

MY IDENTI-TREE

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As Margaret demonstrates, the 'who' is linked to the 'where' in our lives. Here, she takes a very personal approach (arguably the most important) to the issue of identity.

Who am I?

There is no single clear-cut answer to this question. Our identity is not fixed, but is an ongoing process, influenced by many factors: some involve 'time', others 'place', 'people', 'experiences'; all are embedded in our family history and geography.

Who do you think you are?

Even though I live in Devon, I think of myself as a Londoner – albeit one who speaks with northern vowels developed during years of teaching in Humberside. (In my first year a colleague commented that the Reception children I taught talked about 'caps and saucers'!) London is where I was born – in Stanmore, in the ancient county of Middlesex – and, although I haven't lived there for over 55 years, I still identify with the capital city. Yet, like most of us, factors in my family history, family geography and my own life suggest I have a much more complex identity.

Perhaps, like me, you've been exploring your family history, possibly inspired by the BBC television series *Who Do You Think You Are?* (now in its twelfth series). In the course of my research, on my mother's side I've been introduced to many people I'd never heard of in family conversation – Christina, Isabella, Elizabeth, three Walter Sidneys, three Edward Charles and many others. I have discovered a Scottish salmon fisherman, East Anglian stonemasons, a Norwich silk weaver and boot maker, an ostrich feather curler (for Victorian hats), one of Queen Victoria's Kensington Palace gardeners, meerscham pipe finishers, an ivory turner and five generations of Thames lightermen. There was even a guard on a convict ship – the prison hulk *Dasher* moored at Woolwich in 1827–28. (Charles Dickens describes these hulks in *Great Expectations*). All of these people have contributed to my identity.

Where do you think you come from?

Through these people and their occupations I have 'visited' north, east and south London, Essex, Kent, Norfolk and Aberdeen in the UK, America and Australia. All these places have contributed to my identity.



My great-grandmother, mother and grandmother at Yarmouth.

Suddenly (and it was sudden) my interest and question changed to 'Where do you think you come from?' I had moved from family history to family geography. What had caused my ancestors to move from Aberdeen and Norfolk to London? Why did one young male predecessor go to Australia? Why did two sisters sail to America in the 1850s? In geographical terms, what were the push and/or pull factors that encouraged my family to move around? And how has this movement impacted on my identity? What were these places like, what were their characteristics, when my ancestors lived in, and left, them? What are they like now? What caused the changes? How has the identity of these places changed?

Some of these movements can be linked with the Industrial Revolution, for example the decline of the hand-loom silk weaving in Norwich with industrialisation

resulted in the move to London. However, why the salmon fisher and shipwrights in Aberdeen moved all the way to London in about 1832 (bypassing other estuaries and major rivers on the way) remains a mystery and encourages speculation.

Apart from feeling like a Londoner, I have always had something of a 'love affair' with the Scottish highlands and islands; needing an annual 'fix' of the remoteness, landscape and way of life. Imagine my delight, and surprise, when I discovered some Scottish roots in Bridge of Don, Aberdeen – the salmon fisherman.

This is my family geography. I would enjoy using it as the basis of work in primary geography (and history), but it is personal. It is about my family and me. Perhaps though, there are interesting people, occupations, places and movements in your background that you could take into your classroom.

Personal geography

If you have yet to research your family's history and geography, and are not in a position to explore and teach from it, you could start with your own lifetime, your own personal geography.

Answering the questions in Figure 1 can start you on the journey. It's a personal decision whether or not to admit that the details are about you, you might choose to invent a fictitious family to anonymise the details.

My own answers to these questions include Poplar, London; Exmouth and Exeter, Devon; Nsukka, Eastern Nigeria; Scunthorpe and Hull, Humberside; Holland, France, Belgium, Germany and Italy in Europe; Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland in Scandinavia; The Gambia, Botswana, Tanzania and Kenya in Africa; India; China; and the USA. My answers include cities, towns, villages, counties, countries, continents, urban and rural areas, developed and less developed settings, and lots of travel and places in the UK. Phew, what a lot of geography is there!

Returning to the assertion that the evolution of our identity is an ongoing process, I remember telling student teachers that their forthcoming study visit to The Gambia would be a life-changing experience. Afterwards one of them said that at the time they had not believed me, but that it certainly was: the experience had influenced their identity.

Family geography

If you have researched your family history, you might like to focus on your family geography. You will be able to develop a longer timeline, with more places, more change, more interesting discoveries and more influences on identity.

Advantages and disadvantages

It is probably advantageous to centre on a family, whether real or fictitious, because it will include both genders and a range of ages. What would life be like for each member of the family at 'this' time and in 'this' place? It would be tempting to encourage pupils to investigate their own family geography, but this is impracticable. It would be different for each pupil and thus unmanageable in the classroom – there would be no common ground to talk about. In addition to the difficulty in collecting information, there are sensitive situations that should be avoided. This is why using your own family makes sense. The people (even if anonymised) and the places would be known to you, so you would be teaching from a position of strength and interest.

Beyond considering personal identity, the geographical opportunities in asking 'Where do you come from?' are many, including: characteristics of places 'then and now'; identifying how push/pull factors influence people's movement; the cause/effect of changes in industries and occupations over time (with the trends from primary to secondary, tertiary and quaternary industries).

Finally...

Having just read through what I've written, I realise there's a place temporarily forgotten that has had a huge influence on my identity. In 1944-45 my mother, sister and I were evacuated to a farm (Figures 2a and b) on the Staffordshire/Shropshire border; a stark contrast to our suburban London semi. We regularly holidayed there afterwards and visited the farmer's wife until her death in 1991. As I reflect on this, I realise what a strong influence



Figure 2a: The farm in Staffordshire I was evacuated to. Seen here in 1972.



Figure 2b: The 'farm' today.

the farm has had on my life, interests, activities, career... in fact my whole identity, and even those of my son and grandson! Without this experience what direction would my life have taken?

Identity is influenced by time, place, people and the experience of the individual and those before and around them. At a time when there is a lot of interest in what it is to be British perhaps we should focus on what it is to be 'me'. This may then lead to a more personal construction of what 'Britishness' means. Our personal identities are nested within the people, places and landscapes of, and beyond, these islands.

Further reading

- Geographical Association (2009) *Primary Geographer*, 69, (Focus on Britain and Britishness). Available at: www.geography.org.uk/pg (last accessed 13 October 2105).
- Spencer, C. (2004) *Place attachment, place identity and the development of the child's self-identity: searching the literature to develop an hypothesis*. Available at: www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/156231.htm (last accessed 13 October 2015).
- Tanner, J. (2009) 'Place attachment and children's happiness', *Primary Geographer*, 68, pp. 5-8.

Where were my parents born?	If these places are different, why did my parents move?	How has my identity been affected by these decisions, movements, places, experiences?
Where was I born?		
Where did I go to school?	What influenced my choice? What were the push/pull factors?	
Where did I go to college?		
What were these places like 'then'?		
What are they like now?		
Where do I live now?	What influenced these choices? If there were other moves, include these.	
Where do I work now?		
Where have I travelled to/ been on holiday?	What influenced these choices?	
What are these places like?		
Where would I like to travel to/visit in the future? Why?		

Figure 1: Questions to start your journey of a lifetime

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