EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH TO PROVIDE AN EXPLANATION OF LEADERSHIP LEARNING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

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Extended Abstract

Biography as a methodology teaches us about life and human behaviour; it can help us to understand individual motives, personality, the people and conditions that influenced an individual in a way that brings their life and work to life. ‘Biography adds flesh to the bones of achievement; it adds human form to the spirit of ideas and emotions’ (Jones, 1998 p. 161). Accordingly, biographical approaches create an opportunity for those interested in studying the lived experience of leadership learning and development processes. This is important because leadership learning has been shown to be overwhelmingly naturalistic, predominantly occurring through everyday lived experience (Kempster, 2009).

As a methodology biography can involve a wide range of data collection methods and analytical approaches. Drawing on the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2005; 652) a brief précis of terms used in the literature illustrates many interchangeable expressions. First, these include the phrase narrative - meaning an oral or written account acquired through fieldwork, interview or naturally occurring conversation; the second term, life history, generally describes extensive autobiographical narrative this may be collected in oral or written form; third, life story refers to the autobiographical story in the person’s own words – although life history and life story are often used interchangeably, what is more, some researchers prefer to use the term personal narrative instead of life story; however, the term personal narrative can also refer to a wide range of additional written artefacts as well as autobiographical stories. For historians, oral history describes interviews that focus on the meanings historical events hold for individuals who lived through them. The examination of primary or secondary
sources of data may involve the study of artefacts, such as diaries, letters, interviews, biographical notes and other sources, and is most commonly associated with the study of ‘distinctive’ individuals (Jones, 1998). For the purposes of this paper, biography involving the examination of narrative undertaken during interviews covering the totality of a person’s life is discussed, as opposed to the examination of historical artefacts, as this is primarily associated with research concerning influential historical figures.

Whilst there are a number of distinctive differences in the methodological approaches outlined and, of course, there are many different analytical approaches, by paying attention to the narrative in respondent’s accounts they share some common ground. Notably, researchers’ of this creed typically share an interest in people’s lived experience. They have an appreciation of the temporal nature of experience, process and change over time and in the self and representations of the self. Frequently, there is a desire to empower participants so that the respondent contributes to determining the most salient themes to emerge for discussion. Additionally, biographical researchers’ are generally aware that they are also a narrator in the process (Elliot, 2005: 6). Fundamentally, the presence of the researcher during the storytelling makes them a ‘co author’ of the story (Chamberlayne et al, 2004: 183).

Elliot (2005) notes narrative identities are a product of interaction between cultural discourses that frame the narrative structure, and the material circumstances and experiences of the individual, thereby tapping into aspects of experience difficult to elicit through other means. An individual’s story unfolds within the framework of personally constructed genres, generated through the established repetition of their story, shaped to conform to the expectations of the audience. This process is learnt over time. The different ways in which ‘narrative frameworks’ are maintained may be more or less restrictive as determined by cultural texts and shared experiences in which they are formed. For Chamberlayne (2004), biographical approaches enable us to study social reality and see it continuously reinterpreted by social actors, and as a result it possible to describe how individuals give meaning to their experiences (ibid, 189).

In the field of leadership studies, Kuhnert and Russell (1990) explain that biographical data can illuminate the development processes involved in life events related to the matter of research interest. Proposing a strategy for the integration of biographical data with constructive/ developmental theory, the authors argue that it is possible learn about a leader’s
personal characteristics and behaviours or their underlying values, attitudes, motivation, believes and environmental contexts. Arguably raising the profile and potential of biography as a methodology, Kempster and Parry (2004) drew on Kuhnert and Russell’s (1990) approach to tackle the problem of identifying a method for eliciting tacit knowledge of ‘how’ an individual has developed and provide an explanation of managerial leadership learning through lived experience. By learning about important and meaningful life experiences and their outcomes, rich insights can be gained into the importance of lived experience to leadership development (Kempster and Parry, 2004). Additionally, this can lead to a greater understanding of the meaning that leaders derive from their life experiences, thereby adding support to life course theory discussed elsewhere in the literature (Rouse and Jayawarna (2010).

However, as a methodology, biography is not without its critics. Although Howe (1982) suggests biographical data can draw out a person’s uniqueness and provide insights into individual human development that can help to elucidate the relationship between earlier experience and later achievements, the author cautions that this should not replace traditional sources of knowledge obtained from ‘empirical research’ (p 1073), and in so doing reveals prejudices that serve to undermine biographical research and qualitative approaches in general. Countering this proposition Newton (1995) explains biography is a naturalistic form of empirical research and a rich source of ideas about the development of the individual across the life span. Although critics elsewhere sometimes claim biography is voyeuristic, invasionary, exploitative and obsolete, Fillis (2006) argues that it is equal to more traditional approaches can tap into the intangible nature of creativity, whilst also introducing creativity and imagination into the research process.

Creativity is also a feature of this paper and a proposal for a novel approach to the traditional conference format. It follows Reinmann (2003) who describes his experiences of participating in a joint venture to make the process of ‘finding the findings’ in biographic narrative visible. Deviating from the traditional format of a conference session, a biographical transcript was distributed so that it became the matter of open discussion. Although this transcript originated from a very different discipline - a sociological study of the experiences of migrant Turkish woman living in Germany, it brings to light some interesting possibilities for the present conference and for exploring and understanding the potential of biography in the discipline of leadership studies.
Following Reimann’s (2003) approach, this paper is accompanied by a transcript (see Appendix) of a biographical research interview undertaken to explore entrepreneurial leadership learning and development. This study was part of a much larger research agenda and evaluation of a leadership development programme. You are invited to contribute your own pieces of analysis and interpretations of the narrative.

The interview was conducted using Minimalist-passive’ (Wengraf 2000) interview techniques facilitate uninterrupted narration. This provided those participating in the study with an opportunity to ‘voice’ their experiences and determine the most salient aspects of experience for narration. The transcript provided for this conference was conducted with Jennifer (pseudonym). It tells the story of her early life, family experiences, career trajectory and, more recently, her experiences of joining her husband’s family business, and she discusses learning from the leadership programme. I believe that the interview is a particularly valuable resource for learning about the challenges women face asserting leadership in an entrepreneurial setting, and issues of salience, social identity and self-efficacy.

As noted, I suggest that you turn to Jennifer’s story (in the Appendix) to understand the narrative and the experiences which it reveals. You are invited to use your own reading of the transcript – Jennifer’s - as the base for contributing your own pieces of analysis at the conference or to comment on interpretations of the text offered at the event. Thus it is hoped that this will contribute to the ethos of the conference to loosen up rigidity and encourage as much intellectual dialogue, debate, and exchange as possible.
References


Appendix 1: Transcript of interview – Jennifer (see next page)

Basic symbols used in the transcription:

I = Interviewer (Dr Karen Jones)
N = Narrator (Jennifer)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pseudo graph</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>change name to preserve anonymity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pause, untimed</td>
<td>…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pause, timed</td>
<td>(1 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>truncated/cut off word</td>
<td>wor-</td>
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Vocalisms

| Breath in                      | (H)    |                                               |
| Exhale                         | (Hx)   |                                               |
| Laugh                          | @      |                                               |
| Laughing word                  | @you’re @kidding | laugh symbol marks laughter during word |
| Vocalism                       | (COUGH)| various notations (SNIFF) etc               |
| Click                          | (TSK)  |                                               |
| Glottal stop, creak            | (%)    |                                               |

Manner

| Vox                            | <VOX>  | <VOX> voice of another                      |

Metatranscription

| Unintelligible                 | #      | transcribed words are uncertain             |
| Uncertain                      | #you’re #kidding | interviewer’s comment on anything |
| Comment                        | ((words)) |                                               |
| Replaced word                  | [words] | words replaced to protect identities    |
N: Eh, well OK was brought up in [names place in UK], ehm – and my dad worked in construction for a company called [names company] which is an internationally kind of construction engineering company, as an engineer. And then I think when I was very young, when I was mmh maybe four or five, he decided to go self employed to spend more time with his family because he was travelling such a lot.

I: Yeah

N: Mmh and I quite - I do remember that shift in family life actually because he built a little office next to our house ehm – and my mum was kind of his secretary, so in the home environment the business and the home was kind of interconnected, you know, I: Yeah

N: So I would kind of burst into the office and ‘hi daddy let’s play football’ or something you know and he’d be on the phone in the middle of doing things and it was kind of about learning a slightly different way of living and a that’s very early sort of memory, so it did impact straight away there. So I went through – I’ve got a little brother. All my family are actually from north Wales, ehm – and we used to kind of drive up, ever since childhood I’ve driven from south to north Wales, so I know the road very well and uncannily have ended up settling here but ehm – for various reasons, so ehm – yeah a pretty regular very happy childhood but ehm – I would say that my most, one of my most memorable things that’s maybe relevant to this was sort of being a bit confused as to whether I was a rebel at school or whether I was actually going to do something constructive. And mostly being a bit of a rebel and not doing very much and thinking oh I’ll just be a beautician or something and then it kind of come to GCSEs and I failed all those outright, the only bit of revision that I did was for my chemistry exam where I memorised the periodic table, sat down in the exam and got given the periodic table to answer the questions!

I: ((Laughs))

N: So Ok I’m totally not getting this!@ I’m missing something!@ So I re-sat the GCSEs and took on 3 A levels and I don’t know how it happened really but I just thought hang on a minute I’m really kidding myself here, I’m not this sort of person, I just sort of had this identity moment of awakening – ehm – I don’t know what the drive was actually but I just thought no, actually I’m going to really do something and I think I want to go to college, so for the next two years I just kind of hid away in our dining room and studied – really really studied, obsessively, ehm and got all my GCSEs and got straight A’s at A level and got into university, and it was a real shift. And the head master wrote to us and I was this example of a child who was a rebel but turned a corner@. And a lot of people ask me you know, why did - where did that come from to suddenly think no I’m kidding myself, that’s who I am and I need to follow that path, and I’ve no idea, I can’t remember really – ehm – it wasn’t anything particularly significant but that’s what happened and I kind of got the straight A’s, and it was obsessive, I used to sort of tape myself reading Jane Austin and take it into the shower and play it so that when I was having a shower I was still being able to read Jane Austin!@ I was like that obsessive about it@

I: ((Laughs))

N: But that was a really proud moment, turned 18 got straight A’s, went to [UK] University to do psychology, ehm – then had a fantastic time at University as you do and then I went to [another UK university], got a scholarship to do a masters there, in research methods, then I went and worked as a research assistant in ehm – a place called [names place] which is just south of Amsterdam in eh Holland, so I was there for a year and I was looking at how people delay gratifications, so how - the application was actually to encourage people to save money and it was all about how people understand money and why young people don’t start saving for a pension as soon as they can – ehm – so it was all economic psychology based stuff. Ehm
had a fabulous time in Holland. And then I was going to continue that research with a lady
called [says name] who was based in Brighton, and I wanted to go and live in Brighton, I had
my heart set on that and then unfortunately she died just before I went there so her nearest
colleague was in [local town], and I thought I don’t want to go to [local town] because I’ve
always travelled from [that place] and my nana lives in [names local town] and it’s not very
cool and there’s no night clubs and stuff, I wanna go to Brighton, you know!

I: ((Laughs))

N: But remarkable I kind of followed the academic sort of commitment and ended up moving
here, ehm – so yeah to do the PhD, and that was as an economic psychologist really and it
was really about blending economic theory, which is based very much on logic and systems,
with psychology and people’s mind sets that are very illogical and trying to understand how
perception of time and perception of probabilities to do with risk taking and decision making,
how people make decisions. So it was essentially decision making type work, ehm – and it
was things like, you know I used to do this thing going around and meeting people and say if
you had a one in 10,000 chance of a lamp post falling on your head, how much would you
pay to avoid that risk? So they say, well I don’t want a lamp post falling on my head, I might
pay you know £10,000. Well what if you had a one in a million chance, how much would you
pay? And it was these sort of questions. Ehm – and eventually we came up with a statistical
value of life, which we sold to the government and eh people # the research through the HSE
and it was ‘every life is worth a million pounds’ @ so it was a great piece of research, so you
need to invest a million pounds per head in health and safety around the World you know! So
that was all very exciting, that was brilliant and eh had a lovely time really and then towards
the end of that era when I was mostly teaching I met ~Bob, who is actually linked to my
family in various ways here in north Wales and eh we moved in together, I was his tenant, he
was my landlord, this was – I have to ask him, I think it was 15 years now, ehm and we sort
of lived together as tenant and landlord for a couple of years and then kind of got
romantically involved and ehm – I moved into his house, so at that time he was just learning
the ropes of this business. He was actually a [say’s profession] out on site with his dad
running it, family business. Ehm – and then I think for about seven years .. I was academic,
and I’ve done just different research projects where ever there was money basically, and a bit
of teaching, and then for the next seven years I moved jobs completely, and I saw an
advertisement and it just totally – a job ad that totally inspired me for a company called [says
name] which was about ehm – sparking partnerships between businesses and the arts, and I
saw this as being really relevant to what I’d been doing academically. So my academic
research was very much about economics and psychology, it was about quantitative methods
verses qualitative methods and trying to blend the two and understanding two mind sets and
two different cultures. I was really interested in all that sort of stuff, and arts and business
struck me as a real world application of all that, they’re unlikely bed fellows, what would
business want with the arts, what would the arts want with business? And I started to look
into the company, ehm and the job was to manage the north Wales region, so it was about
independent, it was about applying academia, it was about being my own boss, having my
own project, and the whole project was to launch the office, so I had to start from scratch
really, ehm – and I did that from 2001 until eh nine years I’ve done that for. Yeah so finished
that two years ago. And that was full time and I had our little boy and I went part time and I
went back part time but in reality what I was doing was contributing here in my other part
time, because at that point ~Bob’s mum and dad had severed all ties from the business - ehm
- and fully retired really the last sort of five or six years it’s been a transitional thing – ehm –
just when we had our son ~Bob was fully in control of everything and the need for some
support was kind of always there, so I kind of contributed part time while I was still working
at [names company] and then decided well actually I’m trying to balance too much here, and
teaching, still always loving and doing that. Adults returning to learning, and ehm so joined
the business two years ago, ehm and had continued to teach as a little, this is my little thing
ehm until this year. It’s only now with second pregnancy that I’ve decided not to do that
anymore because it’s just juggling too many things and I want to really throw myself into
(Hx) into this role really and have done, and applied all that I’ve learnt through [names
company she was employed at] and launching and managing PR side of things and people
management - ehm – was very much the calling here. Ehm – the other gap that was really
required here since ~Bob’s mum left was the financial management – ehm – which I started
doing two years ago – ehm – and started to try and do it without any training, went and looked
at some courses, started doing some maybe SAGE ((accountancy software)) kind of courses
and realised that it wasn’t fast enough, I needed to know how to do it now@ I’m gonna learn
on the job and actually it didn’t work out at all. Ehm – I was just a – just didn’t have that
ability to do financial management – ehm – basic accounting stuff, just didn’t have the mind
for it. So there I was this sort of academic whose always done well, always succeeded in
everything, one half of this job was OK and the other half was completely ‘oh my god I
cannot do’, really it’s a certain type of mindset accounting that I for the first time had to
accept I have not actually got inbuilt, and ehm@ that’s been a real awakening and that was
really hard, that was – ehm - you know do I blame lack of training - do I – you know how can
I come to terms with this and that’s been a really interesting process to not be able to do it.
We’ve outsourced all our financial management to a very good accountant instead of a book
keeper down the road
I: Yeah
N: So we’re in control of that now but for a period it was quite hard, I was making you know
so many mistakes and just not getting it, not doing it properly. So now I’m focusing on
marketing and PR, I do all the personnel management side, which is much more natural to
me, ehm and the business development, and ~Bob and I are very much a partnership in terms
of running the business and I’m trying - ~Bob’s an activist, he’s a doer, he’s very practical
and he’s very hands on. I’m much more from an academic background, from a creative
background as well with working with the Arts, so I like to think that I bring them, that I look
up you know above the trees, above the clouds and I sort of pull him along and say OK so
where’s our direction, much more objective. I’ve brought a fresh pair of eyes - ehm – and
hopefully have contributed a lot, even though the financial side role didn’t work out – ehm –
and I’m just about to have our second child now in two weeks time. So, we’ll see what
happens, how we cope with all that.
I: Yeah
N: Planning on having six months off but you know, could be shorter depending on how
things are here. And ehm I think that’s kind of a bit of a career sort of nutshell, I think, ehm
((five seconds thinking and preparing food)). In terms of the kind of leadership management
side of things and the ... what I see as the significant sort of motivators are that I was brought
up in that environment, it was a very natural environment – ehm – always around my parents
being their own bosses and being a partnership, which is where I’ve ended up. I don’t think
that’s a coincidence really. Ehm – I think academia is an independent role, as I know you’re
very much part of the university infrastructure and things but you have to have original
thought, you have to be self motivated, you have to discipline yourself to actually get on with
it@ Ehm – you have to find money, you have to you know be creative about finding funding,
and all those sorts of things, and my subject area was very much about people and how
people think and what motivates them so I think that’s complimented where I’ve ended up,
ehm – and arts and business were a very significant part of my life and that was very much
about having ownership but it was actually part of, it was half public sector funding, half
private, so it had a public – sorry private funding arm as well. So I got to learn a lot about the
commercial world and the public sector and the differences. Ehm – which I think has complimented this as well, and just having responsibility and just having a small team to manage. Learning personnel skills and management skills and bringing that here, because of course ~Bob has learnt everything from the bottom up. You know he used to install all our products, then he became a sales person, now he’s managing director. So he’s lived and breathed this business, whereas I have, I think I’m bringing new things because I have got a slightly different sort of history but still very much couched in the same sort of drives you know about making your own decisions, understanding people, bringing people with you to achieve the same goals and those sort of things. And ~Bob ultimately isn’t you know that commercially driven. It’s not a cut throat business it’s [names industry] but it’s not a [names similar cut throat industry] where we’re out there you know knocking on doors and forcing people to buy crooked [names product], you know it’s a socially responsible business that values the work life balance for everybody. Ehm and that’s why I think we work quite well, I think were quite similar in that way. Ehm – so yeah I think in terms of what’s driven me to get to that point I think without actually know all the factors were building this path, all the way but I just didn’t know it. I think I was just following it instinctively and have ended up in this position because I was sort of meant to, and kind of collected good experiences that I can bring something to, to this moment if you like but – ehm - and it’s perfect because I – it’s a brilliant business to be involved in a place that we really love and feel passionate about, and I think you’ll probably find that – I don’t know if it’s come out but with a lot of businesses in this area you’re running a business but at the same time in the background there’s always an element of compromise because you’re in a beautiful place that has got its own kind of commercial culture and we’re not a city ehm – and there’s a lot of frustrating things about that and there’s a lo- there’s – I don’t know how I’d describe it without (Hx) being crude but it’s almost like the business community isn’t as sophisticated as you might get in Manchester and London and places like that so ... as a business that is actually a constant experience that you are willing to have because you love where you are and you love north Wales and it’s not about going to the city and making lots of money, it’s that, it’s a life style and it’s your own business and it’s your you know it’s – this is our life, it’s not somewhere where you arrive and go home at five o’ clock and forget about it, and it’s the same with the environment, you know the environment is our life, north Wales is our life and we love it, ehm – and that’s why we’re here running a business and we’re not in the city trying to make our millions and maybe retiring here later you know. And also because family is here, so the – ehm – we’ve made something in our home, we’ve made something that fits our home and I think that’s been a lot of the motivation rather than the other way around, which you might get with a lot of business people who live in cities – I don’t know, it would be interesting to know, but yeah, yeah so my rabbiting is that as much as you need.

N: I did it for two years before I decided it wasn’t working because I wasn’t able to give as much as I needed to each role, so I was doing everything half well, ehm – and I needed to give it my best shot because I wanted to do it all, I wanted to be everything but actually that drained the motivation because I could never really excel at any one thing, it felt like.

I: Yeah
and I knew I was getting away with it and I knew something had to give and it was the same
when it came to the teaching, when it came to marking time, it was all very well walking in
there doing the lecture, giving out the essay titles but then I’d turn around and I’d have 30
essays to mark in one clump, and that would be at a time when we’d be recruiting here or you
know I couldn’t get any childcare or so suddenly sitting down and marking 30 essays became
a rushed job and I started to feel bad that I wasn’t giving the quality of time to that, and I felt
that that was ehm – and really my heart was here ultimately because it’s a blood thing know,
you know this is like everything, so it became quite clear really that I had to – and then at the
end of the day wanting to spend time with a child whose growing up really fast and feeling
guilty if I was too tired to read him a bedtime story or something like that you know.
I: Yeah
N: And I did really try and do it all, and I kept the teaching on for a bit but even that had to –
with number two it’s like oh no no no you know, it’s just not possible. Yeah
I: Yeah
N: So does that explain your questions, answer your question
I: Yeah I think so, yeah ((private discussion and short break)) I’ll go back to these questions
in a minute.
N: Yeah the whole working mum thing, it’s very interesting.
I: That’s what I was wondering a little bit more about really, how did you feel, did you feel
quite torn with having a child and business?
N: Well ultimately it was about – I’ve never been torn, I’ve always known that my priority is
home and quality of life and my family, it was just trying to fit other things in it to make
money to make that quality of life even better. But actually motivated by a lot of self pride
and because each role is in- it’s got quite a lot of independence, it’s not like you’re sitting at a
computer working for someone else and go home, you know [names arts company] was my
region, ehm you know when you teach they’re your students, ehm – and this is our family
income and our name and ehm – so I would say probably all that personal pride stuff was
kind of up there over and above the level of income thing, ehm – and sort of feeling that
letting some of that go was quite hard, yeah. But it was never a question of which is a
priority, it was just seeing if I could pull it off, but I couldn’t pull it off, no, not really, not
properly, not to the standard that you want everything to be, yeah ((8 seconds – thinking)). I
had a very interesting boss with [names arts company] and north Wales was a regional office,
so my boss was in Cardiff. She ran Wales [names company] Wales but she was in Cardiff, so
her challenge was to get someone in north Wales in to run it and to fit into her vision for
Wales ehm and my challenge was to establish the office, build up a reputation, build up a
client base and roll out our services across the patch. Being in north Wales but of course my
boss is in south Wales and south Wales is quite different, and all the south Walians yarn as
soon as somebody from north Wales says ‘well we’re different, culturally different, the
businesses here are different, we’ve just got the A55 it’s rural, stop trying to impose your
Cardiff mindset and policies on what we’re trying to do’, you know and I can understand how
that must be terribly boring to hear but was increasingly true and it was really interesting
balancing and independent office, a satellite office, within a country like Wales with the
personality of the boss that I had, who was absolutely brilliant in so many ways, I mean I
really was sitting at the foot of the master when it came to networks ehm – strategy, people.
Her weakness, as do all greats, was really balanced with bad people management.
I: Mmh
N: Running a team, she had a very high turnover of staff, she didn’t have loyal staff, ehm – it
was all women, it was a very very bitchy place, ehm – and eh – there was a lot of problems
and issues to do with all sorts of things that I could go into but learnt a hell of a lot about
people management and I had a very different style of people management so if something
wasn’t working out she would want me to be much more dictatorial, is that the word? You
know and say you’re going to have to go and tell her that ddd d d d, got and tell her that she
so and so and so and so, whereas my way is much more different. You know I want to
motivate and empower people to want to do what I want them to do. Eh – much more, I
mean she would say much more laid back type of approach to managing people, so we had a
constant battle eh when it came to that. Eh – so I learnt a lot about the power of networks,
the power of people, connections through her and I learnt a lot about managing people
through her mistakes. Eh – and seeing how her team really had to . . . almost had to
supplement that weakness of hers, had to support that weakness of hers all the time. Then had
to compromise a lot because it really was quite a problem, she didn’t really, she didn’t really
understand that you have to manage different people differently and she was trying to use the
same – and then quite a lot of people left and sort of blew the whistle on the management
style and eh I think things were probably getting better as I was leaving, she was starting to
realise that she needed to do some work on that side of things, yeah. But it is true how you
learn from bad management. Eh – I’ve heard people here say the same things that I had said
then that I realise that the management approach hadn’t been right here, so I’ve been eh- my
biggest influence here was something that I’d learnt from [the leadership programme], well I’d
learnt how to put it, I was always doing it but it was interesting what I was saying earlier, I
didn’t really know how to verbalise it and describe it, eh – but the previous culture here was
a very parenting style. So ~Bob’s parents funnily enough were parenting the staff and it was
very – eh m – so ~Bob’s dad quite an authoritarian type personality and it was very directing
everybody, and everyone had a prescribed direction of where to go and they didn’t really not
want to do it because ~Ted can be someone you don’t want to cross. Our style is opposite to
that and it’s what my coach would call the adult style of running the business, to use that
transactional analysis type approach – it’s about getting people to understand why they’re
doing something, why they’ve been asked to do something and being motivated to do it,
because they don’t want to let you down and they want to achieve your goal with you, rather
than they’d get told off if they didn’t. Eh – so that’s been really interesting and I’ve learnt a
lot about that through [names arts company] because I was being parented, and understanding
a bit about transactional analysis through psychology as well. So that’s been really
fascinating how we’ve tried to shift that here, but it takes a long time because there are staff
that have been here from the beginning, were trying to change a culture without clearing all
the staff out and getting new staff.
I: Yes exactly. How did that make you feel when you were in that situation yourself?
N: Being parented?
I: Mmh
N: Mmh (4 seconds) I didn’t really understand it, so it was confusing, eh – you know for
example I’d be working very hard towards a goal that I had implemented something - I’d set
something up and I had a very clear goal in my mind, I’d be half way there, I’d be excited
about something and I’d tell my boss and then she would say ‘no I don’t want you to do it’ -
ehm – ‘I want you to focus on this’, and ‘because you’re not doing that very well actually,
you’ve taken your eye off the ball, forget that it’s not as important, I don’t value what you’re
doing, do this other thing’, and I’d be absolutely floored, completely de-motivated – eh m –
frustrated and again because I was running the ship it’s not something that you can cry to
your staff about, you know it’s your thing so – eh m – I learnt over the seven years I learnt
how to manage that, and not manage her but I learnt how to respond to things. If I made a
mistake for example, it took me about five years to learn that if I made a mistake I shouldn’t
try and explain how the mistake happened or defend myself in anyway, the only way to best
communicate it to her as a boss was to go ‘oh my god I’ve made a mistake’ and be upset and
then it wouldn’t turn into a big disaster and she would be very supportive.
I: Oh right

N: And she would help, physically she’d get on a plane and she’d be helping and she’d be going ‘oh it’s ok’ you know stroking me and sort of saying ‘oh you’ve made a mistake and we’re all going to help you know’ whereas if I phoned her up and said ‘I’ve made a mistake because, well it’s partly not my fault because of external reasons and I’ve tried really hard to do this and what I’d like to do now is this this and this’ that would get her back up because well there are lots of reasons as to why that would get her back up, but if you were helpless then the parent in her would come out. Ehm – and so I used to do that even though it wasn’t genuine. I used to sort of say ‘oh I’ve made a mistake, dd d d d d.’ I wouldn’t bother telling her how that mistake had occurred and the fact that somebody had let me down and some external factor that I could control. In the end I didn’t bother explaining because I wanted to manage the relationship so that I could actually get on with the job.

I: Yeah

N: And ended up withholding a lot of information because otherwise it would just be interfered with, so in the end I learned what to tell her and what not to tell her really. Yeah, it’s things like that, is that relevant?

I: Yes, yeah yeah

N: and another interesting thing was Wales was funded separately to England but England was the head office, so I watched her dynamic between the politics of running or delivering the services in Wales whilst being slightly separate to England and having to deal with a lot of things. So for example, England would launch a new brand and Wales would have to adopt that brand. Ehm – even though they might not agree with it. And then translating that brand into Welsh would be a nightmare and telling them you needed more money for that was really difficult because they didn’t understand it. So that might be a political battle to do with personalities and money and all this sort of thing, and watching her and how she dealt with it very often mirrored north and south Wales, and some of the stuff she would come out with, she would say – you know she might actually say ‘London roll my eyes every time I tell them Wales is somewhere different’ and blab la bl bl bla and she would be saying what I would say about how she would respond to me!

I: Yeah

N: And I learnt a lot through that. How she handled London, I tried to adopt and try and copy in # implement what she was doing to manage her so that I could get on with running north Wales in the way I thought should be run and trying to do that without it being too obvious. But yeah I learnt a lot from her in that way. Does that make sense?

I: Yes it does. So you sort of took the good from her and then learnt from the bad as well?

N: Yeah yeah, definitely yeah.

I: yeah

N: I tell you who is brilliant at that sort of thing, did you ever come across ~Janet Jones?

I: No

N: She was the [names position in University], she’s left [local university], she left about three years ago. She was the head of [names school] and she headed up the [names project] ehm – before ~Ronald was fully in the sort of behind the steering wheel. She was very much an influencer in getting it up and ready. So she was my boss when I was doing research for the [names school] before she became [names position] and – she was another big influence of mine, and how she dealt with people, yeah

I: In what way, what did you learn from her do you think?

N: The importance of managing people over and above everything else. So if its, if you’re trying to implement something, an idea, you’ve got a project, you need people’s help to get there, how do you manage the individuals and understand individual people is the most powerful thing to do. It overrides being authoritarian and having, it’s a key part of that kind
of, I don’t know if it’s charisma or if its skill or you know what you might describe it in the end but she managed people brilliantly, how she would get people on board and how she would deal with difficult people. Yeah, and she was, and she had some sort of meteoritic rise within the university, so she started off in [says school] and ended up being [names position] and then she got frustrated I think with various politics to do with [names project] and now she’s in [names another university]. I think she’s pro vice chancellor in [names university] now.

I: Wow
N: Yeah so she’s an interesting one, and also her work life balance – ehm – and her private life and her interests and the stuff that she used to do, I really admired her colourful personality that wasn’t just all about work, was kind of appreciating her life style and things.
She was quite an eccentric. Mmh

I: Are there other people that you can think of who have been influential?
N: Well ~Bob, hugely. For the first half of our relationship I’d get quite frustrated about a lot of things, about work kind of interfering with our lives a bit, in the last seven years where we’ve become a partnership I’ve come to understand the talents that ~Bob has got and what he brings to this business and what he pulls off, what he actually achieves here is just phenomenal and I actually had no idea, you know@

I: Yeah ((Laughs))
N: I’m coming to understand that a lot but I’ve come to admire his talents, ehm – and a lot of them are very interpersonal, I think that’s just what I’m interested in. Psychology, but he wouldn’t describe it in that way, but I don’t suppose I notice the technical talents and the practical industry related talents that well, mmh because that’s something I’m having to really learn in this business. I’ve shied away from it actually for the last two years, I’ve never – I’ve sort of contributed without really understanding our products that deeply because it’s just technical, so I just switch off, but I’m having to embrace that and actually get into it a bit more, and I think the more I understand about that the better really. But – eh- so ~Bob has got all that knowledge because he’s you know - got to where he is from the bottom up like. But yeah I really do appreciate, so I would say that he is a kind of role model in a lot of ways and a big influence and I’ve learnt a lot. My dad, because he ran a business. My mum because she supported him and how she supported him and how it didn’t work as well and the arguments and my dad’s weaknesses and how I feel like I understand why he’s not a multimillionaire, that he’s always tried to be an entrepreneur, he’s always kind of come up with ideas that never actually happened. He’s not a failed business man, but he’s not kind of achieved what he wanted to achieve I don’t think. I think he’s – I mean his company went bust in the 80s when – eh- the rest of that recession – bad recession hit. Cos it was a building company, and – so how old was I then, that would have been A level time, A levels. He often says he remembers me coming into the office and going I got A’s I’m going to Loughborough and he’d just really the penny had just dropped for him that the business was no longer viable and that he was going to have to come to terms with that and break that to the family really, so he often says ‘I remember you bursting in, you were so happy you were going to college, and I was thinking oh god I’ve just spoken to the accountant and this company is no more’ you know, I mean he’s set up another company since then and it’s fine but - ehm – he’s not retiring on lots of money, which was always his plan and I think I understand some of the reasons why. So that’s an influence, a positive influence as well.

I: What do you think of some of the reasons are?
N: Ehmm – eh I think ... I think there people management related, I do, I think how he’s got people behind him and the choices he’s made, the people he’s gone into partnership with over certain things, eh – he’s too eager to trust, ehm – he’s not savvy enough in terms of, well I suppose what you could just say to put it crudely is that he is just too soft and that
have taken advantage of him along the way, ehm – he’s good – he’s got entrepreneurial skills
in that he does spot good opportunities but he’s never built the right sort of infrastructure
around him to really implement it properly and it’s always failed just at the last hurdle and I
think that’s just because the way that he is with those people around him, he’s not made the
right decisions, the right choices, yeah, yeah, yeah. It’s an interesting question really, I’ve not
thought about that before. Mmh. Yeah I remember going for a job at the university, it was,
was it head of business development, oh what’s that entrepreneur called or the entrepreneurial
guru in [the local] University
I: Eh
N: And he went to [names local town]?
I: I don’t know
N: And he writes in the daily post, he was a lecturer, he ran the business department for many
years and fell out with everyone and went to [names local town]
I: I don’t know who he is, I might do if I knew his name because I was in Social Sciences
before.
N: [says name] professor [says name] or something like that. I went for a job with him and it
was about working with different departments in the University and pulling them together
towards the same goal, ehm of business development and I remember being in the interview
and really talking about, and he was saying ‘well how will you get people on your side’ and I
started talking about people management, about relationship building. And this other woman
who was on the interview panel said ‘it sounds as if you think that if everyone likes you and
you get on with everyone that they’ll do what you want, and what do you say to that’ you
know and I remember, cos I taped the interview, I had a Dictaphone in my bag!
I: ((Laughs)) I never thought of doing that!
N: Yeah yeah cos I was brushing up on my interview skills and ehm I remember bringing it
home and the pause just went on so painfully when she said, just floored me, I didn’t know
how to answer it because I was still learning what I meant really and – ehm – it did come –
when I listened to myself it did come across that people management was about people liking
you and then somehow they just magically do what you want them to do ((Laughing)) which
it isn’t at all.
I: No@
N: and I always remember the pause after she told me that and the sort of waffle that I came
out with@ as a response@
I: ((Laughs))
N: Oh I don’t know.
I: Oh dear, ehm –
N: I think it was professor [says full name]
I: I should probably know who he is.
N: He has probably written loads of stuff on entrepreneurship
I: Yeah, it sounds familiar.
((someone enters room and short discussion takes place)).
N: These images here ((pointing to photographs on wall)) were just when I’d left [arts
company] and I knew I was going to have a HR role and a marketing role and it was a really
enjoyable first project where we got all our fitting staff to choose a product, take it out to a
place that was meaningful to them and install the product, and we got a photographer to
record the process. So this one, this one’s won an award actually – it’s printed on aluminium
which gives it the effect but it’s one of our [names product] in a rock face quarry in [local
town].
I: It’s amazing
N: Yeah, the same guy did the beach one actually, and some of the fitting staff, you know and these are guys, these are labourers that you know they just go to work and they just go to the pub and that’s what they do and completely different lifestyle to my own, to motivate them into doing something creative like this, to start off with was completely alien and what we did is we found one or two people that were warm to the idea and made sure they were on side and they did it first and they actually got everyone else involved.

I: Yes, yeah

N: There was a lovely piece of – that’s what I mean by people management – but it was lovely to see the potential of someone to come out with something creative like this that we are actually using in our marketing, so when we did the summer jazz event we took these two images and had these on easels outside our marquee and it brought people in and people were interested – what’s a [names industry] company doing with the [product] in the sand and it was a conversation point with potential customers and you know things like that. So – ehm –

I: and what did they think of them when they saw what they had achieved?

N: Absolutely loved it, really proud of it, you know a lot of them have got these images in their homes, ehm – what we need to do is the next stage – where we get enough in the budget for next year is to have a really big kind of montage of the fitters actually doing this. Lots of little pictures we’ve got with all the different teams and that’s going to go at the top of the stairs – ehm – and that’s nice to see themselves in the project, that they all really enjoyed you know. It was a real turn around. Some of them just thought oh my god what on earth is this you know when I walked in with a photographer saying ‘we’re going to go out to a beach or to an old ruin’ and they were like ((pulls face)) what?

I: ((laughs))

N: and by the end of the project they’re wanting to have a copy of the latest write up in the daily post to take home and show to their wife, you know, great! I just love that sort of stuff.

I: What sort of impact do you think it had on them then?

N: For the life time of the project very positive, you have to have the resource to be able to keep that kind of thing alive. Now it doesn’t really, it’s not like a legacy or anything, although this is that these images are here, but to really keep that buzz you’ve got to do something else and something else really ehm – yeah but you know I’m very interested in the fitting staff, we’ve got installers, we’ve got managers and they’re completely separate so the last two years have been about working on the fitters and working on the managers, the future is going to be making it much more holistic as a business because they don’t know what those people up stairs do at all, they haven’t got a clue!@ They probably just think I make up little party projects when I go home!@

I: ((laughs))

N: So we’ll change that at some point, yeah

I: So is that what you’re thinking about now, working on

N: Yeah very much yeah – ehm – I’ve spent a year refining everybody, all the manager’s job descriptions, looking at how the processes link together, and then I did eh psychometric testing on all the staff and looked at how some staff positions are quite natural to their personality types over and above skill and experience, and some actually aren’t, and that’s something that one of the masterclasses really complimented. Was it Anita?

I: Anita Rogers

N: Anita yeah

I: with the Myers Briggs

N: and the Belbin one to an extent, I don’t like the Belbin as much as the Myers Briggs actually. I think the Belbin one spoke more to the audience there who might, I think the Myers Briggs was more sort of psychology and theory, so it appealed to me but to the rest of the businesses I think the Belbin one was probably the stronger out of the two.
N: But yeah, so a lot of what you, we had a manager’s away day where they had the results of their tests and sort of spoke a bit about how we’re going to change some of the roles, so we’re going to – we’ve got three kind of operation guys who are in the downstairs office together that are very much about here’s an order, no here’s a contract – someone wants to buy a [names product] so someone does the ordering, someone co-ordinates the fitting – the installation of that product, and then someone does the sort of after sales services and the guarantee sort of work. So it’s the heart beat really, and we’re going to swap their jobs as a trial for three months, and we’re going to do it based on their personality types. So there’s somebody managing people who shouldn’t be managing people, the guy who runs the fitting stuff isn’t a people manager, he’s not motivated at all to manage people and yet he’s managing a team of 22. So it’s things like that. And we’re not addressing it on training, or experience or support, we’re gonna move him because his personality type doesn’t suit what he’s doing which is something that is obvious to me but to get the other directors on board to make a decision based on that has been quite challenging and I’ve relished that, I’ve really enjoyed –Tudur who popped in an asked for my keys, he’s my cousin and he’s one of the directors and –Bob as well. They’re very hands on, very construction orientated and I’ve come in wanting to do personality test and make decisions on that basis, and do art projects! I’m quite aware of, I mean this is something that came up in the coaching, of how I might be perceived and at the same time wanting to have credibility and trust in my position and not just be the bosses wife who, you know, I’m – I want to be understood for contributing the core, which I am and actually have been doing behind the scenes for a long time, for many years but I’ve never physically had an office here, so that’s quite interesting, you know talking about being the woman and the mum and – it’s been really interesting that process and trying to build it up, and a key for me is building the relationships with the individuals and helping them understand my contribution on a one to one basis and building trust with people. So someone might confide in me and I will purposefully not tell –Bob, and then a situation will arise where it’s been revealed that –Bob didn’t know and they therefore have trust in me and go ‘oh she didn’t go and tell –Bob otherwise this would have happened’, and those sorts of opportunities to establish that trust has been really key. This is why the coaching was so good because I did get coached throughout a lot of those processes.

N: Mmh mmh. I mean the coaching basically described what I was doing anyway, but described it and formalised it and verbalised it, ehm – so it was reassuring. I think that’s what coaching does.

N: Like somebody who is running their own business, it is a reassuring guiding hand rather than any kind of you know – eh - direct spoon feeding type, yeah.

I: How would you describe your experiences as being a woman in business?

N: I’d love to dye my hair brown – just see what kind of impact. I’ve seen it done on telly you know where they’ve dyed women, also a couple of friends of mine have gone from blond to brunette, I’d love to try it because I’m sure it’s significant.

N: I’d love to do it. A few people have # a good friend of mine turned brunette and she runs the youth service for [name] Council, no [name] Council, ehm – and she’s actually gone back to being blond but she said it was a lot easier at work, people took her seriously, men responded very differently to her, ehm – yeah she said from a work point of view, but from a rounded who she was and her identity she wanted to go back to being blond, which she did, over you know it wasn’t obviously that significant for her to override it, but it was very interesting to hear that, but ehm – in I don’t think it’s significant in academia in my
experiences there, or in teaching, I don’t know. I don’t know in those contexts if I’m conscious about it necessarily, although I did flirt with dying my hair bright red once, about a year ago. I was really close, I went to the hairdressers and had the consultation and chose the colour, I was on the verge of doing it but there was something stopping me and I remember saying to a friend of mine – ehm – ‘oh something’s stopping me from doing it’ and she said ‘well try and describe it’ and I said ‘ok, I’m imagining myself going into a lecture where everyone knows me and there I am with bright red hair and I feel like perhaps they won’t take me seriously or something’ and she turned around and she said ‘oh las’ she’s from Texas ‘oh las getting off the stage’ @ she said!

I: ((Laughing))

N: I said what do you mean, she said ‘get off you’re stage, do you think they don’t give a shit, why do you think your students are going to judge you differently?’ and I just thought of my god yeah, that sounds sort of self-obsessed that this room full of people are going to judge me and even care, you know, it was a proper wake up that was. The reason I didn’t do it was because they said there was something like a six week re-growth and you’d have to have it touched up every six weeks and ‘oh I can’t be faked’. But it was perhaps a good indication, but ehm so yeah you’ve asked me about being a woman in business and I think being blond is actually quite a significant part of that, or I’m conscious that that is a significant part. Ehm – so I don’t think within teaching or certainly within [the arts company] I ever felt that I had to sort of be conscious of it or compensate in some way. [arts company] is a woman’s world, I think there were about seven male staff members and I think five of them were gay and very camp, and they were part of the women’s team in a lot of ways. Ehm – I definitely used it if I’m honest, with male clients that I needed to woo in some way, I needed them to sign up for a sponsorship deal of # and I wanted to get six grand or something, and they were a bit flirty. You know I did sort of capitalise on that, if it was appropriate you know, and some of the best relationships I had with my clients were of that not god inappropriate or lude in any way but fun kind of, I was definitely a female with a male having a business relationship. I couldn’t have been a man, yeah so here I’ve been very conscious of it because of the culture of the business and the industry being construction led. The fitters I know have not known how to take me and I think some of them have felt very intimidated that I’d not necessarily been approachable perhaps. And I think on the other hand with the managers it has been that they don’t really understand my past, they think it is something to do with the university and something arty and here I am in the building world, what’s really going to be my contribution? Ehm - I don’t know if that’s about being maybe being a woman as well, I don’t think really people knew what I was going to contribute. So I was very conscious of that, that was part of my motivation of doing [the leadership programme]. One of the most important things I got out of the coaching was that issue, and I think being a woman has been an implicit part of that but it’s wrapped up in everything else. I wouldn’t say that being a woman, I do feel like a woman in a man’s world here, and what I’ve got to do is learn the technical side of the business so that I can talk the talk when it comes to do [names technical job] or different materials and the benefits of [names them], I have closed all that off because it’s just not what my brain does. So if you talk to me about how a car works, it’s just like phew – I’ve shut off now@. You know, I am a bit of a stereotypical woman actually when it comes to that, and that’s got to change if I’m going to continue to build my credibility with the installation with the lads who I will – who I am managing, I’m not managing as a line manager but I am directing HR – ehm – I’ve dealt with you know quite serious motivational issues. I’ve done disciplinaries, I’ve had to fire staff and because they’re all men and they’re not just men these are, I’m being really stereotypical, but they are you know manual workers – very very different to me - how they communicate is very different, their culture’s very different, ehm and some of them are very very Welsh as well, you know first language Welsh
language – ehm – ~Bob’s a Welsh speaker so he’s got an immediate connection. I’m not a
Welsh speaker so, I would say being a woman is part of many things that I’m conscious of in
my role as director of a business but not that I’d ever really considered in isolation and I find
difficult to consider in isolation really, to come up with anything specific. Except for the fact
that I have used it, I have used femininity to build relationships, though completely
professional I can’t think of another way of describing it, but you know understanding how
men think a bit and sort of manipulating that, I’ve definitely done that to an extent. I’ve seen
other women do it too much and inappropriately and seen how that’s not of substance at all.
Ehm – I’ve seen women not use their femininity at all and lost opportunities. I like to think
I’m somewhere in the middle. But it is, it is something that is always in the back of my mind
because of the type of business this is. It’s not a design consultancy, you know it really is
bricks and drills and – eh – it is something I’ve got to embrace. I’ve been very process driven,
I’ve been very strategy, I’ve been very – it’s all been about you know job descriptions and
I’ve implemented an appraisal system for all the lads, which wasn’t in place before – ehm –
things like that, but I’m going off what their line manager’s telling me about their ability to
install our products without really understanding the technical side. So if ~Rob their line
manager says they’ve made a mistake putting a flat roof on because it was too hot and the
materials of the flat roof warped and did di di, after that I switch off because I don’t
understand the technical side of it and yet I’ve got to do an appraisal. Ehm – so I’ve – that’s
got – you know I’ve got to really throw myself into it, and now, about now would have been
the right time for it but I’m actually going off on maternity leave which will delay it a bit
more and, but that’s life isn’t it.
I: So do you feel your - this feeling about needing to get into that more technical side of it is
more to do with ehm – from a practical perspective so you can
N: That’s the first thing, yeah
I: yeah, or is it to do with your credibility?
N: That comes second but it is part of it. But I think if I was a man I would need that for
credibility as well, and maybe I need it a bit more because I’m a woman and because the
people here I think are very traditional people – ehm – I think it would have quite an impact
as a woman to be very technically able. It would have double the impact it would have if I
was a man, so I’ve got to use that opportunity. Ehm – but I’m also aware that other people’s
perspectives of me, which I’m always trying to understand because I’m interested in that side
of things, and it’s part of our approach to team management now, was the 360, the way we all
see each other rather than the boss at the top – it doesn’t matter how he’s perceived but he
just tells everybody, which is what we I’m referring to ~Ted, which is how he used to do it.
So ehm – and of course ~Bob’s parents when they managed the place, probably about 40% of
the staff now were here then, were being managed by a very traditional, he’s the big boss and
the wife in the background does the books. I know the wife in the background who does the
books actually contributed a significant amount to the business but I understand that was
really within a very traditional context, and how it was perceived was that she did the books.
I know, ~Bob knows and ~Ted knows and ~Rob knows that she was a key decision maker, so
it’s the classic kind of side kick woman who was actually very powerful but perhaps wasn’t
appreciated on the shop floor as being such – ehm – now were the partnership whose running
to the 40% and having seen that parenting style, ehm – I’m quite aware of, and [the
leadership programme] again has helped me be conscious of it – ehm – how our partnership
is perceived, and the trust that I need to get from staff that’s independent of ~Bob. And
another big part of understanding my role through the coaching has been about how, this
might be of relevance, how a lot of my motivation to do what I do within the business was
about reducing ~Bob’s stress levels as a partner, which was a supportive role that I was never
going to pull off. You can’t support someone and reduce their stress levels, I don’t believe
now, but I think when I started out I thought that was what I would do, that I would actually reduce his stress. I’ve learnt now that that’s his business. His stress is his business and he controls his stress not me. Ehm – I probably would have come to that conclusion eventually but the coach really helped me conceptualise that and that’s been really interesting – yeah – and made me think about how I need independent relationships with all the staff. So the duo thing as a woman and a wife I found really interesting, and I couldn’t have sat here and described it this way without having the coach in. It was just in the background of my sort of brain activity that I couldn’t describe. But I’m much more aware of it, I’ve read about it since. I wouldn’t have known what book to choose had I not had a coach who said you know it’s this, it’s that and so that’s been quite interesting, and also there’s a couple of people on the course the same. The woman who runs the IT company [says name], she’s in a similar position. Ehm – [says name] from the [company] works with his partner, so there’s a couple of people on there, and actually [says name] who runs the ehm – the
I: Engineering
N: Engineering [says company name]
I: Yeah
N: Yeah – ehm – she’s a woman in a man’s world with her sons and I’ve shared a lot of things, [names another delegate] sister’s just joined the business and how he was dealing with all that. There’s been some fascinating commonalities that we’ve shared in our learning sets or what were they called learning sets
I: Action learning sets
N: Yeah action learning sets, but I’ve learnt a lot from
I: What sort of things did you think you had in common?
N: The challenges of it are common and to be reassure that it’s not just me and that it’s and it’s kind of OK because other people feel it – ehm – but [names female delegate], have you spoke to [names her] yet?
I: Not yet no
N: She’s got three, I think she’s got three kids – they are quite a bit older than mine, but she’s with her partner and she’s the mum but she’s also an equal contributor – ehm – and the frustrations of that and the frustrations of being different to her husband and how her husband operates and how he makes decisions and she’s kind of cringing and wondering to what extent does she interfere and to what extent would that undermine his credibility to their staff, where he’s going to make a huge blunder because he’s just rubbish at X Y Z, and she wants to just walk in there and blab la bla and then she thinks ‘you know what, no I need to pick the kids up and just leave you to it and if there’s a mistake, there’s a mistake, I’m gonna go and pick the kids up because they’re waiting at the school gate’, and she told this kind of story and it was like ‘oh yeah, yeah@ yeah yeah!’@ You know it’s that, it’s that sort of shared experience at that level of detail where you think oh god I’ve seen a decision being made that I’ve disagreed with and I’ve got [baby] to pick up from school and literally on a day to day basis, you know that can be the case. Whereas if you didn’t have another commitment you could probably contribute more, but then how would you do that because your managing your partner as well as your, your husband as well as your business partner – that’s been really int- that’s been interesting to share. Ehm – [names another female delegate], is in a very old fashioned, traditional business – ehm – not her business isn’t old fashioned, the industry isn’t a sophisticated technological type business
I: Yeah
N: It’s very kind of similar to us in a lot of ways like that, in terms of personalities - her sons could be working here in terms of how they think, and how she’s been trying to empower them because she wants to lead them to lead the business. Ultimately ~Bob and I want to
have one or two individuals who we feel have got potential to run this business and we are
able to work on it and not in it.

I: Yes

N: and she is driving for that as well. Ehm – and she’s in a very similar culture to me. She’s
better at it actually, so I’ve .. and I think it’s because she’s – one of the things I’ve learnt from
her is that she has got a lot of technical know-how so she can, she knows what she’s talking
about on that side of things. Ehm, which I don’t and I need to be able to do at some point,
yeah so that’s been interesting. Ehm- [names male delegate] these are all anecdotal chit
chatty type things that we share but [says delegate’s name] often sort of laughs about ehm –
how he’s had his weaknesses shown to him by [name] his wife and how he’s had moments of
realisations that actually they are quite true, and he’s had to sort of go with them and so he
can get really fixated on and stressed on one particular thing and [his wife] is sort of trying to
nudge him onto the next thing and he sort of has his moment of realisation where he sort of
goes yeah you’re right I’ll have to do that you know. It’s just their dynamic is similar to ours
where you know it’s ehm, you have to be quite careful because there’s professional and
private and trying to go on holiday and not talk about work the whole time, or you know the
weekend comes and you’re not just, you know that’s quite interesting to get to that point I
think.

I: Yeah, how do you actually manage that, to keep the professional and the private – well
manage it?

N: Well, I don’t think you do to be honest. I don’t think we’ve got it sussed at all, I think
probably the most obvious one is, and the advice we’ve had off our parent’s and his parent’s,
cos we’re following in their footsteps aren’t we? Ehm – don’t talk about work when you go
home is like the golden rule that they swear by, no matter how tempting you’re sitting around
the table and your kid wants to talk about something at school and don’t interrupt and say
‘did you do that job with so and so, you didn’t oh we’ve got to fire him then, come on you’ve
got to do da da d. You know that’s kind of the worst scenario, so it’s really hard to do that
because sometimes you really need to say something about work – there and then because it’s
popped in your head and what we have ended up doing is emailing each other from home.
We’re talking, we could be talking about a party at the weekend, I’ll have a memory, I’ll go
to my phone and I’ll send him and email about work. And he’s in the kitchen there! I’ll send
it by email to him rather than say ‘can you remember’. And the good thing about email is that
he will deal with it when he comes in on Monday. So we’ve started doing that. That’s bizarre
I think. A lot of people find that quite odd. Would you like a scone? ((stop for short break but
discuss gendered practice, issues and personal experiences during the break)). To what extent
my example here, and this is something that came out of the mentoring was – to what extent
is that true that I am a woman in a man’s world and it’s a man’s world and I’m doing it with
my partner, and I might feel insecure about that or I might feel frustrated about certain
incidences say, but I’ve had to really question what’s true and what’s not
I: and through your actions you’re contributing to the construction of this as a woman

N: Yeah and also take responsibility for it

I: Mmh

N: and that’s been a real moment of awakening where I have had to take really take
responsibility and think yeah I’m gonna have to learn about our products and I’m gonna have
to become more technically driven – ehm – ((private discussion takes place)) but I’m also
very aware that a lot of feelings of being stereotyped come from your own stereotype about
yourself and not just what is actually true. And I quite like, I like to question that myself
really because I just assume that it must be the case because these are all builders, you know,
and I’m a psychologist whose got a creative background from her old job and you know what
– how – what on earth – how would I be perceived, you know this was my thought two years
ago. Ehm – what I’ve come to appreciate is that’s my assumption, that’s my thought, you
know and am I going to confirm that because that’s my thought because that’s my thought or
is it actually true, and trying to be objective – it’s almost impossible isn’t it? I don’t think I
saw it in academia but maybe that’s because I was in psychology, which is ehm you know
pretty healthy in terms of the male female, but maybe in business, but not social sciences is
quite
I: you were saying about some of the men that work for you are these working Welsh men
and the way that they might see you and their attitude, can you just say a little bit more about
that?
N: Yeah, ehm – yeah I’m trying to think of an example, ehm – one of our members of staff
has worked with the company for 20 odd years, Welsh speaker, very skilled, manual labour,
love hate on the knuckles type, I don’t know if it’s love hate but something like – ehm – the
identity thing as a complete aside I find fascinating because I am Welsh!
I: Yeah yeah, I am, yeah
N: West Walian, just don’t speak it, but if you don’t speak it are you allowed to be Welsh?
You know all that kind of stuff it’s fascinating. ((someone comes into room again)). One of
the things that I did straight away when I took on the personnel side of it was have trackers
fitted on all the vans. Ehm- for two reasons, there was a practical reason and there was a
message as well. The message was we know where you are and that sort of message, but that
was never explicitly given. The message we gave as in the real reason was that if we know
where certain fitters are we can manage – ehm – the spontaneous side and the service side
much more easily. So for example, if we know that ~Gwyn is in [local village] and we’ve just
had a service call in [nearby village] [example of job] we can look and we can say oh he’s
~Gwyn is still in [local village], call his mobile - can you call into [nearby village] and help
Mrs Jones with her [job], and the management of servicing has just gone so much more
smoothly since we can physically look on the computer to where people are. It’s also, funnily
enough, we’ve decreased our petrol consumption because they know we can see where they
are, they’re not popping to the Spar so often and all this kind of thing. Ehm – anyway so this
was implemented, pretty much when I arrived and I was aware of the message it was giving
and I thought carefully about it and decided it was a good thing actually. So one of our guys
whose been here for twenty odd years – ehm – absolutely hated it, felt controlled, of course,
ehm threw his tools down, literally threw his tools down and walked off site and said he
wasn’t coming back. At the same time I implemented – ehm – a feedback sheet from
customers that the fitters had to get from our customers, which was a piece of paper that they
had to hold and potentially even write on – like a contract number. I’m not their ‘f’ ing
secretary and I’m being watched and I’ve been here twenty years, I don’t need to be watched.
I completely understand it and in retrospect I would have managed it slightly differently but
there were various issues you know at the time. Ehm – that meant it had to happen the way it
happened in a way but it wasn’t ideal. Eh I’m getting mixed up now. Oh yeah, so that was
one particular guy’s reaction and I was very aware of that it was well it’s since ~Jennifer’s
been here isn’t it. All of a sudden now we’re getting forms and we’re being tracked sort of
thing. Ehm and there was one time when we passed each other on the forecourt there and he
actually blanked me, he just didn’t say hello or anything, he just grunted and drove off with
like a skid so it was like eeechhhh@ I’ve managed a team of like seven women and it’s
nothing like this lot I tell you in terms of bitchiness and the hissy fits and ehm – oh my god
it’s crazy. Anyway, so that was the first thing. Then the next thing is that a week later one of
his team members complained that he’d lost his temper on site and thrown a hammer which
had banged his hand, so all of a sudden we had a potentially serious issue on our hands when
it came to personnel management and health and safety and legal issues. I got some legal
advice on it. The legal advice at the time was actually to suspend this man in case he’s violent
on site, that’s my phone alarm – hang on ((deals with phone)), ehm and this was all within the
context of me doing appraisals – ehm – and there being one quite ugly disciplinary that I was
involved in ehm where, well basically we had a series of disciplinaries where we were trying
to manage this guy out who we were trying to manage out, ehm – and all of these things sort
of arrived together. So this guy who’s been here for sixteen years was being managed out,
they had forms to fill in, they had trackers, they’re having appraisals, and you know I quickly
realised that I wasn’t communicating what I was doing in a very effective way at all. Ehm –
which looking back is so obvious, ehm – but the reaction was quite negative. So the
appraisals were an opportunity for me to try and address the balance that I’m not some
stranger who just kind of parachuted in and you know making their lives difficult, that I’m
actually trying to implement things that are important for our protection and your protection
as a fitter, that the appraisals aren’t about marking you ten out of ten or one out of ten for
how good you are it’s a system that’s designed to encourage you for us to find skills, gaps, to
look at what additional training there is to motivate you to go up to the next pay scale, which
there wasn’t one, something to move towards, you know, appraisals were an opportunity for
me to do that. So with this one particular guy we had this very blatant attitude of not really
agreeing with a lot of things that I was doing, and then he threw a hammer and then he had to
have an appraisal so I had a situation where I was in a meeting with him but I had to think
very carefully about how I was going to manage that meeting, and it was an opportunity for
me as a woman, whose blond, who’s not Welsh speaking, whose married to the boss whose
come from a psychology background, ehm – who’s put tracker’s on his vans – it was a really
important meeting for me to get right. At the same time – ehm – I was developing a
relationship of trust with this guy’s line manager, who manages all the fitters who was in on
the meeting and it was an opportunity for me to demonstrate to him how I am going to
manage a very tricky meeting. I thought about that meeting, I didn’t think about much else
for about two weeks, so I really properly prepared for it and spoke to a few people to get their
advice on it. Really tried to understand his perspective and how I might be perceived but at
the same time be aware of my own assumptions and it was very complicated as you can
imagine. So I had quite a designed approach to the meeting really – ehm – but it came across
as completely spontaneous to him, hopefully. But I’d thought very carefully about it and –
ehm – you know very proud of how that went. It really did go well and he left laughing and
motivated and also got a lot of the other fitters who were a bit narkey about having trackers
on their vans on board because he understood why we’d done it, and you know I played down
the I wanted to check he was going to Spar at six o’clock and really upped the it so that when
you’re in [local village] you can go to [a nearby village] and we’ve saved ourselves twenty
pounds. If we save ourselves twenty pounds on one day, in a year it’s this, which will give us
a surplus of that which we’re going to put into the bonus system so the appraisals now is that
if you go up a level you can potentially earn another fifty pounds a week and the appraisal
system helps you to understand what you have to do to get up to the next level. Well what do
I have to do to get to the next level? Well you are very good at this and your skills are
there, where you can build up is getting cheques in from customers because this is actually
talking to the customers at the end and getting cheques in off them at the end, he’s not doing
that, somebody else is having to do that which is an extra resource, so if you did that, that
would bring our costs down and you’d go up to level 3 fitter which means you’re earning an
extra £50 a week. And he’s starting to think OK OK. And then we had to address the tricky
situation of his violent nature, which I started off making a joke of and then sort of, it was
very much about building the relationship with him. And this is what I mean about building
the relationship with him and saying ‘and I hear you’ve got a bit of a temper haven’t you
~Dewi’, ‘well you know I have a bit I must admit and I go shooting see, and you know I go
shooting and it’s brilliant for me and it helps me, helps me relax you know’. ‘ Oh you go
shooting’ blab la bla, start talking about the shooting – ‘my uncle goes shooting, I know a little bit about it’, started talking about his guns, by the end of it he promised to bring a rabbit home at the end of the weekend which I was really excited about and the relationship was already there, I’d already said you know that I was aware of the violence issue and tried to explain to him from an employment law point of view how serious that could potentially be. If he hurt some other member of staff he was under our protection, (H) and tried to explain the legal issue as a serious issue so that it wasn’t just me saying ‘don’t be cross and throw a hammer about you silly man’ and try and get to his level and then explain something quite complicated to help him to try and see a different perspective, and really just spent a lot of time trying to put together the perfect meeting. It wasn’t perfect, you know, I could have done it better but I think I addressed the key things, and I think what I did was build a rapport with him in a way that I still had credibility and a lot more understanding and got him a lot more on side and what I had to do was really manufacture that opportunity and design it very carefully because I don’t have the automatic impact as a woman, as a bosses wife, as a new person – ehm – so I think being conscious of all those things was a good thing and it helped me design that meeting and try and use it as an opportunity

I: Yeah

N: and I think you just have to be a bit more conscious of those opportunities and using them whereas perhaps if, in ~Bob’s position, who’s been here for years and can talk Welsh to them and understands that he’s got a lot of respect from a technical point of view, we’re very different, he wouldn’t even have to think about it. He would just say ‘~Dewi did you throw a hammer at so and so, that was a bit ridiculous wasn’t it?’ You know, whatever, it just takes a bit more time and effort, a bit more thought. Yeah – that’s an example isn’t it?

I: Yeah, and are you learning from that all the time, are you learning from these #

N: Yeah I’ve learnt who the ring leaders are, that’s been key. We’ve purposely got rid of one of them which has had a huge impact. How I delivered the appraisals has come out of that, my relationship with ~Rob [line manager], told other people about that meeting and that was fed back to other people in other indirect ways, ehm – so ~Rob could see I wasn’t just someone landing, I did understand personnel management and the processes and even just the knowledge of the employment side of things, you know that kind of thing gets talked about – ‘well ~Jennifer handled that well because she knows that apparently if it did hit ~Jacob’s hand as all ~Jacob has to do is make a statement and that’s it, ra ra ra’ and they are all @

I: Yeah@

N: I know who the honey pot is, and the honey pot is ~Leslie, the lady downstairs on the reception. Ehm – all the fitters talk to her, all the manager’s talk to her and she is very much a centre piece of the business as she is practically within the business as well as her role of office manager. My relationship with her is absolutely key in how I, I use her to manage my relationships with other people. You know I’m very conscious of that. I don’t think ~Bob is as conscious but I have to be more conscious if we’re doing something new ~Leslie has to be on side. ~Leslie has to be on side in ways that aren’t obvious. So if I want to get ~Leslie on side I won’t treat her to something a week before because it will be too obvious, so there is an ongoing relationship thing and my relationship with ~Leslie is key to how I’m related to everyone else in the business, and it’s true for everyone else in the business actually but I don’t know how conscious they are. Maybe I’m more conscious of it. Because when I talked about it to ~Bob he’s like ‘do you, really what?’

I: Yeah

N: I say, all the fitters come in at half past four, they walk through the door and they go straight to ~Leslie and they have a chat with ~Leslie. ~Leslie knows what’s happening with every contract, what’s pissing the fitters off, what’s not pissing the fitters off, why they’re dropping out of the [firm] football team, why they’re cheesed off about it, you know ~Leslie
knows all this stuff you know. She’s the office manager, you know, it’s like a different way
of understand it and the impact that you can have. I think that’s another thing that has come
out of [the leadership programme]. We’ve all been really forced to think about the impact that
we have, we just think people get on with it but
I: I was going to ask you a little bit more about that, what do you feel you have got out of the
programme. What would you say the really key things are?
N: The mentoring and coaching in crystallising what my issues are, not resolving them – ehm
– helping me verbalise them. Ehm – and the biggest thing has been sharing commonalities
with other businesses in a way that you can’t do at a classic networking type group or event
or something. There’s something instantly deep about the relationships on the course and I
don’t really know why. Whether it’s the dynamic of our cohort or whether it’s something
common to them all but it was very open and deep very quickly. Ehm – so there’s real
support and empathy between people. It’s quite special relationships that we’ve all got with
individual people. There were some people there that I’ve hardly spoken to but there are
some where quite special relationships over and above getting a business card. Ehm – saying
that the network, we’ve sold a couple of jobs off it and you know we’ve discovered [another
delegate’s product] you know where to go if you want some welding done or this kind of
thing, so you know it’s complimented the business network as well as personal development.
Ehm – and it has timed, it has a time table so you have to have some time to think about your
business otherwise you’re not on the course. Ehm – and that’s a rare opportunity isn’t it, so as
I say those were the main things.
I: Yeah
N: Much more so than anything to do with the content of the masterclasses or any like
activities that we might have done. They’re all, for me, incidental, they’re, they’re almost the
context where the good stuff can happen.
I: Yes
N: Yeah, rather than I haven’t really learnt anything – I haven’t really learnt anything new in
any of the masterclasses. Ehm – I think that what it’s told me is that this business is actually
quite a sophisticated business so if I’ve learnt about web design or the marketing one, and
one or two are really taken with one or two of them, I kind of think no I kind knew that. The
sales one that everyone was really raving about, we’ve been doing that for years. So I didn’t
learn anything new but I thought oh good, you know, our sales team know what they’re
talking about then. Ehm – yeah the masterclasses haven’t really – Anita’s did speak to me
because she’s a psychologist and it gave me the impetus to, I’ve always wanted to do
psychometric testing, but it gave me the impetus to do it there and then.
I: Yeah
N: Definitely, ehm – the action learning sets are a formal context that is like a catalyst for the
relationships that you’re building anyway. So you know, that’s really what the whole course
is – a context to allow other things that are really difficult to achieve, to happen, it’s more
than the substance of the course really. For me personally, I mean I don’t know, I think a lot
of people would say differently about perhaps the masterclasses or something. I think a lot of
people have actually been, you know, quite critical about a few of them, but a lot of them
seem to have got a lot more out of it than I have Ehm – I personally find the coaching the best
I think. But there are some people that didn’t get anything out of it, so it’s interesting isn’t it.
How does that compare to
N: Well as you say it seems be different for different people. You know some people have
gone away and realised they’ve got to do quite a lot of work on their branding,
I: Yeah the branding one really did have a big impact on a lot of people
N: And then very mixed reviews about the action learning and the coaching as well. I think
I: That must be hard from an evaluation point of view, to have such a diverse response to the same thing, because what do you do then? Do you keep the branding masterclass but not the environment one, you know, it’s like, I dunno.

N: I think on the whole, with perhaps the exception of one of the masterclasses I think the rest will be repeated because most people felt they got ((ambulance passing so inaudible)) I think the action learning and the coaching, you know my personal view is it does seem to depend some extent on the dynamics either with the facilitator or the coach and within the group – if it’s action learning within the group, and also how open you are to the whole process. You know coaching isn’t for everyone is it?

N: It’s interesting how it will be evaluated because I think that some of the coaching ones that didn’t work out were usually the woman coach and the man businessman and they didn’t understand coaching, and they didn’t like the thought of sitting and talking to a woman and I think that was probably for a lot of the people who saw it as a counselling thing and there were sort of a lot of misconceptions, and I thought that’s going to be very hard to evaluate because if you just get the feedback from the business person it’s not really that fair and what would be an interesting thing to do with [the leadership programme], I don’t know to what extent it’s done already, but to recruit businesses pro-actively, sorry I mean intentionally so the businesses that come together is designed in some way and the coaches and how they are matched with people is designed as well, that it’s intentional – I think it’s been random. I think how the cohorts are put together depends on who’s applied and the coaching thing has been quite random, but I think actually they’re quite important. I think I’ve been very lucky with this cohort. If I imagine myself on the next cohort, I don’t think the businesses on the second cohort would be right for me in that I see them as, I see ourselves without sounding completely big headed and arrogant, but we’re more advanced. I think this business is. I don’t think I’d have got the same, but (Hx) I’d probably be completely wrong and judging books by its cover. When I saw the list I thought I’m really glad I’m not on that cohort because this cohort is about right. Of course, I could be totally, that’s probably a huge assumption actually and you learn from everybody don’t you, you know. But – ehm –

I: Did you feel there were specially skills in that group then that you learnt from?

N: Yeah, yeah, the level – it’s not the size of the business, I don’t know how I would measure it, and my lay term is sophistication, they are the right level of sophistication and I felt that could be even further stretched sort of thing and that maybe there’s a cohort that would stretch me more, I don’t know, or even to have a business that was more similar to mine would have been interesting as well as the fact that there are very different businesses. It would have been quite nice to have had that sort of thing. And I think the coaching could have benefited from careful consideration as to who was matched with who, rather than it being random.

I: So you didn’t choose your coach?

N: No you were assigned, and I think it was random and I think that’s why some of them didn’t work out. Like there’s a couple of people that haven’t had a positive experience that I think would have done had they have had my coach, ehm – or if they’d have had a coach that was better at dealing with ehm – wrongly made assumptions at the beginning of the sessions. I think some of the coaches just assumed that maybe they’d been briefed or, so things like that – yeah, yeah.

I: Yeah

N: But at the same time it would lose the natural, so I don’t know if it was very manufactured in terms of how everyone is put together, even the action learning sets. I thought god is this really random? Because they’d be huge benefit for some thought as to whose grouped together and is the knowledge of us as individuals deep enough for whoever is going to make that decision to make the right decision? And how would you ever get to that point? I don’t
know, but and that’s one part of my feedback is always you know, I’d be really interested to see how a much more intentional recruitment and placing of individuals – how you’d do it I don’t know. And maybe the openness of it is actually its benefit. But I’d be very interested to know if there was another way of doing it. Yeah

I: Going forward now to the business in the future, where do you see your business going?
N: Well our five year plan is to have re-structured the ehm operations of the business in terms of personnel so were doing the next year will be this pilot mini job swap and then really what we are looking at is instead of having the structure we’ve always had we’re going to change the structure quite radically. We’re sort of coming at things like that, we’re sort of coming at things from the side – a lot more personality driven from the side of skills, and we’re going to departmentalise the business so that departments are more self-policing which makes less hands on management that’s required is the plan. Yeah so, the people in charge of departments are the right people and we’re making that decision on a different criteria now than just skill. Ehm – and it’s reflecting departments that have got responsibility, which is a very adult way of structuring the business, so instead of having you know a top management team that dictate down what everyone should do, we’re hoping that it will be one long line of six different self-policing departments that have two or three overall overseers and then they have to be developed in such a way that if personnel does change it’s not the end of the World, because that’s always a problem in a small business – that you put all your chickens, all your eggs into one basket where you’ve got one key personnel person and if they decide to move to Edinburgh you’ve got to start again and you can never get to the – so we need to work that out so that it becomes a structure that needs less hands on ultimately so that – ehm – we’ve got opportunities to work on the business and not in it, but also our other interest – we’ve got a property development company as well that we’ve sort of half started that’s doing small bit’s but has got much more potential so we want to grow that. Ehm – we’d like to take a year out as a family and travel for a year before the kids get too big

I: Lovely, yeah
N: Ehm and early retirement. So five years we will have the bones of this structure. Ehm - and in ten years all our dreams will come true! @ It will be this lovely little machine that just works by itself and just chucks out dividends once a year! And ehm – we’ll have our own projects that won’t necessarily be about solving – troubleshooting on a daily basis. And I think that’s probably the same for most small businesses is trying to get to that point. Ehm – more training for me definitely, more training for everybody in the business – ehm – and holding our values, which is that we are not a purely a commercial business and I think that’s something that is quite important to me and ~Bob. We’re – we do other things, you know we do good charity work, that’s something that’s very important to us so we support and are involved in local things around us that we care about, that if we were purely money driven we wouldn’t do and also just continuing to make it a really happy place to work rather than a cut throat business, we want people to be happy here and for it to be a happy place to work, ehm – but at the same time it’s got to be profitable otherwise there’s no point in doing any of it. So it’s ever striving for that really.

I: Are you coming back full time after you’ve had the baby?
N: Yeah, yeah it’s just a matter of when!
I: ((Laughs))
N: Yeah, we’ll use the same kind of child care that we did, so I’ll have six months at home and then I will do three days probably – so there will be childcare involved for two days and then I’ll do that probably for three months and then the baby will then go to nursery, which is connected to ((names nursery)) where my little boy is now and then my little boy will actually be in proper school - primary school just up the road, so the timing of it is actually quite good. So it will just follow the same pattern because it worked really well with the first.
I: Yeah
N: And I don’t have any of my other things going on, I can purely concentrate on this and really get focused into that five year plan. This is the idea – she says! So we’ll see.
I: I’ll come back in five years and see!
N: Yeah I’ll still be here; I’ll have probably taken up teaching again and eh@
I: Is there anything else you’d like to tell me before I switch this tape off?
N: Ehm – no I think I’ve just talked haven’t I, I’ve just talked for hours – I bet you’re knackered are you@?
I: I’m fine@
N: I’m sure it’s enjoyable but it’s also quite strange listening to someone else for a few hours isn’t it?
I: No it’s actually really really interesting.
N: Yeah, OK well I hope I’ve said some things that are relevant.
END