

## 4. Learning from precarious trajectories: portraits of young adults in four European countries<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of learning during the whole lifecourse and across its domains, i.e. lifelong and lifewide learning, has received increased attention as the preferred route to skills acquisition, allowing individuals to reap the benefits of technological change while keeping abreast of requirements to stay employable and coping with varying contexts (Corrales-Herrero & Rodríguez-Prado, 2018). European Union initiatives and national policies have substantially contributed to the definition of lifelong learning as a political, societal and individual priority in member states. In the last 20 years, the powerful image of the ‘knowledge society’ (Council of the European Union, 2000) has put education and training high on the political agenda and made it a fundamental component of the labour market and social policy. Examples include the widespread implementation of training funds and individual learning accounts (Renkema, 2006; Schuetze, 2007) and active labour market programmes with a strong training component (Card et al., 2017).

Although targeting a large share of the population, lifelong learning policies put political and policy emphasis on vulnerable groups, who are more likely to face difficulties in making fast and safe transitions into the labour market or experience additional burdens in processes of social and economic integration (Bussi, 2022; Mikulec, 2018). Young people, precarious workers, women, and ethnic minorities represent some examples of such groups (Brine, 2006). Despite this political and policy focus, many contributions from diverse disciplinary backgrounds have shown that vulnerable groups are less likely to participate in (formal and non-formal) training.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on international surveys, Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) have identified situational and institutional barriers, such as lack of childcare facilities, lack of appropriate courses

or course schedules that could not be reconciled with other commitments. Elsewhere, Illeris (2003) has explored dispositional barriers, for instance individual motivation and identity reasons. While there is an emphasis on lifelong learning as a lifeline for vulnerable individuals, the actual learning places for the lower skilled and/or those that did not build their learning biography in the traditional education and training system are limited (OECD, 2019). Moreover, there is a kind of inequality in the role that learning plays in different social strata of the population. Jarvis (2000) explains that the pervasive reflexivity and the learning component of human activities are recognized mostly for knowledge-based and knowledge-intensive occupations, where learning is required, institutionalized and praised. By contrast, for workers who are not employed in knowledge-based occupations, learning is private and not recognized publicly.

In this chapter, we focus on learning that takes place beyond the limited space of work, careers and structured non-formal and formal learning institutions (Alheit, 2018; Hallqvist et al., 2012). We instead look at learning and account for its natural, lifewide and lifelong features. Individuals constantly adapt and change their behaviours when in contact with new situations, thus learn throughout their lives. We argue that the relevance of this diffuse and omnipresent learning throughout life has been overshadowed by the dominant political and economic understanding of lifelong learning, which reduces the act of learning to an instrumental, and mostly economic aim (Hallqvist et al., 2012). Rather, learning from a biographical perspective is often tacit, non-predefined, unplanned and contextualized, which makes it more difficult to grasp, measure, or evaluate for policy purposes, but does not reduce its relevance for individual agency defined as ‘the capacity to give direction to one’s life’ (Biasin & Evans, 2019, p.48). Biographical learning processes appear to be more explicitly triggered when a person’s life-course is changing and people are faced with transitions (Hallqvist et al., 2012). Hence, in a context where the destandardization of life trajectories has exacerbated multiple changes and made life planning riskier and less predictable (Alheit, 2018), it seems reasonable to take the individually and socially bounded dimensions of learning more seriously (Hallqvist et al., 2012).

The concept of biographical learning, initially theorized by Alheit and Dausien (2002), is useful for unveiling the hidden learning processes that tend to be undervalued at the policy level since they often do not produce ready-to-use marketable skills as a main output. Yet these learning processes might be more relevant for low-skilled individuals with unstable trajectories. On the one hand, this group is likely to have limited access to organized forms of learning. On the other hand, they are more likely to face unexpected changes, forcing them to learn how to adapt when faced with unprecedented situations. These turning points, i.e. important heterogeneous experiences and

life events that are personally significant in requiring change or some reorientation in values and goals in one's life, can lead to developmental crises and might represent a fertile soil for biographical learning (Biasin & Evans, 2019).

Biography becomes, then, a field of learning, where individuals reflect, organize and interpret their experiences in order to create individual coherence and guiding principles that underpin their actions (Biesta & Tedder, 2008). This may allow the individual to keep control over their personal agency and orientate their trajectories. Hence, in this contribution, we will focus on the biographical learning process of individuals who have had a precarious start to adult life. We use their biographical narratives to understand how learning processes take place in fragmented and precarious trajectories and how these learning processes can influence individual agency.

The remainder of the chapter is structured in four sections: the first reviews major contributions dealing with learning, biographies and agency and outlines the theoretical framework that will guide our data interpretation. A short methodological section then describes the data used, whilst the next section presents a selection of individual biographies showing different combinations of learning and agency in unstable trajectories. The final section discusses the results and attempts to draw some conclusions from the findings.

## 2. BIOGRAPHY, LEARNING AND AGENCY

A first attempt to capture and theorize the learning component embedded in individual biographies was made in the early 1990s (Hallqvist, 2014). Biographical learning emphasizes how learning takes place in spaces that allow individuals to develop self-reflexivity and autonomy, which is oriented to taking decisions on a continuous basis following the individual and changing nature of trajectories (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). Using Biesta and Tedder's words, biographical learning can be defined as 'learning from our lives, through our lives, about our lives and for our lives' (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p.139), or as 'learning within and through one's life history' (Alheit, 2009, p.125). Hallqvist (2014, p.499) further explains that 'the concept of biographical learning is attractive partly because of its holistic character, including both formal and informal learning processes, binding emotional, existential and cognitive aspects, and uniting preconscious and conscious dimensions'.

Referring to specific critical moments in one's trajectory, Merriam (2005) argues that both anticipated, and even more so, unexpected transitions in individual biographical trajectories might represent opportunities for learning and development. For people experiencing precarious trajectories, unexpected or unwanted changes and adversities, such as a jobless period, might be more likely than in linear and stable trajectories and might require greater adaptation

efforts (Schoon, 2018). This would imply – potentially – a higher number of occasions for unanticipated, unstructured and informal learning.

In line with the interest in how learning embeds and shapes biographies, there is a growing academic interest in the relationship between learning and agency (Ilieva-Trichkova & Boyadjieva, 2020). Biasin and Evans (2019) look at the connections between identity and agency and learning at specific turning points in the trajectories of middle-aged women in the UK and in Italy. The authors use narrative learning theory in order to illustrate and compare how women represent their lifecourse and its turning points, and how these are related to their agency. Biasin and Evans consider agency ‘as a bounded and reflexive process that is exercised through environments’ (Biasin & Evans, 2019, p.48). They found that turning points having an impact on women’s agency (for example, parenthood, education, faith) are not equal or do not play the same role in Italian and British women’s trajectories. Hence, they show how agency is embedded in the individual’s cultural and social environment.

Following a similar logic, Barabasch and Merrill (2014) apply biographical learning theories to understand strategic learning in career biographies across several EU member states. They found how biographical learning is associated with specific contexts and temporality. This is similarly argued by Schoon, who explains that ‘learning occurs through experience and it is shaped by the life the person is leading and the circumstances encountered’ (Schoon, 2018, p.3).

Along similar lines, a contextualized and relational approach to agency and learning from a biographical perspective is suggested by Biesta and Tedder (2007). The authors underline that learning can help individuals to build and shape their capacity to respond to (emerging) situations. Yet they warn that ‘the extent to which such learning allowed individuals to be (more) agentic was in an important way mediated (and limited) by ecological factors and available resources’ (ibid., p.143). Such mediating factors could be cultural resources or economic capital.

Biesta and Tedder suggest using Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) definition of agency that includes the iterational, the projective and the practical-evaluative dimensions (Biesta & Tedder 2007, p.135). The iterational dimension of agency explains patterns of actions in the present with references to experiences in the past. This dimension of agency identifies the selective reactivations of past patterns of thought and action which are routinely incorporated in practical activity (ibid.). The practical-evaluative dimension of agency is embedded in the present and refers to the capacity of individuals to contextualize past habits and future projects in the present contingencies (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This aspect of agency relates to the capacity of individuals to take decisions among and express normative judgements about alternatives when dilemmas or bifurcations arise. The projective dimension of agency

relates to the individual's capacity of projecting themselves into the future and is connected to specific decision-making processes based on values and experience (future dimension).

The three dimensions of agency coexist and the interplay between them can change across time (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). When analysing agency, the authors explain that the act of narrating one's own history allows individuals to articulate, explain and reorganize one's own agentic orientations and choices. This exercise creates an opportunity for learning about one's own agency in the biography (ibid.). This particular learning is then 'learning about one's life and from one's life' (ibid., p.139), i.e. biographical learning.

In this chapter we will adopt the three-fold distinction of agency – iterative, projective and practical evaluative (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) – to grasp the impact of biographical learning on the multidimensionality and multiple temporality of agency. Our chapter complements Ilieva-Trichkova and Boyadjieva (2020), who show how precarious early trajectories affected young people's agency scope with regard to decisions to become learners again. Based on a different selection from the same interview dataset that we rely on for the present analysis, the authors interpret the role of continued education using the capability approach and identify agency achievements in terms of: improving knowledge and skills, improving professional qualification, developing self-concept, raising self-esteem and self-confidence, increasing personal autonomy, empowering oneself to make decisions, empowering oneself to control one's environment (Ilieva-Trichkova & Boyadjieva, 2020).

Using full transcripts of selected biographical interviews from four countries, this chapter identifies learning moments in 'life-historical experiences, transitions and crises' (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p.15) and investigates their learning component and relationship with agency as defined above by Biesta and Tedder (2007). Specifically, the present chapter addresses the following questions:

1. *How does biographical learning take place in fragmented and precarious trajectories*
2. *How does biographical learning relate to the three dimensions – iterative, projective and practical-evaluative – of agency?*

### 3. DATA AND CASE SELECTION

The analysis in this chapter relies on interview data from the Horizon 2020 project NEGOTIATE,<sup>3</sup> which investigated the short- and long-term consequences of early job insecurity across three age cohorts in seven European countries. National research teams collaborated to conduct coordinated lifecourse interviews with 210 individuals in seven countries and from

three different cohorts (1990–1995/1970–1975/1950–1955). The interviews were carried out in 2016 with the purpose of grasping the negotiating patterns of individuals who had experienced a difficult entry into the labour market as young adults in historical moments characterized by unfavourable macro-economic conditions.

This chapter analyses the full original transcripts from the lifecourse interviews of six individuals, based in four different European countries: Germany, Poland, the UK, and Czechia. The analysis aims to identify and interpret relevant instances of learning embedded in critical moments as identified by the interviewees. While the choice of countries offered variation in historical and institutional contexts, the explorative character of the analysis did not allow us to systematically distinguish and compare the role of these institutional and social settings. Nevertheless, we describe the role of institutional contexts to the extent that they are relevant in shaping the individual trajectories of the interviewees.

The selection of six cases out of 210<sup>4</sup> and their presentation as vignettes are due to methodological as well as pragmatic reasons. First, our research question has to account for the way in which individuals narrate their disruptive early transitions, and in particular turning points, in the labour market and how they make sense of them. To give space to these narrations and the context of agency and learning, we chose to use vignettes to give thick descriptions of the interviewees' life stories and grasp the concatenation of learning and agency across individual biographies from the perspective of the agents themselves. In this way we 'capture the insiders'' views of what is important (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, as cited in Hackmann, 2002, p.51). This approach clearly does not reach the goal of data saturation, but instead it serves to identify mechanisms of narrative construction of learning and its impact on agency among specific groups of vulnerable (young) adults. Second, the lifecourse interviews were based on a thematic interview guide that was developed jointly by the project's international team. The primary objective of the international research for which the interviews were conducted was not the same as in the analysis presented in this chapter. The specific focus and interests of this chapter led us to select those interviews that more than others were in a narrative form. Finally, we selected interviews in which substantial learning elements emerged from the biographical reflection over past actions (Aronson & Fleming, 2019). We identified critical events in respondents' biographies that, according to the interviewee, brought about learning and assessed how learning impacted on agency.

## 4. EXPLORING LEARNING AND AGENCY IN SIX BIOGRAPHIES

In this section, each portrait gives space to the most relevant learning moments – i.e. ‘moments of evaluation’ revealing the reflexive relationship between experience, learning and individual agency (Hallqvist & Hydén, 2013). We provide a first analysis for each interview. We take individual experience and its meaning for the research participant seriously and remain as close as possible to their understanding (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). A transversal analysis of all interviews is developed in the concluding part of the chapter.

### 4.1 Jesse: Volunteering as a Learning Moment

Jesse is a young British man, aged 28 at the time of the interview. After finishing compulsory school at 16, he had a very clear idea of becoming a chef. Yet this clear idea and capacity of thinking about the future – which could be associated with the projective dimension of agency – had disappeared when he lost what he defined as his first meaningful job at 19. He entered a negative spiral, which led to depression and drug dependence.

Interviewer: So what were your aspirations at that time?

Jesse: I never really knew. I knew I wanted to do something with my life, not just be in like, dead-end jobs. I’ve always wanted to do something not for myself, but do something that would make my parents proud.

Poor mental health, coupled with what he defined as a bad habit, resulted in reduced projective agency and strong iterational agency, trapping him in an uncontrollable negative spiral. Four years of jumping from one meaningless job to another just to pay for his marijuana consumption made the situation deteriorate further. Jesse explains that at the end of these four years, although receiving material help from his parents, he felt a lack of moral support and that they strongly disapproved of the life he was living.

Jesse recalls a triggering event which allowed him to break the repeated negative agentic pattern. A strong desire to be accepted by people around him and particularly by his parents, motivated him to take control of his life again. More specifically, Jesse identified a volunteering experience in Kenya with HIV/AIDS women as an important learning moment in his trajectory. To join the volunteering project, he carried out a successful fundraising campaign and convinced the organizers that he largely met the volunteering organization’s (i.e. others’) expectations.

Jesse explains how being confronted with vulnerable people's success in coping with difficult health conditions, made him reflect upon his own situation. This vicariant experience, i.e. observing others succeeding in overcoming difficulties, improved his self-confidence and helped him take back control over his life and make it more meaningful.

After this experience, Jesse went back to the UK, and took two jobs that he was able to keep for longer than he had managed in the past. When reflecting on his past troubles and difficult trajectory, he clearly recognized how he learned how to change his trajectory from an unsatisfactory life, which also impacted negatively on his close relationships, to a life that he felt more in control of. He demonstrated modified agency – practical evaluative agency which is embedded in the present and allowed him to make what he considered sounder decisions – as well as projective agency in the future.

These learning moments prevented him from repeating the past mistakes made during unemployment and depression. His practical-evaluative agency pushed him to take the important decision to leave his current job, even though he enjoyed it, in order to get away from conflicts with co-workers. At the same time, he managed to avoid getting caught in negative patterns that had caused problems in the past. Moreover, what he learnt about himself and others during his experience as a volunteer triggered new aspirations and enabled him to project himself into the future.

Jesse evaluates that period in the following way:

- Interviewer: When you look at this time when you were in and out of work and doing all these jobs, etcetera, do you think it's shaped you?
- Jesse: Mm, yes, definitely. I know now that I never want to go back to the lifestyle that I had, that's for sure.
- Jesse: It's definitely showed me that what I was doing with my life isn't any way to live really. And that what I was doing to myself wasn't nice on my family either. For them watching me essentially ruin my life.
- Interviewer: And have there been any negative aspects of that? You know, if you look back on it, has it had a negative effect on your life?
- Jesse: I think it did for a long time, but I think now I look back and it's made me more of a stronger person, because I know that if I can change that then most people could.

Two main findings come up in this interview. The triggering factor is identified in the painful feeling of being seen as an individual who lacks agency and is led by bad habits, rather than someone who is important to other people. The turning event – a social learning experience (volunteering) – reactivated two types of agency: practical-evaluative agency insofar as he decided to avoid



past patterns and felt capable of making informed and reflexive decisions about his trajectory and projective agency because he plans his future and has personal aspirations again. Thus, the learning component of the critical event has clearly had an important influence on Jesse's agency.

#### **4.2 Jimmy: Migration as a Learning Experience**

At the time of the interview, Jimmy was a 44-year-old British man. Following in the footsteps of his father and uncle, he went into employment as a bricklayer at the age of 15, suggesting Jimmy's decision was shaped by family (male) role models and social environment (Otto, 2000).

After that, he took part in a government-funded scheme, the Youth Training Scheme, which allowed him to enter formal education and complete vocational education, training to become a specialist in bricklaying. Jimmy stated that, during that time, the favourable economic situation allowed him to freely choose a job he valued, suggesting a strong and extended agency made possible by the historical and economic contingency.

In 1994, the economic recession hit the UK and the construction sector was badly affected. Jimmy was laid off and spent some months in unemployment when he was 22. He received housing and unemployment benefits, though explained that he still had to look for a job to survive.

He did not report any mental or financial difficulty linked to being jobless and he rather showed confidence and a solid understanding of institutional rules (job-searching etc). Yet he underlined how formal skills were not a protective factor and that, even if he was qualified, he felt a lack of agency as he had to lower his job aspirations and revise his plans.

Pushed by the lack of job opportunities in the UK, Jimmy went to Germany. Jimmy clearly identified that his migration and work experience in Germany had a relevant impact on his agency. This period provided him with new skills which, once back in the UK, allowed him to have easier access to job opportunities compared to his former colleagues, who had not acquired new competences.

Moreover, the ease of jumping from one company to another while being in Germany allowed him to alternate work contracts with holiday periods, which was something he valued and that he felt positively distinguished him from other British migrant co-workers. With hindsight, he also recognized that learning new skills in the workplace clearly empowered him not only at the present time but also in terms of shaping his future. He was able to avoid unemployment once back in England even in economically challenging times.

Interviewer: So looking back, if you look at this period of unemployment then, do you think that this period of unemployment changed your life?

Jimmy: A hundred percent, a hundred percent, yes. Because obviously I actually went out there not as a bricklayer as well, I went out there to learn a new trade. [...] I'd never done [tasks as a carpenter] before so it was obviously a new opportunity. Yes, moving forward from that, I did that – as I say – out there for three and a half years and then I never came back to England to do any bricklaying. I got involved in that sort of stuff; carpentry and joinery, bar work, shop – as in building pubs and the shop fitting side of it, that sort of element. But yes, never went back to bricklaying after that point.

He clearly identified how learning new skills offered more and varied employment opportunities. This allowed him to not be stuck in bricklaying, which he considered as a 'hard grafting' job.

He concluded the interview by underlining that being unemployed (a triggering factor) allowed him to have experiences (taking opportunities abroad) that changed his life and to do what he feels confident doing.

Jimmy: [...] that period of six months of being unemployed obviously it did change the rest of my life basically. It gave me opportunities to do a lot of travelling, meet a lot of new, different people. I think it's given me the confidence to become what I am now, which is a Construction Manager which obviously a lot of people don't feel that they've got that ability to do. That's why it's a market that is very selective, for that reason. I think through the whole of that time it built my confidence, which enabled me to be where I am in my career at the moment.

In this interview, the migration experience is identified as a turning point, with an informal learning (unstructured learning on the workplace and social interaction) component that has an impact on Jimmy's self-awareness and perception of control of his trajectory. The way in which his agency modifies his biography's trajectory throughout sticks out clearly when he compared his friends' trajectories with their similar background and experiences. In Jimmy's biography, practical-evaluative and, in particular, project agency is enhanced. He expresses confidence about the employment choice he made and declares being able to project himself in the future thanks to what he learnt in the past. This testifies to a strengthened projective agency.

### 4.3 Tony: The Relevance of Self-Learning

Tony is a 44-year-old Czech man. As a child, he wanted to become a car mechanic. However, this was not possible due to his health conditions. He was able to re-orient his training career and complete vocational training to qualify as a carpenter. While this was not his first aspiration, he declared not to regret it as he gradually started to like it. Overcoming his limited occupational choices and his decision to stay in the profession despite initial doubts was a key positive turning point in his life.

Beyond vocational training, he did not attend any specialized courses. Instead, he learned much about carpentry through non-formal self-learning. His projective agency was strong, forming an interest in learning and predicting what skills he would need in the future. He argued that once one has acquired ‘the basics’, there is a continuation of step-by-step learning and learning-by-doing in a never-ending process. He was also very much aware of the importance of learning on the job and from more experienced colleagues to be able to keep abreast of changes. He explained:

Tony: You have to learn all the time. It is not like you know everything. These technologies improve, and you must learn [them]... You cannot freeze at the place, otherwise, the competitors would overrun you... You have to learn everything again... to look at the internet for assembly plans... Sometimes I learn by trial and error. Still, you can learn by mistakes, and the next one [product] is good.

After completing vocational training, Tony worked for various employers for six years. When he got laid off by his last employer, he decided to become self-employed. He argued that he had ‘wild’ [bad] experiences with employers (lousy behaviour, enforced overtime, not paying for work done), and he wanted to enjoy the freedom of doing things his way.

Tony: When you are an entrepreneur for some time, you get used to freedom, you are not entirely free, you must work hard to earn money, but you are independent... [In the past] I created something nice [a piece of furniture]. Still, employers criticized it should have been done differently. It bothered me.

Tony recognized the decision to become self-employed as a turning point in his career. It was the result of a learning process that was done both through bad experiences with previous employers by whom he did not felt recognized and his perception of having acquired the skills needed to face self-employment.

Some of these skills were technical and related to his profession. Others were related to how to run a business (for example, material and price calculation, accounting, communication with customers, driving) and were essential in him succeeding in his self-employment project. Also, the system and rules for self-employment turned out to be complicated and frequently changed. Tony confessed it was hard for him to adapt. The institutional setting was not very supportive of entrepreneurship. So, he realized he had to count on his skills to manage his business.

Again, Tony was confronted with self-learning, as he had to do everything himself because he could not afford to pay for specialized support. Yet, he could count on his mother's help to do the accounting. Tony concluded that going into a more significant business would mean becoming a manager, which he argued would reduce his self-satisfaction achieved through the creative dimension of his job.

Tony: I like doing what I do now. If I started [more significant] entrepreneurship, I would not do what I want. I work with my hands, take a piece of wood, make a door, and assemble it. I look at it and say to myself that 'that's nice'. If I had my workshop, I would have to care for it, pay everything, hire people, gather commissions, and not have time to do what I like.

Tony said that life is more about being happy than about making money. He wanted to enjoy a calm and easy life with his wife rather than having high ambitions. Learning helped Tony in his projective agency, i.e. imagine and later achieve a life he valued as worth living.

Even though his financial situation was better at the moment of the interview, Tony's family was still living from hand to mouth and unable to save. He reinvested almost all his money back into the business. Although Tony had been unemployed in the past, he did not mention changing professions or retraining, and it was not offered to him by the employment office. It probably did not even come to his mind.

This portrait shows how Tony recognizes the relevance of learning in different contexts in order to secure his capacity of making choices and taking risks (becoming self-employed) and pursue his idea of a happy life. Tony recognizes how experiences as an employee helped him to get enough technical skills and self-confidence to start a business (iterational agency, i.e. how he kept past patterns of actions yet adapted them to his new project). He became a master craftsman, hence strengthening his identity as self-employed. 'When you run a business for so many years, you feel self-confident', but also a person knowing what he needs for happiness (projective agency). Tony could modify his working conditions despite a challenging institutional environment with

ever-changing rules, a substantial lack of managerial skills related to running a business, and a lack of formal education for entrepreneurship.

#### **4.4 Ellyn: The Learning Potential of the ‘School of Life’**

Ellyn, from Czechia was interviewed when she was 24 years old. She had changed schools twice. Initially, Ellyn had completed vocational training as a chef but she refused to work in restaurants serving meat as she was vegetarian. She then followed her father’s wishes and enrolled in an entrepreneurship course. However, the school turned out too difficult for her, so she dropped out and switched to vocational training as a confectioner. Ellyn reports that she had a difficult relationship with her father, who had told her to move out from home. After leaving her parental home, she started to have mental health problems, leading to psychiatric hospitalization and later to partial invalidity, for which she still received disability benefits. She also dropped out from the second vocational training programme due to another mental health breakdown.

After Ellyn had to leave home, she moved to live in a different city, and she recalls how she had to support herself without any assistance from her family. Yet she acknowledges how her disability benefit represented the cornerstone of her income security. Ellyn spent two and a half years in unemployment, doing only occasional jobs. She also reported that employers often refused to employ her or laid her off after a short time. Ellyn reports that during this period she had to change and had to learn how to cope with the insecurity of occasional jobs, little money and without close support from others. She developed a modest lifestyle (for example, buying second-hand food and clothing, flat sharing, reducing expenses for social life). Although she recognizes that it was a psychologically challenging situation to bear, Ellyn reports that she was able to adapt to the situation. When looking back, she acknowledged the learning impact this phase of her life had on her current agency. In particular, how Ellyn learned from the past comes out clearly, and her modified practical-evaluative dimension of agency is apparent in her reflection of the past experiences and how these changed her current living and acting:

- Ellyn: I learned the most from the school of life. Education is important, and I would like to widen it. However, when you are skilled, you can get a job even without education... it is more about the experience. You must set goals, find the work you like, and go after it.
- Ellyn: I worked in various firms, occasional jobs, supermarkets, restaurants, farms, more than thirty jobs. I got more experience and met new people... I learned to rely on myself... I learned to

do what I like, go after it, and not be afraid. Not to rely on others when I want something. When I do it myself, I do it my way.

Ellyn noted that she learned how to adapt to new places and new people. With hindsight, even though it was associated with a tough period of her life, she looks positively at this learning. It helped her to establish her life goals and priorities. There is a positive link between her experiences, the positive image she created about it, and her personal development. Learning from experience helped Ellyn to enhance her projective agency by being able to set life goals and project herself to the future.

Yet, despite the apparent strengthening of her practical-evaluative and projective agency, her longstanding health conditions still reduce her ability to work under pressure and lead her to think that she needs to avoid taking on responsibility. She was afraid of another mental collapse. Ellyn also reflected on her long-term and short-term plans and how lessons from her experiences affect her aspirations. She herself sets limits for her future pathways (using experience in her arguments about a preferred and possible future), for example, when she categorically refused to work as a cook handling meat. Finally, she recognized how her chances to change her biography were somewhat limited by the lack of learning opportunities offered to unemployed by public activation programmes.

Hence, taking an evaluative stance on her own career, Ellyn testified to how challenging times triggered a learning process that made her able to overcome daily challenges and secure a stable, yet not ideal, job in a supermarket. This learning component of her biography suggests a modified practical-evaluative kind of agency that – by avoiding repeating past patterns of unemployment and being in a desperate situation (job insecurity, not enough money for food) and learning from several job changes and employment instability – allowed her to realize small but cherished achievements (life stability, relying on herself, being able to work for longer despite mental problems). Yet, she also gradually started to formulate and project her plans (projective dimension), including strategically considering concrete steps and possible constraints such as health problems, learning difficulties and limiting preferences. However, what she learnt from the past linked to her health condition and its impact on her employment, still conditions and limits her projective agency (her fears, limited expectations) and she still feels trapped in past patterns of failure. For instance, she still struggles with a perceived poor ability to succeed in school (based on previous experience) and she is unsure about her ability to acquire the qualification needed to become either a vegetarian chef in a restaurant or a social worker (dreamed professions).

#### **4.5 Pawel: The Cumulative Effects of Biographical Learning on Individual Agency**

Pawel, a punk in his youth, was born in a small town in Poland and at the time of the interview he was 42 years old. He recalls that when he was young he hoped to become a horse breeding specialist (secondary education) and even planned to study economics. His educational path was interrupted by early age parenthood and marriage, which he recognized as a turning point in his life, and behavioural problems which led him to take a year off from school. This decision led to unemployment because the qualification in agriculture earned during communism was no longer demanded in the new free-market economy. During unemployment, Pawel reported how he learned to bend the rules and cheat the system with the help of his close family in order to keep receiving allowances while working in the grey economy, which allowed him to cater for his personal and family needs.

Later, on his cousin's recommendation, he was hired by an agricultural trading company. His resourcefulness and ability to learn in the workplace allowed him to climb up the career ladder from assistant miller, through office worker to sales representative. While in this job, Pawel explained how he took advantage of formal training opportunities to get a lorry (HGV – Heavy Goods Vehicle) driving licence. His capacity to identify training possibilities, well-matched with his career aspirations manifests practical evaluative agency. Furthermore, he recalled the values of freedom and easy money as an HGV driver who was paid under the table. Therefore, his narrative suggests a tangling of the practical-evaluative and projective dimensions of agency when the desire to make a profit quickly did not entail risk evaluation in his subsequent decisions and future plans. Pawel identified a second turning point in his trajectory eight months after quitting his full-time job: a criminal group recruited him to transport stolen lorries with valuable goods. When recalling his criminal record, Pawel underlines how he was only able to act in the present with a low capacity of projecting himself in the future (lack of projective agency). Being in prison for eight years was psychologically difficult as he also had to endure divorce, the breakdown of family ties and severe emotional problems. Although Pawel refused to recall his emotions during custody, he recognized that he learnt that he would never go back to it.

A concrete occasion to rebuild his life came from an opportunity to do a tiling course while being in prison. Pawel first applied for a job in a maintenance team, then attended a tiling course, and finally received a proper certificate as master tiler. The last step of his prison career was the promotion to foreman, which he held for the last three years of his imprisonment. Moreover, he was allowed to work outside the prison, being responsible for refurbishing schools and kindergartens. Pawel underlined how that opportunity of learning

in different employment positions allowed him to find several jobs abroad. One of his fellow prisoners offered him a job in Spain, where he spent 18 months, then moved to Norway for eight months and finally worked for two years on a construction site and in a chocolate factory in the UK. Nevertheless, the problems he had with his ex-wife and children compelled him to come back to Poland. The criminal record made it nearly impossible for him to find work in his small hometown. Pawel also underlines how the low-wage job churning in Poland frustrated him and pushed him to leave the country again in 2016. Pawel recognized that the variety of experiences he had accumulated over several jobs in different countries represented a valuable learning ground which allowed him to increase his job-search efficiency.

Yet, what he learned from previous experiences did not protect him against unemployment. His driving experience acquired before imprisonment allowed him to work more efficiently than other novice drivers, but the employer asked for a Disclosure and Barring Service check<sup>5</sup> which resulted in job loss and a serious nervous breakdown. Returning to his home country exacerbated family conflicts and his excessive drinking ended in a four-month episode of homelessness. His deteriorating health caused sepsis and, once cured, he entered a community shelter. Talking about his present-day life, he sums up all his disruptive life events:

Pawel: I'm unemployed, homeless, sick, and I still don't have an easy life, but I prefer to live simply... to have less, but more peacefully. Because it did not lead me to anything good (breaching social norms).

Pawel reflexively summarizes his life struggles, which testifies to a lack of projective agency and orientation towards satisfying immediate needs.

Pawel: I never thought about my future retirement or pension, that something bad could happen to me, but the most important thing was to make as much profit as possible. I did not look too far into the future.

All the three dimensions of agency are manifested in Pawel's biography. Looking at his life in retrospect, Pawel stresses that he had never considered his own decisions in light of the long-term risk and negative consequences in the future. The quest for freedom to live on his own terms and orientation toward short-term profits effectively eradicated the instinct to calculate risk and assess the consequences of his actions (highly limited and biased projective agency). Whereas moderate practical-evaluative agency is demonstrated when Pawel took advantage of various opportunities for career change and



promotion (i.e. on-the-job training with the agricultural company and learning the vocation of a tiler in prison) and when evaluating his past experience, whenever he faced an opportunity to take a shortcut he did not think twice before breaking the law or trying to circumvent the ‘system’ (biased projective agency trumps practical-evaluative). This testifies to a strong iterative agency, which trapped Pawel into past patterns of actions, which led him to experiencing social exclusion.

#### **4.6 Arndt: Formal Learning and Employment Stability as Turning Points**

Arndt was born to Turkish parents in Germany in the early 1990s. When his mother divorced and remarried, they moved from the north of Germany to live in a city in the south. They quickly returned to northern Germany but faced difficulties finding a place to live and went to live with Arndt’s grandparents. Arndt recalls how the situation affected his school performance. At 16 he temporarily moved to a supervised residential home for young people and dropped out of school. Without anyone at home telling him what to do, it had been relatively easy to just stop going to school. At the age of 17 he got his own flat and until he turned 18, a care worker helped him to manage the monthly social assistance payment (*Hilfe zum Lebensunterhalt*).

After dropping out of school Arndt lazed around and struggled to find anything but very short-term jobs. His first real job was a 450 EUR part-time mini-job at a petrol station.<sup>6</sup> He also started evening classes to complete his lower secondary school certificate but soon realized that he was unable to manage combining work and school. In the interview Arndt does not really reveal what made him go back to education but the fact that he tried, even if unsuccessfully so, represents an example of agency.

When the petrol station job ended Arndt went through a period of unemployment, with only occasional temporary agency jobs. He perceived the lack of education and work experience, combined with young age, as fundamental obstacles to full-time employment. This kind of reflection represents an empirical example of the potentially instrumental and life-shaping role of biographical learning. At some point Arndt was offered a mini-job as a hotel receptionist, which soon transformed into a full-time position. Arndt stayed for two years, before being laid off. Another spell of unemployment followed, this time six months.

Arndt used this period to think about what he wanted to do. He decided to get a vocational diploma to avoid being stuck in mini-jobs or on minimum wages forever. These steps can be perceived as manifestations of practical-evaluative agency that have clear links with a learning process taking place as his biography unfolded. To access vocational training, he needed a school certificate

and, thus, enrolled at a school for adult learners which allowed him to pass the lower secondary school (Hauptschule) exams. The school certificate represented a turning point. In line with Arndt's expectations, this step appears to have been instrumental in breaking the cycle of unemployment and low-paid jobs.

With his school certificate in hand, Arndt sent applications everywhere. He was not sure what job sector he aspired to. After many rejections, he got an internship in an IT company. He enjoyed it and showed that he was suited to this kind of work. The IT company offered him a training position, which would lead to a vocational diploma and a middle secondary school certificate (Realschule), considerably improving his professional opportunities upon completion. At the time of the interview, Arndt had already worked in the IT company for two and a half years.

There are several key moments of informal learning in Arndt's narrative. One relates to the challenge of learning how to manage personal finances at a young age. This kind of learning speaks mainly to the practical-evaluative dimension of agency as it draws on past experience to avoid repeating mistakes. It refers to a rather basic, but nonetheless crucial skill when trying to set up an independent adult life. An inability to handle personal income, especially when it is modest, risks posing restrictions on and limiting opportunities in several areas of life.

Arndt: I learnt the hard way. [...]. [W]hen I got a Hartz IV<sup>7</sup> payment [...] I thought I had a lot of money [and] went off to buy new Nike shoes and so on. Then on the tenth the money was gone and with twenty days until the next payment. Yes, that was really a bit tight [...] I fell flat on my face and learnt from that. Then month by month I improved a little.

In the absence of guidance that many adolescents receive from their parents, Arndt had to find out many things on his own. His bumpy labour market trajectory shaped his career aspirations and affected his views about the labour market and taught him about the significance of formal education.

Arndt: Nobody told me that, hey, you have to get good marks to get a job where you can earn good money, where you don't have to work at a building site [...]. I didn't have this person, most people have a father who represents a figure who paves the way and [...] says do an internship and see how it goes. I didn't have that. Now I would have done it differently. [School] is really the key that enables you to pick a reasonable door into professional life.

Moreover, Arndt explained that the period of early job insecurity had

Arndt: [...] shown him where he wanted to go. What I had to do and what not, to avoid entering the track of unemployment. [...] Then, as I said, I looked for something, and also being lucky, I found this IT path, where I don't see any precarious work on the horizon.

The two latter statements from Arndt's interview resonate with all three dimensions of agency. First, they refer to the need of breaking past patterns in order to be able to make different decisions and judgements at the present moment. Second, there are clear elements of forward projections. His actions had been motivated by what he hoped to achieve in the future, i.e., enter a (secure) professional life and earn money. Third, we suggest that Arndt demonstrates practical-evaluative agency by showing that he reflected on his past trajectory and used his past experiences as a basis for making reasoned decisions that should improve his range of future opportunities. In summary, Arndt's case shows how, despite a difficult starting point, an individual can exit a path of labour market precarity.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the framework of this book about transitions across Europe, we started our analysis adopting the perspective that the act of narrating one's own lifecourse allows individuals to evaluate and understand the composition of their agentic orientations and how these have contributed to shaping the direction and/or taking control over their lives. Hence, the narrating act creates a space for biographical learning.

Awareness of the learning processes embedded in the biography is necessary, but not sufficient, for individuals to gain more control over the direction of their lives. Biesta and Tedder (2007) recall that agency is not exerted in a vacuum but rather in contexts that are time and socially bounded. It should be noted that in this contribution we did not explore what combination of contextual and temporal factors influenced the exercise of agency itself. Despite this limited focus, analysing the perception of turning points, their learning components and perceived effects on three dimensions of agency – iterational, projective and practical-evaluative (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) – allow us to make some interesting reflections.

Based on the main categories in our analytical framework, Table 4.1 compares the empirical cases presented in the chapter. It summarizes the main turning points the interviewees identified in their biographies, the ensuing

Table 4.1 *Biographical turning points, learning and change in agency*

	Jesse	Jimmy	Tony	Ellyn	Pawel	Arndt
	UK	UK	CZ	CZ	PO	DE
Biography						
Major turning point – i.e. experience perceived as learning-intense	Volunteering	Migration	Choice of profession, becoming self-employed	Leaving parents' home	Joining a criminal gang and migration	Getting a regular job in IT
Perception of learning	High	High	High	Moderate	Moderate	High
Perceived change in agency						
Iterational	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Strong	Strong	Strong
Projective	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Strong
Practical – evaluative	Strong	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Strong

Source: Biesta and Tedder (2007) for types of agency and authors' elaboration based on selected NEGOTIATE data.

intensity of learning, and the perceived change in the three dimensions of agency.

Firstly, in line with the literature, not all critical moments – although stimulating self-reflection and learning about individual agency composition – enabled individuals to modify what they perceived as a negative or unwanted trajectory. For instance, Ellyn and Pawel do identify turning points in their biographies, respectively leaving the parental home and joining a criminal gang, but their iterational agency, i.e. the reactivation of past patterns of thought and action, seems to prevail. At the same time, these dynamics seem to be associated with a lower capacity to project themselves with assurance in the future.

Secondly, the same type of reasoning seems to also hold for the practical-evaluative component of agency. For instance, Ellyn expressed a moderate confidence in making practical and normative judgements about the alternatives she faced in her trajectory. This is also partially the case for Pawel when commenting on single critical moments and what happened after them. Yet, Pawel seems more able to make practical and normative judgements when evaluating the cumulative effects of turning points and the need to make different choices in the future in order to reverse the spiralling negative effects of the past. The other vignettes, which are characterized by a stronger learning dimension linked to biographies, seem to have developed a stronger

practical-evaluative dimension of agency which allow them to justify why they chose a specific direction in their lives.

Thirdly, important changes in the projective dimension of agency seem to be associated with narratives that identify a strong learning component of specific critical moments. This is the case, for instance, for Jesse and Arndt, who are able to project themselves in the future, imagine possible trajectories where past patterns of actions are revised and reconfigured in relation to new or reactivated aspirations. By contrast, the successions of events in Pawel's narration and the decisions he made, seem to have precluded him from imagining different futures, but it has rather pushed him to concentrate on day-to-day decisions (i.e. practical-evaluative agency) to avoid the reactivation of past patterns as 'it did not lead to anything good' (Pawel). It is also interesting to note that overall, those interviewees who narrate their biographies in substantially positive terms (Jimmy, Jesse, Arndt and Tony) are also more inclined to identify a strong learning component in critical events that empowers them for their future projects.

Although it might seem trivial, it seems important to highlight that not all critical moments that led individuals to 'learn about their life and from their lives' (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p.139), i.e. adapt or adopt new agentic schemes, lead to (perceived) positive outcomes. Belzer (2004) explains that new experiences can create loops that might push the individual into learning challenges, requiring the development of new schemes, but that these new schemes can also become barriers to learning, locking the person in unwanted directions. Hence, experience can be an enabling or a sanctioning element, but its cumulation represents a reservoir into which the adult can tap (Belzer, 2004, p.43).

These findings, although not statistically representative, shed light on how (young) adults learn from adversities and can change the way in which they control and give direction to their unstable trajectories. Approaching atypical biographies in this way differs from analytical perspectives that underline the deprivation of learning opportunities. Instead, this perspective sheds light on learning mechanisms that remain hidden in aggregate, quantitative analyses focused on the achievement of formal qualifications and learning goals.

Finally, these findings also recall that critical moments or turning points modifying an individual's agency are of a varied nature and do not fall into formal and structured forms of learning. Our vignettes rather illustrate that migration, job loss, joining a criminal gang are learning-generating experiences that may have a strong perceived impact on individual trajectories and agency. This reminds us that the way in which individuals make sense of what they learn from their own life and the impact of their agency has to be contextualized in the historical, cultural and social environment in which the action takes place. This calls for future in-depth qualitative and comparative research on contextualized biographical learning and its ensuing impact on agentic

orientation, particularly for those individuals who experience unpredictable and unstable trajectories.

## NOTES

1. This chapter is based on data collected under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme NEGOTIATE, grant agreement No 649395. For more information: <https://negotiate-research.no/project/>.
2. Formal learning refers to 'learning that occurs in an organized and structured environment and which is designated as learning. In this setting, the activity of learning is voluntary – i.e. the person knows that she is taking part in formal learning – and it usually leads to validation and certification' (Cedefop – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2014). Non-formal learning refers to 'learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view' (Cedefop – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2011, p.113). Informal learning results from daily activities (work, leisure or family) and it is not structured or organized, and most of the time takes place unintentionally by the learner (Cedefop, 2011, p.85)
3. Grant agreement 649395, for more information see <https://negotiate-research.no/project/>
4. We selected interviewees born in 1990–1995 and 1970–1975 because the oldest cohort was not relevant for Poland and Czechia due to full employment under the communist regime.
5. Criminal Record Background check. Poland has one of the longest expungement periods in Europe – ten years.
6. So-called mini-jobs have been quite common in Germany since the early 2000s. The term refers to a specific form of marginal employment that used to allow a maximum monthly net pay of EUR 450 or a very short-term employment relationship. Workers doing mini-jobs receive no or limited social protection coverage. For an explanation, see for example, Duell et al. (2018).
7. 'Harz IV' was the colloquial term for unemployment benefit II (*Arbeitslosengeld II*), a minimum income benefit intended for individuals in need who were able to work.

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