

Who am I?

Gary Reynolds

Abstract: This is a personal narrative of Gary Reynolds, a first-generation Ph.D. student at Durham University. This narrative outlines Reynolds' struggle with overcoming early life experiences to achieve his ambition of gaining a Ph.D. at an elite higher education university in England. Reynolds discusses how issues such as early childhood trauma, crime, drug use and homelessness have impacted his life and how these experiences have shaped who he is today. This narrative concludes with Reynolds explaining how he has used these experiences as a positive influence in his studies and why he feels this makes him and other first-generation scholars valuable additions to the higher education system. Content Advisory: This narrative contains content that may be upsetting to readers.

Who am I?

This is, in some ways, a simple question to answer. I am me, this person going about my day to day business. I am a father, a husband, a homeowner and a Ph.D. student. I have an ambition to develop a career in academia where I can research important issues and teach in a field that piques my interest. I am a person who loves to read and write and learn new languages. I am a person who feels a deep connection with the area that I live, the lakes and mountains, the history of the place and the people that came before me. I am a person who loves to travel and explore new places and cultures (and food!) and I find joy in watching football, even when my team loses every week. This is me, in a nutshell.

The description of the person above is one of a regular person, one that many could identify with, one of a person who should, on the face of it, have no problem getting by in the world of higher education. To some extent, this is true. I have got by in higher education for six years of my life so far and some might say, I have excelled with what I have achieved to date. I achieved first class grades in both my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and I have received funding for my Ph.D. in a fiercely competitive funding stream. These are fantastic achievements and ones I am very proud of. However, regardless of my achievements and my largely normal identity, I always have, and perhaps always will, to some extent, feel constrained by the person I once was. This previous identity follows me around like a shadow and on a subconscious level, it holds me back from being the academic I know I can be. I work very hard, and I try my best at everything I do but previous experiences and the stereotypes and labels that these have come with have left their mark on me and make 'getting by' and even excelling just that little bit harder. They make me feel like I am not worthy of a place in this institution and of my funding. They make me doubt myself and my ability to engage in discussion with others who may have been more privileged than I and who may feel like they belong. They make me feel like an imposter and that I have somehow tricked my way into doing what I am doing.

So, who am I really? What other identity do I speak of other than the one that you might find on social media?

The brief background outlined below is very difficult for me to share; it is incredibly personal and is not something I share lightly. Nevertheless, the basis of my first-generation scholar experience is embedded within these stories. It is these experiences that have shaped me as a person

and without sharing this context, it would not be possible to truly understand my experience as a first-gen scholar.

I was born to working class parents on a council estate, like many children. However, unlike many children, my brother and sister and I experienced things no child, or adult for that matter, should ever experience. As young children the three of us would often see our mother being beaten by our father. We were also unfortunate to be in the house when my mother was being raped by my father, the screams from which are a sound that one does not forget. These beatings were not restricted to our mother as we too were also beaten and locked in dark cupboards when we were naughty. My father, who experienced his own trauma as a child, was a criminal and we were subject to the ramifications of his lifestyle, including various retaliatory acts as a consequence of his behaviour. We experienced our house being set on fire twice whilst we were at home, and we had bricks thrown through the windows in the room we slept in, leaving my brother in hospital with wounds from the broken glass.

Understandably, my mother turned to alcohol and drugs, and we spent many days either without parental supervision or in the house whilst my mother was unconscious. We also experienced her trying to commit suicide during a stay in a women's refuge whilst trying to escape my father, likely as a way of not having to experience her own pain. As a result, we went into the care of the state, and we experienced many different moves to foster homes and children's homes in quite a short space of time. At first, the three of us were placed together but we soon got separated into different homes as we were too hard to manage as a triple threat. I was the 'lucky' one out of my brother and sister, being the youngest and I got adopted at the age of 8. My adoptive parents were just what I needed at the time. They offered me stability, love and care and for 8 years until I was 16, they tried their best to undo the damage that had already been done. Were it not for these kind people, I would not be where I am today.

At 14 I started experimenting with smoking weed and drinking alcohol and committing petty crimes to look cool, like many of my peers. At first, this was just an experiment, but it soon became more of a habit and a way of life. Looking back, I can see this is when the wheels were starting to come off. I was the class clown at school and always yearned to make people laugh, probably as way of making people like me. With the constant moving at a young and important educational age, I missed quite a lot of what was required to keep me in line with everyone else. I always felt like I was playing catch up and I often got detentions for my behaviour or for absurd things such as, my handwriting being messy. My French teacher seemed to hate me because she thought I was writing this way on purpose to annoy her. Low and behold, I made a habit of getting into trouble whilst at school. I see now that, while I do take responsibility for my actions, this could have been minimised or event prevented if I had teachers who understood individual needs and ways of learning rather than trying to make every student fit neatly into a box. In year 10, in a year group assembly, I was voted as the most likely to go to prison when I was older. This was meant as a joke, but this only further embedded the way I was feeling and behaving at the time and set in motion the feeling of being different and not worthy of a place. It almost doesn't need written that I failed my exams at 16 and I left school with no qualifications.

Shortly after failing my exams, my birth mother died from the years of drink and prescription medication when I was 16. This was and still is one of the most painful things I have dealt with. This unfortunately coincided with a chance meeting with my birth father who was still up to his old tricks. From here, I went from low to low. I parted ways with my adoptive parents after a series of serious clashes and I went to live with my brother in a flat that was being paid for by the social services (he was still in the care of the state). Over the next few years, we moulded

ourselves into what our birth father always wanted, criminals. We got involved in various entrepreneurial activities and did things I deeply regret that were a requirement for this way of life. We built a name for ourselves and lived off this reputation, which at the time, was very exciting, especially at the age we were at. However, the pair of us still maintained our habit of drinking to excess and now we were both dabbling in other forms of drugs. We both got on the wrong side of the law many times and spent many a night in police cells not knowing if we were going to prison. Our behaviour eventually led us to an all time low when we were made homeless. We spent 6 months living in a tent, drinking and taking sleeping tablets to get to sleep and shoplifting food in order to eat. These months were the lowest of my life and I can remember lying there in a daze of sleeping pills and alcohol on the cold hard ground wondering how I was going to get out of this mess. These living arrangements were eased somewhat with intermittent stays at what can only be described as a crack house, although the sight of seeing people inject drugs into any body part they could find a vein in while I tried to sleep was in some ways, just as traumatising as sleeping on the cold hard ground. A little part of me knew that this wasn't me doing this. I felt like I was living the life of someone else and I was just a passenger. I knew I was better than this.

After a couple more years of the highs and lows of this lifestyle, I was ready to relieve myself of this way of life. I was ready to regain my sense of self and to do something with my life. I had always had a passion for exercise and throughout this period, come rain or shine and regardless of the drink and drugs, I always went to the gym. Bodybuilding was the only stable thing I had in my life during this time. This was part of the bravado and the 'look', but it was also an hour or two a day where I did something normal and to better myself. It was an ambition of mine to work in a gym and I considered doing a gym instructor qualification for some time but was never in a position to do so. The state benefits I was on at the time stipulated that I had to apply for any job and take it if offered, or else I would lose my benefits. Fortunately, a job came up at a gym in the town where my life began, where I could achieve my early ambition, and I readily applied. The only snag I had was that I was currently doing community service for a crime I had committed the year before, which meant I had to attend one day a week with other criminals to carry out some form of community work to pay back for the harms we did to society. This put my chances of employment in jeopardy. However, on attending the interview, it turned out that the manager of the gym remembered me and my family when we were kids. He understood my situation and the reasons for my troubles. He gave me the opportunity to do the job and finish my community service at the same time. He was the first person to give me a chance at achieving something and saw me for who I am. He was able to see the person rather than the problems I was having and gave me space to be what I knew I could be. For this, I owe him everything! This was the opportunity I needed to turn my life around and it was an opportunity I did not let go of.

So why did I share this brief, yet deeply personal story and what does it have to do with being a first generation scholar at university? Well, if we go back to the question posed at the beginning of this narrative, who am I? The person I once was and the person I am now are miles apart; however, I am both of these people. Yes, I feel guilt, anger and shame for the things I did and sadness and sorrow at the things I experienced as a youth. However, I would not be the person I am today if it were not for these experiences. It is these experiences, both bad and good that have allowed me to develop into the person I am today. I may not be from a privileged background, and I may not have had things handed to me on a plate. I have had to work hard to be where I am today. I have had setbacks and I will continue to have setbacks, just like everybody else. Yet, my early life experiences have given me the personal characteristics to tackle these setbacks in a very different way. I have the resilience to overcome challenges and I have the drive and will to achieve

no matter what the circumstances are. These are characteristics that first-generation scholars have in abundance. As first-generation scholars, we feel like imposters in the higher education system, yet we add just as much value to the system as anybody else does and this is something that we should not forget. Our experiences and characteristics need to be embraced.

As my adoptive father always told me growing up, “you are no better or no worse than anybody else, don’t let anybody tell you any different.”