, there is no way we can balance with the income that is coming in. We are just losing, losing.  
(Sam)

Sam demonstrates Knowles (1984) theory that “adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to know or do something in order to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives” (p.11). Brookfield (1987) calls this readiness for learning a “teachable moment” (p.10).

Phil indicated that she was aware of the existence of MABS but thought she knew how to manage a budget until the family income was suddenly reduced. Then she realised she needed the assistance of MABS to help her manage her budget and deal with creditors.

There was always an advert on the internet or yellow pages, but it was for someone else, because I know how to do this, I know how to manage my budget, I have loads of cash around me and it was only when that went, when (*husband*) lost his job and the budgeting took over. Then we needed to use the facilities of MABS.

(Phil)

Despite Phil’s education, her level of financial literacy is questionable the findings indicate she topped up with credit when the need arose instead of budgeting and planning for foreseeable events. The deficit in Phil’s budgeting skills only became apparent when her financial situation changed. Her testimony begs the question; did she ever have the capacity to budget in the first place? Perhaps budgeting and the middle-class could be explored by further research.

The findings indicate that interviewees came to MABS because they were motivated to gain knowledge of how to budget and deal with creditors. Although interviewees are educated, these skills appear to be foreign to their middle-class habitus but necessary for coping in their new environment of instability, reduced income and over-indebtedness.

The discussion that follows will address how critical awareness could have altered how interviewees interpreted their experience of over-indebtedness. It explores why a critical pedagogy is not part of mainstream education.

### *Discussion*

This research commenced with the understanding that education equips people with more than literacy skills. It develops the ability to reflect, to explore new possibilities and to initiate change (NALA, 2012). This capacity to critically reflect and explore new possibilities should equip the educated, middle-class interviewees to manage their over-indebtedness alone. However, this capacity for critical reflection and its creative application was not evident in the findings. Although already discussed in the literature review the next sub-section serves as a reminder why mainstream education fails to develop students with a capacity to be critically reflective agents.

### *Mainstream Education Critiqued*

The literature indicates that mainstream education in Ireland is based on what Freire (1972) calls the “banking system” where teachers “fill” passive students with information devoid of contextual analysis. Connolly (2007), Cosgrave and Hanrahan (2008), Giroux (2006), Inglis (1997), Lynch (1989) and McEwen (2004) all contend that mainstream education lacks a critical pedagogy. The education system is created to suit neo-liberal policies which prioritise the production of disciplined worker-consumers who don’t question power structures (Inglis 1997, Limond 2007).

Inglis (1997) suggests that a critical pedagogy is purposely avoided in mainstream education because critical analysis could pose challenges for the existing power structures, including the education system and the teachers therein. Giroux (2006) posits that educating teachers in a critical pedagogy could redress the situation.

The findings indicate that interviewees are trapped by the social conditioning of their habitus. Mezirow (1991) sees the constraints of the habitus in terms of distorted assumptions or premise. Sam provides a good example of the limiting nature of his habitus by his testimony that an offer of €2 weekly to repay his debt was inconsistent with his commonsense understanding of lending and borrowing.

Adult education theorists such as Mezirow (1991, 1997, 2000) and Brookfield (1987) contend distorted meaning schemes can be changed by engaging in critical reflection.

A distorted assumption or premise is one that leads the learner to view reality in a way that arbitrarily limits what is included, impedes differentiation, lacks permeability or openness to other ways of seeing, or does not facilitate an integration of experience.  
(Mezirow, 1991, p.118)

Mezirow (2000) contends transformative learning can help individuals contextualize their situation and help them regain control of their lives.

Transformative Theory's focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meaning rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers.  
(Mezirow, 2000, p.8)

Arguably, transformative learning can assist MABS clients to clear mental blockages and regain a sense of control over their lives. The findings indicate over-indebtedness renders middle-class clients like a ‘fish out of water’. Perhaps transformative learning can redress this situation, *not* by changing the environment (the ‘water’), but by facilitating clients to change their frames of reference or their perspective so that they can feel like a ‘fish in water’ again.

However, Connolly (1999), Inglis (1997) and Thompson (2007) contend that radical education has the potential to empower individuals to change the environment to suit their needs, rather than changing themselves to suit the environment. To use the fish analogy, radical education seeks to change the ‘water to suit the fish’.

This sub-section of the discussion explored the lack of a critical pedagogy in mainstream education which fails to teach students to be critically reflective and creative agents, thus hampering interviewee’s creativity to deal with their crisis of over-indebtedness and critically reflect on the context of their situation. It examined transformative learning as a means of developing critical thinking in adults leading to personal empowerment with the possibility of extending this to social emancipation. The next sub-section examines the role of the MABS Money Adviser as a facilitator of transformative learning.

#### *MABS as Facilitator of Transformative Learning*

A person can only learn that which he doesn’t know, but if he doesn’t know it, how does he know what he is seeking to learn? (Socrates)

The findings indicate that interviewees seek the assistance of MABS to learn how to manage on a reduced income and deal with creditors. According to Brookfield (1986) it is inadequate to simply meet the expressed educational needs of adults coming from a narrow paradigm where they are possibly unaware of “belief systems, bodies of knowledge, or behavioral possibilities other than those they have uncritically assimilated since childhood” (P.124). He claims to do this is to “condemn such adults to remaining within existing paradigms of thought and action” (ibid., p.124). The discussion that follows is based on the understanding that the expressed needs of clients should not be the only factor to determine the educational focus of MABS.

Brookfield (1986, p.124) contends that sometimes the educator has a responsibility to take students beyond the narrow paradigms of their existing thoughts and actions. He sees the facilitation of critical analysis as a way of making these narrow paradigms broader. The research contends that the Money Adviser/client relationship is a site where clients can be facilitated to realise that “bodies of knowledge, accepted truths, commonly held values, and customary behaviours comprising their worlds are contextually and culturally constructed” (Brookfield, 1986, p.125). By facilitating this new awareness it is hoped that clients could be more critically reflective, see creative alternatives to cope with over-indebtedness and ultimately become more pro-active personally and socially.

### *The Site*

The MABS office is not seen as a conventional site for the provision of adult education. However, Brookfield (1987, p.135-161) contends that critical reflection can be initiated



whenever and wherever individuals need to re-assess practices which are proving to be inadequate, the process is not confined to the classroom. The findings indicated that external changes have left interviewees in a state of crisis not knowing where to turn. Brookfield (1987) claims “as people try to make sense of these externally imposed changes, they are frequently at teachable moments as far as the process of becoming critical thinkers is concerned” (p.10). Therefore, the interaction between client and Money Adviser comes at a time with the client is at a stage of readiness to incorporate critical analysis or transformative learning into their repertoire for coping with over-indebtedness.

The aim of transformative learning in this case centers on alleviating the client’s suffering. However, transformative learning comes with a warning that critical analysis of existing meaning schemes can be a disturbing process as already mentioned in the literature review, see (2006); Mezirow (1991), Hunt and West, (2006) I tentatively posit that middle-class people could be disturbed by critical reflection if it brought to light the corporate power structures and neo-liberal ideologies they were influenced by and colluded with. Brookfield (1987) suggests it is important to maintain an equilibrium to ensure learners do not get distressed.

This section concentrated on education. The findings indicate that despite being educated and middle-class, interviewees come to MABS for assistance with financial literacy skills, budgeting and dealing with creditors in circumstances of over-indebtedness. The findings noted a lack of capacity to critically reflect and creatively imagine alternative

ways of dealing with over-indebtedness. Lack of a critical pedagogy in mainstream education was posited as being responsible for this capacity shortfall. It looked at adult education as a vehicle to develop critical awareness and empower clients to regain control of their situation, while consciously acknowledging that the potential to progress from empowerment to emancipation is a possibility not to be ignored. Finally, the discussion examined MABS as a facilitator of transformative learning with a view to ameliorating the suffering of all clients, not just the middle-class clients who are the subject of this research.

### *Conclusion*

This research set out to ask why educated, middle-class, over-indebted individuals cannot manage alone and seek the assistance of MABS. The findings indicate that the sudden change in the economy forced interviewees into a 'foreign' environment, alien to their habitus. The hysteresis this caused blocked mental functioning and negated their capacity to manage alone. The findings were underpinned by the failure of mainstream education to operate a critical pedagogy which culminates in students failing to attain the ability to be critically reflective actors. The absence of critical reflection was a significant finding and it was argued that this contributed negatively to the interviewees' ability to cope. The discussion offered the critical pedagogy of adult education as a means of developing critical reflection in adults. It cited MABS as a facilitator of critical reflection which underpins transformative learning. Ultimately the findings indicate that the interviewees' experience of over-indebtedness is subjectively viewed through the lens of their middle-class habitus. Therefore, their experience of over-indebtedness will be

different than the experience of an individual from a different socio-economic or cultural background. The next chapter draws together the conclusions from the whole study.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

The research question asked; why educated, middle-class, over-indebted individuals are like a ‘fish out of water’, unable to manage alone, requiring the assistance of MABS. This chapter serves as a reminder of the research question and how this research fills the gap left by current research. It looks at the research methodology employed to collect the data. It discusses the research findings and the implications this has for MABS policy on education. Finally, it discusses the limitations of the research and suggests how this research could be extended.

#### *Previous Research*

Based on my observations as a MABS Money Adviser I was interested in investigating the uniquely middle-class experience of over-indebtedness and how this experience negates a client’s capacity to act on their own behalf. No previous research was found to link the parameters of over-indebtedness, middle-class, habitus and education. The parameters used in this research make it valuable across disciplines, for example; education, business, finance, sociology and anthropology. The research is particularly important for understanding the middle-class experience of over-indebtedness and approaching the research from the perspective of MABS as an educator makes this research of specific relevance to MABS and MABS’ policy on education.

### *Findings and Discussion*

The research defined the middle-class habitus as being characterised by income stability, home ownership, educational attainment and a lifestyle where cars and holidays are normal. The collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy plunged many middle-class people into over-indebtedness and forced them to live in an unfamiliar environment foreign to their habitus causing what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as hysteresis.

In contextualising this crisis, the research contends that the neo-liberal policies which underpinned the Celtic Tiger era encouraged a society that valued upward mobility and competitiveness, policies that contrived to produce avid consumers and borrowers. The Law Reform Commission found the middle-class in particular funded their lifestyle by credit. The findings indicate the dominant discourse of a booming economy had the power to inspire confidence in people and encouraged them to borrow in the knowledge that they had a stable income to repay their debts. The collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy forced them into an environment foreign to their habitus where they feel like a 'fish out of water'. As Lunn (2012) says "prior to 2008 many consumers in Ireland made decisions that, knowing what they know now, they would not have made" (p.4).

These neo-liberal policies extended into the realm of education and paved the way for the production of a society of disciplined workers/consumers rather than critically aware citizens. This not only allows for the status-quo of power to be maintained but it also produces a society lacking in the capacity to be critically reflective actors. This educational void becomes apparent when individuals are forced to operate in an

environment foreign to their habitus, as was the case for the research participants. They were found to lack the capacity to contextualise their situation or imagine creative alternatives outside the confines of their middle-class habitus. Adult education and transformative learning in particular were posited as a means to redress this situation. The site where the MABS Money Adviser meets the client was identified as an ideal educational setting. The client's disorientating dilemma of over-indebtedness coupled with their readiness to learn new coping skills combine to form a solid foundation for transformative learning. Engagement with critical reflection can allow clients to re-evaluate and change the distorted meaning schemes of their habitus and imagine alternative ways of coping with their situation.

### *Recommendations*

MABS provides very good skills based education, delivering knowledge to the community and MABS clients in relation to budgeting, borrowing and managing their over-indebtedness. However, a critical pedagogy is not explicit in the education resources available to Money Advisers. This study contends that by taking the step to boldly and explicitly underpin all MABS educational resources with a critical pedagogy MABS education could be moved into a whole new realm. Rather than simply equipping clients to cope with their over-indebtedness, they could be facilitated to perceive their situation through a new lens and imagine alternatives both for themselves and others. However, the study had a number of limitations to be discussed in the next sub-section.

### *Limitations*

For ethical and operational reasons this study was limited in the number of suitable research participants it could interview. It was also limited by its geographical scope.

Although the research was validated by triangulation, the findings cannot be generalised as applicable to all over-indebted, educated, middle-class MABS clients. The next subsection explores how this study could be extended.

### *Further Research*

This research explored over-indebtedness from the perspective of over-indebted, educated, middle-class clients of MABS. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the same study with the experience of over-indebtedness from a working-class perspective or from the perspective of the uneducated, middle-class (those pushed up to middle-class status by Celtic Tiger economy). Further research could ask; has the disorientating dilemma of over-indebtedness in the middle-class been a catalyst for transformative learning? Is there evidence of transformative learning in the thoughts and actions of people?

### *Conclusion*

This study examined the lived experience of educated, middle-class MABS clients. It discovered their experience isn't just exasperated by material poverty or harassment by creditors. It goes deeper, it is about how they perceive their situation through their socially constructed middle-class lens. This makes their experience a uniquely middle-

class experience. It explored the absence of a capacity to be critically reflective agents and the constraints this places on the individual's ability to think creatively and imagine alternative ways of dealing with their circumstances. It suggested that the MABS setting and the MABS Money Adviser can facilitate transformative learning and give clients a sense of control in their lives. It suggested the MABS policy on education should explicitly incorporate a critical pedagogy.

Finally, when my clients make comments such as: "I never thought like that before" or "I didn't look at it like that", I am hopeful that I have facilitated the start of a journey of transformative learning, a journey that will allow them to see things in a new light, imagine alternatives and regain control. Ultimately, we hope they will begin to feel like a "fish in water again", equipped with the capacity to deal with their situation and the potential to actively engage socially and politically to create a more equal society.



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