

MONICA AND LUCIEN

A Day in the Life

09.06.2008

Getting there

I made contact with Monica by email in order to arrange the observation. She is still working full time and her partner Jamie is at home looking after Lucien. She wondered whether I wanted to observe her or him. We agreed that I would observe her during a day that she was on leave from work while Jamie was away in Germany. I arrived at her house around 10.30, having cycled from my home. It was a hot summer day, and my bike ride took me through a series of neighbourhoods, where various of my friends are currently mothering. I cycled through residential areas, past schools and as ever on these trips I made mental notes about 'good and not so good areas to live in'. Her neighbourhood is on the edge of desirable locations, cheap enough to afford a house but served only by buses. The bike ride took about half an hour and I arrived sweaty, having got lost a couple of times and rung the wrong doorbell – answered by a friendly Sikh man in turban and bangle.

At home Monica answers the door, and I immediately check that she has remembered that I was coming. Yes she had. Monica is wearing a tight fitting short sleeved brown blouse and a pair of loose light tweed trousers. Her hair is long and layered and she is back to her pre pregnancy skinny self. When she opens the door further and I am met by 2 and a half year old Lucien's stare. He is wearing a red Thomas the Tank Engine top and jeans, with a mullet type kiddie haircut and big blue eyes. I am ushered into the front room to see Lucien's train set. A DVD of Thomas is on the TV ready to play and he is into an elaborate train world laid out on the floor, with bridges, sidings, a coal dept, tunnels and much more. As I come in I notice that the house had received lots of improvements in terms of decoration since my last visit. We talk about the train set and Monica explains that they bought a bit and that Jamie had then found more on e-bay, suggesting that it was as much for his own pleasure as for Lucien's. She could always sell it back on e-bay, people sometimes pay more than the original retail price on e-bay without realising it, getting so wrapped up in bidding wars. I wondered whether the idea of selling the train set means that they had decided against more babies.

Lucien invites me into his play, explaining that the bridge had 'collapsed'. I remark on what a good word 'collapse' is and Monica comments that he really likes words. His language has only come recently, but it is very rich. She translates some of his phrases to me (he switches 's' and 'f'). From the word go we were in a three way communication.

While I play with Lucien Monica is on her mobile to a friend and it transpires that she is setting up a visit to a drop in group. I briefly explain what I want from the day – to come along with her, to see how it goes, to take pictures as we went along as aide memoires to help me write up notes later. Monica seems comfortable with the plan and I get my camera out to show Lucien and together we take a picture of his train set. Monica explains that this is an unusual day as she was at home for once – although in her words (echoing our email exchange) there were no typical days. She had arranged with a friend that we will go to a drop in group, which she has never been to before. Her friend Sabine had scouted it out and encouraged her to go. Monica gets out a

small A-Z.

We look for the street where the Children's centre is located. She seems at sixes and sevens. I am offered a drink and have a glass of water and then we are gathered up for the outing. Monica packs a pink and orange bag with nappies, drinks, wellies, toys etc, and I ask if I could put my purse and camera in as I only have my bike bag which is cumbersome to carry in hand. Lucien is happy to hold my hand as we leave the house, allowing Monica to get the buggy out of the hall. I am pleased that he is so confident having only just met me. Monica explains that they had friends to stay the previous night and he had loved the company and a late night. He is confident with adults but not with children. Again I clock this as a 'single child' characteristic. Monica explains to Lucien that we are going out. He says he wants to stay at home. She encourages him by saying we will see his friend.

Walking to the children's centre – 10.30 am

On the street I notice that Monica had a different buggy, geranium pink, which goes well with the pink and orange bag. She had to buy it for public transport. The 'brown one' that I recalled from our first meeting had turned out to be too cumbersome. I asked her whether they had sold that on e-bay and she said not, laughing, they still had it. Monica takes a patterned hat out of her bag and puts it on Lucien's head, suggesting that we walk in the shade. I had forgotten this aspect of mothering, and recalled how it went against my natural desire to always walk on the sunny side of the street. Lucien is very interested in buses and has been talking about a particular route along the way. We pass a bus in the street and take a picture of it. Monica promises him that we will go on the bus later.

As we walked along we talked while also using the A-Z to navigate our route. Monica was panicky about reading the map and eventually I took over from her planning our route. She said she was hopeless with directions. We walked past the nursery where her friend Sabine sends her son, and where Monica is hoping to get a place for Lucien. She has been disappointed that there is no room for him until the end of the year. Jamie is planning to go back to work in October, which leaves them with 2 months without childcare. The plan is for Lucien to have 2 days in nursery and then they share the other 3 days childcare between them. During the walk we talk about work and about how it has been with Jamie looking after Lucien. Monica worries that Jamie does not like mixing and so spends most of his time at home with Lucien. She would like him to go to groups such as this one but he is resistant. She worries that she does not have the time or energy to do all the work necessary to find out what is on and to become part of the networks. She feels that Lucien needs friends, yet she also worries about him having to negotiate new settings – something she feels is a 'projection' of her own, having struggled with all the moves that she had to make during her childhood. Jamie does not worry about these things.

She also talked about her work, and how she was very unhappy when she went back after maternity leave as she returned to a different job. She has moved twice since (all within the organisation) and is planning another move soon. She also managed to get promoted during this time. I ask her about how they feel about a second child, knowing that this was on the agenda last time we spoke. She explained that they still wanted another child and had been trying but that she was trying to stop herself from getting desperate about it, having decided that they would not go down the infertility

treatment route. They could not afford this but she also did not want to unleash the desire. During our walk Monica had a couple of calls with her friend Sabine, explaining why we had not got there yet, and fearing we were lost. She explained that Sabine is German. They had seen each other around and smiled. They then discovered the German connection although Monica had not been confident enough to talk to her in German. She explained that Sabine and her partner were like a reverse version of herself and Jamie. Sabine was reserved and her partner was a real planner, always creating complicated schedules for their son, out and about.

Monica tells me that Sabine's son is Lucien's only friend and that she is hoping that they can do the same day at nursery. She and Sabine sometimes see each other on a Saturday and go to the park together. Monica wondered whether her anxiety about mixing and participating was a 'female thing' but noted that this was not the case for this other couple.

The drop in group 'paints and pots' 11.20

We finally arrived at the children's centre. A modern low rise building behind a high security fence. Sabine is outside the building talking to us on the mobile and waving. She let us in and we parked the buggy with many others, before entering the building. Sabine and I shake hands. We enter into a busy room with low tables and chairs, small children sitting and eating and parents either talking in groups or following children around. The room is a large square with a glass roof and a small anteroom at the end. Everyone has badges on with 'Visitor' and their name written in biro. Sabine is already involved in the room and she facilitates Monica's entry. Monica knows some of the children and mothers. I hang back, trying not to get in the way, smile a lot and look at the visitors book which was full of high praise from parents about the drop in. There appear to be two workers, although they do not wear special clothes so it is hard to tell apart professionals and parents. Holding a clip board, one comes over to me and explains that I could go to the tea room and have a drink. I comment that the visitors book had wonderful testimonials in it and she explains that these had been written about the group in a different venue. She is not happy about this venue which is too hot. After snacks we will go into the garden for singing, though that is also not ideal as there are so many distractions that it is hard to get the children to join in the singing.

I walk over to the tea room, make myself coffee and note the composition of the parents. One dad (maybe Turkish), an Asian woman in sari, and an African woman. Another 10 white women, most of whom are 'yummy mummies' – (mc, trendy clothes, older). Two of the white mums are German (Sabine and Carla and they slip between languages). Several are northerners. Two cold cups of tea sit on the side in the anteroom. I am unsure of what milk to use, that in fridge or on the top. Toddlers come in and out of the room and I engage with them, stopping one from going into the bin. Sitting in the room I can see most of the larger room and clock that Monica and Sabine are sitting with some other mothers at a table talking. I start to read the mags – parenting pamphlets and Pride magazine, then realise that I should be observing – doing ethnography rather than passing the time. I eaves dropped on a conversation between a worker and a mother close to the door. The worker compliments the mother on the little girls dress. They talk about where it came from and the worker indicates that she too has young children and knows the neighbourhood and the best shops. She talks about a neighbourhood festival that had taken place on the weekend and how it

had ‘not been good for children’ – too busy. The worker then asks the woman about support and I have the sense of her ‘working’, helping this mother access networks and talk about her isolation. The woman is complaining that everyone either had new babies or were working. Both women spoke with northern accents. At a certain point one of the workers came into the room and asks me if I was ok. I realise that I am looking a bit ‘isolated’ and I explained that ‘like a granny’ I am giving Monica some space to talk to her friends – this is a pure panic reaction. I work out that Monica has told the workers that I am a researcher. I presume that they checked with her who I was.

At this point it appears that we were moving outside and one of the workers asks in a loud voice that everyone make sure they have a visitors badge. I loiter a bit until the last people are leaving and the workers ask me about my research. I tell them that we had been following Monica since pregnancy, and that the project was about ‘everyday’ mothering’. This is misunderstood to mean that I am observing her every day. One of the workers explains that she has taken part in infant observation with two of her children and enjoyed it. She had not done it with her last baby as no one she knew was doing it.

At the door to the outside Lucien refuses to go into the garden. Monica, I and the worker encourage him and he takes my hand saying that he wants to take me. Once in the garden the worker with the clip board nobbles me and asks conspiratorially if I ‘know about children’s centres?’, proceeding to talk about her concerns with current changes in early years provisions. Their community project is having to leave their venues which are being turned into nurseries. They then have to find space in Children’s Centres which are too formal and which are not welcoming. I notice this as we moved through the building. No eye contact from the nursery workers (distinguished by wearing overalls and being non-white) as if we are invisible. The worker also tells me about problems with the ‘mix’. These informal groups are not popular with black parents (who tend to want somewhere to leave their children rather than to hang out’ and with Turkish parents who prefer the newest buildings and clean facilities. She fears that their group will not work so well in a formal environment – they’ve been doing this drop in for 8 years – and that community provision is being dropped by children’s centres. We are deep in conversation when Lucien comes and takes my hand to come and play with him.

Lucien takes me to a large wooded pagoda filled with soft play building blocks. Sabine and Monica are here as well as another German woman and another woman, white and blonde. They all seem to know each other. I sit with Lucien and Monica in one corner, away from the rest. Lucien and I play building a tower. He makes a complicated structure using slopes. We are very admiring and clap. This is a really nice place to sit, in the shade, chatting, with lots to look at. We are interrupted a few times with cries of pain and mums jumping up to see who is hurt. The worker comes over to check who pushed who. It seems that there is a ‘naughty boy’ ‘Samuel’ who has pushed other children several times already. Samuel is the only black child in the playground. His adult is standing alone in the shade by the building. After another ‘incident’ the worker engages Samuel in one to one play scooting, while his adult looks on and smiles. I feel that the worker wants the adult to do the playing – that tensions are being expressed between child care and drop in modes.

Lucien becomes bored of building and wants me and Monica to explore the garden. He shows no interest at all in the other children. We walk over a bridge to look at the river and I get my bearings, working out how this area links geographically to others I know better. The garden is really nice, lots of sensory play. Drain pipes with pebbles to go through them. I am impressed. I try and escape Lucien to see what is happening in the playground. The Asian woman and Turkish man are chatting in the shade. A small blonde girl is accompanied by a Philippino older woman and I wonder if this is her nanny. The little girl has paint on her hands and dress and I wonder if they will be in trouble. I approach the worker and try to re-engage, complimenting the environment, saying what a lovely space and suggesting that one of the outcomes of childrens' centres is improved infrastructure. She says, it was already like this before. I sense that she does not want to chat again and is busy working with Samuel.

Suddenly time is up – there is a physical movement of the yummy mummies from the pagoda towards the door. The worker asks what the time is? Ten to twelve, so that is the end. It is almost as if she was caught unawares. I feel that she is torn between bits of her job. As we leave Samuel comes over to Lucien and pulls at his hat. His adult comes over and slaps both of his hands in punishment. Samuel cries. Nothing is said, except 'sorry' by the adult, but it is a moment where difference is felt acutely between the parents present, and probably the children. I say thank you to the worker. As I leave she say that 'we need research on drop-ins. There is nothing out there'. I feel that I am taking her message out into the world. Beware of children's centres! Leaving the building is complicated by the arrival of a man with a barrow of fruit. Chaos at the heavy security door. Children seem to be too young to wait. I hold the door but there are kids in the way and the second door cannot be opened as it needs a button to be pressed. Security is high, something Sabine and Monica approved of. I take a picture of the high security fences as we leave to make sure that I remember this.

I try and help by getting the buggy sorted. I have Lucien with me and Monica is still in the building, signing the book so that workers have a record of how many people attended (the service needs to demonstrate effectiveness!). Again I am amazed that he is happy to be with me with his mum out of sight, but as I think this he seems to get a bit anxious. I have forgotten how to take the break off the buggy, and am helped by the Philippino woman, laughing. Perhaps I am not an experienced mother after all. Monica, Sabine and I walk along with two buggies. I am not sure 'what the plan is'. It transpires that Sabine will go home for a rest, pass her son to his dad and then go and teach some classes. I am wondering if Lucien is tired or needs a nap (I do!). I manage to stop myself from fussing out aloud.

Walking back 12.30

As we walk we talk. I ask Sabine about where she is from – and how different it would be being a mum there and here. Much easier she says. She is interested in the research, and seems to take up my invitation to talk about the challenges of inner city mothering. Sabine is also 42 (although does not look it). She is tall with short dark hair and black jeans, with a red punkish tea shirt. I notice that she has hairy arms. She is less feminine than the other 'yummy mummies', in fact a different category. Monica and Sabine talk about the route and Sabine says she will take us home via the short cut – she lives very close to Monica. She was worried about giving these directions to Monica beforehand as they entail walking through an

estate and she feels that some people might be frightened. I ask them about the kind of people that go to the drop-in and how much mixing there is in the neighbourhood, telling them about the conversation I had with the worker. Sabine acknowledges that it is mostly middle class mums at the group, and that the services struggle to get working class parents. They tell a funny story about their partners going (at different points) to a fathers' group that was aimed at 18 year olds and having to learn about what food is ok to give babies. They laugh saying that their partners understood the difficulties of the workers and their need to keep numbers up. Sabine talks about working as an education worker in Germany with immigrant families. She would take the kids to hangout in a café rather than on 'educational trips' and then get receipts from friends. The children just wanted to do something ordinary.

I ask Sabine if she is planning on having any other children and immediately feel I may have overstepped the marker. Both laugh and Monica says, 'lets just get to the heart of the matter'. I wonder if they have ever talked about this with each other? Sabine talks about how complicated this is. They live in a flat, and just about manage. She has her son in 2 days a week at nursery (£33 a day as low income). With one child they can carry on 'improvising' without planning the future, but she feels with 2 they would have to be 'settled'. I ask if she thinks about returning to Germany – 'Of course, we all think about moving' she replies. We talk about the neighbourhood. Sabine mentions the yellow signs reporting street violence incidents and how depressing they are to walk by. I observe that at least their children are too young to read the signs and immediately realise that they have not thought about this as a possibility. Sabine talks about the neighbourhood being ok now, but who knows when her son is 8. I feel strange as my son is 8. She talks about how she grew up in a small town that was very boring and she was never interested in going into town as there was nothing there except shops. Her partner takes her son into the centre of the city all the time. This is far from her experience.

Walking down her street I comment on how lovely and quiet the street is and Sabine says yes she really loves it. It is the best place she has lived in the city. During the walking and talking the children are quiet and almost invisible to us. When Sabine leaves Monica negotiates with Lucien what we will do. He does not want to go to the park but he does want to go on the bus. Monica suggests that we could get the bus to the park. My sandwich is back at the house but I say that is ok, we can eat at the park, we could have ice cream! We take the long route to the bus stop in order to cross the busy road at a safe place. Lucien is fascinated by the bus and knows lots by number. When we get on a bus that I realise could take me all the way home. Monica parks the buggy in the space for push chairs and Lucien wants to get out and sit at the back. She persuades him that he will sit on her knee on the fold out chair. This seems to satisfy him and he watches out of the window and talks about the things that he can see.

Monica explains that Jamie is in Berlin looking at flats with her mother. She says she will explain more when we get to the park. A woman gets on the bus who looks like a transsexual: muscles, leopard print boob tube, bleach blonde and heels. Monica and I look at each other. As we approach our stop I offer to hold Lucien while she gets the buggy off. A woman says what a clever girl Lucien is. Monica says nothing. I say he is a boy. The woman, says that he is a very beautiful boys. I carry him off the bus, again he does not resist being passed to me. He goes into the buggy and we go into the park.

The park and café 1.30

The park is an oasis in the city. As we enter from the noisy street we can see a wonderful view of the valley falling away into the distance. There are lots of Hassidic families walking around. Men with wide brimmed fur hats and long black satin coats. Women with wigs and grey suits and children with skull caps. The gardeners are planting out orange and red borders. The sun is shining and birds chirping, the atmosphere is transformed. We walk into the back of the café which is inside an old Georgian looking house. On a board in the lobby is lots of community information and toilets. I offer to buy lunch and Monica chooses a strawberry cornetto for Lucien, a humus sandwich for herself. I get a haloumi and tomato panini. She orders fresh orange and organic apple juice. I suggest that Lucien might like pasta pesto – always a favourite for my son and his friends. Monica says that he would not like it. He is 'awful with food, in fact this will be his first ice cream, a milestone. I feel like I have done a terrible thing in corrupting him but Monica is easy going. I pay and we go outside to find a table on the grass. The food will be delivered.

We move a table into the shade, next to a clump of trees that Lucien calls the jungle. He knows this park well and Monica explains that this is where she came while on maternity leave and on her Saturdays with Sabine. There are lots of other families on the grass. Mostly women with babies and young children, toddlers. Lucien is not interested in them. He is interested in the jungle and wants me to come too. I am resistant. Eventually I take him to it but he is scared to go in. We walk around the perimeter and to where there are other children, but he is not happy, so we go back to the table.

We spend a long time at this table chatting and eating, and lots of things unfold. The food arrives and Monica tries the ice cream out on Lucien, spooning it to him. He does not like it. I am amazed, and feel slightly better in that I may not have corrupted him. It soon transpires that he really is 'difficult around food'. The only thing he eats is toast and cake. Monica says that he is 'not bothered' about food. I vaguely recall seeing them feeding him toast in his high chair the last time I was there. Monica goes and buys him a croissant and he looks at my food. On her return he decides that he wants some of my sandwich, which Monica says 'make her a liar'. Now Lucien wants me to feed it to him, which I am resistant to do. This is feeling tricky and I make my escape to the toilet in order to give Monica some space. While sitting at the table alone with Lucien other mothers smile at me, and I feel drawn into making friends.

We see the tranny from the bus walk by, Monica says you have to be so brave to do that. S/he is sitting in the garden with two other white haired women, chatting in the sunshine. The setting of the café is beautiful. We talk about Monica's job and how she has done work around trans employment policy. She found it really interesting. Lucien is now resorting to high pitched screaming, it is hard for him when we are talking. Monica is calm and does not seem to react to the screaming. She takes a phone call and I take him for a walk outside of the gated area into the open park land. We pretend to fly. When we get back to the table Monica is still talking. It is Jamie in Berlin reporting on a flat. She gives the phone to Lucien who makes a train noise and talks to his daddy as if he can see what he is pointing to.

Lucien stays close to me at the table, and enjoys tactile games. 'He's flirty isn't he?' says Monica. She talks about how he likes to get his grandmas around his finger. Earlier she told me how hard it had been to leave him to go to work, and that they had experienced a difficult period when he seemed to prefer his daddy. But now Lucien is a Mummy's boy which makes things easier. I am not sure what is going on. A toy bus is given to Lucien to distract him and we continue to talk, and Monica tries to get him to eat. She had to eat his ice cream and so did not have the appetite for his sandwich. I am still hungry as he had half my sandwich but has left it uneaten. I wonder if it would be gross to eat it after he has played with it. I would with my own son.

The next stop is 'the water' which turns out to be a water fountain by the café, which Lucien puts his hand in the stream of water while Monica pushes the button. He can't push the button himself. While he plays Monica tells me about the Berlin flat. Jamie had a small inheritance and they decided that rather than put it into the mortgage they would buy a flat. She describes it as 'aspirational' rather than a money making scheme. They could even move to Berlin perhaps. She likes European cities. It is easier to get into the countryside, less intense.

We return to the café and Monica takes Lucien into the loos to change his nappy. I go look at local information on the walls and then go back out and photograph the water fountain and feel that I need a moment's separation. When they come out Monica asks me to mind Lucien while she goes to the loo. I suggest to Lucien that he climbs into his buggy. He tries but cannot get in on his own. I am surprised and encourage him to learn. He is not happy, and I pick him up and put him in. We watch the gardeners planting the beds until Monica returns and we walk out of the park onto the busy street. I ask her whether Lucien has a nap, and she says not until later, 4 or 5, and I remark that it is surprising that he can then sleep through the night. I add that there is no such thing as 'normal' and whatever their routine is seems 'normal' to a child. Monica seems to like this idea and elaborates it. We talk about whether to walk or take the bus. Lucien wants to take the bus (so do I) as it is really hot now and we are all tired.

We get off the bus and walk along the main road, back towards her house. Lots of traffic, quite an intense feeling, hot and dirty. We talk about the neighbourhood. She says that it is a bit rough. She is not that happy being there. It is all well having high ideals about mixing but in reality she wants her child to be with other people like them, middle class. We turn onto her residential street and it becomes much more quiet. Lucien falls asleep in his buggy. This is unusual. I suggest that she leaves him in his buggy when we get back and she says no she will put him on the sofa where it is more comfortable. I laugh that I am a 'slack mum' and she worries that she is too protective. We both laugh.

Home again 3.pm

While she gets him to sleep in the front room I put on the kettle. When she comes in I ask her if she minds if I have a cigarette in her garden. She says fine. I ask her if Jamie is still smoking – yes- though he has made a new giving up date. She explains that his mother still does not know that he smokes, and that she is worried that Lucien will work it out and tell grandma. They have no vocabulary around smoking. So even though Lucien 'knows' that Daddy goes out into the garden, there is no way for him to talk about it. I enjoy my fag, but have to avoid getting smoke all over the washing

hanging on the line. I ask Monica what Jamie does with ash and butts, she doesn't know. I work out the place I think he sits and smokes, at end of garden. The garden is lovely, and very quiet.

Afterwards I go into the kitchen and flick through the hair mag on the table while tea is brewing. Monica is planning a cut. Her hair is getting very greasy so she is thinking of putting some colour in. Jamie wants her to go blonde. She has been blonde in the past (bleach blonde) but doesn't think that is right for her now. She hasn't got the confidence for a short cut and wants to avoid the standard mummy layered look with highlights, though knows that this is exactly what she will get. Looking together at these haircut pics I again got the sense of how children take a toll on your body, age you.

We move into the garden and sit at the table and chairs and chat: about mothers, cats, social lives, festivals. Monica's eyes fill when she talks about how she 'can't talk to her mother enough' and how important that connection to her Germany roots is to her now. She feels that her mother is very brave, doing things alone (holidays), driving into the city, but she gets lonely. We talk about how strange confidence is: you may have the confidence for a crop at 18 but fear what others think of you. In some ways the height of your confidence is in middle age. We also talk about social life. Monica tells me that they have not yet had Lucien baby-sat (I try not to look surprised), and that they have only been out once since he was born. This is not a problem, she knows that she is protective, but this feels comfortable. I tell her about how my partner and I are rediscovering going out now that our son is older, and how we all go to festivals. She is really interested in this and gleans information from me.

I ask how they do their shopping. Initially it was internet – during the intense part, and then Jamie learned to drive and now drives to the supermarket. But they don't use the car much. Monica struggles to keep up with housework. They don't have a cleaner, not that she is not against it in principle, it is money. She only really cleans when someone comes round. I feel a bit guilty but then think, that this is what I do, and that it is a good way of forcing yourself to do it. We talk about rural childhoods and driving, *Child of our Time* and overly protective parenting. Monica keeps acknowledging herself as protective but also ok about doing it her own way. She comments how intense that early period of parenting is and how hard it is to move on. Am completely fagged out and say that it is time to go – 4pm. At the door I say 'goodbye Monica' – which makes her laugh, and her laugh makes me recognise what I have done. Leave feeling slightly ashamed. Cycled the long ride home and feel hungry. When I get home I email Monica to thank her and she emails back to say that 'Lucien really liked you'.