

WORKING PAPER 4

Learning Lives: Becoming and Belonging

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See www.tlrp.org



The Learning Lives Research Project

The Learning Lives research project began in June 2004, and runs until the end of January 2008. The project is a collaboration between the University of Exeter, the University of Brighton, the University of Leeds and the University of Stirling, all in the UK. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The award number is RES-139-25-0111.

The focus of the research is on the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in people's lives. There are two strands to the data collection, involving the integration of three different methodologies. The first strand is a qualitative study of around 120 people, drawn from different walks of life, living in different parts of the country, and of different ages, gender and ethnicities. Each of the university partners has its own sub-sample, with different core interests. The Exeter team (Gert Biesta and Mike Tedder) are focused on learning, identity and agency in relation to family and the local community. The Brighton team (Ivor Goodson and Norma Adair) are focused on issues of migration, including within country migration. The Leeds team (Phil Hodgkinson, Heather Hodgkinson, Geoff Ford and Ruth Hawthorn) are focused on people engaged in adult learning and/or guidance, and on older adults. The Stirling team (John Field and originally Irene Malcolm, now Heather Lynch) are focused on work and unemployment. Of course, these issues overlap. On the qualitative strand, we are combining two normally separate methodologies: life history research and longitudinal qualitative research. Though we will have a shorter engagement with some of the sample, we are following most subjects for over 3 years, involving about six sweeps of interviewing.

The second strand of our work is quantitative. A second Exeter team (Flora Macleod and Paul Lambe) is using the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) – a data set of 10,000+ adults from across the UK who have been interviewed annually since 1991 – to develop robust measures of formal and informal learning, identity and agency in their different dimensions and to test the validity of these measures against a range of outcome variables. Once these theoretically informed instruments have been developed using BHPS variables, longitudinal data analysis techniques (multilevel models of individual change and hazard/survival models of event occurrence in both discrete and continuous time) will be applied to explore the significance of learners' identities and agency for their learning, dispositions, practices and achievements and how transformations in a given individual's dispositions, practices and achievements impact upon their sense of identity and agency and their ability to exert control over their lives.

To establish an iterative relationship between the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data we are mapping the case study participants' learning trajectories onto wider trends and processes in the UK as revealed through analysis of the BHPS.

Working Papers

This paper is one of a series of working papers being produced as part of the Learning Lives research. These papers are of very different types, and their prime purpose is to help the team with its on-going analysis and synthesis of findings. Consequently, they represent work in progress. A second purpose is to share some of our preliminary findings and thinking with a wider audience. We hope that you will find this paper, and others in the series, of interest and value. If you have constructive critical comments to offer we would love to hear from you. Please send any comments to the contact author, identified on the front cover.

Learning Lives: Becoming and Belonging

Ivor Goodson and Norma Adair

There's another saying that I've heard from the Dagara that means a lot to me which, which says you know, those who are without, family will be the ones that teach us about family, so those who are without will teach us to be with, whatever the subject matter. And I did think about that for a long time because erm, you know, why, why is that? And erm, I do think it's because that that yearning, you know, the fact that, in my childhood I felt so, that I didn't belong, so that yearning made me go and search for and find out about how could I access it so in a way you've got much more of a whole picture than if you got that and you kind of take it for granted, because it, you know, it's not, never been so highlighted because you've never been without it.

So it's the lack of something, it's the recognition that there's something not quite right, that there may be another way of doing things, that gives you

Yeah, it's like the emotion that is created by the lack of something is sort of, you know, the engine that drives you forward to go and find it. And erm, you know, I do think that from a, from a, sort of human nature, you know, you know, pain in that sense, has got some, an energy associated with it that will make, create some kind of action.

(Momo El_Naima, Interview 3)

Introduction: Contextualising the respondent's stories

Momo's story was presented to us as part of our data collection for a large scale research project currently taking place in the UK, entitled Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life Course. The purpose of the project is to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between learning, identity and agency and how adults make sense of their lives. Four sites across the UK are collecting life history and life course data for, in total, about 120 adults, in a longitudinal study covering a period of just over three years. Further details of the project may be found at www.learninglives.org. For this paper all except Timothy have been selected from the sub-set of data collected via the University of Brighton site, which is focussing on collecting life histories of 'migrants', including inter and intra-national migrants, socio-economic migrants, and those we refer to as 'migrants of meaning', by which we mean those who have shifted their understandings and ways in which they make sense of their worlds. Timothy is a respondent from the sub-set of stories gathered via the University of Leeds, where the focus is on older adults returning to learning and/or seeking careers guidance.

Currently we are almost half way through the project, and a little over half way through data collection. Respondents have mainly been interviewed 3 or 4 times in

this period and most will be interviewed a further 2 – 4 times before the close of the project. Interviews begin as unstructured, but as the project progresses and initial analysis is undertaken, so progressive focussing takes place and some degree of structure begins to take place in the questions asked. Nevertheless, it is the intent of the interviewers to keep open as many avenues as possible for as long as possible, to ensure that early closure of important narratives does not ensue. The extent of focus and structure is dependent on the individual interviewer and each interviewee.

From initial analysis of the texts a number of broad themes have emerged. In this case the theme was around the importance placed on early childhood experiences to explain later life events and choices. The respondent's stories that we use in this paper are drawn from a larger set of respondents who fit into this themed group. They have been selected to provide an overview of the range of experiences in childhood that may be seen as important for identity formation in later life, and for the quests that have developed from these experiences.

Introducing the respondents

Momo is in her 30's and was born in East Germany, the daughter of a Sudanese illegal immigrant and a Jewish German mother. She was brought up by her mother (a nurse) and, from the age of three, her step-father, a freelance artist. She was encouraged to play the piano but did not continue her studies when in her teens she ran away from home and lived on the streets for a number of years before entering intensive therapy. She came to Britain as the partner of a British man of Jamaican heritage. The relationship, like several others, did not work out, but after a number of difficult episodes in her life she is now married, with two children. Her and her husband run a 'creativity' centre as well as fostering children. She has trained as a psychotherapist.

Gezhen is also in her 30's and was born in Tibet, the daughter of a Tibetan father and a Chinese mother. She is university educated and taught briefly in Tibet before meeting and marrying her British husband. She came to England with her teacher husband seven or eight years ago. They have two children and Gezhen has occasionally worked in low-skilled jobs but when I first met her she said she would eventually like to train as a nurse or as a primary teacher. However, she has recently returned to China with her husband and children, where her husband now works in an International school.

Armand comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo where his father's family held an influential position. He is in his mid 30's and came to Britain in 2004 after he had escaped from prison, where he had been detained because of his political activism. He sought and gained asylum and when I first met him he was seeking employment, preferably in his profession as an architect. He has since started work as a labourer on a building site. Armand tells us that his wife and children were killed by government officials before he left the Democratic Republic of Congo and so he began his new life in Britain alone.

John Kentman is in his 50's. He has lived mainly in the south of England, where he was born. His early working life was spent in retail management roles and later he worked as a manager for a rail company. Both his marriages have ended in divorce and he is now sharing his home with a woman he has had an unsatisfactory

relationship with. John recalls the death of one of his two daughters from his first marriage, telling us that she was killed in a motorcycle accident several years ago. He also has a son from his second marriage. Following the death of his daughter John resigned from his job and began a 'simpler' life style on a smallholding, taking on part-time jobs for financial reasons.

Eva is in her 30's and was born in Rumania to musician parents of Hungarian decent. She is an international musician now living in Britain with her South American partner, a lecturer at an English University. Eva moved to Israel with her mother and brother when she was in her teens, where she went to university, and came to Britain about ten years ago.

Ben was born in London, in the late 1960's and moved to the west of England when he was three. His father owned an engineering company. Ben went to university, worked in a number of hotels, travelled the world after the death of his father, then trained as a journalist. He went into partnership with others and for a short while ran a restaurant in London, before 'downshifting' to run his own hospitality establishment in the north of England.

Frederick is in his 60's and was brought up by his mother and step-father, an army officer, in the south of England. He is a puppeteer and has been director of a small theatre for a number of years. At the start of this project a 28 year relationship had just ended and Frederick is in the process of rebuilding his life on his own.

Introducing some theoretical issues

It has been suggested that in late-modernity or postmodernity it is impossible to be other than a traveller, at least spiritually if not physically (Bauman, 1998), "moving homes or travelling to and from places which are not our homes" (p. 77). Migration, defined as a move from the 'natural habitat' or 'home', affects us all whether this is international migration, internal migration within a nation (Bertaux-Wiame, 1981), between social classes and cultures (Bron, 2005) or migrations of meaning, where we shift in our understandings and the ways in which we make sense of our worlds.

Bauman (2004) describes how "once I had been set in motion, pulled out from wherever could pass for my 'natural habitat', there was no place where I could be seen as fitting in, as they say, one hundred per cent. In each and every place I was – sometimes slightly, at other times blatantly – 'out of place'." (p. 12). Taken out of the 'natural habitat', the comfort zone of the familiar space called 'home', the traveller becomes a foreigner or stranger, alienated from the others and potentially alienated from oneself (Bron, 1999). With this feeling of being out of place comes the sensation of 'floating', an uncertainty about self, identity, place and belonging (Bron and West, 2000). Being out of place is an unnerving experience that lacks the safety and security of the known, the familiar, the 'home'; it is a condition that ultimately requires resolution through the adoption of strategies to reconstruct a new self which allows us to feel at home or permits us to accept ourselves in the role of stranger (Bauman, 2004). In a world of constant flux and uncertainty, we relentlessly find ourselves in the act of becoming; of seeking to belong.

Yet in Momo's story we begin to see that the place of 'origin', the comfort zone of that familiar space called 'home', was not the place of her belonging, though she sees

it as a driving force for her becoming. The “*yearning*” for belonging fuels her quest to be. But Momo’s story is not a story in isolation, a one off case that may be used to illuminate a theoretical point. In this paper we tease out from a number of life histories, the ‘homes’ inhabited by those who feel they did not belong. These are physical, social and psychic ‘homes’, spaces where there is discomfiture or pain; alienation or unease, from which there is a desire to move, escape or change. Whilst each of the stories is unique to the storyteller, so we can begin to use the threads of the individual to weave patterns of the collective for a cluster of humans for whom their primal quest in life has, either in their telling or our – as researchers – interpreting, a beginning in the unsafe, insecure, ‘foreign’ or smothering ‘home’. We consider how the ‘original’ spaces inhabited are storied as having in some way(s) provided a source of ‘emotion’ or psychic stress that has led to the identification of what Csikszentmihalyi (?) refers to as a ‘life theme’ by which he means “a problem or set of problems which a person wishes to solve above everything else and the means he finds to achieve solution” (p. 48).

‘Natural habitats’; Alien places

Momo tells us that in her early childhood she felt she did not belong, but what was it in her childhood that made her feel this way?

She began her life in East Germany, as a “*mistake*”, not any mistake but her mother’s “*biggest mistake*”; born to a woman with “*very strict Christian values*”, outside marriage, Momo says “*that perception of me being a mistake . . . did have quite a big impact . . . in the way that I was raised within my early childhood years*”. She believes her mother,

“had this idea that I had to compensate for the mistake and be extra specially good or erm, extra specially, which was all sort of survival concept that were based on justifying my existence and erm, I was very well aware of that.

In what way were you aware of it as a child?

Well, one, because it was said so clearly, very much erm,

On a regular basis?

On a regular basis. I think there wasn't any week that didn't go by that erm, you know, where that issue wasn't raised”.

Momo’s father, a Sudanese immigrant living illegally in East Germany, did not remain part of the family unit and had left the mother before Momo’s birth. Her mother was, therefore, left to raise Momo by herself. For the first two and a half years of her life, Momo spent weekdays in a ‘*kinderkrippe*’, a residential home, while her mother first trained and then worked as a nurse. She found herself,

“in a place with lots of other children and staff and, erm, you know, but it wasn't a place that was responsive to me as a person, to me as a black person to me, you know I was a cute kid, so I'm sure you know I did get some level of attention but it was sort of, very old fashioned in terms of

you know there are certain feeding times and there are certain times to do this and it isn't very, it wasn't very child-centred on individuals”.

At weekends, her mother would sometimes put Momo to bed, then leave her to go to work, so that Momo “*was there in my bed screaming my head off because, you know, there wasn't anyone to respond to me*”.

When Momo was three years old her mother met and married another man with whom she had two children. As at the kinderkrippe, Momo found her basic physiological needs were met, but just as at the institution, so too at ‘home’, she found her stepfather unable to “*really embrace me*”; he would physically beat her and although he was “*fair*” in so much as when asked he would say he had three daughters, nevertheless, “*in the way he treated me and the way he felt about me it was very clear that, you know, I wasn't his child*”.

This separateness or difference was further aggravated by colour:

“I think the fact that I was a black child made that even, you know brought that out much, much stronger. Erm, so growing up, in terms of erm, my identity I think erm, there was a lot of erm, total ignorance about erm, things, I mean, you know, I was, I was raised with statements like erm, you know, it's not good to have your hair short because it's much curlier then, and erm, then, you know, you look more African. Erm, and they probably wouldn't have even used the phrase African, they would have used, you know, a phrase similar to erm, negro, if not to say nigger. But it was just not something desirable to look like, you know, equally, you know, I was instructed not to wear, big earrings because erm, erm, you know, it would look me more, you know, in the direction of a gypsy, which was also not desirable. So I was raised with all sorts of erm, really racist erm, erm, stigma around me, of how I had to be in order to be accepted”

But it wasn't only Momo who did not ‘fit in’; she also tells of her family as being somehow alien:

“there was a kind of classroom environment where no-one wanted to have anything to do with me because I was different. Because I was black, because we weren't sort of erm, my parents weren't for the system, as such, erm you know, we went to church, which was not considered to be good, in that system, and that made you different erm. Unlike other people we had, we didn't have a television, I was the only child [chuckles] in my class who didn't have a television. Erm, my Mum refused to buy me the kind of trainers that started to become popular, erm and erm, but we had two pianos, so we were a family that just didn't fit in.”

As with Momo, there was a mistake made at the beginning of Gezhen's life in Tibet. She was born two months prematurely and when she was three days old her father mistakenly thought she was dead as she made no sound at all. He,

“buried me and I suddenly screamed out from the little hole

Oh, right!

And they picking me up, realise I'm not actually dead. [laughs] That's why I'm still here”.

But Gezhen remained a sickly infant and when she was one year old and still tiny for her age, her father took her to live with a peasant family in mainland China. Here Gezhen stayed for the next six years of her life, unaware that the people she called her parents were not relatives at all.

Unlike Momo, Gezhen was happy with her surrogate family who, although financially poor, (Gezhen remembers having to fight for bread) were able to provide her with “*lots of love*”, freedom, ‘mental support’ and a love of the simple life, a life she describes as “*incredible*” and “*real*”, fitting in to the routines of nature. Only when she was seven, did Gezhen begin to feel differently about ‘home’.

At this point, her natural father returned to China to take her back to Tibet so she could go to school. Suddenly she became aware of her ‘natural habitat’, her familial ‘home’. Here she found herself unable to recognise her parents and found she was “*very scared close to them*”. Her birth mother found Gezhen irritating, perhaps, Gezhen suggests,

“because you know she not really used to me and suddenly she see me and she immediately feel dislike of me because I very, very nervous, she didn't put lot effort try to close to me like”.

Her paternal grandmother, a Tibetan, showed Gezhen affection, but there was anger between the grandmother and mother (who was Chinese), and in any case, the grandmother died two years after Gezhen’s return to Tibet. Gezhen was expected to do many of the household chores for her parents and her siblings. She was regularly beaten and was so frightened that she could hardly speak for several years. She began to feel that she was “*not good enough compared with my brother*”, and felt that her parents treated her, “*not like daughter just like I'm a little servant*”. Being a Buddhist, Gezhen made sense of this by believing that in a past life she must have done something bad to her parents, and that in this life she was now ‘paying for’ the misdemeanour. As she says “*for me paying is normal*”.

Throughout this time, Gezhen felt her emotions were “*trapped*”, it was an entrapment she explains through cultural difference. “In Tibet you can freely expression your feelings” whereas her mother with her Chinese cultural norms, made Gezhen feel, “*I have to all the time tie myself up like a rope, in this sense*”. The trapped emotions “*give you a pressure and that's maybe where to learn as well*”. Like Momo, Gezhen goes on,

“It's, you know the pressure feel like train, without the pressure train won't move. But energy, pressure is like energy, like erm without this pressure I don't think I will be Gezhen today. It's lot, lot of idea come out by pressure. Because without my mother's pressure my train, my Tibetan different background, I won't have this idea, like today what I've said, all this idea . . . like my pressure because my pressure is very extravagant, my parents so totally different person, so it's like when you

squeeze me here, when you squeeze me there, so eventually I have to develop new person because I can't go this way, I can't go that way.

Right.

That's what I mean, I learn. So my view, my idea, people think my view, my idea is incredible because they're just like er, so weird, compare normal people maybe.

Right. But you think that that's come out of the pressure.

Yeah, because I, I feel I being squeezed like poor tomato and I become come out top, as something else. Which I, I can, I feel like I have, I have to know both mountains meaning, I have to understand both mountains, like Chinese and Tibetan, and I have to understand them, and that's knowledge, and that's learning, you see, that's, but without the pressure I won't learn. I would just like a normal Tibetan go hang round the street or doing the job in the school and be very happy. But I am happy but sometime I'm full of this er, thinking, you know, I couldn't stop myself to talk or think sometimes.”

Armand, in a way similar to Gezhen, found the first six years of his life “*pink*”. Only when his father was killed in politically motivated violence in the Congo, did his ‘natural habitat’ become insecure and alien. Only then,

“our real problems, family problems started there because they always fought about what they get, the children, when we go to my mama's family or to my dada's family so they justified it as one part go to my mama's family and another part go to my dada's family”.

Armand, and one of his sisters were sent to live with his father’s family; his other siblings moved to a different area, to live with the family of Armand’s mother.

Here began his alienation: in his mother’s family,

“ . . . they wasn't really poor.

They weren't.

But, I was living like a poor, because I wasn't their son.

Yeah.

Sometimes to my uncles house I told you this time, so I was really poor. I was there to do their, their jobs they cannot do, I was doing that, do that, do that . . . they give me some job to do, they give me some work, do that, do that, do that, so I can't play with my friend. I'm angry there, I say OK, I escape from here, I go to my, er, father's er, family, alright”.

When he went to his father’s wealthy family he was treated like,

“a king, you are always alone, just teacher and er, how they call teacher, not really teacher but the people come to home to do something . . . so

always with them, but I cannot play with friend, I cannot do that, I cannot do that, cannot do that. Even when I tried to try something, don't touch this because you are this, so, I never lived my life. Never lived my life. So I just go like that, and erm, after that I became er, we became with my sisters, like er, angry, angry about everything. So this is in myself just . . .”

Another respondent semi-dispossessed of his family, and feeling estranged from them, is John Kentman. Apart from a year or two living in Germany, he has lived for over fifty years in the south of England, never more than about fifty miles from the place of his birth. Yet he feels that “*as a family, is a circular table, I'm on the edge of it, er, I'm always on, the outside*”. John lived with his natural parents for the first few years of his life but when his younger brother was born, John moved,

“next door, er, a neighbour, er she lived on her own, and she would've been the age, the age of a grandmother, er, and, so I moved in there, er and er. So it was a bedroom er, and there was a hole in the fence and I'd just go to bed into, er, the house next door. Then, then my er, then my parents moved, and I didn't go with them”. When John was about seventeen, the lady died and he moved back to the home of his birth parents. He found this move “extremely hard” and “felt that I was a visitor if you like, more than a part of the family . . . Maybe it's something that has actually gone through the whole of my life, I haven't really felt, [stammer] I am where I should be, [stammer] I think that's the right words, [stammer] but I'm [stammer] that I'm actually not [stammer] fully a part of actually what I'm supposed to be in, as marriage, as relationships, blah, blah, blah, [stammer] I've always felt that it's kind of [stammer] of a visiting er you know.

[interruption radio sound personnel]

Yeah so it has gone through, through the whole of my life that, that kind of a feeling that I'm simply [stammer] passing through something”.

There are aspects of Eva's childhood that are similar to that of Momo. Like Momo she was born in the 1970's and spent her early years living under a communist regime, (in Eva's case in Rumania) with parents who did not comply with the authorities. Her mother is “*Jewish Hungarian, brought up in Germany and Hungary*”, her father “*Catholic, very Hungarian*”. The father,

“was very involved with other intellectuals trying to counteract the cultural repression of Hungarians at that time in Rumania, and for that there's been a bit of trouble with local security services and so on.”

Eva grew up feeling “*proudly Hungarian*” but she was also aware of the “*victim*”, partly as a member of a repressed culture, partly as she learned of her mother's Jewish connections, and from the age of seven, partly as a result of domestic violence.

Eva describes her childhood, as John Kentman has done, as a “*very normal life . . . very, very normal, . . . very every day, nothing, nothing special*”. She tells of times spent with her father who nurtured her interests in science and crafts such as kite making saying “*he was really very, very special and he made you feel very special,*

very unique. Erm, it was, he was fantastic.” But she tells too of his alcoholism and his violent attacks on her mother. And while she speaks of her friendship with a “*gang*” that used to play out in the streets near her tower block home, she also reveals,

“Erm, but I think, a little bit, maybe sad, thing was that I didn't know, erm, I didn't know how to make, how to make those connections, those social connections, er, of being liked by, by just socialising in a, in a very normal way, that kids socialised, or teenagers socialised . . . I wasn't so much interested, in the normal things that everybody else was interested in. I was absolutely not interested in, and still am not in, popular music, for example, popular musical culture, so I never knew who sang what or, you know, because I wasn't interested, I was more interested in you know, for me it was more interesting to see whatever, Jupiter's moon than to hear Abba or Boney M, which everybody was, you know, into, so there was this, this real divide, and that I could never quite cross. First of all because, as I said, because I just was not interested. I, I didn't have any, any interest in, any interest in blending in that way, erm, and I didn't have anyone to share the other things with, because most of my peers were not interested in the things that I was interested in [chuckles]. So, so I think my, what given my father by, by giving me these wonderful tools, erm, which later in life would influence what I do or how I approach things, erm, did cause a little bit of a

IG Cut you off

Exactly. So, and that was, that was always difficult, so I was always the one, for example, who wasn't invited to, to parties because I wasn't popular in that way, I wasn't normal, in that way. And again, I was the teacher's pet, so, who likes the teacher's pet, no-one, obviously, so, [laughs] it's really annoying, to be like that. So, so and I did feel very, very isolated in, in those kind of social ways and I remember that feeling very distinctly.”

Ben had a “*nondescript*” and not “*particularly happy childhood*”. He was a,

“caterpillar when I was a child. . . I was, a shy kid. . . I never really engaged with anybody much, just kept myself to myself. Which again comes back to a lack of self confidence I expect. Very shy, I was very very shy. . . I was a victim really, I used to get bullied as well, at school, because I was shy I think. Probably angry I should think. . . I imagine I was probably angry because I probably, even then realised I was missing out on stuff. You don't know how to fix it do you um, when you're in that sort of situation. . . I can remember being teased and and feeling unhappy about that and, not feeling that I had anyone to talk to at home about it and, you know. Its just a feeling it was just a general not, not being, there was no desperation there was no, you know I wasn't like um you know I wasn't, suicidal or anything there was no, desperate feeling of loneliness it was just a feeling of, you know I don't know whether you actually feel at the time that things could be better but you don't

know how to do it or whether, its just afterwards you feel like that, I don't know, really, you know."

He was not, he says,

"a typical boy . . . never wanted to be a doctor, never wanted to be a train driver or any of the other things that, boys are supposed to do". For Ben a typical boy is "good at sport, popular with girls [pause] scruffy, always dirty a bit like my brother really, he was a typical boy. Where I was a much more thoughtful sort of indoor type. And I, was quite, used to always my mother always used to comment that I always used to come, back from school, looking as smart as when I went whereas, Jonathon would probably have, somebody else's shirt on lost a shoe, have holes in his trousers you know. Cos he was climbing trees and, getting into mischief [pause] I suppose".

It was not that he sought to be a typical boy, but he did feel an angst which he "*dealt with . . . rather than trying to fit in*" by withdrawing into himself.

The school he went to accentuated his difference; it was sport-orientated and Ben was not "*the sort of chap that the school expected me to be*". If he had been good at sport he would have been "*put on a bit of a pedestal*" but as it was, although he "*shone . . . at English and creative writing*" and "*was always desperately competitive to be the top of the class*" he never felt the environment "*suited him*".

At home he, along with the rest of the family, "*lived in shadow*" of his father, an alcoholic businessman who was verbally abusive and a bully. His mother was "*running around trying to hold everything together*", but as Ben says, those who are not loved themselves, "*probably haven't got enough to give out either.*" He "*didn't feel that I was central in my parent's life*", nor did he feel especially supported.

Although Ben does not overtly talk of his sexuality, he did not feel comfortable in the masculine world that was the private boys school, and later he comments that his career choice would not be seen by everyone as a "*man's job*" and that if his business partner were a man,

"people would say would assume that we were a gay couple because because I fit all the stereotypic, stereo types of somebody who's gay really".

Frederick is gay and his sexuality plays a central role in his storytelling; the information is given in sentence 9 of the first interview, when he has been invited to tell the researcher his life story. Prior to this he has told,

"my name's Frederick, Frederick Sayer. But it wasn't the name I was born with, my name was actually S . . . , F . . . S . . . , and erm, I think part of my whole life journey is around the identity that I have through the name that I carry".

Frederick's natural parents separated when he was two and a half years old and soon after, his mother remarried. His stepfather was,

“an army captain, and erm is not very, you know, used to call the sort of things I did, pansy and things and you know, you know, a real man doesn't play with puppets, this sort of thing. You know, there was a lot of anger going on underneath”.

Two other aspects of Frederick's early life of interest here are, he says,

“I've been slightly eccentric as it were right from early on. And er, part of me, is, suffers from that and part of me is very proud of that because it keeps me, on the erm, there's a sort of edge about it and that keeps one, perhaps quite focused”.

This idea of eccentricity seems to emanate from an incident with his brother:

“I remember once I was making, I think I was painting scenery and in order to paint scenery you used, you sized it first, I don't, I think size is some kind of glue. It's like . . .you melt it down. And I think I left some in the larder, did I tell you about this?

No.

No. And in a bottle. And my brother thought it was lemonade. And he poured some of this size into a glass and put water with it to dilute it and drank it. Or he started to drink it. And he was furious. And I think mother, I heard it downstairs, this hullabaloo going on. And I think my mother was sort of defending me a bit, you know, and I remember my brother saying, "He's eccentric, Mother". And that really hurt me at the time. To be called eccentric was a, I mean now I think it's great, I'm really proud of it, but in those days it really hurt me, you know, because I think that somehow I really wanted to be normal, really wanted to be, to be er, you know, a credit to the family. At one level, and at the other level I didn't (?) And that really hurt me. I can still hear him saying "He's eccentric, Mother". [pause] For years I thought that was terrible. The other thing is, the other thing that sets me apart is I have a birth mark on my back, just on my left shoulder at the back, and I, this was something that I felt very ashamed of. So when we went on a holiday I would feel terrible about not taking my top off because I thought I was thin and weedy and I had this birth mark. And that was another thing, I think that, the fact that I had that also, made me different. It sounds like a small thing, but sometimes these things are very big things to children, you know, and erm, I think my mother was, you know, she didn't, I had a fantasy of people pointing and saying look, but I don't think she did that, I think she was, she was alright, it's not a problem, it's not horrible, but at the time I thought it was horrible. So that set me apart”.

Frederick reflects on these stories of his childhood, places them within his “*life journey*” and says,

“it's like I feel that, and I don't want to blame my parents for this, but I think my, I came out of such a childhood of confusion, [interruption as drinks served] yeah, I came out of family, out of such confusion that I

had a tremendous lot of sorting out to do. That sounds a bit like blame but it isn't intended to be because I think actually out of that rich soil I think I've been able to make quite a lot. I think I said last time that the fact that I'm, I am unconventional, I have an unusual job, and also being, as I said before I'm a gay man, has set me always apart from the run of the mill. And maybe I, maybe fate, or maybe I chose that deliberately in order to give myself erm, to make myself walk along the edge rather than in the centre.

You chose what?

Well, I chose to, the puppet thing. Or did it choose me, because I feel it's a definite vocation, I do feel I was born to be a puppeteer, I feel that's what I was born to be. I, I don't have any doubts about that, erm, and it came upon me when I was very young, erm, and I've done everything I can to allow that to blossom. And I'm proud of that. I chose, choosing the gay thing, no I don't think I chose that. And when I, when I was in therapy, one thing I did notice, one thing I did learn was that perhaps the, the degree of anger towards my, stepfather particularly, for not being my father, you know, he wasn't my father and yet he was there in my father's shoes, as it were, his place. And there was a tremendous lot of anger towards him. And erm, [pause] just lost the thread there. The anger made me lose the thread. Erm, I, [pause] and it may be through the anger that all these things were decided for me, in some way. You know, I had to rebel in some way. I don't know whether one chooses these things or whether they are chosen for you, but [pause] then I was, when I was in my, so during the sixties I, I was trying to become an adult, perhaps, although I wouldn't, I wouldn't call it that, I was trying to live, trying to survive really. And nobody really taught me how to do it. My parents didn't teach, didn't, bring me up in the way of showing me how, I think a good, good parents will show their children how, how to interact with the world in order to make the best of their lives, and also hopefully contribute to the, to the society in which they're born. I didn't have any of that. I was, I was a sort of emotional ragamuffin really, erm, er, you know trying to make sense of it all. I had two brothers and a half-sister by my stepfather and they were all very different from me, erm, and maybe I made myself unique. Maybe I am unique anyway, I was anyway.

And as an “emotional ragamuffin”, trying to make sense, Frederick began to identify his “set of problems which [he wishes] to solve above everything else and the means he finds to achieve solution” (Csikszentmihalyi, ?).

Primal Quests

Frederick found puppetry or puppetry, as he says, may have found him, but however it is storied, his “*vocation*” or “*mission*”, for this is the way Frederick describes his occupation, has become central to his quest to make sense of the alienation, difference and ensuing anger of his early life. Others have found this too.

Take Timothy, not yet introduced,

“I am a believer that, I think we touched on this last time, that certain events in my earlier life made it easier for me to become an actor and something that might have been a tendency has become this search, you know, trying to find an identity and all this sort of thing and expressing myself, you know. Having so many broken relationships, broken family situations and this burning question of ‘Who am I?’ You know, the ability to – this pattern where you can jump into that character, you know, and jump into several characters and complete yourself and all this sort of thing. And also there’s a feeling inside, that the core seems to be interested in acting like a, I don’t know if it’s a tendency or what it is. I don’t know all the ingredients that have shaped me into wanting to be an actor and being good at it but I’m certain my early experiences helped. Now if things had been different, and we can all say this about ourselves, and it might sound a strange thing to say because I’m quite a sensitive person and I can’t, you know, even if I’d had a stable upbringing and completely different circumstances we don’t know how I would have turned out but it’s a strange thing to say but if it wasn’t acting the army might have been my career.”

Ben has,

“always strived towards being my own person and having my own freedom and that comes from the fact that my dad was his own boss and so that’s how we grew up”

and he looks for his efforts to be recognized. This latter he says, is,

“it’s a very fundamental human need really. Modern human need anyway, in an industrial sort of society, because we’ve lost the er, we’ve lost the sort of primeval instinct of you know going out hunting bringing back food and feeding the family and that’s enough you know because it’s not is it, because we can do all that, so, so you need that extra reassurance, that extra reward if you like, it’s a reward at the end of the day so”.

And this “*fundamental human need*”, he believes, drives him.

Ben spent “*a lot of time in hotels and pubs*” his “*dad being what he was*”.

“There was this one particular hotel, we used to go to a lot [pause] which had revolving doors and I always used to be fascinated by, I don’t know how old I was, probably about seven [coughs] or eight I used to be fascinated by these revolving doors and also, the doors in or out of the kitchen the fact that people went in, one door with the dirty plates and they came out of the other door with plates full of food. And you always got these fleeting glimpses of the kitchen behind but never actually knew what was going on the other side of the wall and I can always remember that, fascinated me as a child and I used to say from a very early age I’m going to run a big hotel one day and um [pause] when I grew a bit older and I had a sort of bit more awareness of what it was all about I always

thought I was going to run the Dorchester Hotel in London . . . when I was little what I saw myself as was, a manager in a morning suit, in a big, hotel by the sea, you know, sort of one of those big [coughs] sea - grand hotels like The Grand in Brighton, the sort of, a bit like, a sort of um a bit like a hotel manager in a Miss Marple novel you know the, big fancy cars drawing up outside and, you know just standing, not really doing very much because you imagine hotel managers don't actually do much of the hard work, they just stand there being terribly nice to people and swanning in and swanning out . . . It's a glamorous role its glamour . . . It's a bit like being a film star really . . . being able to dress up in morning suit and, greeting lots of famous people at the door."

In this fantasy world of hospitality, Ben sees a form of theatre, an acting out,

"showing off . . . very much like in a theatre, you go behind and it's all chaos and confusion and everything's stacked up against the wall and then out on the stage it's a, it's a show."

Now, in reality, through the career he has chosen, managing – with his wife - his own 'superior bed and breakfast' establishment, he can be the thespian he says he is "*at heart*" and he can have the freedom, and space he craves.

Eva also performs, in her case as an international violinist. Reflecting on her need to learn to play well, and to do well at school, she says,

"I think in my case it's definitely a lot of it, especially my younger years, was in order to, to gain, to gain affinity from others. And it probably has to do with, with the situation at home which was very personal, very personal thing, which was that the things at home were not so, not so great, and I, I, I wanted to be liked by, by other people, by other adults, and because things at home were a bit, a bit, a bit volatile, and it's not that I wasn't liked at home, I was very liked at home, but, but because of my father's alcoholism it wasn't a very, very safe, erm, grounded erm, environment, so I probably, it probably was an escapism". She recognises that "from the very first time that I started playing I knew that I wanted to do well, or better than others, because, because then people will like it, and then I'll like myself because people like me, so it's a, it's probably a self-confidence thing as well. You only see yourself as a mirror of other people's image of you, rather than your own, your own self".

While playing the violin has become her life's work, it is only when,

"I went to a teacher who then taught me everything I know about, about the violin, and also about that it's actually to, to express what you feel, which is never something that I thought was part of it",

that Eva moved from 'technical' playing to 'interpretation'. This, she says,

"was also something that I learned when I was, when I was in Israel and that's one of the biggest differences and it's made a huge difference to who am I today."

When asked in what way it had made a difference she responds,

“I think it enabled me to, to express some kind of inner, inner voice and enabled me to, to feel that I can express my feelings, not only verbally but through, through music . . . and that was a very novel, a novel experience.”

Having found this ability to express her “*inner voice*”, it was not until she “*found what I really liked doing which is baroque music*” that she found a “*little crusade*” that she attributes to her early childhood learning vis-à-vis her father’s struggle against ethnic oppression and the subversiveness that was ever present in her childhood home. For here was a musical form that had something,

“slightly subversive about it, and something not quite mainstream, that was hugely appealing for me. It was just like you know, being involved in the Hungarian side when I was a youth”.

Another respondent with a penchant for performance is John Kentman.

“I have since I was probably about thirteen, fourteen years, always been a bit of a thespian, [stammer] and [stammer] I always like to be [rubbing hands] [stammer] you know sort of up on the stage, I always like to have an audience, [stammer] and that's the same now, the members that are here, if I have [stammer] if I have a walk round, they all know me, that I'm [stammer] that I'm a bit of a character and so, and so if you like to have, well it's an audience, and so [stammer] and so I tend to play on that, and in the band I was [stammer] the action man one, the four others were just play, play, play, [stammer] but I'd be the Jagger person, I'd be up and down the stage and I'd do all the [stammer] the extra bits [stammer] and so if you like I had that sort of [stammer] persona that I was extremely extrovert you know, and [stammer] and a bit of a nutter, and I think that's how they see me here as well, [stammer] but as soon as I go home I mean I'm just absolutely really completely different, absolutely yeah, but it has to be at the right time, it has to be, in the right place but selfishly, it has to be [rubbing hands] on my terms if you like and I, I can be like that as well . . . as soon as I had the guitar in my hand and the microphone here, out it comes you know and

So this other person?

Yeah, it's kind of a soul if you like

A soul?

Yeah, certain things bring it out, it might bring it out [stammer] I'll say a cricket match [stammer] say [stammer] at a football match and it's the same with, I get a guitar in my hand or if I have a camera in my hand you know its [stammer] something that's in me which is [stammer] a fairly natural thing that I seem to be able to come alive if I've got the right tools [stammer]”.

This desire for showmanship is linked also to a need to belong to a group, a search

that began early in John's life:

“I think it was a search for a being part of a team [stammer] not so much a part [stammer] of the family [stammer] the things up to that time that I'd seen as a family were [stammer] they weren't all that good, except [stammer] grandparents who I got on well with but [stammer] I didn't seem to be able to [stammer] to share an interest with them [stammer] at that, very young age, there was no sort of [stammer] I think I said to you that [stammer] I can't ever remember [stammer] my mother cuddling me, ever. [stammer] And so there was that little bit of [stammer] you know [stammer] let's find a relationship that's on, the outside of that. I think that's where I'm coming from, I think. I think it was a search for a being part of a team [stammer] not so much a part [stammer] of the family [stammer] the things up to that time that I'd seen as a family were [stammer] they weren't all that good, except [stammer] grandparents who I got on well with but [stammer] I didn't seem to be able to [stammer] to share an interest with them [stammer] at that, very young age, there was no sort of [stammer] I think I said to you that [stammer] I can't ever remember [stammer] my mother cuddling me, ever. [stammer] And so there was that little bit of [stammer] you know [stammer] let's find a relationship that's on, the outside of that. I think that's where I'm coming from, I think”.

At about the age of ten or eleven John,

“joined a choir at the local [stammer] Church of England church, more for something to do [stammer] and, and so for quite a long time after that I was fairly church [stammer] centred. I didn't have a faith, [stammer] but it was [stammer] a belonging to something, [stammer] and I think this went on further when I joined [stammer] kind of a pop sort of a rock band, it was to be a part of something. [stammer]. . . It's the old thing I suppose of [stammer] you can't select the family but you can [stammer] select your friends and just a little bit of that, so from the age, of about ten I felt [stammer] a need to be a part of a group, something that I could share things with a lot of other people”.

But while part of his quest was to belong, so he wants,

“to feel that I have, achieved something in a personal sort of egoistic way that I want to give back, the things that I've, the things that I've got from life er, and although, if you look back at my life, I suppose, it hasn't been bad er, but what is the real me? Its, always searching, its it is always trying to find, a kind, a kind of an inner peace and I've searched, the Christianity bit, er, I've searched, er, Spiritualism, er and I'm a douser now but but that's for more, positive lines and, you know and everything else, so. There has, there has starting from a very very very young age I can, er I see myself as, that, I, I have, searched”.

From the age of nine or ten, John felt he wanted

“something that's going to go beside me and I found Christianity in, in [stammers] and out of my life, but it's not been there for about

seventeen, eighteen years now, but even now, you know, I like thinking oh, Buddhism, you know a really lovely, lovely, really super kind of a faith, but the idea you can come back as a rat, and slightly you can't take that so you have to shove that one out the way, and so it's finding a bit of a (?rule?) and if you like end up finding your own inner peace, and but inner peace as far as there goes, goes a long, long way back. Inner peace for, if you like life, was probably about half way through the first marriage. Why, I haven't a clue and [pause] I, there have been a number of times where I've, not since then I don't think have I really consciously said I need to find it. Now I find that it's finding me. And that's nice, but it's scary as well”.

Armand also seeks peace, both for the world (now his dream) but also,

“first thing, for me because everything you have to have for you, for yourself, so to get, erm the minimum for my life and if I get something, to make the peace in the world [touches head] that's my dream, yeah [very quietly] that's my dream.

So you're looking for peace in the world, are you looking for peace in yourself?

Erm, one of my teacher told me one day you can't give something you don't have, yeah [chuckles] so I oh the word is French - have to start first with the peace in my, first in my mind, our mind so, so I can give it to someone else”.

For Armand his dream is for a better future for those in the Congo; it is a dream he has been pursuing for some years.

“In my country, you know, living the poverty, I always, I always thinking, I was always thinking about that, you see, so I'm very young, how to try to do something to change something in my country, because since I was very young, very young, I was really, I was a [?] asking some question by myself and what I can do, if I can do even the small one things to change those things, because I wasn't happy. And many children like me wasn't happy this time. Many people was living in poverty, many people were starving, many people, and er, I was really thinking, thinking, thinking, and I grow this idea”.

This dream, begun in childhood, now helps Armand to survive as he rebuilds his life, alone, in Britain.

Gezhen also draws strength from her early life experiences, in her case so as to survive an unhappy married life:

“So I tell him, you can't control me, so some in a sense of life here seven years I feel I've suffered more and being pressured more than two cultures, two countries only give me the knowledge how to survive, but I use the knowledge I survived here in seven years. I don't think, if I don't have this background I maybe already crushed dead. Because I survived

in two countries for a long time, the skill you just get on, you know, do it best you can. And that's all the attitude just try the best you can . . .”

It is the pursuit of happiness that is important and for her,

“how to be happy is here [touches head], and here [points to heart], you don't have to go outside looking for it, it's inside here. If you doing something satisfy your mind, you're satisfy your own value, you are the happy person”.

For Gezhen, her search is to have enough spiritual strength

“to tell you the correct direction you're going . . . Although it's far away from lots of people or money or position. And I find that that is the best direction I should go. Go ahead, because I know that will give me fulfilled happiness and forever in how to say, forever in kind of, how to say, how to say the word. It's like you found the real direction is there maybe, become nothing . . . My body will die but my soul will go up to stay with Buddha and I become nothing. I don't want to become er, anything”.

Momo, on the other hand

“had two ambitions as a child, erm, in terms of what I'm, who I'm going to be. One was a writer, because I think the world of books was sort of one of the safe places to go, erm, and I loved reading, I still do. So a lot of learning I think for me has taken place for sure from, literature erm, across the world. Erm, and erm, the other one was to be a therapist, and I think I've achieved that one [chuckles]”.

On being asked what it was that gave a sense of safety by entering into books Momo responded,

“I could identify with whoever I wanted to, and be, the hero, the heroine, you know, whatever, whatever I wanted to express, you know, the joy, the sadness, da-da-da, without having to, without being questioned in that choice, without being knocked down in that choice, because it was my own private, world, if you know what I mean, and I knew how to keep that for me, so you know, I used to, as a child, as a small child already I used to sort of make up stories and I mean, I think, sort of with the knowledge, the therapeutic knowledge I have now, I think that sort of one of the strategies that I sort of devised for myself that probably helped me to keep my sanity, erm, where I used to do kind of like mini-plays, which erm, I used to sort of act out in my bedroom in the evening, in the night when everyone else was asleep, and erm, I, was you know, there was no way that that could be exposed, because I remember once my Mum sort of happened to snatch something that it was just through the wall because I must have got a bit loud and she sort of asked about it, and I really I hate the fact of her knowing even as much, a little bit about it because that's just for me and I didn't want anyone knowing about it or, or, commenting on it or whatever, that was mine, and erm, but I do remember that you know, how real the emotions were that I played out,

it was kind of like you know, I played all the roles, you know, the prince, the princess, whatever, but erm, it was a kind of a way of giving me emotionally what I needed so I could you know, play one role that was really sad or being you know, mistreated and I would cry, and then I'd also be the role that would come and comfort that person and, and erm, sort of you know play out all these different aspects. Erm, and so I know all the sort of conflicts that I've had with my mother and da-da-da, I kind of, it's like I think by playing out all the kind of split of parts it was kind of probably a way of integrating the experience emotionally.

And as well as books were there other safe places to go?

Yeah, in nature, my garden and sunflower, I did love, to be with plants, so that, I've mentioned that today already, that was definitely a place, of safety and of nurturing and of beauty. Erm, mmm, there is a bit that, [pause] I'm controversial about it. I think there are people that know me that would think that I've also lived, part of me in the music, which is why, so many people you know thought that it was so good, because obviously something I've been able to express in there, and partly I associate with that, that you know that was a medium that I did use to express myself, and inasmuch as that it was safe but, it's sort of mixed up with so much other stuff so it's not, I haven't claimed that without, it has been rubbished, if you know what I mean, it kind of, it sort of, if I compare it to a container with clear water, I've managed to kind of, keep that safe and keep that mine, and no-one's ever been able to throw mud in it, but with the piano and the music that wasn't that case because people did throw plenty of mud in it, which is why it's also difficult to still use that tool, but with books that's always been something I know, I mean the only thing I remember is that my Mum, you know, because I used to read adult material very, very early age, so sometimes she would take books away from me, with the result of me going and get it somewhere else or steal it back off her or whatever, and I've always had this thing that, once I've got something within me you can't take it away. There's nothing you can do, you can take the bloody book away, but what I've read already I've got in my head, in me and you can't eradicate that as long as you haven't eradicated me, and I'm not going to make that process easy. So that's kind of, there's a victory in that and a place where you know, I could, could be me, and erm, I think it was also a means of escape because erm, [pause] I could escape, on one hand it was, you know, identifying and emotionally playing out these characters that helped me emotionally to kind of work through issues that I was, whether that was conscious or unconscious, I think it was always a bit of both, and erm, erm, on the other hand it was a clear escape of just not being in the present but being in you know, some other country, other situation other than my own reality that I didn't want to be part of, so I could just go in a wonderful world and I could be perfectly happy. When I returned I wasn't, if you know what I mean, so that's why that was a safe place to go, it was a kind of a resource”.

Conclusion

We have provided a range of life history vignettes to illustrate the way some of our life story tellers story their life as a quest, a journey, a search, a 'yearning'. Throughout we have been struck by how this primal yearning is connected to deeply engaged 'learning'. It is as if this search for selfhood, this pursuit of personhood, this process of 'becoming somebody' provides a set of drives and engagements that are of absolutely central importance in learning and evolution. Primal yearning we think equals primal learning at least in the cases we draw on here.

This kind of primal learning shifts the position and terrain of each person's identity. As Sheehy has argued, people only really change and grow when there is an 'internal shift in the self' It is these internal shifts we mean when we talk of primal learning.

This kind of learning does not exclude or override other forms of learning whether it be formal learning in school, or college, or workplace learning or indeed the full spectrum of institutionalised learning. But it is to say that primal learning approaches the person from a different angle. This is because it is already sited in the deeply engaged heartland of the self. This is not a learning that is devised externally and seeking internal connection with the individual. This is learning that grows out from the internal agenda of the personal self project and that searches the external maps of learning for aid and sustenance in the process of becoming somebody.

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