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Learning to Live Differently in Lockdown

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Abstract

I developed a novel approach, a form of 'impressionistic research', during the Covid-19 pandemic to enable non-contact data collection and its ethical dissemination. During daily lengthy walks, I added material observed and overheard to that gleaned from personal contacts, practising a form of rural flâneurie. To ensure anonymity for my direct, but limited, sources, I then created composite fictionalised stories that demonstrate human adaptation and resourcefulness throughout the life course. Incidental learning is evident in these stories imagined but also in my researcher narrative as I was finding a new way of working when social distancing proscribed biographical interviews. Thus, this article describes a methodological innovation alongside the snapshots of life in lockdown in England.

Keywords

impressionistic research, flâneurie, data fictionalisation, stories as research, human resourcefulness, Covid-19 pandemic, research methodology

Introduction

In this paper, I consider ways in which people have changed their lives to accommodate the restrictions necessitated by the global Covid-19 pandemic. How I do this may challenge some readers' expectations, for this is not an account that adheres to traditional formats for presenting research. Rather than creating this narrative from interview data alone, I extended and blended it with material gleaned in real-life situations as I took my daily exercise, taking on the role of social 'voyeur' or, more appositely, *flâneur*. It is from this positionality that I offer

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stories of micro-level changes to lifestyle, habit, and expectation in the face of a significant external threat – a transnational health crisis that has impacted all other levels. These stories exemplify ecological perspectives on life and learning: in adapting, people reveal learning at a fundamental level, incidental learning as we 'live and work' (Foley, 2004, p. 5). As a biographical researcher I also adapted my expectations and practices to 'what was possible', learning as I went along. Therefore, this account provides multiple examples of learning across the life course, through stories that align with generational divides.

The stories were collected both deliberately and incidentally. I emailed colleagues, friends, family, and other contacts, asking for an instance where they or someone known to them had been resourceful during lockdown. I avoided requesting 'stories' as such, fearing that would evoke a need to display literary talent and therefore reduce responses. Ironically, it was the word 'resourceful' that caused problems. From the replies I did get, it became clear that this had been interpreted as 'neediness' by many, and 'heroic' by others, whereas all I wanted were minor happenings and changes to everyday practices. I persevered, sometimes telephoning, and did get some usable material after picking up on minor comments to prompt a storied explanation. The process clearly demonstrated the poverty of email in comparison to my normal conversational interviewing practices. It was noteworthy, too, that the people who most readily responded to a direct request were those already embedded in an educational environment and especially those with a defined interest in stories and narrative – notions of adaptation and responsiveness resonated with adult educators, particularly.

At this point I decided I needed to be resourceful, too. If I wanted to remain research active when face-to-face contact was forbidden, I needed to adapt my methodology. I considered my options carefully and for a while thought I might just focus on interviewing an elderly relative in depth. Lockdown had dramatically reduced her independence, necessitating my slow descent into carer, a process I term 'care creep', for like 'soil creep', the change is imperceptible, visible only in retrospect by the damage it has caused. "You can't see creep happening" only its consequences, and, metaphorically in terms of caring, too, only the "leaning fences and poles and broken retaining walls show where it has taken place" (Onegeology, 2021). To so focus, however, presented an ethical dilemma, as I did not want to draw upon the story of a single individual to demonstrate the negative consequences of the pandemic on the elderly. Nor did I want to lengthen the caring sessions to include intensive conversations about such problems as this seemed detrimental to both our wellbeing (routine appointments to adjust hearing aids

were on hold during the pandemic). Instead, I decided to broaden my collection methods to include stories and comments encountered in other contexts. I tuned my research 'antennae' to pick up on chance mentions in conversations with other purposes and to pay attention even to comments simply overheard, as I tramped the local pavements and footpaths as part of my daily exercise.

I have long been a *flâneur* (Elkin's title *flâneuse* (2017) is best left to earlier centuries where it has inclusive relevance in acknowledging women's involvement). I fit well with *flâneurie*, the notion of a "wanderer in the modern city, both immersed in the crowd but isolated from it" (Coverley, 2018, p. 71), perhaps moderately well with Baudelaire's (1863/1995, p. 9) attribution "passionate spectator", and fully with his "'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I'". Even as a schoolchild I liked to wander aimlessly but with curiosity around the local town if allowed 'out' during lunchbreak, and roaming was customary on family holidays, too. In cities at home and abroad, I still wander to see 'what is there', my close observation of my surroundings enabling me to easily 'find myself' at the end. As a geographer, I like to have a large-scale map in my backpack but use this to understand the significance of the place where I am, not to trace a route. Fictionalisation fits well with flâneurie, too. Solnit reminds us that the flâneur "did not exist, except as a type, an ideal, and a character". The concept derives from literature: Baudelaire, describing the flâneur in his literary essay, *The Painter of Life,* was himself was drawing on Poe's short story, *The Man of the Crowd* (1840/2003) (Coverley, *ibid.*). This literary connection makes 'storying' appropriate. It frees us to personalise the notion, too, for as Solnit also points out: "No one quite fulfilled the idea of the flâneur, but everyone engaged in some version of flâneury" (2001, p. 200).

There are strong precedents for an academic to practise flâneurie. As Nuvolati (2016, p.21) writes, it is a term "in use since the late nineteenth century to designate writers, poets and *intellectuals* that critically observed people's behavior while strolling among the crowd". But equally importantly, he claims that this practice is "*once again of central interest* (in sociology, philosophy, literature, and cinema) … as a particular type of *reflective relationship* with people and spaces". [my italics]

So, I took my flâneurie a step further and into the countryside, a place suddenly overflowing with aimless people ostensibly taking daily exercise just to get out of the house. Rather than simply enjoying the natural affordances of my local outdoor spaces, I harnessed my irritation with the number of people I had to countenance, by considering them data. In effect I 'listened to' and 'observed' what was going on around me, mindful that such approaches were not uncommon in the past, before ethical committees redrew the boundaries around what constitutes

acceptable practice. I, nevertheless, respected the need to act appropriately and, drawing on the concept of situated ethics (Simons & Usher, 2000), I decided that I could protect my sources entirely if, instead of telling individuals' stories, I merged similar sources to create a set of 'typical' tales, an approach I refer to as *impressionistic research*. Using the snippets of data I had collected, heard, or seen, I used my imagination to view the world through the lens of the other, and write about what I had learned from a fictional (auto)biographical perspective. Initially I focused on the elderly as I had so much first-hand experience of attending to and listening to my relative and what her friends were doing. But later I considered other groups – the active retired, workers, teenagers, and the very young – to capture generational differences without straying beyond those groups that I encountered regularly.

This is an evolving process but one I find 'narrowly' creative, by which I mean creative within limits, as my aim is to find authentic voices rather than let my imagination run riot. Like Gibson (2020, p. 2, citing Byler & Iverson, 2012) I acknowledge that the line between reporting on real events that happened (non-fiction) and those that are figments of the imagination (fiction) is fragile and the process I undertake straddles the two as the events are 'real', and are recounted 'realistically', but not in 'real time', nor exactly as they happened. Like Wade (2009, p. 40), I am trying to create "a fictional account truthful to the findings but not necessarily to the original context of research;" an "evocative narrative" (Kiesinger, 1998, p. 129). And to me this seems rather appropriate given the literary origins of the term flâneur.

Thus, I have collected? collated? constructed? created? stories from a broad range of people, and in this paper I will share some of the ways that individuals have modified their behaviour to cope with exosystemic change and consequent restrictions imposed at the macro-level. The variety, in itself, is interesting. Predictably, the stories from the very elderly are ones of isolation, containment, and confinement, and a general loss of independence, although several showed a willingness to accept that life was now home-based after a period of adjustment. Among the recently retired, a common comment was that life had changed very little. With no need to work, and young enough to be in command of digital technology, these individuals were able to minimise the effects of restrictions, cushioned by their pensions. Those living in the countryside with sizeable gardens and easy access to open spaces were able to take advantage of the good weather and meet people outdoors, while those with nearby grandchildren quietly continued to see them as normal despite governmental fears that the young might put the elder generation at risk. We know, too, that for many of working age the pattern

was one of working from home, unemployment, or furlough. Others adjusted to work in ways that were possible – delivering produce to domestic customers rather than restaurant chains, serving food outside or as take-away, teaching using online media, carrying out 'home' visits to clients in the local park sitting on a bench or wall, etc. I found particularly fascinating the stories I received about children – as these were rarely the subject matter of news reports or television coverage, yet they revealed that even the smallest children observed and learned from what was happening.

Writing the stories was enjoyable as I found that they largely wrote themselves once I progressed beyond the opening sentences. Although 'fictions', the process for me seemed to have a lot in common with the analysis-through-writing (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) that I frequently use when making sense of my interview data; but I was calling on material stored in my head rather than buried in interview transcripts. However, as this form of analysis is undertaken after a long period of immersion in the data, perhaps my 'revelation' should not have been such a surprise. Perhaps, too, I should have been less surprised that I found myself interpreting and reflecting on my stories as if created by someone else or some other process. I include the reflective interpretations, too, to show how, although I wrote the stories instinctively, I was afterwards able to see why I included the details in the way that I did. I hope that will enable readers to explore these processes alongside me.

This focusing of my narrative gaze to see life in terms of an imaginary 'other' was actually quite 'transformative' (Mezirow, 1975), for the viewpoints 'haunted' me as I went about my daily life for quite some time after the event, and even now they can suddenly come to the fore when something provides a trigger. But perhaps I am overly suggestive? I have long been fascinated by Avery Gordon's view that the past continually haunts the present, so perhaps I am open to experiencing my imaginary 'friends' (apologies to Winnicott) lurking at the edges of my thoughts and actions. Looking further for explanation, I found support of sorts in the work of Coutu (1951), who coined the term 'synconation' to describe George Herbert Meads' original meaning of 'role-taker' as "a strictly mental or cognitive empathic activity, not overt behaviour or conduct" (p. 182).

> In Mead's usage the term refers to that phase of the symbolic process by which a person momentarily pretends to himself that he is another person, projects himself into the perceptual field of the other person, imaginatively "puts himself in the other's place," in order that he may get an insight into the other person's probable behavior in a given situation. (p. 180)

My process is not exactly one of trying to put myself in another's place and feel as another 'does'; it is rather one of trying to think and feel as another 'might', distilling observations of, and comments from, multiple others into one. In doing this, I recognise the 'slippery' nature of the term 'empathy' (Watson, 2009) and accept Van Loon's (2007, p. 280) view that "the claim to empathy is an impossible vanity" and his critique that I, like an ethnographer, can "never become [my] research subject". However, none of these comments invalidate the attempt to get as close as it is possible to understanding and communicating the view(s) of someone other than oneself.

But now I will turn to the stories and my reflective interpretations, letting these stand independently from me, the writer – and let you, the reader, walk alongside us like T. S. Eliot's invisible 'third' (Eliot, 1922). I give you not just Mishler's *story as told* (Mishler, 1995) but the *story imagined*, a blending of the *story overheard* and the *story observed*.

Dora – An Elderly Citizen Living Alone

Life is a bit lonely but there's lots of good shows on television. I've seen some before but that's okay – I know what's happened if I have to get the door or something.

My daughter drops by quite a bit and people phone me more. I don't have one of those 'magic carpet' things so I can't see their faces, but I can hear them better on the phone. All that shouting 'hello' through the window is hard even if I have my hearing aids in.

I don't go out much – people might get too close. And how can I wear glasses, hearing aids, and a mask – and my earrings! My mask pinged off outside the Post Office and knocked my glasses into the gutter. A lens came out – landed on dead leaves luckily. A really kind lady got them back for me. Just as well, as I can't bend that far.

I stayed home after that but then my daughter said I should get more fresh air, so I went out the front and walked round to the back a few times. Boring – but easier than putting on all that stuff *and* proper shoes.

The family don't go out much either. Make me do a shopping list every week and they buy it on the 'carpet'. They get things wrong even though I tell them

> exactly where things are on the shelves. They say everything has changed but I think they just forgot my eggs! And they get the wrong oranges or none at all – and then tell me to eat more fruit and less tinned stuff!
>
> It's not important – but they need to know that they aren't trying hard enough. I can buy cake at the village shop when I go to get my paper on Saturday mornings. And that makes a good tea with a bit of cheese, and a pudding for lunch if I add some custard. They don't know I buy cake, that's my business, I need some control of my life and there's precious little left with the library van cancelled, and no trips on the bus or to friends' houses for a cuppa and a chat. Even the gardener doesn't come and my grass needs cutting again. I'll be living in a jungle by the time the family get round to it.
>
> It's jigsaws, jigsaws, jigsaws – and the way they make them now, you can put the pieces in anywhere and they fit, so what's the point. Once I've done one, I only have to take it apart again and often no one except me sees it made.

Reflective Interpretations

In this story, the isolation and lack of things to look forward to is evident, but also the frustration that others aren't completely at her 'beck-and-call' together with a preference to limit the times she ventures out alone as there are new challenges to face. I can sense an ongoing tension between herself and her daughter in the joy with which she 'outwits' the family by buying cake on the quiet, and the deliberate reference to online platforms and laptops as the 'magic carpet' when she knows about these even though she chose not to embrace new technology when that might have been possible. But in some ways newer circumstances not directly experienced don't register, for instance, the reference to where food is located in the supermarket and the failure to accept that not everything is easily obtained in the Covid-19 world.

Glenda and Mark – Enjoying an Active Retirement

> We don't have to be frugal; our pensions are good, and we have everything we need. We are used to shopping online so giving up trips to the supermarket was no hardship – you can get everything you need if you look hard enough and, anyway, we have a wonderful man who delivers fresh

vegetables and a good butcher in the next village who will pop things across if we phone our order through before 10 am.

We've got the garden and that keeps us both busy most of the year and I go for a power walk in the village every day as the gym is closed. There's not many people about – most people round here have big gardens and stay in them, especially now. We spend a lot of time in ours and Mark is forever digging something over or planting things. We grow lots of things from seed in the greenhouse, so we have flowers all year if we find time to transplant the new seedlings – and there was lots of time to do that this year. And to spray – we've had more greenfly this summer, loads more insects. More bees and butterflies, too, that's been nice.

And we've got our grandchildren. Our daughter has her hands full, two children under five already and now a new baby this summer. So, we went over there a lot – they aren't far away – and helped out with the bigger children. We would have done that anyway so not much changed really. But then they went back to nursery, and we do miss seeing them all but it's not really safe for us to go over now that they see other people every day. And her husband is back at work – with the emergency services – so that is risky, too.

Christmas was hard. We weren't really sure whether to brave a get-together or not, but the picture wasn't good, so we didn't. So that's the baby's first Christmas missed. He wasn't really big enough to know we weren't there but the other two were – and so were we. It was sad when they kept asking us to go over and see their new toys, especially the presents we gave. They kept forgetting they came from us as they were just more parcels sitting under the tree with those that Santa brought. Children forget so quickly if they are just told something rather than experiencing it. We won't get that back. And we won't get our summer holiday back either. We were planning to take a cruise or go somewhere a bit more exotic but, luckily, we hadn't finally booked anything. Wouldn't have wanted to be stranded on a cruise ship with people with Covid. We can do a cruise another year – if we want to – might be safer to stay on dry land, in future, and be able to get away from people who don't look well. Maybe rent a cottage here, or a villa abroad if Europe opens up.

But for now, Mark is making and mending things – lots of woodwork! I do the garden when it's nice and carry on sorting out the family photographs when it isn't. So, we have plenty to do.

Reflective Interpretations

This is an embellishment of a family story, told to refute the need to be resourceful (in the frugal sense). In passing, it raises the benefits to the planet of human confinement (more insects, and possibly a longer-term reduction in international travel). Yet, while finance is clearly not an issue, there is a tangible need for normality and family contact. The sense that opportunities missed can never be recovered resonates throughout this account. Living is reduced to a minimal existence in this twenty-first century narrative of tending one's own plot. To me, it is the more poignant for not being necessary for survival. In feudal times, tilling the land had purpose as a means to feed the family, whereas here it is a poor substitute for actually seeing the family.

Dan – Working From Home

It's lucky I chose the loft-space for an office. It's a bit cold in winter and sweltering in the summer but I can send the children back downstairs if they venture up when I am busy – and that seems to be most of the time at present, what with emails and meetings with people in other time zones even the weekends aren't sacrosanct. We might have had jet lag but travelling abroad at least solved that one!

Jenny has it harder working in the old dressing room at the top of the stairs. Not sure how she copes. The children walk in constantly, wanting help with their schoolwork, and start to argue if she doesn't pay attention, even when she is actually in an online meeting if they haven't checked first. They get so loud sometimes I have to shout downstairs. They really should manage better on their own. They're 12 and 14 now and we bought them laptops and new mobiles, but this generation is so easily bored. Suppose they miss their friends.

I miss my colleagues a bit but it's not as if we ever had time to actually talk when we were in the office. We joked a bit and Sarah brought us tea when she made hers and Jenny doesn't always bother. Sometimes we went to the wine bar at lunchtime but mostly people just worked through, eating lunch at their desks so that they could hit the road before the rush hour. At first it was good not to have to sit in traffic jams – travelling took me an hour each way – but occasionally, I miss it. I got to listen to the news in peace without other people complaining and wanting to change the channel as happens now if I try to watch it on the box. And I pay for the licence, as I keep telling

them. And I miss the feeling that the day is over at last and I can relax. Now I even eat dinner at my desk some days as it's still afternoon in America.

Reflective Interpretations

To me, this story captures the difficulties in separating work and home and confining work to normal hours. It also reveals how in families the women so often get a raw deal, in terms of workspace, childcare, and domestic responsibilities but also how in the workplace, too, there can be an expectation that the women will make the tea. There is a reminder of the reality of the English work culture in the eating-lunch-at-the-desk syndrome and also, that commuting is stressful but valuable in enabling separation of work and home life. The children having to study at home get an incidental mention, clearly showing that this is not a situation they welcome or enjoy and that material goods only partly substitute for parental attention.

Anna and Ellie – Being Three and Going to Nursery

Anna: [Talking to self] Why we here? Not my room. Not my teacher. Not my friends. Just littlies? Babies don't play! Can't even talk properly. [Bottom lip wobbles] Want mummy! Want furry beary! Want mummy to get furry beary. Furry beary stayed in bed. Better not let him catch Covid. Keep him safe. He snug in my bed, warm and cosy. But I *need* him. I *need* furry beary.
[Another 3-year-old enters]
Ellie: Oh Anna, Hello. Let's splay with the jigsaws. Oh, not here. Let's paint. Oh, no paint today. They not got the toys out. Late, late, like me. Little Miss Lazy. Not got up on time. Never on time, oh dear! Let's be teachers, Anna. Let's teach the littlies. I be Miss Ellie. You be Miss Anna. Come here littlies. Say G'morning Miss Ellie, G'morning Miss Anna.
[Three littlies look up, one grins, one stares, one waves his plastic skittle at them. Two others crawl away, intent on other things.]
Ellie: No good. Babies can't play. Let's read. Oh no. Where the books gone? Where is the Gruffalump? Not still in bed, too? Ohhhhh? Where is it all? All in the cupboard, lazy, lazy people.
Never mind, I know, help me Anna, hold the shelf really still.
[Ellie climbs onto the first shelf and stretches up for a metal bookend. She puts it on the floor and climbs up for a second one and gives it to Anna who is still looking puzzled but holds the shelves dutifully.]
Anna: That's to keep the books tidy, silly, not to play with. Not a toy. Sharp. Can cut our fingers.
Ellie: No look. It's an iPad like Daddy's. You take that one there [pointing].

I'll sit here.
[Anna goes to sit about two metres away as indicated. Both sit cross-legged on the floor facing each other and clutching the 'iPads'.]
Ellie: Now we safe. No Covid. Can't touch even if we stretch our arms. We zoom. We can talk not shout. Can you see me?
[Anna nods]
Ellie: [Singing] You're a mute, you're a mute, you're a mute. Turn your mike on. Now speak.
Anna: I can hear you. I can see you. Noooo – you're frozen. No – okay now. What shall I say?
Ellie: We have to talk to people we can't visit. I talk to Nanna on Sundays. And I talk to Auntie Pat when she's not at work. Who do you zoom?
Anna: I want to see Nanny George, by the sea, long way. Nanny George has sweeties – in the monkey tin. Get one if I eat my tea nicely. No fingers, just fork, and say thank you.
Ellie: I know, you be Auntie Pat and we talk. Pat, Pat, say hello.
Anna: Hello, Pat. Nanny George here. Do you want a sweet? After, if you are a good little girl today.

Reflective Interpretations

Here perhaps we see the reactions to change of the more introvert and more extravert child, not least to the sudden disappearance of many expected play resources. Anna finds new circumstances stressful. Through her self-talk, we grasp her dependence on others and her comfort toy (one her mother has persuaded her to leave at home, probably to avoid cross-infection). She is cautious, worried about cutting her fingers and used to having to wait for her rewards for good behaviour (Nanna's sweets). In contrast, Ellie is instantly verbal on arrival, more of a pragmatist, ready to embrace change and make the best of it, organising Anna to play along. She draws on her expectations of what will be possible rather than stopping to see what is, only noting the lack of things as she focuses on them in turn. Like Anna, she also echoes her mother's words ("never on time") but in a light-hearted way. She is familiar with social media and the Internet – finding pretend iPads and singing about being on mute – appropriating group behaviour often seen on TV broadcasts. Anna says nothing about 'meeting' relatives online, but she understands being 'frozen'. Her response to the invitation to be Pat shows she has not fully understood this but, actually it is Ellie who failed to see that Anna can't easily stand in for someone she doesn't know. Both children pursue their individual family meetings using the other as the imaginary 'other'. Both demonstrate an awareness of aspects of contemporary life, such as maintaining

social distance, staying safe, and isolating from other family members.

Rather than the 'normal' horizontal grouping of children by age, during the pandemic, rooms were arranged vertically to place siblings and close neighbours in the same 'bubble' and reduce the impact of a family needing to self-isolate. In some ways this echoed the mixed-age-group classes favoured by pioneers like Montessori but lacked the associated caring and sharing ethos that these earlier settings championed. In this temporary re-arrangement, the children did not readily adapt. Far from relating to the younger children, the older ones were dismissive of the 'littlies' who 'can't play', demonstrating how the establishment of an integrated classroom is not achieved overnight but nurtured by thoughtful teacher(s). Doctor Korczak, from Poland, would have readily admitted that creating a harmonious 'republic for children' requires energy, patience, and time. In *The Child's Right to Respect* (1929/2009), this is implicit in his rhetorical question: "How much more understanding does education work with the group require" (p. 30); in his comments about teachers who fail to "make a real effort to organise community life" (p. 31), his claim that "simple victories from stories about orphan children are celebrated by every teacher: these illustrations deceive uncritical moralists into believing that it all comes easily" (p. 39). The day nursery, too, has learned that the re-grouped children will need encouragement to play together harmoniously.

I am aware that teenagers are absent in these generational stories and during early lockdown they were surprisingly invisible in my village, perhaps confined to home and garden by anxious parents. To address this, I now share a real incident but tell it from my own perspective.

Teenagers – Hanging Out When Hanging Out Is Banned

It is 2.00 am and I toss and turn restlessly in bed, unable to sleep as the village peace is shattered by sudden bursts of sound from the park opposite my house. There are two kids over there, standing in the dark among the trees, believing that the cloak of night renders them invisible, and invisibility makes silence unnecessary. Don't they know that children should be seen and not heard? Or that they will be seen, for several houses overlook the park, and each time they use their phones their faces are illuminated from below – but maybe they simply don't care. There are only two of them, it's hardly a crowd. But for me, it might as well be, for they are using their phones to talk to others, who presumably are talking to other others. And all compete to share the best music and the funniest jokes, broadcasting these on speaker phone, making my bedroom walls bounce with multiple teenage

voices, sudden bursts of music, and bits of favourite shows. A virtual gang is hanging out beneath my window and they have been there for several hours, arriving when every late-night walker (and I am often one) had completed their final torchlit circuit.

I try to be tolerant, it's tough being a teenager *and* confined to parents and home. It's a Saturday and they don't do this every night – and perhaps they might if I do something they see as a challenge. So easy to scratch the cars when passing by, to pick the flowers in my front garden – or worse. I consider phoning someone to complain – but who? Calling the police feels excessive and anyway they don't even come out when people are burgled. And would I have wanted neighbours to ring the police when it was my teenagers who populated the park after dark? And doing something would actually mean waking up properly and being coherent – and turning on a light as, unlike the youngsters, making phone calls in the dark is not my forte.

It starts to rain – good – surely now they will both go home. But no, instead, they move into the bus shelter – and that has a seat and is even nearer the road, so closer still to me. And the noise continues…

But my sleepy brain has made a link. I mentioned light. Would that help? They don't know that I have been awake for hours, dozing fitfully throughout their evening out. Maybe I can make them think they have woken me up and I am about to do something that will cause them problems. I know, all our curtains are open – as, ironically, no houses overlook ours! Staying out of sight, concealing myself like an animal staying downwind of its prey, I slowly turn on all the upstairs ceiling lights and creep downstairs to do the same there, illuminating the house as if newly woken up.

I had a plan – and it worked! I heard them leave the shelter and all was tranquil. I turned off all the lights and gratefully returned to bed. To sleep at last.

Reflective Interpretations

Reflecting later, I wondered why I chose to write this story from my perspective rather than that of the teenagers – and decided it felt more honest. I was purely the observer (even the victim) in this story. I had not talked to any teenagers, just watched (heard!) them from afar, so it seemed fairer not to second guess what

might be going through their minds. And, actually, there was no evidence that the external world was impinging on their behaviour except that they were not able to be elsewhere with a mob of friends as perhaps they might have been on a Saturday evening. Perhaps by making the story mine I convey (or at least fail to contra-indicate) the thoughtless nature of the teenagers' activities, their aimless and reactive filling of time by messing around with phones (as teenagers do). In saying that, there is no unkind judgement intended – we were all teenagers once – but nowadays I need more sleep!

What Is the Learning From the Stories?

Looking across the stories, it seems that lockdown learning varies with age. For Dora, the elderly citizen and, also, for the retired couple, Glenda and Mark, the process was one of learning to accept the changes to lifestyle. As they were no longer working, were settled in their own homes, and already partly accustomed to being self-sufficient within their family unit, lockdown largely meant no trips to the shops and minimal social contact. Glenda and Mark had the advantage of better understanding what *was* changing. In contrast, Dan was having to (and struggling to) learn to multi-task (parenting and work), to cope without the peace of a dedicated office and a team of supportive 'staff' (and still has lessons to learn about gender equality). The teenagers have learned to compensate for the lack of opportunities to socialise in large groups by foregrounding practices that normally filled the gaps in their social interaction. In all these stories there is an element of making do with and extending known practices. The nursery children, however, were actively learning anew and voiced out loud the connections they were making – between home life and nursery, between parent and staff habits. They were resourceful problem-solvers and happy to collaborate, and clearly demonstrated that they grasped the realities of life in lockdown (social distancing, not seeing people, using online platforms, and being mute and frozen) despite being very young.

However, we should also consider the *ability to learn* and the *extent of necessary learning*. If the young readily coped with changing circumstances and the elderly had fewer changes to make, perhaps it is those who get least attention – being neither vulnerably old nor young – who most felt the consequences of the pandemic. It is the adolescents, expected to learn independently to prepare for uncertain futures, and the working population with continuing financial and caring responsibilities at a time of discontinuity, whose lives are newly precarious.

Capturing Snapshots in Time

In many ways, although the pandemic continues, these stories capture an historic moment that is already disappearing. The shock of the first lockdown (23 March-10 May 2020 in England) brought people out onto the streets for their legal daily exercise entitlement in a way not seen since, and the intensity of the change made it possible for me to collect the data as people were desperate to share their thoughts and experiences with neighbours and family. Walking and talking was the only permitted way to make contact with others, and even then, in a very limited way. In addition, the shift to online living provided an opportunity for people to catch up with those they seldom contacted. I clearly recall, if not quite going through my address book, thinking about my friends who lived alone and making contact in case they were lonely. I think, from talking to others and being phoned and emailed by others myself, that this was quite a common occurrence. For me, it led to a greater sharing of views about daily life on which I was able to draw.

Ironically, the pandemic made Van Maanen's (1995) urging 'to make the familiar strange' redundant: suddenly we saw the world differently without needing to make a deliberate effort. Life became very strange – and it still is – but already we hear less about the 'new normal', suggesting that many of us have adapted to what is really a rather bizarre change of behaviours for social beings. Of necessity, many of us have learned to live without social interaction and found new ways to give our lives meaning, but others still struggle with this. Technically, England experienced a second lockdown from 1 November to 2 December 2020 and a third lockdown from 4 January 2021 that only significantly started to lift in April, but in the South and East of England the move to Tier 4 (very tight) restrictions in mid-December meant that we experienced very little respite between the two. When, after 12 April 2021, I was at last able to go shopping for anything other than 'essential goods' (which we had been buying online anyway), I felt as if I was planning a trip abroad to an unknown destination, and in a way I was. So much had changed in my local towns, I had to re-learn where to park and how to shop safely, to re-learn everyday practices in order to re-enter the social world.

Will the old, the ill, the vulnerable, manage to do this?

As I write this article, the international news is really very bad, the pandemic heightening in countries that are possibly even less able to manage the crisis than we were. Vaccination is benefitting those who can access it but there are significant concerns about for how long and for how many. No doubt there will be further stories to capture and different research approaches to try out before the pandemic

burns itself out across the globe (as we hope). But for the moment, I stop here with stories that capture experiences of life during England's first Covid-19 lockdown and the methodological changes I adopted to create these narratives when unable to carry out more traditional biographical interviews.

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