LEARNING THROUGH WORKING LIFE: INDIVIDUALS' AGENTIC ACTION, SUBJECTIVITY AND PARTICIPATION IN WORK.

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Maintaining and improving the capacity to be effective in work is held now to become an important social goal in order to maintain, individual, local and national well-being, including standard of living (Organisation of Economic and Cultural Development (OECD), 1996). Yet, without knowing more about how individuals are able to engage in work and learn through that work, and are motivated to continue to learn there can be no certainty about whether the expectations upon individuals are realistic. This paper reports the initial findings of an investigation that aims to understand something of these relations through understanding the working lives of five individuals. It aims to explore these individuals' working lives including how they exercised their agency ethically at work. In doing so, it aims to identify how this agency is shaped by individuals' identity and subjectivity, and how these shape their participation in and learning through work.

Change and working life

Learning throughout working life is seen as essential in circumstances where the requirements for work and the means of participating in work are held to be constantly changing. Maintaining and improving the capacity to be effective in work is now held as an important social goal in maintaining individual, local and national well-being, including the standard of life and social provisions (i.e. health, aged care, education) (OECD 1996). Rather than cyclic periods of high and low economic activity, structural adjustments in global economic activity (Green, 2001) now require enhanced skills to sustain the standing of the economy of countries like Australia. Yet, without knowing more about how individuals are able to engage in and learn through work, confront change and be motivated to learn, there can be no certainty about whether the expectations upon individuals are realistic. Therefore, it is important to know more about how individuals participate in and learn throughout their working life, how they are able to exercise their agency and participation and how these are linked to their values and beliefs. What is it that directs individuals' lifelong learning?

The discussion here centres on the role of agentic action – how individuals construct their goals for and act in the social world (Somerville & Bernoth, 2001). That is, how human agency shapes participation in work, with that agency reciprocally shaping but also being shaped by individuals' identity and subjectivity. Central to individuals' development is their decision-making and ethical action, and the degree by which these are shared across working lives and life outside of work. This is an important discussion because individuals play a key role in initiating, sustaining and directing that development, albeit mediated (e.g. either assisted or inhibited) by workplace practices and/or working communities and the social milieu beyond (Rogoff, 1990). Although the press of immediate environmental factors, such as in workplaces, can be strong, learning is not held as being captive to situational determinism. Instead, Valsiner (1998) claims individuals are able and indeed required to ignore much of social suggestion, except the most extreme and forceful ones, in order to buffer their personality against constant social suggestion. So individuals' intentionalities play a key role in decision-making and learning, albeit shaped interdependently by subjectivities that are societal and cultural in origin. Wertsch (1998) distinguishes between compliant

learning (i.e. mastery), which is superficial, and learning to which the individual is committed (i.e. appropriation), and where richer learning is more likely. Therefore, individual intentionality and agentic action are central to individuals' participation in and development throughout their working lives. Yet, a clearer understanding of the influence of individuals' identities and subjectivities on that development, may assist understanding the prospect for achieving key economic goals through lifelong learning.

Constructing knowledge and identity: Agentic action at work
The conceptual focus here is in assisting understand how individuals' thinking and acting throughout working life is related to their identities and subjectivities. In doing so, it centres on the interdependence between the social (e.g. geneses of subjectivities, cultural demands and situational requirements) and individual (e.g. intentionality and agentic action) contributions to thinking and acting (e.g. Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). Pavlova (2001) argues that in a society of consumers, individuals' identity that was previously related mainly to work and was constructed mainly on the basis of work ethics, is now being constructed on different bases. Ethical attention as a chosen road to moral improvement might be transformed so that work will be judged by the amount of pleasure it affords, or its centrality to individuals' goals. The road to self-identity and meaningful existence now resides increasingly in the market place, with the individual now charged with the task of self-construction. Yet, nowadays, a continuous and logically coherent working life may be less available. Many new jobs are contingent -- fixed term and part-time (Carnoy, 1999). The notion of vocation as a pathway to self-identity may have become less likely, as well-regarded and assured jobs becoming a rarity (Bauman, 1998). Nevertheless, employment in routine, but very necessary and productive work, may provide a source of material comfort, the ability to consume, yet provide for family and to progress personally and socially. Objective measures, such as salary levels, objective social good, personal discretion in how individual engage in work and for how long and to what intensity, interesting work may be the privilege of fewer workers. For instance, according to Rifkin (1995) more than 75 percent of the labor force in industrial nations engages in work that is little more than simple repetitive tasks that do not provide any gratifying and meaningful identity for the workers in the current social conditions. For those workers, it might be claimed that there may be a limited prospect of constructing a life-long identity on the foundation of their work. However, there are other bases, apart from the judgements of external observers about what constitutes meaningful work and workers' identity. The outcomes of this self-construction may be prized differently dependent upon the values of the observer. Dewey (1916) holds that the meaning of an individuals' work is found in its consonance with their life goals or directions. Others may not share satisfaction and sense of self that individuals might derive from some kinds of paid work. Yet, not all individuals' work will provide the desired personal identity nor will it be afforded through their work. So what are the bases for this self-construction?

As the requirements for work and the means of participation in work are transformed, they have direct consequences for individuals' subjectivities and identities. Understanding these consequences may be enriched through a consideration of the enactment of human agency and the kinds of decision that reside within that agency – the exercise of agentic action. This is the focus of their self-construction and life goals. Lifelong learning is viewed as a journey of development each individual negotiates as they engage in changing work, work practices and shifting bases for engagement in work. Throughout their journeys, individuals' identity, subjectivities and actions will likely be transformed through contested and reciprocal engagement with the social world which influences their decision-making and what constitutes ethical action. A key

element of agentic action is in its bases for decision-making. This in turn may shape their decision-making in and for their working lives, including how they engage in the demanding processes of extending their knowledge throughout their working lives. These sets of concerns motivated the investigation reported below.

Procedures

The investigation reported here attempts to identify the bases by which five individuals engage in their paid work and what guides their practices and decision-making. The principal method of data gathering comprises a series of recorded conversations with the participants. These conversations occur every six weeks or so over period of 11 months. They are used to elicit data about transitions in working life, learning, the exercise of agency and the bases of that agency. These conversations will lead to the production of biographies that are used to verify and provide a basis for further reflection and discuss recent, current and emergent working life issues. The interviews with individuals focus on: (i) the role of work in their lives; (ii) bases of ethical decision-making; (iii) key moments and transitions in individuals' working lives; (iv) reflections on those moments; and (v) causes of changes in identity and subjectivity. For each of these focuses particular questions are used to assist in eliciting data and shape its analysis. The data will be used to identify the trajectories of the participants' working lives and their ontogenies or personal histories of work. A key concern of the investigation is to continue the conversations through a process of refinement and extension over a year-long period. The aim here is map changes in working life, subjectivity and decision-making over this time. To refine and appraise the initial analyses, the data from each interview and its initial analysis are discussed with participants in the subsequent interview. The data presented and discussed here is derived from the first two interviews. These focused on their work, changes to the work, issues of identity, motivation and personal goals and what constitutes ethical activity and practice.

Participants

The five subjects were selected to encompass diverse forms of work and engagement with work, as well as diverse work histories (e.g. migrant, part-time worker). Lev is an electronics engineer who works for a large multinational corporation as part of the team on transportation projects, particularly trains. Mike is an automotive mechanic who works as a supervisor and coordinator in a large motor vehicle dealership, working between the workshop and sales departments. Lyn works part-time as a member of small team of workers in a wholesaling business in the metropolitan fruit and vegetable market in the early hours of the morning and into the day. Carl is a broker who works for a large national insurance brokerage company on a commission-only basis. He is essentially a sole operator business within a large enterprise. Ken is a manager of an information and communications technology unit within a corporatised state government department.

These individuals took diverse pathways in arriving at their current work. Lev learnt his electronics skills in the Russian military and practiced them in Russia in transport related work, before moving to Australia. However, here he had to initially engage in relatively menial and unrelated work as he developed the English language proficiency required to effectively practice electrical engineering. Mike's paid work has consistently focused on motor mechanics. However, much of it has been as a service operator assisting motorists whose vehicles have broken down. Lyn has engaged in a range of work (e.g. retail work, detailing cars in sales yards and factory work) in between being the sole parent for her three children. Carl was a professional sportsperson before retiring and taking up insurance brokering. Ken grew up in a church

community and his first work experiences were church activities. He then engaged in a range of service-oriented work (e.g. retail, restaurant management, pest eradication) before developing expertise with security within information technology. Through this expertise he became a manager within a corporatised government department. So, of the five participants' only one has had a continuous vocational path: Mike (who is interested in customer servicing as much as mechanics). The others, by different degree, have experienced discontinuities or transformations in their work and occupational identity, and perhaps as with Lyn, that identity remains immature and she integrates her identity as a caregiver with that of worker. This suggests that lifelong learning is more than being generative of skills it is about negotiation and remaking occupational identities.

Changing work
Each of these individuals' work has changed in recent times and by transforming work requirements. Yet, rather than being disruptive and disarming, they absorbed these changes, which in some instances were also instrumental in their work progression and identity formation. Lev's current employer has been affected by the downturn in the aviation sector following the attacks on New York and Washington. Previously, he held a similar position in a large enterprise that was taken over by a multinational company that centralised its maintenance work elsewhere, thereby making him redundant. However, he moved to this more prestigious job. Mike's current job is in large part a response to the extended warranty periods offered by manufacturers to customers buying new cars. These warranties tend to wed customers to the dealership yet demand the provision of services and maintenance. Consequently, interacting with and maintaining clients has become a key focus for dealerships because clients may go on and purchase another new vehicle at the end of the warranty. Mike possesses the combination of automotive and inter-personal skills required to address these clients' needs and coordinate work activities to support the continuity of the relationship between the dealership and its customers, and those in the workplace. Therefore, this change resulted in an opportunity for Mike. Lyn's workplace tends to have a high employee turnover, like other businesses in the fruit and vegetable market. Work in the market commences in the early hours of the morning and continues until all the orders have been sent to retail customers. Lyn is a relatively new employee, and is aiming to secure and develop a niche role for herself, which includes organising weekly export orders. Carl's work has been changed recently because of governmental regulations and legislation that demand greater evidence and transparency in the processes of advising clients about their insurance quotes. Each quote now takes longer and is documented more meticulously. Consequently, small insurance jobs have become less attractive. These are passed to company employees. A new boss is shaping how Ken's department operates and is transforming his work. As his work is involves IT security processes, within and outside the department, it has recently become more intense and of greater interest.

The changes in work have facilitated these individuals' career development, as much as challenged it. Carl who likes working on large insurance projects because of social interactions and relations, is now directing more attention to these kinds of projects, and reports being successful in this. Mike's employment standing and security have been enhanced by extended warranty arrangements. Moreover, he enjoys this kind of work. Although Ken does not support all his new boss' initiatives, the new emphasis on security has buttressed and secured Ken's work role. Lyn is using new requirements in the workplace (i.e. export orders) to bolster her particular place in the work team and make more secure her position. Unlike clerical workers whose contracts were not

renewed Lev's position, has also been bolstered because he works on train transport in a corporation whose reliance on air transportation projects has become imperilled. So, although changes to work bring about challenges and intensification, it has also supported the continuity and development of these individuals' work. This is, because in at least three instances, there is coincidence between their work goals and the changing requirements of their workplaces. Moreover, as discussed below, these changes permit the projection of their personal values into their work.

Identity, motivation and goals
All five subjects claimed that their work was largely a means to an end, and that things outside their working lives are of greater importance than their work and working life. For Lev, family life, aesthetic pursuits and a small business installing security equipment are claimed as important goals beyond the workplace. He directed efforts into his small business, and looked to this and his salary to generate the income he required to maintain the particular life-style, to educate his son and take him to Russia in order to learn about his father and mothers' cultural heritage. He will change jobs if another will provide him better financial benefit, because this is important to him. Mike stated that rather than working in the garage he would prefer to spend his time messing around with computers. This, and his family, are the ends to which his work efforts are claimed to be directed. As a single parent, Lyn's goals are to provide more for her family through work (e.g. buy a house, have a holiday). Carl emphasised the importance of his family life, his good relationship with his wife and his interest in his children and their development. He referred to divorces that some of his colleagues had suffered from focusing too much time and energy upon their work. The lesson here was salient: there had to be a healthy balance between work and family. Ken was quite insistent that his family and church represented the ends towards which his work efforts were directed. His commitment to a life outside of work was evident in the weekly tithe he paid to his church. He stated that beyond retirement he would never consider or think about his paid work. All individuals stated life outside work as a major point of their life engagement. This supports a theoretical claim that work is no longer the only force that shapes individual identity.

Nevertheless, they each acknowledge the important role that their working lives played as a part of their identity and sense of fulfilment. By different degrees, they all referred to the importance of being respected as being effective and valued by their peers and other workers and from whom others would seek advice and be valued for their counsel. They are required to be effective at work, so they can secure their employment. Lev referred to his work as providing a status of a respectable middle-class person (i.e. electrical engineer) as well as the financial freedom that a good salary provided for him and his family. Since arriving in Australia, Lev has worked hard to become proficient in English and realise the use of his electronics knowledge in productive employment, after a period of engaging in menial and unfulfilling work roles, constrained by his poor English language. Yet, he feels under-utilised in his current position and believes he has the capacity to contribute more and deserves higher remuneration. His work has not provided opportunities to establish close friendships with his colleagues. However, as he considers social relationship an important part of his identity, he realises this through socialising in an emigree Russian community. This suggests a sense of work identity and agency that is strong and frustrated by a lack of potential fulfilment.

Mike has high professional and personal standards and views about understanding clients' needs and responding to those needs. These are central to his identity as a worker and a decent human being. For Lyn, work in the fruit markets

provides the opportunity to demonstrate her capacity to perform roles other than being a caregiver to her children. A strong sense of industry and organisation, and desire to build a further financial foundation for herself and her children sees her direct her energies proactively to her work. In becoming a worker and having sole responsibility for an area of work seems to fulfil an urgent need to re-affirm her identity outside of the family home. In the first interview, she expressed an interest in becoming an expert in the purchasing and transportation of fresh herbs, arising from an opportunity in previous employment. By the second interview, her intentions and agency were directed to another opportunity, being responsible for export orders. This requires understanding and responding to quarantine and costumes requirements that she alone would have expertise in. Insurance broking for Carl is something at which he is highly proficient and follows a career as a professional sportsman. He enjoys the work, the interactions with business people that brokerage work brings, his freedom to develop his clients and contacts and watch his business grow. Ken likes his work because it is an area of growth and employment security (which was not a feature of his earlier working life) and should provide him with meaningful and well-paid work until retirement. However, any stable, well-paid work will suit his needs, because he does not associate his identity with work. So his work identity is shaped by more general employment goals. The process of self-construction relates to both working life and that outside of it. The degree of their relative importance differs across these individuals.

In addition, each individual, apart from Lev, views their current work as being satisfactory in the current progression of their careers. Lev, although enjoying the status of his job, would like more responsibility and to be more valued, respected, and influential. Lyn is making the most of her opportunities and sees prospects for the future that are associated with personal goals (e.g. buying a house, having holiday) but also establishing an identity for herself outside of the family. Mike is doing the kind of work he enjoys and is not seeking advancement. Carl is quite content, and if he sought advancement it would be through the start of his own brokerage business. For Ken, his job offers the prospect of continuity of paid work through to retirement. A significant difference is that between the role work play for male and female subjects. All male subjects accepted work as given, as something that has been with them forever. For the female participant work is playing more important role, it's something new for her. She is just establishing her working identity.

For all five individuals, work relates to their identity: they are identified as an engineer, supervising mechanic, effective worker, diligent and trusted insurance broker and manager. However, all five subjects are able to exercise a part of their personal agency at work. If the exercise of individual agency is through personally fulfilling activities is a measure of the link between individuals identity and their work, it might be concluded that all five individuals were exercising their personal agency and engaging willingly and reciprocally in their work. That is part of their identity and sense of self (self-construction) and the exercise of agentic action is being directed and remade through interdependence with their work. This sentiment reflects what Pusey (Pusey, 2003) concludes is the role of work for middle Australia – "For nearly everyone work is a social protein, a buttress for identity and not a tradeable commodity." (p.2) All five subjects referred to the importance of being able to exercise their agency in their work activities. Whether it was the ownership of the work undertaken, the possibilities of trying to do new things, being able to manage oneself, being able to exercise standards of work and discretion that reflect individual, or the exercise of personal licence, the significance of the exercise of agency was amplified by each informant. A

measure of this agency is what individuals construe as ethical activity and decision-making.

Ethical activity and decision-making
The common motif running through all the interviews about what constitutes ethical activity at work was the idea of 'doing the right thing'. Within this idea was the dual goals of being ethical with others ultimately meant 'doing the right thing' by yourself. The projection of what constituted ethical action appeared closely linked to the participants' personal values. Given that these values were often linked to prior experiences and events, some semblance of links between the personal history and ethical activity in working life and outside of it emerge, although are not fully endorsed in the available data.

The focus of ethical action for others' sake was quite diverse. Perhaps because Lev's clients are very remote from him (although he considering safety of the passengers as the main issue), much of his focus of ethical action work was associated with working with others, particularly how they would collaboratively complete a project. For Lev, this meant an effective work environment in which he could exercise his interests as fully as possible while maintaining a high level of salary. Completing things was claimed to be important and by being able to act agentically and with some autonomy he was able to exercise this goal. The 'others' for Mike were the workshop mechanics and the clients whose cars were being serviced and maintained. Doing 'the right thing' by both of these groups – reconciling their needs and resolving problems - was the key factor in directing Mike's energy at work and a key component of his job. Yet through working to ensure the right thing was done by the mechanics as well as done by them and clients, he was able to realise important personal-professional goals for diligence and careful work, addressing others' needs and high standards of work performance. The 'others' for Lyn comprised the fruit and vegetable shops that they supplied throughout the state (and now overseas) and her boss. This was important for her standing and the viability of the business. Lyn's concern of 'doing the right thing' by her boss was reflected in belief that he was to the right thing by her (she described him as being more like a mate than a boss). For Carl, the 'others' were his clients and the company for whom he worked as a commission-only employee. The clients were important to him and he needed to demonstrate to them that he was working ethically in their interest. The company had been good to him, therefore Carl felt quite loyal to the company as an employer. Surprisingly, for a commission-only employee, he engaged in activities associated with developing employees' skills and capacities. This effort would not secure more commissioned work for him, but nevertheless he claims to have put considerable effort into these employees' development. In discussing the sources of his personal and work values Carl referred to his country upbringing and sporting life. Being fair, playing hard but fair and being part of the team seem to resonate in his claims about his personal conduct in the workplace. Ken makes a distinction between his ethical action towards his subordinates and towards other managers and his boss. As a manager, he gives his subordinates as much discretion as possible was a way of 'doing the right thing' by them. His ethical behaviour in all other instances are restricted by organisation and he felt that his personal values are much "higher" than those required by organisation. Similar to Lev, he believed that with more autonomy and trust, he could achieve more. In these two cases, large organisations prescribe a set of rules that regulate employees' behaviour and relationship towards the others. Perhaps what was missing was significant distance between individual and workplace values and what constituted ethical action. All this suggests, the way that these individuals have deployed their personal values is consistent across their working life and that outside of

it, and these values are sourced in earlier iterations and development of values and identity through earlier engagement in life activities.

In conclusion, from an initial analysis of the first two rounds of interview data, some patterns emerged about these five individuals' agency, identities and bases for participation in (and learning through) work. Against some predictions about changes adversely affecting workers, it was found that change for these five workers had either buttressed or facilitated their standing in the workplace and their vocational goals. While all five participants claimed that their working life was merely a means to an end, the evidence suggests their identities, agentic actions and subjectivities were exercised and enacted in both their working life and that outside it. By different degrees, there was evidence of an interdependence between these two lives. In particular, it seemed that these individuals' capacity to exercise their agency at work was strongly associated with how they valued that work and identified with it. That is, it reflected how they might exercise their efforts in participating in and learning through their working life. This suggests that for lifelong learning to be successfully enacted consonance between the qualities of work and individuals' identity and interests may be required. These propositions will be explored further in the subsequent series of interviews.

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