

LSRN Conference:
Making Progress or Losing Control
The Exchange, Bridgwater
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*'THE PERSON THAT I WAS
INTENDED TO BE':
LEARNING FROM CHANGE AND
TRANSITION IN THE LIFECOURSE*

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THE LEARNING LIVES PROJECT: LEARNING, IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN THE LIFE-COURSE

A 3+ year longitudinal study into the learning biographies of adults (aged 25-85)
as part of PHASE III of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 'Teaching
and Learning Programme' (TLRP)

started: Summer 2004 finishes: January 2008

project team

University of Exeter:

Prof Gert Biesta, Dr Michael Tedder; Dr Flora Macleod, Dr Paul Lambe

University of Brighton:

Prof Ivor Goodson, Dr Norma Adair

University of Leeds

Prof Phil Hodgkinson, Heather Hodgkinson, Geoff Ford, Ruth Hawthorn

University of Stirling

Prof John Field, Heather Lynch

an investigation into what learning 'means and does' in the lives of adults

KEY CONCEPTS

learning – identity – agency – lifecourse

- how identity (including learner identity) and agency (ability to give direction to one's life) impact on learning dispositions, practices and achievements
 - how learning impacts on identity (sense of self) and on (sense of) agency
 - against the background of unfolding lives (transitions and transformations)
 - within social and historical context (history and structure)

Learning is approached as one of the ways in which people respond to events in their lives (from adaptive and reproductive to generative and creative)

DESIGN

Repeated life-history interviews with 125-150 adults over a period of about 3 years (retrospective and 'real time')

Analysis of British Household Panel Survey data (1991-)
(Macleod & Lambe)

4 THEMATIC FOCI

older learners (Leeds)

(un)employment (Stirling)

family and community (Exeter)

migration (Brighton)

THEORETICAL WORK ON

- learning (learning from, for and through life; biographical learning; narrative learning)
 - identity (including narrative identity)
 - agency (including an ecological understanding)
 - life course (context & generation)



METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION

combination of methods and methodologies within
a large scale longitudinal project

PROGRESS SO FAR

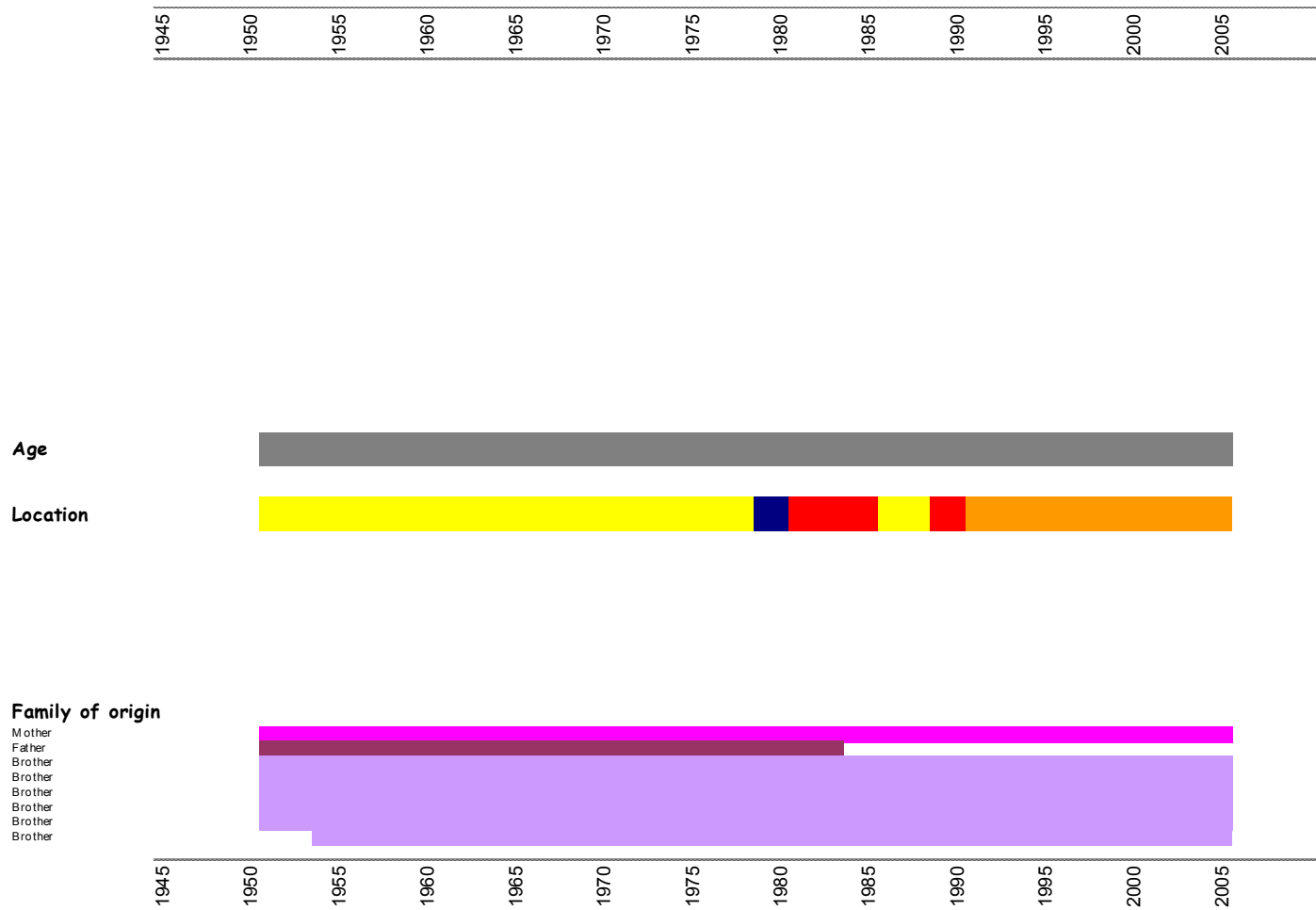
see www.learninglives.org

(working papers, publications, presentations)

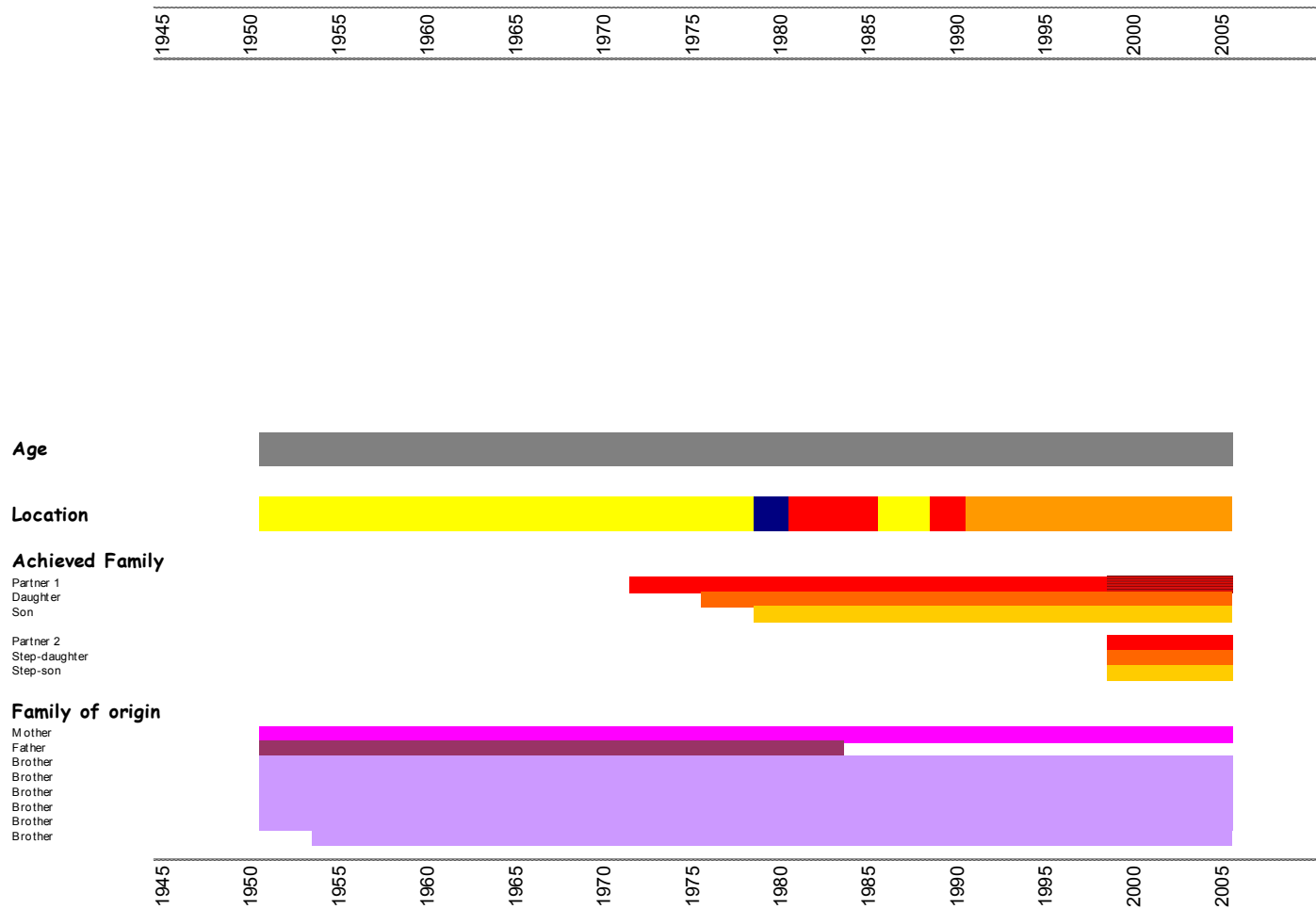
PLANNED OUTPUT

- TLRP commentary on Lifelong Learning (2008)
- project book in TLRP 'Improving Learning' series (2008/2009)
 - project monograph (2009)
 - book with Learners' Stories (2008/2009)

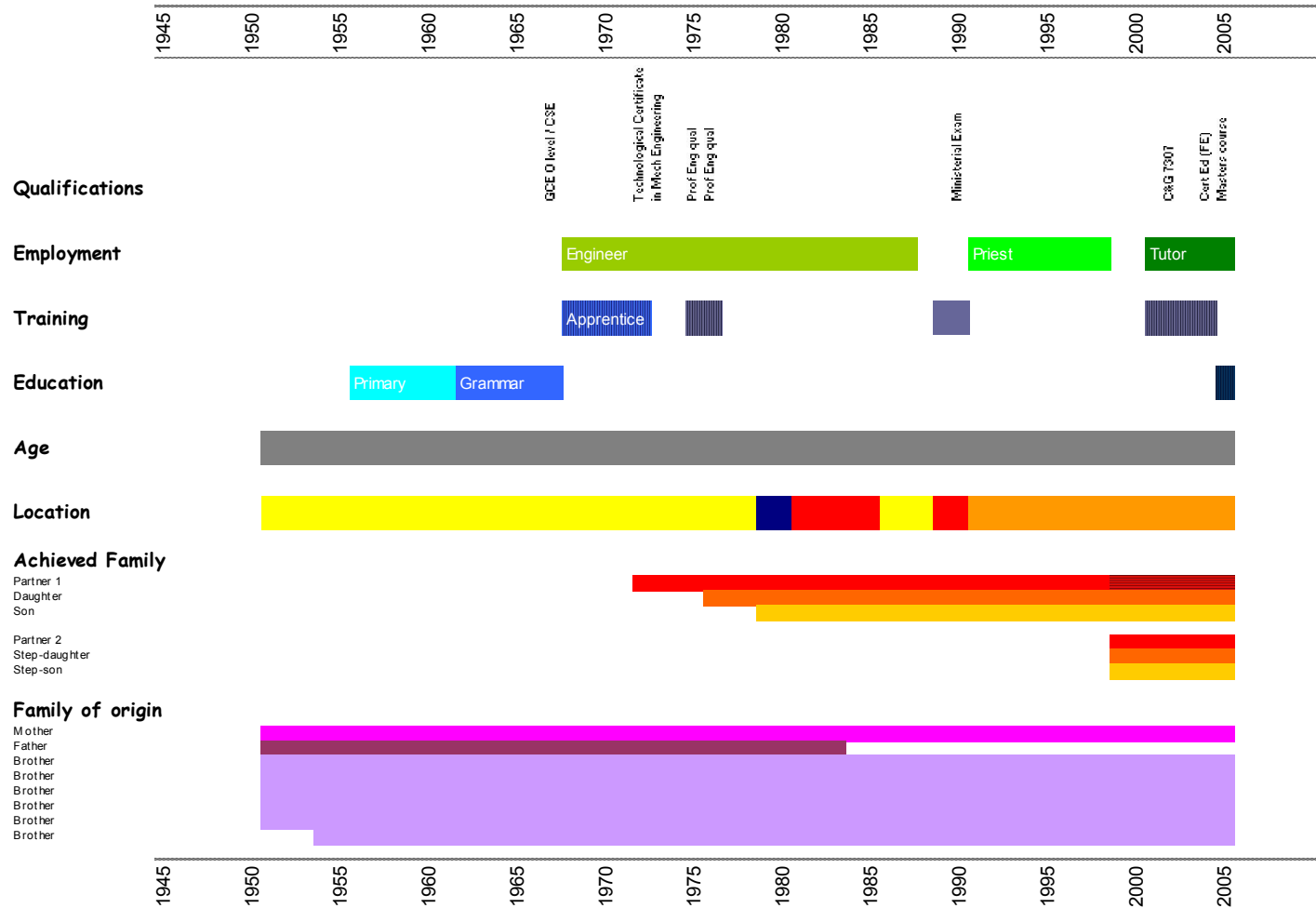
Russell Jackson timelines



Russell Jackson timelines



Russell Jackson timelines



What has Russell learned from his life?

- Knowledge, skills and competencies within formal education and training
- Knowledge, skills and competencies at the workplace
- Values, a normative and ethical stance, sympathies and beliefs
- Confidence
- 'Instinct' for problem-solving - ability to interpret non-verbal language, to understand issues, to assess priorities

What has Russell learned from his life?

About himself from key-events ...



I'm now turning away happily and minding my own business and I stop the lathe and I'm turning the big pine bowl ... I'm surrounded with chippings ... It's in the evening and I've got the light on in the garage shining on this bowl, and I just have an overwhelming sense of a presence with me really. It's really difficult to be, to describe this in rational terms. It's as real to me now as it's always been ... I had a sense of the real presence of God. (Interview 2, December 2004)

What has Russell learned from his life?

About the person he is, the person he wants to be

I still find it really hard to talk about um the things that I did as a parish priest and as a children's adviser.... we ran courses for clergy and young people on child protection issues, I did a lot of good in that role. ... I learned lots of things ... so you see, it's really close to my heart.... It's been the role um that I felt most truly mine, to what makes me most truly the person that I was intended to be. (Interview 7, December 2006)

What has Russell learned from his life?

About the role of narrative....

*(T)he one thing I've got is the power of narrative. I'm not well qualified. I'm not, you know, hugely intelligent or all those really worthwhile things, I've just got a story. And the story informs who I am and the story makes me who I am and out of that I have an ability and a confidence and the ability to deal with people in their stories.
(Interview 7, December 2006)*



What do we learn about narrative?

Narrative is a way to 'objectify' one's life, make it the object of attention, reflection, learning

The special quality of Russell's narrative →

- His 'power of narrative' is related to examples of agency
- a life narrative with a plot: the 'core identity' of the 'priest' (making a difference in other people's lives)
- this plot becomes the organising event in his life story
- not a description of a succession of events, but 'leading up to,' 'moving away from,' etc.
- an evaluative life story
- and (therefore?) a learning biography

What do we learn about narrative?

Difficulties

- The mix of more implicit and more explicit learning.
- Identifying significant points in time because learning takes time.
- Accounts of learning are all retrospective
- The 'selection' is also/partly based on what the interviewee has learned from life - what appears as significant from the present.
- In this respect life stories are always already learning biographies

CONCLUSIONS - DISCUSSION

Russell's case shows:

- the importance of life narrative(s) for learning from life
- how the life narrative is a learning biography

Questions:

- Are narratives necessary for biographical learning?
- Do different kinds of narratives have a different ***learning potential?*** (e.g. descriptive versus evaluative)
- Why do people have life narratives? What is 'good' about having a narrative? Is it a sign of strength or a sign of weakness?