

THE SIGNIFICANCE ON AGENCY IN LIFELONG LEARNING

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**Symposium to be presented at the 36th Annual Conference of the Standing
Conference on University Teaching and Research on the Education of Adults
(SCUTREA) 4 – 7 July 2006, University of Leeds**

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The significance of agency in lifelong learning

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In this symposium we present emerging findings from the Learning Lives project, a four-year longitudinal study of the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in the lifecourse (see www.learninglives.org). Through repeated interviews with a large group of adults over a period of three years, our research seeks to gain an understanding of the meaning and significance of formal and informal learning in the lives of adults, both retrospectively and in 'real time'. Alongside the interviews we conduct analyses of survey data from the British Household Panel Survey in order to be able to map our case studies onto larger trends and processes in the UK. In this symposium case studies are used to exemplify the co-creation of the life history narrative, to trace structural influences and their interactions with class and gender in the working lives of individuals, and to show how adults 'achieve' agency in response to conditions over which they have differing levels of control.

Tell me your life story: the freedom to speak, the fear to say

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Introduction

When a craftartist being interviewed in an unstructured way, speaks of an apprehension about the interview, seeks guidance from the interviewer after only a couple of sentences and is reluctantly provided with a suggestion by the interviewer, there is an authored explanation given for his hesitancy and uncertainty. Mishler (1999), initially unsure about the cause of the hesitancy, eventually stories the difficulty as being to do with the interviewee's desire to be a 'good respondent' and to meet the interviewer's – and interviewee's – high expectations of what it is to be a 'good interviewee'.

In conducting unstructured and semi-structured life history and life course interviews as part of the Learning Lives project hesitancy and uncertainty among respondents, when asked to tell their life story, has also been experienced. While a possible explanation may be that given by Mishler, one of the Learning Lives interviewees' response to the interview process brings with it a more complex rationale involving voice, power and knowledge, race, gender and class.

The researcher-researched relationship has long been seen as one of unequal power (Kvale, 1996; Mishler, 1986) where the interviewers 'initiate topics, direct the flow of talk, decide when a response is adequate' (Mishler, 1986: 30). Through the use of unstructured interview methods such as those used in the early stages of the Learning Lives project, the researcher attempts

to move away from the asymmetrical distribution of power, providing space and freedom for interviewees to articulate their stories, stories often silenced, marginalised and excluded. If this is so, how can meaning be provided to the conundrum of a highly articulate mixed race Jamaican, 'working class' male having difficulty in relating his life story to a white, British 'middle class' female?

This paper provides a skeleton portrayal of Cuthbert Williams, the interviewee – the 'lay voice'; a skeleton of theory – the 'academic voice' – that has infiltrated the thinking of the author; and it introduces the theoretical concept of the 'third voice' - the voice of collaboration. The theoretical concept of the 'third voice' (Myerhoff et al., 1992) speaks of a telling that is neither the voice of the interviewee nor that of the interviewer, but a 'voice of their collaboration'. Here I lay the foundations for a deeper exploration of putting into operation the 'third voice', across cultural divides.

Cuthbert Williams – interviewee

Cuthbert is in his early 60's, born in Jamaica of mixed race, the son of a planter and a postmistress. His early years were spent in the hills and gullies of Jamaica, where he worked on his father's farm, was educated at the local school to age 15 and spent what time he could playing cricket. At 16 he was sent by his parents to join his older siblings in England, with the purpose of having a better life. He briefly worked in factories before joining the Armed Forces, where he trained as a cook. After leaving the Forces, he spent much of his adult life working in catering in the public sector, eventually becoming a catering manager, a job from which he has now retired. He is married with children and grandchildren. It is through his role in a Black History project in the south of England that he became a recruit for the project.

At two preliminary meetings Cuthbert spoke cogently about his life in rural Jamaica and the Forces; he talked at length about aspects of Black History; he asked about and proffered views on the research process; and he talked about racism. The first interview, like Mishler's interview with a craftartist, had a very hesitant start; the second more readily flowed. On our third meeting Cuthbert voiced his concern at the lack of empowerment he felt in the project, seeing little purpose in the research other than to aid the careers of those already in more powerful positions: the 'authors' of knowledge. Cuthbert was especially concerned that a white middle class interviewer would not be able to relate to the history of a mixed race person from Jamaica who had spent much of his working life in catering.

Voice, power and knowledge

'Voice' has become a term used to denote a collaborative relationship between researcher and researched, where experience is privileged over theory or training, where dominant voices take a lower place to the 'voice' of people more used to being oppressed and silenced; it is about participation and empowerment (Hadfield and Haws, 2001). But 'giving voice' does not of itself empower. We may not hear 'voice' even if we 'give voice'; we may use 'voice' through it's rewriting, for our own ends, using 'voice' to speak our message in an act of ventriloquy (hook, 1990; Hadfield and Haws, 2001).

Likewise, the 'voice' we hear may itself only be an act of ventriloquy for the voices of powerful others (Wertsch, 1991), using as its basis 'a "prior script", a script written elsewhere, by others, for other purposes' (Goodson, 2003: 42). In 'giving voice', a term itself heavy with the irony of power, we need to consider whose 'voice(s)' we hear, whose 'voices(s)' we write and for whose benefit.

One way to attempt to address the issues of 'voice' is to give interviewees the freedom to 'tell their story' in their own 'voice' without recourse to structured questioning; to return transcripts to interviewees; to provide space to work with the researcher on interpreting the text and share draft reports with the interviewee (Mishler, 1986). Through this collaboration comes a shared understanding of what is known (Emihovich, 1995), knowledge being 'constructed *inter* the views of the interviewer and the interviewee' (Kvale, 1996: 14), that is, in the 'third voice'. In this way neither the original voice of the interviewee nor that of the interviewer is presented but rather, a new co-creation, a social construction is devised. While there is collaboration, nonetheless this revised telling remains heavily impregnated with 'the accent of the author's voice' (Kaminsky, 1992: 17), designed to fit the purpose of the researcher.

In the sixth interview Cuthbert commented,

. . . historically most people never, most people in England seldomly believe that this happens to this black person, I mean . . . So I think historically it's in the, well it's in my mind anyway, maybe not in other people's mind, to be cautious, of how, what you say and how it's gonna be taken. It's, it's, that's my opinion anyway. Not that it values much, but . . . And people in some position don't, they read it in a text book, that these things goes on, they've never experience it. So it's very difficult for them to believe the layman when they tell them things if it doesn't tie up with what they've read in the text book. It's very difficult with academics. If it's not in the text book, they might not totally believe him . . . so, yeah, it's very difficult to overcome those issues.

During the seventh interview with Cuthbert, an interview held in a professor's office, surrounded as we were by floor to ceiling shelves of books, he said

Many work has been done on this interview, so whatever I said, they'll go back to one of their text book and there's, oh, yeah, that's right because it says in here that's how he says he should behave. So really, you're looking at what I say, my behaviour, my, my, my voice, my smile, my laughter, and go back to one of the text books and think, ah, that's right, that's how we should believe, he should behave.

To do just what Cuthbert is commenting on academics doing, I return to the textbook, the authorised knowledge. Two texts spring to mind. One is that of LeGuin (1989, cited in Brown, 1993) who talks of 'mother tongue' and 'father tongue', where the latter is seen as a language of social power. Regarded as 'the highest form of language', the father tongue is a language of explanation

and science, seeking universality and supporting a 'notion that there was a general norm that all people aspired to' (Brown, 1993), totalising and normalising all human experience (Usher, 1998). On the other hand, the 'mother tongue' is the language by which stories are told, a language that is personal and subjective, embracing difference. In Cuthbert's narrative we see an understanding of the power position of the father tongue. Only the authoritative – white, male, academic - text provides believable and valuable 'knowledge', for as Bourdieu points out, the only language regarded as 'legitimate' is that of the dominant classes (Jenkins, 1992).

And why should an ethnic minority person be anything other than sceptical of such texts when 'academic research has, after all, found us genetically inferior, culturally deprived, and verbally deficient'? (Delpit, 1997)

Conclusion

The faltering beginnings of the telling of Cuthbert's life story may have been, as Mishler assumes of his craftartist, to be an apologetic gesture for possibly not meeting the requirements of the interviewer. But it may, as is inferred by Cuthbert, be linked to powerful histories of subjugation and silencing, where the script of ethnic minorities, among others, has been deeply engrained, to be wary in telling the dominant a story that may be re-scripted and turned against you. It may be that the dominant father tongue, the tongue of social power imbued with class and gender and race, has also scripted Cuthbert's telling: only objective, scientific academic texts count; what value the lay person's views, opinions and feelings, what place for story-telling and 'mother tongue'?

As Cuthbert keeps on reminding me, albeit often through inference, the script of four hundred years of slavery cannot be magically erased. Telling the story of the 'third voice' may be a way to start to redress the power differentials, acting to achieve a collaborative interpretation may take us a step further, but we must also learn to listen closely to the silence of the voice when given the freedom to speak, to hear what that voice may be too afraid to say.

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Working identities: Gender, agency and social class

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Part of the attractiveness of biographical research is that it shows how learning, like every other form of human behaviour, is deeply embedded in people's everyday practices; it also reinstates the agency and identity of the individual at the core of a learning life. This strong interest in agency, identity and biography seems to reinforce a view of people as highly differentiated individual agents - a tendency that is compatible with individualisation as it is discerned in late- or post-modern societies.

While accepting at least one version of the individualisation hypothesis, this paper returns to a classical sociological concern with social class. In our work in the Learning Lives project, we have been explicitly concerned with the relations between employment and learning. This involves both a broader and a narrower set of concerns than the relationship between social stratification and learning: broader because we are examining identity, agency and change in adults' working lives, and narrower because we are focusing on learning as one dimension of adults' working lives. Here we report provisional findings on the way in which social class makes itself felt in adults' working learning lives, above all in ways that are shaped by gender.

Social class, it seems, is remarkable in current adult education research chiefly through its absence. Nesbit's overview of inequality in recent adult education scholarship showed that social class came third behind gender and ethnicity in researchers' interests (Nesbit 2005, 11). While Nesbit's evidence is largely drawn from North American sources, things do not seem very different in the UK. More generally, across those social sciences that have most strongly influenced adult education research, aspects of structure have been increasingly submerged by the turn towards culture and language (Devine and Savage 2005). And while a number of feminist adult education researchers have shown a keen interest in social class (Jackson 2004, Skeggs 1997), they have tended to be concerned with class as subaltern position, and not with theorising class as such. In particular, middle class social positions are implicitly treated as unproblematic (which belies recent empirical work by Reay, David and Ball 2005 and Ball 2003).

Working lives, learning class

We now turn to our fieldwork, to Jeannie Taylor and Lucinda Argyll. Both women are in their mid-lives and work in typical middle class occupations: customer service and teaching. Jeannie's parents were from the service middle class, while Lucinda's father and mother were both working class.

Jeannie

Jeannie Taylor is in her mid- 30s. Her mother is of Irish Catholic origin: her father's family from the Highlands. Her father was a primary school teacher and her mother worked in the factory of a well-known publisher. Jeannie's mother returned to learning and was in the year above her at secondary school; they went to the same university where her mother was also a year ahead of her. Jeannie's family were members of the public sector service middle class, though her mother was a newcomer to that stratum.

Before taking her year abroad as part of her university course, Jeannie worked in a shop to which she returned when she finished university. When she was about 25 she started working in telephone banking, becoming a call centre supervisor and getting involved in training. While at the bank she met her present partner. She has been living with this partner for over five years and helps him to look after his daughter, while taking on the main responsibility for work in the home.

Jeannie has been in her present job in a customer contact centre for over five years. She monitors calls and gives feedback on quality; she also coaches the call centre agents:

...most of the calls get recorded so we can play that back to the agent and say 'What did you think of your performance, what would you have done differently, what did you do well?'

...you have to keep your own motivation up, you have to not sound robotic but when you've got a hundred calls in the queue it's kind of hard to do.

At one stage, when her first employer was merging two different banking systems, Jeannie and other supervisors were dealing with complaints from irate customers for the whole of their six hour shifts. Jeannie talks about the need for (female) employees to leave their workstation and cry somewhere or to go to a manager to tell her/him that they are not coping. Jeannie's linguistic style and delivery in the interview provide a contrast to its content: she is very matter of fact, and makes extensive use of irony and humour. Her story itself seems scripted and organised: customers are classed as 'screamers', for example, and some of the call agents, like Jeannie herself, can be 'weepers'. Work is described in a way that suggests a systemisation of emotional labour.

The family is an important context for Jeannie's life. One important influence was her parents' and her family's commitment to Socialism. Through the eighties Jeannie was taken along to protests against the Conservative government and at university she was a member of the Labour Party and CND. Her parents have now left the Party and an active Socialist identity has not survived into adulthood:

It's the background's there but the activism really isn't it just doesn't seem to be as many issues to get as passionate about now and it's, I mean the conversation we have now, the lines are more blurred now it's different, it's very difficult to tell from a policy which party that comes from now ...

Lucinda

Lucinda Argyll is in her early forties, and her story begins with a childhood spent in 'a very nice Council scheme', which she summarised as 'a very working class background': her father was a skilled engineer in a large company.

Lucinda's parents were not ambitious for their children and Lucinda says that her father in particular was aware of his place in society: yet Lucinda saw herself as privileged compared to others. Both parents were happy for her to take a "wee job as a typist down the road". When she achieved four good Highers no one had mentioned university, and she took an HNC in retail distribution, while spending her spare time on amateur dramatics. Subsequently, she took a post in London as a nanny and was encouraged to apply to the Royal Scottish Academy where she was offered a place in a stiff competition. However, one of her Highers did not carry sufficient academic weight, and Lucinda attended evening classes to obtain two further Highers.

One year later, when she has to take the audition again, Lucinda has a crisis of confidence and is overwhelmed by a fear of failure, such that she doesn't attend.

Influenced by a boyfriend, Lucinda then joins the police force. At twenty-three she thought of herself as experienced. However, this self perception changes. In 1986 the police force was strongly male dominated and Lucinda became "a bit overwhelmed by society's ills". "There's nothing a police officer doesn't see, nothing." She was involved in what might be regarded as the feminised areas of public service, that involve intense emotional labour: child protection, counselling in rape cases, and in incest cases. Work in Lockerbie, in the aftermath of the plane disaster was followed shortly afterwards by her father's sudden death. These events had a profound impact on Lucinda.

While still in the police force, Lucinda is encouraged to do an Open University Arts Foundation Course: "I loved it, I absolutely drank it all in". While doing a difficult job as a police officer she feels that the OU kept her sane. After getting married she left the police force to take a year out: the emotional stress had taken its toll. Her first child was born in 1999, and she took an offer of part time teaching in further education. She then took a teaching qualification and had a full time post by the time her second son was born three years later. In 2003 she started an MA in Education at the OU. Lucinda takes on most of the work in the home; while her husband is helpful, she feels that women are better at such work.

Politically, Lucinda too had rejected the socialism of her family background. It was her father who was a socialist, and whose attitudes Lucinda now sees as constraining:

The political one, the socialism, just constantly berating the middle and upper classes without really understanding them you know (laugh) because in many senses I have now become what my dad most abhorred (laugh)...

She also saw herself as less a feminist than she had been for much of her life, though this was a nuanced judgement:

It maybe doesn't mean that I'm not a feminist, but I think that in the sixties, seventies, early eighties we really thought we could have it all, have a job, a wife, a mother ...yes you can, but I don't think we were realistic about the cost, you know the emotional cost when you want to be with your kids and you're having to go out to work ... I think the ideal would be part-time while you're raising children for women, now that's probably not a very feminist view ...

Employment was nevertheless highly significant. Unlike her mother, it meant that 'I still have my own income, so I could still make choices'.

Despite leaving her father's politics behind Lucinda also admired his values, and believed that they were central to her own sense of who she was.

Lucinda believed that in taking her father's values, she had developed them further than she believed he was capable of doing.

As for Lucinda's current position, being middle class was something that she accepted but was not entirely comfortable with:

Uh huh so you're saying I mean, socially you've moved from a sort of working class background to sort of more of a middle class?

Although I would never have wanted to label myself like that, the fact is I have, and in my thinking I've moved on too.

Emotional labour had played a critical role in Lucinda's working life. Partly this came about by accident: she was working as a police officer in south-western Scotland at the time of the Lockerbie bombing and was immediately sent to the village, an emotionally exhausting and traumatic experience. Later on, she attributed her posting, in a specialist unit dealing with women and children, directly to her gender. She compared the work with 'drowning emotionally'.

Conclusions

In these narratives, class is certainly present in complex ways. On the one hand, we found less of a reluctance to discuss class than Devine found among British interviewees in her comparative study in Britain and the USA, let alone the strongly pejorative associations that her British interviewees attached to the concept (Devine 2005, 148). People spoke about it freely; some, though not all of them, saw it as something that was located in their past, usually as an important aspect of their upbringing. Yet although our Scottish interviewees spoke of class today, they sometimes did so after prompting by the interviewer; and if they came from working class origins, like Lucinda, they were not always comfortable with the idea that they were now middle class.

So class is "in the present", but it is slightly troubling for people's sense of who they are. In Lucinda's case, this discomfort does not seem to be eased by the fact of repeated successful participation in education and training as an adult: despite qualifying in several skilled occupations, she acknowledges her current class position only with some reluctance.

Class influences both interviewees' trajectories, through the culture and aspirations of parents. For Jeannie, university was a natural next step; what was less conventional was the two-year period of shop work. For Lucinda, university was simply not an option.

Class is also visible through the erosion of class-based political loyalties. This process affects both women, though their starting points are slightly different. Both felt that today's Labour Party had abandoned its and their political roots, but neither had found a replacement, and they were certainly not looking for a politics that had its origins in social class.

There is, of course, a strong gender dimension. On the one hand, both Jeannie and Lucinda can be seen as examples of the ways in which social space has opened up for women since the 1960s. Neither is willing to follow what they see as the traditional script. Both are pursuing their careers, but both also have experienced the constraints of gender. In particular, both interviewees indicate the 'double journée' (Dubar 2000) of many women who combine primary responsibility for care with a commitment to work. Lucinda's reflections on this tension appear to have led her to doubt whether or not she is still a feminist. Jeannie expresses frustration at taking on significant responsibilities in the home, alongside the demands of a management role in the workplace.

Finally, both interviews raise questions about learning and emotional labour. The concept of emotional labour has been a controversial one, and it is certainly not at all clear that it is as new as Hochschild (1983) has claimed. Nevertheless, we believe that the practice of emotional labour raises important questions for women employees in particular. The challenges of emotional labour certainly caused some serious learning for our interviewees (in some respects, it was hardly welcome learning), as well as drawing on resources acquired from previous experiences. These are also gendered, and classed.

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Agency and learning in the lifecourse

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Introduction

The idea of agency has played a central role in education at least since the Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant made an explicit connection between Enlightenment and education when he argued that the “propensity and vocation for free thinking,” which he saw as the basis for autonomous action, could *only* be brought about through education (see Kant 1982[1803], p.699). The idea that education can help human beings to develop their capacities for agentic and autonomous action not only has had a profound impact on the education of children. There is also a longstanding tradition which sees adult education as a major lever for empowerment and emancipation. Nowadays the idea of agency not only figures in normative discussions about what education *should* achieve. It also plays a prominent role in sociological analyses of modernisation. The general thrust of such analyses is that the erosion of traditions and normative frameworks has resulted in a situation in which life has shifted from something that is pre-structured and given to something that has become a task for the modern individual. In the post-traditional society the self has become a ‘reflexive project’ (Giddens 1991).

Whereas in the normative approach the main argument is that people need to be educated and need to learn in order to become (more) agentic, the empirical line suggests that modernisation ‘forces’ people to be (more) agentic, which then raises the question what kind of learning – if any – is involved in and/or follows from living one’s life under such conditions and also what kind of educational needs – if any – follow from it. It is the latter line of thinking which helps to understand the recent interest of adult education researchers in adults’ life-histories and learning biographies. It also helps to explain the rise of biographical learning itself. One of the aims of the Learning Lives project is to contribute to a better understanding of the relationships between learning, agency and the lifecourse. In this paper we present some ideas about the conceptualisation of agency, which we then use to discuss aspects of the learning biography of Diogenes, one of the participants in our project.

Theorising agency

From a lifecourse perspective agency can be defined as an ability to exert control over and give direction to one’s life. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that an adequate understanding of agency must be three-dimensional: it must acknowledge influences from the past, orientations towards the future *and* engagement with the present (the *iterational*, the *projective* and the *practical-evaluative* dimension). To understand agency we must focus on the *dynamic interplay* between these three dimensions and need to take into consideration “how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action” (p.963). In concrete actions all three dimensions play a role, but the degree in which they contribute varies. Emirbayer and Mische therefore speak

of the “*chordal triad* of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones” (p.972; *emph. in original*).

Agency thus builds upon past achievements, understandings and patterns of action. This is the **iterational** element of agency: “*the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action*” (p.971; *emph. in original*). Agency is, however, always in some way ‘motivated.’ It is linked to the intention to bring about a future that is different from the present or the past. This is the **projective** element of agency: “*the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action*” (*ibid.*; *emph in original*). But agency can only ever be ‘acted out’ in the present, which is encompassed in the **practical-evaluative** element: “*the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations*” (*ibid.*; *emph. in original*). Taken together this suggests that agency is always located between past and future; it has a strong temporal dimension. At the very same time Emirbayer and Mische emphasise the importance of context, in that agency is seen as the “temporally constructed *engagement* with different structural environments” (p.970; *emph. added*). The combination of context and time indicates that it is not only important to understand agency in terms of the individual’s lifecourse but also in relation to the transformation of contexts-for-action over time.

One of the implications of this approach is that agency should not be understood as a capacity of the individual but should rather be seen as a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action. Agency is, in other words, not an individual’s possession but something that is achieved in action. It is not something that people *have* but something they *do*. This calls for what we wish to refer to as an *ecological* understanding of agency, one which focuses on the ways in which individuals act *by means of* environments rather than simply *in* an environment, and which pays attention to the ways in which contexts-for-action change over time. To think of agency as an ‘ecological achievement’ helps to understand why people can be agentic in one situation but not in another. It also helps to understand fluctuations in agency over time, that is, in the lifecourse. Such fluctuations can partly be understood as an outcome of learning (or ‘unlearning’) but it is important to see that a focus on learning as such is not enough. There is always the question whether what was learnt in the past can be utilised in the present. And it is important to see that the achievement of agency always results from a combination of individual efforts and available resources (such as economic, cultural and social capital).

Emirbayer and Mische do not simply locate agency in the ways in which we respond to events in our life but suggest that agency has to do with “the capacity of actors to critically shape their own *responsiveness* to problematic situations” (p.971; *emph. added*). Central in this process is the (re-)shaping of the *composition* of the three elements that make up one’s agentic orientation. If Emirbayer and Mische are right that the ability to change the composition of our orientations may help us to engage with events in our life in such a way that we are able to “influence the diverse contexts in which [we] act” (p.1008)

and can alter our “*own structuring relationship to the contexts of action*” (p.1009; *emph in original*), then the critical question is how people might be able and might be enabled to reconstruct their agentic orientations. On the one hand this seems to require learning about the composition of one’s agentic orientations and how they ‘play out’ in one’s life. On the other hand it requires learning about how one might change the composition of one’s responsiveness. Emirbayer and Mische argue that ‘imaginative distancing’ and ‘communicative evaluation’ play an important role in such learning processes (see p.971), and one way in which this can be done is by telling stories about our lives and sharing these stories with others (see also Dominicé 2000). Emirbayer and Mische thus suggest that it is a particular kind of learning that might help people to be more agentic – a kind of learning we might best characterise as biographical learning (see also Bron 2001). Such learning can, of course, only ever be a necessary condition for agency, but never a sufficient one since the achievement of agency always depends on the way in which one’s orientations play out in a particular context, a process which also crucially relies upon available resources. Another important question here is what will ‘trigger’ and facilitate such learning processes. Whereas Emirbayer and Mische seem to suggest that insight will lead to change, it may well be that it is change that will lead to insight, understanding and learning.

Diogenes

One of our respondents chose for his pseudonym the name ‘Diogenes’. Between November 2004 and June 2005 we conducted three interviews with Diogenes, who works for a charity that supports homeless people. In the time covered by our interviews he became 60 and it emerged that he had worked with homeless people for 33 years, first for charities providing for homeless people in London and, since 1990, for his present employer in the south west of England. Diogenes’ life story shows him as someone who has been able and continues to be able to exert control over and give direction to his life. There is a strong projective dimension in Diogenes’ agentic orientations in that his actions appear to be informed by a set of strong values, ideals and beliefs. In his role as warden of a hostel for homeless people and, more recently, as manager of a day centre, he deals on an everyday basis with the difficult demands of homeless people who have problems of mental illness, alcoholism, or addiction to street drugs as well as homelessness. While he works for solutions that are sensitive to individual circumstances, he consistently rejects explanations for their circumstances that are individualistic. He repeatedly stresses the importance of being sensitive to the differences between individuals but without blaming them for their plight.

Whereas Diogenes’ actions are clearly motivated by his values, ideals and beliefs, his agentic orientation is not exclusively projective but also has a strong iterational dimension, which is evidenced by the fact that his values have sustained his actions for a period of at least 33 years. In our interviews Diogenes was able to evoke a critical moment in his life when he decided to dedicate himself to working with homeless people. He described how, in 1972, while trying to find a family friend who had schizophrenia and who had been evicted from his home, he went to a local night shelter. He discovered

there were many homeless people in need of help and his response was to offer to start immediately.

I suppose some people would say (it was) a sort of 'road to Damascus' and anyway, I thought, 'Right you need help,' and well, yeah, so 'Well, when could you start?' so I said, 'Where can I hang my jacket up?' (*Interview 1, November 2004*)

On the face of it, this experience appears to have been a sudden recognition of an opportunity to be socially useful. That moment was a 'turning point' (Strauss 1962) with consequences for Diogenes, his family and for the hundreds of people he has worked with subsequently. However, the decision could also be interpreted as manifesting dispositions shaped by the cultural and social structures of which Diogenes was part at that time. Diogenes undertook his schooling in the 1950s and 1960s in a catholic school with a strong moral awareness where he was taught by Jesuits. During his secondary schooling he was a member of his school's Air Training Corps (ATC) and, after studying history and literature at university, it seemed a natural progression to start a military career that would combine ideals of service to others with service to country. He joined the Intelligence Corps of the army and was posted abroad. However, such postings in the 1960s were to places undergoing political instability and insurgency and Diogenes is able to recount horrific instances of the mindless brutality and casual violence he witnessed on the streets of Aden and in the jungles of Borneo. After leaving the army, he undertook Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in Africa where he could pursue ideals of service to fellow human beings in a different way and it was on his return from VSO that his encounter with the realities of homelessness in London took place.

Early experiences of working with the homeless reveal the formal and informal learning that helped strengthen the value framework within which Diogenes made his commitment. The experiences which particularly oriented his manner of thinking and believing about social and political affairs seem to have occurred during his military career. The projective consequence of his military service included his sense of how the world could be different, his abhorrence of the brutality and violence of war; his critical view of a society that found vast resources for warfare but not for addressing problems of homelessness; that condoned material wealth for some but abandoned others to poverty. The decision to work with homeless people was a significant change of career direction and the narrative about that decision used a device of being prepared to 'hang up his jacket' to convey the immediacy and rightness of the decision.

More than 30 years later this decision still sustains the ways in which he deals with the challenges of the present in a way that allows him to continue to achieve agency. But there is more to the story than only the values and beliefs which informed his decision. Diogenes clearly has the cultural capital to be a significant agent within his field of action and has locally become a well-known and respected figure. At the very same time he is less dependent on economic resources. He is detached from the material culture of our times:

he no longer drives a car, his home is a modest flat, he does not drink and he says his non-material way of life is incomprehensible to close relatives. These factors contribute to the ecology through which Diogenes is able to achieve agency. The narrative that we hear from Diogenes today suggests that he effected a significant change in his agentic orientation more than thirty years ago, a change that was further consolidated through his experiences of working with homeless people and which, in retrospect, can be construed as a significant learning experience in his lifecourse.

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