Abstract for ESREA LHBN 17

**Natural worldviews: Constructing personal discourses to ‘master the universe’**

This paper examines personal and popular discourses on nature. It takes a grounded narrative approach, discussing material collected through a series of informal telephone conversations to people who were physically related but geographically apart. This empirical data derives from interviews with members of a single family, all co-incidentally female and drawn from four successive generations.

Applying three of Foley’s dimensions of adult learning, ‘formal’, ‘non-formal’ and ‘incidental’ (Foley, 2004), the initial research set out to examine how attitudes towards nature develop within the family and how these have changed over time; addressing my concerns about the apparent indifference to their environment of children playing in a local park. This aim remains important as I collect data from further family groups but my interest is now far broader, sparked by finding personal discourses on nature within the early data that were neither sought nor expected.

The research adopted an informal narrative approach but conversations were orchestrated to address a series of core topics if they failed to arise naturally. To compare the different viewpoints and explore the historical trajectory some parity of content was necessary. For instance, I asked each individual how nature had been addressed in the school curricula and, specifically, ‘what constitutes nature’ and ‘why it matters’. To probe breadth and depth of knowledge, and provide opportunities to make the narratives more concrete, participants were required to name the most interesting/exotic examples of different species with which they were familiar.

Initial data analysis considered key themes across the four conversations and this comparative material served as ‘evidence’ for the different dominant discourses found within each narrative. Complementary holistic analysis, focusing on the images and language used, also showed that each participant held a personal worldview on nature. This clearly developed over the life-course and was distinctively different from that of other family members. Education (formal, and non-formal within the family) appears to support knowledge replication (like naming the same plants), and similar behaviours (like watching *Countryfile*) may derive from shared familial practices, but each individual clearly engaged in continuing constructivist activity (Vygotskian higher-level thinking) to understand nature conceptually.

The paper outlines the four very different individual perspectives on nature. It then considers these in relation to more theorised ‘popular’ discourses within the public and academic domains, and the historical and educational contexts for each participant, particularly in relation to prevalent views of nature. It finds the German concept of *Umwelt* particularly useful. This signifies an innate ability to understand the natural world, one of the mechanisms evolving to ensure survival. *Umwelt* is species-specific, a meso-level concept. It describes the perceived world, a world shaped by our ‘particular sensory and cognitive powers and limited by [our] deficits’ (Yoon, 2009:15). The research reported here, suggests that the concept is applicable at the micro-level, too, for all four participants appear to operate within an individualised *Umwelt*.

**References**

Foley, G. (2004) *Dimensions of adult learning.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Yoon, C.K. (2009) *Naming nature: The clash between instinct and science.* New York: Norton.