

## **Disconnected Biographies: : An exploration of the challenges inherent in balancing paradoxical discourses borne of both growing individualisation and dominant global constructs.**

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**Lesley Gornall:**

**Disconnected Biographies: An exploration of the challenges inherent in balancing paradoxical discourses borne of both growing individualisation and dominant global constructs.**

“If History repeats itself, and the unexpected always happens, how incapable must man be of learning from experience” (Shaw 1903 p. 242)

### **The Social Web**

The parallels with history as we contemplate a watershed moment in 2017 are well documented. Poverty, growing inequality, war, oppressive regimes, refugees and displaced people, polarization of beliefs, questionable evidence, attacks on human rights, environmental concerns have become daily news over recent years and it is clear that humanity has created a complex web of crises. This web of crises is so complex, and so embedded in our daily lives that discriminatory attitudes still deemed illegal have become normalized in public discourse by those in positions of power. Global economics, global power, global conflicts have developed rapidly, and despite significant evidence (Pikeketty 2015, Mason, 2015, Vannisooufakis, 2013) that capitalist structures are in decline and creating a destabilizing effect, they remain the major political driver. The self – appointed ‘political class’ is increasingly alienated from local communities and people, focused on economic growth, conflict and power to the extent that the UN Human Rights Committee 2016 Report on the UK details 72 immediate actions for breaches of the Human Rights Act, none of which have been debated. This paper will analyse the social conditions behind political shifts and in the US and UK, which have the potential to be replicated elsewhere in forthcoming elections, and considers the role and nature of learning in a turbulent, disconnected and anxious world.

“Needing to become what one is is the hallmark of modern living” (Baumann 2001) – prophetic words introducing Beck’s study “Individualization”. Beck raises a number of points which, accelerated by the advance of media technologies have since come to characterise society in 2017. Rather than achieving a ‘reflexive modernity’, the ‘risky venture’, which characterises Beck’s concept of biography, the removal of certainties in terms of employment, geographical location, family, leaving everything subject to decision –

making, on an individual and immediate level, without considering the consequences has become even more risky, and the potential for globalisation to divide rather than unite is demonstrated in global conflicts, extreme levels of income inequality, displacement of millions, increasingly violent crime, and media – fuelled xenophobia. ‘Social crisis phenomena’, focusses blame on the individual, and the markets create ‘atomisation’, for Beck the biography not a positive reflexive project, but because “individualization really is imposed on the individual by modern institutions’ (Beck 2007) it is more a reactive lifetime study adapting to rapid and enforced change, a further source of anxiety, and mitigating against the identification of collective solutions and change. Whilst inequalities still exist, and may well characterise whole communities, the stress on the individual to identify and act on solutions alone is further eroding the sense of a collective class identity which explains the contradictory nature of both policies and supporters of populism, and unexpected election results. This disconnection and isolation is clearly identified by Putnam in recognising the demise of social capital and civic engagement in “Bowling Alone” (1999) and Better Together (2004):

“Even as the value of social capital has been more and more widely acknowledged, evidence has mounted of a diminution of social capital in the United States. In *Bowling Alone*, one of us (Putnam) has shown that whereas during the first two thirds of the twentieth century Americans were becoming more and more connected with one another and with community affairs, the last third of the century witnessed a startling and dismaying reversal of that trend. Beginning in the late 1960s, Americans in massive numbers began to join less, trust less, give less, vote less, and schmooze less. At first people hardly noticed what was happening, but over the last three decades involvement in civic associations, participation in public affairs, membership in churches and social clubs and unions, time spent with family and neighbors, philanthropic giving, even simple trust in other people - as well as participation in the eponymous bowling leagues - all have fallen by 25 - 60%. A variety of technological and economic and social changes - television, two career families, urban sprawl, and so on - has rendered obsolete a good share of America’s stock of social capital. “

The subsequent and ongoing impact of technology has since become an insidious invasion of personal lives and instant online connectivity not only reducing our interpersonal

connections and networks, but having a significant impact on our mental health. Rosen (2012) asks ‘are we all crazy’ and lists increasingly commonplace behaviours which are indicators of an increasing disconnect even whilst in the same room or at the same dinner table with others, reluctance to live and discuss life in the present moment, and the constant pressure of media imagery indicating how we should look, how we should behave, how we should earn. Prilleltensky (2006) identifies the inter-connected factors which promote well-being, often reported and managed separately in modern societies. Material well-being features prominently in the invasive media discourse which is so closely linked to advertising, consumerism, and presentation of the self rather than enabling connections and long-term personal growth. Rosen (2012) identifies anxiety symptoms of 62% and 64% for teenagers and college students if they do not check text messages, and 32% and 36% if they do not check Facebook within a 15 minute period. For generation X this reduces to 42% and 18% for the Baby Boomers, for text messages, and 17 and 8% for Facebook. He further examines a growing sense of anonymity, and the addictive nature of media connectivity against DSM diagnostic criteria:

“...our actions and behaviors when we use technology make us appear out of control.....We can’t tear ourselves away from the highly addictive, highly compelling world of cyberspace.....We are, according to the signs and symptoms in the current American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical manual (DSM-IV-TR) suffering from several clinical and personality disorders along what are known as Axis I, or mood disorders (e.g. depression, ADHD, schizophrenia), and Axis II, or personality disorders (e.g anti-social personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, obsessive compulsive personality disorder.” (p5-6)

Rosen goes on to clarify that whilst not all of us will experience these issues to a dysfunctional level, there is a need to recognize a compound issue in the form of an ‘*idisorder*’. Whilst there is as yet no direct causal link, it is alarming that 46% of Americans of all ages experience some form of mental disorder, the statistics in the UK too are on the rise with 37% of adults experiencing anxiety or depression, (NHS 2016) and 850 000 children aged 5-19 (10%) diagnosed with a mental health problem. Social Media can encourage both the projection of self, potentially a different self to the reality of our own lives, and a sense of competition or inadequacy by comparison with our friends and online acquaintances, all contributory factors to a loss of well-being and mental health, or at the

most extreme to anxiety and mood disorders in younger age groups which can develop into more challenging conditions and disorders in adult life which can be characterized by isolation, self focus and difficulties in connecting and lack of empathy.

The isolation created by this extended focus on the self as the main project of our social media activity is unhealthy, both for the individual and society. Prilleltensky is very clear that a sense of personal accomplishment and connectedness are both essential sources of well - being, and that this connectedness should be present at a personal, community and professional level. In 2001 Beck aligned individualisation as enforced adaptations to changing conditions in employment, economics and society. Add the social conditions arising from the economic crash of 2008 to the isolating impact of technology, and individualisation instead of enabling improvisation and personal mastery, becomes a factor in growing exclusion, and disconnected biographies and discourses. In later writing, Beck (2007, 2009) too sees the issues of the growth in technology and associated speed of information as an increased risk and threat, creating a ‘sub politics’ away from democratic structures. The fluidity of national boundaries represents a further source of uncertainty in that

“they are eroding, disintegrating, and in the vacuum that arises the various players must learn – on an unfamiliar terrain of radicalizing cosmopolitan inequalities – to explore, without falling, their new sphere of activity in the context of uncertainties and not-knowing (and not being able to know).” (Beck 2007)

The rise in global inequality (OXFAM, 2017), and absolute poverty no longer confined to developing countries is at odds with the economic focus of governments dismissed as elites, in the UK even self – proclaimed ‘political class’. Prilleltensky cites studies conducted by Marmot over a 25 year period which quite clearly demonstrate that both individual autonomy and connectedness are vital elements of well-being. This balance is not only absent in current society, but, conflated with ‘cultural products’ (Bourdieu) related to the acceptance of celebrity and media success as concepts of power and personal power. This imbalance has created the social conditions which support the rise to power of the narcissist, the most obvious example being the Trump presidential candidacy giving rise to an unprecedented public diagnosis by American psychologists including Gardner, concerns which continue to be expressed. Paradoxically, the electorate’s rejection of a political elite in the US election and UK referendum, resulting at least in part from a sense that governments are completely

divorced from the realities of everyday lived experiences, have handed power to those even less likely to listen and respond to experiences other than their own. Both campaigns have also exploited creeping acceptance of speeches expressing hatred for specific groups. In short, the biographies of both the majority and ‘the other’ have been displaced and even negated, and the disconnected biography has become a source of opinion not discourse.

Both the rise of opinion over evidence as seen in the current battles between President Trump and the media or experts via Twitter and discrediting the perspective of the academic or ‘expert’ very clearly articulated by British Education Secretary Gove as early as 2012, have added to the virtual nature of political and social realities. This virtuality is also very easily exploited. The work of Kosinski (2016) in making data mining and behaviour predictions based on individual psychological profiles accessible to Social Scientists has inevitably been used for marketing purposes, and more recently political gain. Cambridge Analytica quite openly in a marketing clip on their website, claim success in aiding both the election of Trump and the win for the Leave campaign in the EU.

“Cambridge Analytica is building a future where every individual can have a truly personal relationship with their favorite brands and causes by showing organizations not just where people are, but what they really care about and what drives their behavior.

At Cambridge Analytica we use data modeling and psychographic profiling to grow audiences, identify key influencers, and connect with people in ways that move them to action. Our unique data sets and unparalleled modeling techniques help organizations across America build better relationships with their target audience across all media platforms” <https://cambridgeanalytica.org>

Effectively, data mining firms have listened to the worries and concerns, have acknowledged the ‘lived experiences’ of significant majority populations where governments and their representatives have failed to listen. The growing cultural norms surrounding presentation of often quite personal data, and presentation of self in the ether have provided access to unprecedented levels of data, linked to increasingly effective analytical tools. They have then developed targeted soundbite and Twitter - based campaigns in the language of those whose support they seek, to secure victories surprising those in power, and those removed from the grassroots no longer heeding the advice of the professionals and experts. The by - product of

such intensive online campaigning is that truth and evidence are themselves questioned, the capacity for informed debate reduced. (Gornall 2017). It is debatable whether the demand for change which has been so clearly articulated generates the change to their daily lives and communities voters expected.

Online stories and biographies highlight this disconnect. We tend to seek out like minded individuals (Putnam, 2000, 2004), and online is no different. Both the US election and the Referendum in Britain, however, have been deeply divisive and following online conversations to a 'bubble' other than the most familiar can be important sources of re-connecting and listening to lived experiences and biographies very different to our own. A sense of commonality in some area is identified to encourage conversations with strangers:

**Online Conversation 1:** The EU Referendum debate – in replying to committed Leavers from my home town, a steel town where the foundry had long been closed, and another steel area in which I had worked for a long time and the foundry was about to close, the conversation made it very clear that the issue was job losses, and steel competition from China. These very real worries and anxieties about loss of autonomy, and ability to care for families were the driving issues, and I very much doubt that the explanation of EU regulation limiting cheap imports from China which Britain had not adopted was going to persuade either not to protest by voting leave. The strong belief being that a leave vote would create change and generate funds for manufacturing and services, underpinned by a sense that they themselves needed to do something.

**Online Conversation 2:** President Trump, in general and the travel ban. Conversation with a lifelong Labour voting white British man living in the neighbouring community to the home of Siddique Khan, orchestrator of the 7/7 attacks in London and also very close to the constituency where MP Joe Cox was killed. His expression of the development of fear of a community which has inevitably turned inwards, fed by the demonstrable xenophobia of UK press reported by the EU Commission on racism and Intolerance (2016), and a sense of disempowerment are very real, the accuracy of information used in the conversation was not. Yet this is not someone who seems to be full of violent hatred, rather just worried by the state of the world, and struggling to understand it.

These opinion exchanges are clearly open to manipulation by data miners and ‘clickbait’ articles offering both someone to blame, and promises of easy single issue solutions which thus far have not been kept or proved unworkable by either Trump or BREXIT. An effective demonstration of ‘dialogical manipulation’.

Social changes which began with the diminution of social capital and growth in individualism linked to primacy of economic growth combined with increasingly visible and invasive images of success related to material rather than social wealth and to appearance and personality rather than substance and impact have created an isolating and uncertain social existence. In this context, the very real challenge, for educators, social workers, psychologists, politicians, indeed anyone working with people, explored in this paper, is to find a means to create a more enlightened environment to promote open discourse, to redefine concepts of individual and societal success within current systemic and institutional constraints and their global drivers. To revisit existing concepts of self and our stories in a more connected way, identify means of being rather than having, (Fromm). To develop and explore the need for interpersonal connections in personal and social well – being. A focus on celebrating existing biographies and stories of hope and humanity, of connecting with local and global communities in reflective discourse, as a means to develop new ‘connected biographies’.

### **Connected Discourse**

In a broad sense Lifelong Learning in the US and the UK is very similar. Both systems rely on more regular testing of children than any other nation. Both have expensive Higher Education systems characterized by a traditional divide based on either class or wealth. The increasing commercialization in the UK is creating a debate around purpose and quality of the learning on offer with employability and economic impact high on the agenda across the education sector. Adult and Community Learning outside the third sector is a rarity, and maintaining it is a challenge. In all sectors, competition for learners and funding is the norm creating division and uncertainty in programme delivery. The Economist (2017) directly relates lifelong learning to eight to ten week courses in coding as an example of learning for increased earning capacity.

Yet the core principles of lifelong learning remain at the heart of any potential reconnection across a divided society. Praxis, built on dialogue, common language and understanding lived



experience is a key factor in any form of community learning and development and is a vital component of building confidence and participation in civic life and driving social change. The current levels of division and misinformation in the US and the UK, potentially being replicated across the developed world and feeding conflict worldwide are unlikely to change without accurately informed democratic debate concerning the issues. Given the commitment to commercializing education at all levels in the US and UK makes it difficult for the mainstream institutions to pose and investigate the challenging questions, yet “when a society fails on multiple fronts, its foundational ideas must be questioned” (Martinez 2016).

There are added challenges in questioning those ‘foundational ideas’ in the paralysing impact of anxiety and the overwhelming barrage of often targeted online information and disinformation which conspire to create entrenched and polarizing positions. Current structures in mainstream educational institutions are set within disciplines, professions are set within disciplines, and governments are set within departments. Recognising the interrelationship of both study and social drivers is a necessary element in unpacking the socio-political truths of our time, and it is likely that the processes which succeed will be within movements and communities just as much as in institutions. As a result learning will need to be much more informal and non- formal, much more related to participatory action and investigation as learning, a community development process which by its very nature, is embedded in the experience of the participants.

The New Economics Foundation (2011) recognizes that the complex nature of ‘wicked problems’ requires representative and wide reaching involvement in identifying solutions.

“Policy interventions in wicked problems often bring about unintended consequences. For example, efforts to reduce the harm caused by illicit drugs by restricting their supply have led to drugs that are available being adulterated with more harmful chemicals, leading to greater health risks to users. Such problems cannot be fully solved but they can be managed. Successful management involves drawing on the information, insight, ideas and energy of as many of us as possible.”  
(NEF 2011 p3)

In challenging the concept that politicians are best placed to identify solutions, linking to existing networks to co-produce solutions is an important element of driving effective

change. By creating 'ideal speech situations' (Habermas 1984) in coffee houses, meeting places, online groups using participant's usual communication styles, the aim is to develop broad participation and view issues from as many angles as possible, and identify shared experiences and shared solutions. The presence of an expert to answer questions, inform discussions of frame a topic is an important element in developing a sense of purpose and effective change. Animateurs are required to connect conversations and maintain dialogue and purpose.

“Although distributed dialogue is aimed at generating collective action by participants, it also seeks to offer participants the opportunity to influence government and business actions. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to build connections between the process and the people in a position to influence action – the policy-makers. In addition to their role as the final audience for the outcomes of the connected conversations process, policy-makers can play a number of roles along the way. They can act as a source, providing their expertise; as a participant, contributing to the discussion; or as a champion who promotes the project. In fact, there is considerable value in engaging policy-makers in these roles because increasing their involvement may make them take more of an interest in the project's outcomes.” p26

The concept of shared learning spaces and 'connected conversations' (NEF 2009) offers opportunities to reform connections, enable reflexive dialogue and learning from experience. The co-production of knowledge and understanding, and co creation of solutions is not only the building block to localized community development and learning, but also the means to inform potentially much more pressing global debates based on what we have in common and bridging differences. Just as the data mining and opinion forming approaches have exploited online communities, then so too can those who would seek to develop knowledge spaces where the role of the facilitator is less to teach and more to guide and moderate for accuracy and factual content. Transformational learning theory (Mezirow et al 2009) promotes collaborative enquiry through critical reflection, a holistic approach to action learning conversations in safe social spaces. There are challenges for the facilitator in preparing accurate and complete information to supporting free ranging discussions related to experiences and values which may be completely alien:

“How one categorizes experiences, beliefs, people, events and the self involves frames of references, which are structures of assumptions and expectations on which our thoughts, feelings and habits are based. Frames of reference may be rules, criteria, codes, language, schemata, cultural canon, ideology, standards, power allocation, world views, religious doctrine, aesthetic values, social movements, psychological schema or scripts, learning styles and preference” (Mezirow, 2009 p. 22)

The ability to maintain an open mind, accept the experience, and life long influences which inform alternative perspectives, that there may be contested areas, and demonstrate empathy and understanding is a challenge particularly in a climate of polarized ideas, judgments of others and very blurred distinctions between truth and non- truth, rigorous, accurate data and opinion.

Similarly, to focus on current challenges will also require factual content across disciplinary boundaries, both in supporting and facilitating learning, and in higher education to frame and debate the social, cultural and political challenges of the current world situation. Beck (2006, 2007) identifies the ‘unintended consequences’ from political, economic, scientific or sociological actions. He is very clear, for example that science is constantly working to counteract the impact of earlier discoveries, and is both the cause and solution to environmental destruction. Globalisation has increased inequality, and it is important to understand the relationship between economic forces and social injustices, which reach across national boundaries. Attempts to maintain dominant discourses leading to conflict have far reaching consequences in terms of displacement of refugees, and sowing the seeds of further radicalization and conflict. At the same time, understanding developmental psychology and the deep – rooted impact of genetics and environment on an individual world view is vital in engaging in effective dialogue. Freire’s ‘bruising’ encounter with the labourer in the 1950s who asked him to explain his theories with the labourer’s ‘syntax and rhythm’ led to the use of language and respect for “knowledge and lived experience expressed through popular discourse (Freire 2007.p. 23) as a building block of emancipatory education, building on his earlier commitment that “ the point of departure must always be with men and women in the ‘here and now’, which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene: (Freire 1997, p.66).

This commitment is the foundation for reconnecting biographies. For this to happen in the UK may well depend more on philanthropic efforts, extra curricular commitments to ethical projects and debate, (University of Manchester), and learning within growing social movements, than any overt policy commitment within an increasingly commercialised education sector.

Transformation and connection is part of the solution identified by Beck to the risks often predicted in his work:

“To the extent that risk is experienced as omnipresent, there are only three possible reactions: denial, apathy or transformation. The first is largely inscribed in modern culture, the second resembles post-modern nihilism, the third is the ‘cosmopolitan moment’ of world risk society. And that is what I am going to talk about. What is meant by that may be explained with reference to Hannah Arendt. The existential shock of danger – therein lies the fundamental ambivalence of global risks – opens up unintentionally (and often also unseen and unutilized) the (mis)fortune of a possible new beginning (which is no cause for false sentimentality). How to live in the shadow of global risks? How to live, when old certainties are shattered or are now revealed as lies? Arendt's answer anticipates the irony of risk. The expectation of the unexpected requires that the self-evident is no longer taken as self-evident. The shock of danger is a call for a new beginning. Where there is a new beginning, action is possible. Human beings enter into relations across borders. This common activity by strangers across borders means freedom. All freedom is contained in this ability to begin.” Beck (2006)

The theoretical base in emancipatory and transformative learning is well tested as a means to frame, debate and initiate social change, and has a proven role in ‘pedagogies of hope.’ The current social conditions, power shifts and associated dangerous consequences are replicated in history if on a smaller, less instant scale, and clearly relate to the many ‘shocks of danger’, many conflicting calls for change, the many vulnerable people being denied help. Resources are scarce, and the task may seem daunting, but the need for truth - based learning and reconnected discourse across both social and geographical boundaries to at last learn from each others’ most likely common day to day challenges, and our global shared history is compelling.



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