

WORKING PAPER 5

How is agency possible? Towards an ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement.

Gert Biesta and Michael Tedder

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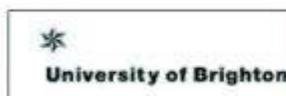
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Learning Lives (RES-139-25-0111) is a collaboration between the Universities of Exeter (lead-applicant), Brighton, Leeds and Stirling and is funded by a major grant from the Economic and Social Research Council as part of their Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP).
See www.tlrp.org



The Learning Lives Research Project

The Learning Lives research project began in June 2004, and runs until the end of January 2008. The project is a collaboration between the University of Exeter, the University of Brighton, the University of Leeds and the University of Stirling, all in the UK. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The award number is RES-139-25-0111.

The focus of the research is on the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in people's lives. There are two strands to the data collection, involving the integration of three different methodologies. The first strand is a qualitative study of around 120 people, drawn from different walks of life, living in different parts of the country, and of different ages, gender and ethnicities. Each of the university partners has its own sub-sample, with different core interests. The Exeter team (Gert Biesta and Mike Tedder) are focused on learning, identity and agency in relation to family and the local community. The Brighton team (Ivor Goodson and Norma Adair) are focused on issues of migration, including within country migration. The Leeds team (Phil Hodgkinson, Heather Hodgkinson, Geoff Ford and Ruth Hawthorn) are focused on people engaged in adult learning and/or guidance, and on older adults. The Stirling team (John Field and originally Irene Malcolm, now Heather Lynch) are focused on work and unemployment. Of course, these issues overlap. On the qualitative strand, we are combining two normally separate methodologies: life history research and longitudinal qualitative research. Though we will have a shorter engagement with some of the sample, we are following most subjects for over 3 years, involving about six sweeps of interviewing.

The second strand of our work is quantitative. A second Exeter team (Flora Macleod and Paul Lambe) is using the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) – a data set of 10,000+ adults from across the UK who have been interviewed annually since 1991 – to develop robust measures of formal and informal learning, identity and agency in their different dimensions and to test the validity of these measures against a range of outcome variables. Once these theoretically informed instruments have been developed using BHPS variables, longitudinal data analysis techniques (multilevel models of individual change and hazard/survival models of event occurrence in both discrete and continuous time) will be applied to explore the significance of learners' identities and agency for their learning, dispositions, practices and achievements and how transformations in a given individual's dispositions, practices and achievements impact upon their sense of identity and agency and their ability to exert control over their lives.

To establish an iterative relationship between the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data we are mapping the case study participants' learning trajectories onto wider trends and processes in the UK as revealed through analysis of the BHPS.

Working Papers

This paper is one of a series of working papers being produced as part of the Learning Lives research. These papers are of very different types, and their prime purpose is to help the team with its on-going analysis and synthesis of findings. Consequently, they represent work in progress. A second purpose is to share some of our preliminary findings and thinking with a wider audience. We hope that you will find this paper, and others in the series, of interest and value. If you have constructive critical comments to offer we would love to hear from you. Please send any comments to the contact author, identified on the front cover.

**How is agency possible?
Towards an ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement.**

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this working paper is twofold. On the one hand we wish to contribute to the theorisation of one of the key concepts of the Learning Lives concepts, viz., the concept of *agency*. On the other hand we wish to make a start with a more systematic analysis of data from the Exeter case studies. In this working paper the second purpose is linked to the first in that we have tried to focus our data analysis on questions about agency – in relation to learning and with attention to life-course and identity. The working paper not only proposes a particular way of understanding agency based upon a review of relevant literature, but also explores the extent to which such an approach is useful in understanding the relationship between agency and learning in the life-course.

THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

The Enlightenment legacy

The idea of agency has been central to educational thinking and practice at least since the Enlightenment. Kant famously defined Enlightenment as “man’s [sic] release from his self-incurred tutelage,” and saw tutelage as “man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another” (Kant 1992[1784], p.90). This led him to articulate the ‘motto’ of Enlightenment as “*Sapere aude!* Have courage to exercise your own understanding!” (ibid.). Kant not only provided a concise definition of Enlightenment. He also made an explicit connection between Enlightenment and education. In his treatise on education (*Über Pädagogik*) he argued that the “propensity and vocation for free thinking” of the human being – which he saw as the “ultimate destination” and the “aim of his existence” (Kant 1982[1803], p.710) – could *only* be brought about through education. He even argued that human beings could only become human through education (“Der Mensch kann nur Mensch werden durch Erziehung.”; see ibid., p.699).

The idea that education is the process through which human beings develop their rational faculties so that they become capable of independent judgement which, in turn, forms the basis for autonomous action, has had a profound impact on modern educational theory and practice. There are, for example, direct lines from Kant to the work of Piaget and Kohlberg who both understand the highest stages of cognitive and moral development in terms of (rational) autonomy. The idea of rational autonomy is also a guiding principle in liberal education and is central to discussions about critical thinking as an educational ideal (see, for example, McPeck 1981; Siegel 1988; Thayer-Bacon 2000; Biesta & Stams 2001). Through the influence of (neo-)Marxism it has also become a leading idea in critical and emancipatory approaches to education, both in Europe and North America (see Biesta 1998). Some even argue that rational autonomy is not simply *an* educational aim, but that it is the one and only aim of education (e.g., Siegel 1988; Hirst and Peters 1970). This not only holds for the education of children. There is also a strong tradition which sees adult education as a lever for empowerment and emancipation (see, e.g., Fieldhouse 1996; Welton 2005; English 2005). Whereas in the tradition of liberal education, but also in Continental traditions such as *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* and the *Bildungs*-tradition, empowerment and

emancipation are basically understood in individualistic terms – i.e., in terms of individual development and growth – critical traditions stress that there can be no individual emancipation without societal emancipation (see, e.g., Mollenhauer 1983). Thus they highlight that agency is not exclusively an individual achievement but is connected to contextual and structural factors.

It is important to note that in these traditions the link between agency and education is predominantly understood in *normative* terms. The idea is that education *should* have a positive impact on the individual's ability to exert control over his or her life and *should* result in emancipation and autonomy. Agency is seen as an educational aim and educational ideal and as the desired outcome of educational processes. This explains why agency primarily figures as a *justification* of particular educational arrangements and interventions. Whether education actually has a positive impact on agency and does result in empowerment and emancipation is entirely an *empirical* matter – although it shouldn't be forgotten that what counts as evidence for success crucially depends on how agency is defined and understood (see Biesta in press[b]).

The idea of 'agency' in social theory

Agency is not only a central concept in modern educational theory and practice, but is also a key notion and issue in contemporary social theory, particularly in sociology, economics and political science. The question in social theory is first and foremost about the *empirical conditions of agency*, i.e., the question how and when agency is possible, and about ways in which the phenomenon of agency can be conceptualised and theorised. (This does not preclude, of course, that research on agency might be motivated by the conviction that agency is basically 'a good thing'; see, e.g., Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p.973.)

Within sociology "the term agency is usually juxtaposed to structure and is often no more than a synonym for action, emphasizing implicitly the undetermined nature of human action, as opposed to the alleged determinism of structural theories" (Marshall 1998). If it has a wider meaning, "it is to draw attention to the psychological and social psychological make-up of the actor, and to imply the capacity for willed (voluntary) action" (ibid.). This resonates with a general definition of agency as "(t)he capacity for autonomous social action" (Calhoun 2002) and, more specifically (but here the definition becomes almost tautological) as "the ability of actors to operate independently of the determining constraints of social structure" (ibid.). A more 'situated' definition is given by Emirbayer & Mische (1998, p.971) who see agency as "the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations" (see also below). In the *Dictionary of Social Sciences* (Cahoun 2002) it is suggested that (t) he origins of the term agency lie in the legal and commercial distinction between principal and agent, in which the latter is granted the capacity to act autonomously on behalf of the form" (Cahoun 2002).

Much discussion in sociology commonly opposes agency to social structure. The 'structure-agency debate' came to the fore in sociology in the 1970s and 1980s "in the context of increased attention to practice or action and an increased concern for the analysis of power relations and conflict" (Cahoun 2002). It can even be argued that the structure-agency debate has become one of the defining discussions of modern sociology. This is, for example, visible in the fact that sociological theories are often characterised according to the relative emphasis they place on agency or structure (see

Marshall 1998; see also Evans 2002). This is not to say that the structure-agency debate is the only way in which work on agency emerging from social science disciplines can be captured. It is probably more useful to follow Hollis (1994) who distinguishes between *holistic* and *individualistic* strategies for understanding or explaining agency. Whereas structural and cultural approaches to the question of agency would count as holistic strategies, rational choice theory can be seen as an example of an individualistic approach, as can be psychological theories which focus on the ego as the main ‘driver’ of agency (see Levine 2005). More recently, sociologists have made attempts to overcome the structure-agency dualism, most notably through the idea of ‘habitus’ (see Bourdieu 1977; 1990) and the theory of structuration (see Giddens 1984). Whether this actually moves the discussion forward by asking new questions about structure and agency or whether it results in a situation where structure and agency are presented as so closely intertwined that “it becomes impossible to *examine* their *interplay*” (Archer 1988, p.80; *emph. in original*; see also Archer 2000) remains an open question. Finally it should be mentioned that although much of the discussion about agency is informed by social theory and (social) psychology, many of these discussion go back to earlier philosophical work on questions about human freedom. Seen in this light it can be argued that the question of ‘agency’ is also a constant in Western philosophy (for recent contributions to this discussion see, e.g., Davidson 2001; Mele 2003).

Agency, learning and Learning Lives

The question of agency plays a central role in the Learning Lives project. The project is not simply interested in adult learning or adults’ learning biographies but aims, among other things, to understand the relationship between learning and agency. This is expressed in general terms in the project’s intention “to deepen understanding of the meaning and significance of learning in the lives of adults” or, in shorter formula, in the intention to understand what learning ‘means and does’ in the lives of adults. There is at least a double relationship between agency and learning possible. On the one hand the project seeks to understand *how learning impacts on agency*, both positively and negatively. The question here is how different forms, practices and processes of learning influence the capacity of individuals to give direction to their lives. On the other hand the project seeks to understand *how agency impacts on learning*. Here we can think, for example, of situations in which adults consciously decide to engage in forms of learning, for example to overcome particular problems, deal with challenges or give their life a new direction or at least create the conditions for doing so. The fact that the Learning Lives project focuses on learning *biographies* makes it possible to examine relationships between learning and agency in a *temporal* way, both in relation to the lived lives of the participants and in relation to wider societal transformations (which includes the question of generations; see, e.g., Antikainen et al., 1996; Alheit 2005). The biographical approach also makes it possible to gain an understanding of the role of narrative – *life stories* – in understanding relationships between learning and agency (see below) while the interest in identity makes it possible to investigate how relationships between learning and agency are mediated by the participants’ sense of self.

Agency and late-modern society: Giddens and Bauman

Although the Learning Lives project is partly motivated by the idea that learning can be a good thing and can contribute to empowerment and emancipation – which can be inferred from the fact that one of the aims of the project is “to identify ways in which the learning of adults can be supported and enhanced” – the project’s interest in the relationship between learning and agency is not exclusively motivated by normative

concerns. Another reason for the interest in agency stems from recent sociological analyses of modernisation and the transformation of modern societies into late, high or post-modern ones (see Beck 1992; Giddens 1990; 1991; Bauman 2000). The general thrust of the argument here is that as a result of the erosion of traditions and normative frameworks – itself a characteristic of modernisation – life becomes less and less something that is ‘given’ and ‘pre-structured’ and increasingly turns into a ‘task’ for the modern individual. As Giddens has put it: “in the context of a post-traditional order, the self becomes a reflexive project” (Giddens 1991, p.32). Although he acknowledges that transitions in individuals’ lives “have always demanded psychic reorganisation, something which was often ritualised in traditional cultures in the shape of rites de passage (...) in the settings of modernity, by contrast, the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflective process of connecting personal and social change” (ibid.). This suggests, to put it briefly, that modernisation, understood as the erosion of structuring traditions and frameworks, makes agency increasingly *necessary*.¹

Giddens sees high or late modernity as the current phase of development of modern institutions, a phase “marked by the radicalising and globalising of basic traits of modernity” (ibid., p.243). High modernity “is characterised by widespread scepticism about providential reason, coupled with the recognition that science and technology are double-edged, creating new parameters of risk and danger as well as offering beneficent possibilities for humankind” (ibid., p.28). According to Giddens this results in an *intensification of uncertainty*, particularly because of the ‘disturbing’ influence of (social) scientific knowledge on the reflexive project of the self. “The chronic entry of knowledge into the circumstances of action it analyses or describes creates a set of uncertainties to add to the circular and fallible character of post-traditional claims to knowledge.” (ibid., p.28) Whereas “in a post-traditional social universe, an indefinite range of potential courses of action (with their attendant risks) is at any given moment open to individuals and collectivities” so that “(c)hoosing among such alternatives is always an ‘as if’ matter, a question of selecting between possible worlds” (ibid., p.29), in circumstances of late modernity “many forms of risk do not admit of clear assessment, because of the mutable knowledge environment which frame them; and even risk assessments within relatively closed settings are often only valid ‘until further notice’ (ibid., p.32). Giddens thus suggest that under conditions of high or late modernity agency becomes even more necessary but at the same time it becomes more difficult to ‘achieve.’

Giddens’s observations resonate with the work of Bauman in that both agree that modernity forces individuals to ‘take charge’ of their own lives. For Bauman modernisation has always implied individualisation, that is, the overcoming of the all-encompassing influence of social, cultural and religious traditions. Individualisation, he writes, “consists of transforming human ‘identity’ from a given’ into a ‘task’ and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task” (Bauman 2000, p.31). Individualisation thus entails the establishment of what Bauman calls *de jure* autonomy (ibid., p.32). What distinguishes old or ‘solid’ from new or ‘liquid’ or

¹ Support for this idea at a more ‘micro’ level can be found in a comparative study by Evans about the relationship between labour markets and young people’s actions in Germany and England. One of the conclusions of the research was that the more insecure and flexible system in England “necessitates greater proactivity and the maintenance of the positive approach to ‘opportunities’” (Evans 2002, p.515).

‘fluid’ modernity, according to Bauman, is not the process of individualisation as such nor the intensification of the conditions under which individualisation occurs. Bauman argues that what is typical of liquid modernity is the existence of a ‘yawning gap’ between the right of self-assertion and the capacity “to control the social settings which render such self-assertion feasible” (ibid., p.38). The “main contradiction of fluid modernity” (ibid., p.38) lies in the “wide and growing gap between the condition of individuals *de jure* and their chances ... to gain control over their fate and make the choices they truly desire” (ibid., p.39), the gap, in other words, between *de jure* and *de facto* autonomy. Bauman argues that this gap “cannot be bridged by individual effort alone” (ibid.). The gap has emerged and grown precisely “because of the emptying of public space, and particularly the ‘agora’, that intermediary, public/private site ... where private problems are translated into the language of public issues and public solutions are sought, negotiated and agreed for private troubles” (ibid.). This is why Bauman argues that in contemporary individualised society we need “*more, not less, of the ‘public sphere’*” (ibid., p.51), we need the ability to congeal and condense “private troubles into public interests that are larger than the sum of their individual ingredients ... so that they can acquire once more the shape of the visions of the ‘good society’ and the ‘just society’” (ibid.) – which itself is a process that requires particular forms of (democratic) learning (see Biesta 2005; in press[a]). This now only shows how Bauman’s analysis of late or post-modern society is different from Giddens’s. Bauman also argues that the question of how agency is achieved cannot be understood by focusing exclusively on the ability of individuals to give direction to their lives. Bauman suggests a definition of agency which includes (a certain amount of) control over the conditions that shape one’s opportunities for action.²

Biographical learning

All this suggests an interesting difference between the normative and the empirical/sociological interest in agency and its relation to learning. Whereas in the normative tradition it is argued that people need to be educated and need to learn particular things in order to become (more) agentic, the empirical/sociological line suggests that modernisation forces people to be (more) agentic, that is, to ‘take control of their lives’ (Evans 2002), which then raises the question what kind of learning – if any – is involved in and/or follows from living one’s life under such post/late/high/liquid/fluid-modern conditions. It is the latter line of thinking which mainly explains the recent interest of researchers in social science and adult education in life-histories and (learning) biographies (see, e.g., West 1996; Dominicé 2000; Bron et al., 2005). At the same time it helps to explain the rise of biographical learning itself, defined by Alheit as “a self-willed, ‘autopoietic’ accomplishment on the part of active subjects (...), in which they reflexively ‘organise’ their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history, and a communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions” Alheit 2005, p.209; see also Alheit & Dausien 2000; and Bron 2001; Bron & Lönnheden, 2004).

The purpose of the working paper

This brief overview already shows that the question of agency is a complex question which has been discussed in different ways across several disciplines. The purpose of

² Interestingly enough this is precisely one of the ways in which Dewey defines democracy (see Biesta in press/2007).

this working paper is to explore in more detail some of the ways in which agency has been defined, conceptualised and theorised in order to develop a working definition of 'agency' and generate a set of questions which might guide and inform the analysis of life history data and possible further thematic data-collection. In part II of this paper we apply some of the theoretical considerations developed in part I on case studies from the Learning Lives project in order to test their fruitfulness for data-analysis.

At this point we wish to suggest a first definition of (the phenomenon of) agency as the situation where individuals are able to exert control over and give direction to the course of their lives. This definition is more general than the definition of agency as 'the capacity for autonomous social action', because this definition already assumes that agency is an individual 'capacity' and has to do with action in the social domain that is characterised by autonomy. Our initial definition is also more general than the idea that agency refers to the 'the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations', a definition which also assumes that agency is an individual capacity and one which restricts the purpose of agency to dealing with problematic situations. At this point we also would like to keep in mind Bauman's suggestion that agency not simply refers to an ability to give direction to one's own life-course but includes influence over the conditions that shape the context for action.

In what follows we will focus on attempts to theorise agency in its own right. This is not only because, as Emirbayer and Mische have argued, the notion of agency "has all too seldom inspired systematical analysis (Emirbayer & Mische 1998), p.962). It is also because "in the struggle to demonstrate the interpenetration of agency and structure, many theorists have failed to distinguish agency as an analytical category in its own right" (ibid., pp. 962-963). This is not to suggest, of course, that agency is entirely an individual matter or that structures don't matter in understanding and explaining agency, but it is to highlight that the structure-agency debate in sociology is not the only way in which questions about agency can be posed and addressed (which is a further reason why Hollis's distinction between holistic and individualistic strategic for understanding/explaining human action is a more useful way to distinguish between different sociological theories and approach than to refer to those approaches as 'structural' and 'agentic'). (Another way of putting this is in terms of the distinction between 'agency as phenomenon' and 'agency as theory' [see for a similar distinction Dannefer 2003, p.647]. From one set of perspectives agency refers to a construct, a phenomenon to be described, understood and explained. From another set of perspectives, however, agency refers itself to an explanatory theory which proposes to understand and explain human action in terms of its 'agentic causes'.)

WHAT IS AGENCY?

An interesting contribution to the discussion about agency has been made by Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische in their paper 'What is agency?' published in the *American Journal of Sociology* (1998). In their approach to agency – to which they refer as 'relational pragmatics' – they seek to overcome the one-sidedness they see as characteristic of much existing literature on agency which either focuses on routine, on purpose, or on judgement. Emirbayer and Mische argue for a conception of agency which focuses on the *dynamic interplay* between these three dimensions and takes

into consideration “how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p.963). They therefore suggest to reconceptualise human agency

as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past, (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment) (ibid., p.963)

The further argue that the agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity “if it is analytically situated with the flow of time,” to which they add “that structural contexts of action are themselves temporal as well as relational fields – multiple, overlapping *ways of ordering time* toward which social actors can assume different simultaneous agentic orientations” (ibid., pp.963-964). Emirbayer and Mische not only claim that actors are embedded in many of such ‘temporalities’ at once, but that in relation to such temporalities “they can be said to be oriented toward the past, the future, and the present at any given moment, although they may primarily be orientated toward one or another of these within any one emergent situation” (ibid., p.964). Against this background they then argue that “(a)s actors move within and among these different and unfolding contexts, they switch between (or ‘recompose’) their temporal orientations – and thus are capable of changing their relationship to structure” (ibid.). This leads them to the suggestion that the “key to grasping the dynamic possibilities of human agency is to view it as composed of variable and changing orientations within the flow of time” (ibid., emphasis added). This, so they argue, makes it possible to make clear “how the structural environments of action are both dynamically sustained by and also altered through human agency – by actors capable of formulating projects for the future and realizing them, even if only in small part, and with unforeseen outcomes, in the present” (ibid.).

Theoretical traditions

Emirbayer and Mische trace their position back to the work of Jeffrey Alexander (see particularly 1988 and 1992) and to pragmatism (Dewey and Mead) and (American; GB) phenomenology (Schutz). They credit Alexander with being “the first major theorist to systematically disaggregate the concept of agency itself” by distinguishing between two basic dimensions of action: *interpretation* and *strategization* (ibid., p.967). This allowed Alexander to overcome a dualism which goes at least back to Kant, viz., between normative (interpretation) and utilitarian (*strategization*) perspectives on and forms of action. What Alexander’s approach did make visible was “the interpretive processes of contextually embedded actors” (ibid.). What he neglected, however, was to situate his analysis of agency within a specifically *temporal* framework. Emirbayer and Mische argue, however, “that agentic processes can only be understood if they are linked intrinsically to the changing temporal *orientations* of situated actors” (ibid., emph. added). It is for the latter that they turn to pragmatism where they find an approach which does not view human action “as the pursuit of preestablished ends, abstracted from concrete situations,” but holds “that ends and means develop coterminously within contexts that are themselves ever changing and this always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction on the part of the reflective intelligence” (ibid., pp.967-968; see for the philosophical background of such ideas in Dewey’s work Biesta & Burbules 2003; for Mead see Biesta 1998).

Emirbayer and Mische particularly mention Mead's work, and specifically his ideas about "time as constituted through *emergent events*" (ibid., p.968, *emph. in original*; see also Osberg & Biesta 2004) and "the concept of human consciousness as constituted through *sociality*" (ibid., *emph in original*; see also Biesta 1999). They summarise Mead's ideas about the first point as follows:

As actors respond to changing environments, they must continually reconstruct their view of the past in an attempt to understand the causal conditioning of the emergent present, while using this understanding to control and shape their responses in the arising future. (ibid., pp.968-969)

This process forms the core of what Mead calls the 'deliberative attitude', which is the capacity to "get hold of the conditions of future conduct as these are found in the organized responses we have formed, and so construct our pasts in anticipation of that future" (Mead 1932, p.76, quoted in Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p.969; for similar ideas in Dewey's work see Biesta 1992).

A definition of agency

Against this background Emirbayer and Mische suggest to define agency as "*the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations*" (ibid., p.970; *emph. in original*). This definition encompasses Mead's conception "of the positioning of human actors within temporal passage, involving the continual reconstruction of their orientations toward past and future in response to emergent events" (ibid., p.971). In addition, this definition of agency also incorporates Mead's insight that it is the capacity for "imaginative distancing, as well as for communicative evaluation, in relation to habitual patterns of social engagement that drives the development of the reflective intelligence" and that it is reflective intelligence which allows actors "to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations" (ibid., p.971). This suggests that agency has to do with the ability to shape one's *responsiveness* to problematic situations – agency is, another words, depicted as a 'capacity' that 'works' upon the self (although this way of putting it leaves open whether this capacity has to be understood as a given or as something which itself is the product of social interaction; the latter is the view taken by Mead and Dewey). This also seems to follow from the point mentioned earlier that agency has to do with ability to change one's temporal orientations and thus one's relationship to structures. It further suggests that in Emirbayer's and Mische's approach agency always has to do with overcoming problematic situations (or, in terms of pragmatism: indeterminate actor-context transactions) and is not understood in creating different 'futures' just for the sake of it (see below).

A conceptualisation of agency: The 'chordal triad'

In their conceptualisation of agency Emirbayer and Mische make a distinction between three dimensions or elements:

- (1) the **iterational** element, which refers to "*the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to*

- sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time*” (ibid., p.971; emph. in original);
- (2) the **projective** element, which encompasses “*the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future*” (ibid.; emph in original);
 - (3) the **practical-evaluative** element, which entails “*the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations*” (ibid.; emph. in original).

Whereas the first element is linked to the past and the second to the future, the third is related to the present.

Emirbayer and Mische stress that these are analytical distinctions and that in concrete instances of action all three dimensions are to be found in varying degrees. This is why they speak of a “*chordal triad* of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones” (ibid., p.972; emph. in original). This is not to suggest that all three dimensions are always present with equal strength. It is possible to speak of action that is predominantly oriented towards the past, towards the present or towards the future. Emirbayer and Mische also maintain that “each dimension of agency has itself a simultaneous internal orientation towards past, future, and present” although they add that for each aspect of agency one temporal orientation is “the dominant tone” (ibid., p.972).

Although Emirbayer and Mische basically locate agency in the actors’ orientations, they do not restrict this to orientations at the level of concrete action. They also suggest that “(t)he ways in which people *understand* their own relations to the past, future, and present” make a difference to their actions (ibid., p.973; emph. added), which means that “changing *conceptions* of agentic possibility in relation to structural contexts [can] profoundly influence how actors in different periods and places see their worlds as more or less responsive to human imagination, purpose and effort” (ibid.; emph added). This means that people’s *sense* of agency, and possibly they way in which they (are able to) talk about their orientations towards the past, future and present – the narration of their orientations – is an important factor in their actual agency as well.

Emirbayer and Mische also stress the social and relational aspects of their conception of agency in that it “centers around the engagement (and disengagement) by actors of the different contextual environments that constitute their own structured yet flexible social universe” (ibid., p.973). Viewed internally “agency entails different ways of experiencing the world”; viewed externally “it entails actual interactions with its contexts” (ibid.). This is why they conclude that agency is “always a dialogical process by and through which actors immersed in temporal passage engage with others within collectively organized contexts of action” (ibid., p.974).

In their paper Emirbayer and Mische provide a very detailed discussion of the three dimensions of agency (the iterational, the practical-evaluative and the projective) (see ibid., pp.975-1002). What emerges from this discussion is an approach which understands agency first and foremost (and to a certain extent exclusively) in terms of problem solving, but where problem solving itself is understood in what in

pragmatism is referred to as a transactional framework (see Biesta & Burbules 2003), an understanding of the human organism as living *by means of* an environment rather than ‘in’ an environment and where the activities of the organism have to do with the (re)construction of viable patterns of (trans)action, i.e., those patterns which allow for maintaining a dynamic equilibrium of organism and environment. Whereas the practical-evaluative dimension refers to the process of re-establishing a co-ordinated transaction with the environment in ‘real time’, the iterational dimension refers to the way in which the actor is able to draw upon previously established/acquired patterns of action (in Dewey’s vocabulary such patterns of action are called ‘habits’ which for Dewey are predispositions to act, not actions or patterns of action as such), while the projective dimension refers to the orientation towards the future which is present in all (trans)action. In this respect we can say that the three dimensions always have to operate together because they are not three modes of action or three components of action, but rather analytic distinctions with a ‘unified whole’ (Dewey).

The iterational dimension of agency

With regards to the *iterational* dimension of agency the locus of agency lies in what Emirbayer and Mische refers to as the “schematization of social experience” (ibid., p.975). This is manifested in the actors’ ability to recall, select and apply more or less tacit and taken-for-granted schemas of action that they have developed through past interactions. The agentic dimension does not simply lie in the possession of such schemas – which exists both as corporeal and cognitive patterns – but in “*how actors selectively recognize, locate and implement* such schemas in their ongoing and situated transactions” (ibid., p.975; *emph. in original*). This shows that Emirbayer’s and Mische’s understanding of the locus of agency for the iterational dimension is located in the actors’ *orientations* towards their schemas – not the schemas themselves. Emirbayer and Mische helpfully show that the basic ideas behind their understanding of the iterative dimension of agency builds upon pragmatism (particularly ideas developed by Dewey in *Human Nature and Conduct*, 1922), and the work of phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty and Schutz. While Dewey and Merleau-Ponty emphasise the “sedimentation of meaning in the body” (ibid., p.977), Schutz emphasises the social dimension “of prereflexive life” (ibid.). More recently Bourdieu and Giddens have developed similar ideas, Bourdieu with the notion of ‘habitus’ and Giddens with the idea of ‘practical consciousness’ (see ibid.). Emirbayer and Mische distinguish between three different processes in the ways in which actors orient themselves towards the past: selective attention, recognition of types and categorical location (see ibid., pp.979-980). To this they add ‘maneuver among repertoires’ as a ‘subtone’ in the chordal structure of iteration that most approximates the practical-evaluative dimension of agency and “expectation maintenance” as the subtone that has to do with the projective dimension.

An interesting aspect of Emirbayer’s and Mische’s discussion is the way in which they relate their analysis of the iterative dimension of agency to examples of empirical research, suggesting that the “iterational orientation of agency has already proved a rich source of research questions in a variety of social science disciplines” (ibid., p.981). The example most relevant in the context of the Learning Lives project is their discussion of research on ‘life course development’ which “inquires into the formative influence of past experiences on agentic processes” (ibid., p.982). Such research, they maintain, “explores the connection between social structures and social-psychological development, as manifested in the life-trajectories resulting from

particular intersections of biography and history” (ibid., p.982). This means that neither structures nor psychological traits in themselves determine habits and patterns of action, because “actors develop relatively stable patterns of interaction in active response to historical situations” (ibid., p.982), which, in turn, means that “(t)he individual life course has to be conceptualized (...) as the result of the subject’s constructive activity in dealing with the available life course programs” (ibid., p.983). Whether this is done in a conscious or less conscious way is presumably an empirical question. (This touches upon questions about social reproduction which Emirbayer and Mische briefly mention in this context as well; see ibid, p.981). Although we could say that the iterational dimension represents the accumulation of past learning, Emirbayer and Mische say remarkably little about any learning processes involved in building up ‘schemata’. What can be inferred from their discussion is that such learning is at least partly ‘habitual’, i.e., pre-reflexive and located at the level of the body.

The projective dimension of agency

The importance of distinguishing the *projective dimension of agency* is to highlight the fact that human beings are able to challenge, reconsider and reformulate their schemas. As Emirbayer and Mische put it: “we maintain that human actors do not merely repeat past routines; they are also the inventors of new possibilities for thought and action” (ibid., pp.983-984). The “imaginative engagement with the future” allows actors” to distance themselves (at least in partial exploratory ways) from the schemas, habits, and traditions” that constrain them (ibid., p.984). Emirbayer and Mische emphasise the subset of words to describe this ability can range from strongly purposive words like goal, plan and objective “to the more ephemeral language of dreams, wishes, desires, anxieties, hopes, fears and aspirations” (ibid., p.984). The locus of agency here lies in what they call “the *hypothesization* of experience, as actors attempt to reconfigure received schemas by generating alternative possible responses to the problematic situations they confront in their lives” (ibid., p.984; *emph. in original*). It is about constructing “changing images of where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there” (ibid., p.984). This relates to Schutz’s idea of ‘the project’ which represents “the completed act-to-be as imagined in the future perfect tense” (ibid., P.987).

Emirbayer and Mische suggest that the “internal chordal structure of projectivity” consists of three ‘dominant tones’ – narrative construction, symbolic recomposition, and hypothetical resolution – and two ‘secondary tones’ – identification and experimentation (see ibid., p.988). All aspects of projectivity have to do with envisaging possible lines of action. This process begins with ‘anticipatory identifications’, that is attempts to understand and clarify the situation on the basis of one’s available stock of knowledge. This then moves to ‘narrative construction’, “the construction of narratives that locate future possibilities in relation to more or less coherent causal and temporal sequences” (ibid.). Emirbayer and Mische argue that narratives “provide cultural resources by which actors can develop a sense of movement in time” (ibid., p.989). ‘Symbolic recomposition’ is about the ‘free play of possibilities’ which allows actors to explore alternative means-ends sequences (see ibid., pp. 989-990). This then moves to ‘hypothetical resolution’ and from there to actual implementation of the best line of action (‘experimental enactment’) (see ibid., pp.990-991).

Emirbayer and Mische argue that projectivity “needs to be rescued from the subjectivist ghetto and put to use in empirical research as an essential element in understanding processes of social reproduction and change” (ibid., p.991). They therefore argue that instead of an exclusive focus on the past to explain the present, life course research should focus on the relevance and influence of future expectations and, more specifically, on the ways in which such expectations are structured and articulated through narrative (see ibid., pp. 991-992).

The practical-evaluative dimension of agency

The *practical-evaluative dimension* of agency, finally, is that which responds to the demands and contingencies of the present. Here the locus of agency lies primarily in what Emirbayer and Mische refer to as the “*contextualization* of social experience” (ibid., p.994; *emph in original*) – which might best be understood as the way in which actors bring their past experiences and future orientations to bear on the present situation. It is important to see that for Emirbayer and Mische the point here is not simply to adapt to a particular situation. They stress that engaging with problematic situations will almost definitely lead to a transformation of the situation – or in more Deweyan terms: it will result in a change of the organism-environment transaction. Emirbayer and Mische analyse the internal structure of practical evaluation with a 5-step model that is reminiscent of Dewey’s theory of inquiry (see Biesta & Burbules 2003, part. chapter 3) and which consists of three dominant ‘tones’ – problematisation, decision and execution – and two secondary tones – the *characterisation* of a given situation against the background of past patterns of experience (which brings in the past dimension), and the *deliberation* over possible trajectories of action (which brings in the future dimension). A central aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension is the role of judgement, which not only has to do with strategic decision-making (i.e., finding the most effective and efficient means to reach particular, pre-determined ends) but also has to do with decisions about the desirability of likely ends (a distinction which is linked to Weber’s distinction between *Zweck-* and *Wertrationalität*; see ibid., p.995). It suggests, in other words, that the practical-evaluative dimension entails judgements and deliberation both about the means and the ends of action. Agency is here understood as “the capacity for practical evaluation” that enables actors (at least potentially) “to pursue their projects in ways that may challenge and transform the situation contexts of action themselves” (ibid., p.994).

Emirbayer’s and Mische’s analysis of agency can be mapped in the following way (the dominant tones of each dimension of agency are highlighted):

THE CHORDAL TRIAD OF AGENCY (Emirbayer and Mische 1998)									
	past			present			future		
iterative	selective attention	recognition of type	categorical location	maneuver (present)			expectation (future)		
practical-evaluative	characterization (past)			problematisation	decision	execution	deliberation (future)		
projective	anticipatory identification (past)			experimental enactment (present)			narrative construction	symbolic recomposition	hypothetical resolution

Context and interaction

Emirbayer and Mische do emphasise that although their analysis of agency is about aspect of the individual’s activities, agency is only ‘achieved’ (our term) when the

three dimensions “enter into different and changing relationships with the temporal-relational contexts of action” (ibid., p.1002). This means that an understanding of agency is only complete when it is able to account for “the variable nature of the interplay between structure and agency” (ibid., p.1002). It is important to note that their way of putting this falls into the trap of using ‘agency’ in two different ways: as referring to what they in their own definition call “a temporally embedded process of social engagement” and as referring to the individual as an ‘element’ of this process. Or, in more technical terms: they use ‘agency’ both as explanans and explanandum. (See also the distinction made above between ‘agency as phenomenon’ and ‘agency as theory’.) To prevent this confusion it might be better to speak about the interplay between individuals and contexts as a/the way to understand agency. Emirbayer and Mische seem to try to get out of this trap by making a distinction between agency, action and structure (see ibid., p.1004). For them agency is a dimension that is present in all empirical instances of human action. Hence they conclude that “there are no concrete agents, but only actors who engage agentially with their structuring environments” (ibid., p.1004). This implies that all social action “is a concrete synthesis, shaped and conditions, on the one hand, by the temporal-relational contexts of action and, on the other, by the dynamic element of agency itself” Ibid., p.1004). Emirbayer and Mische maintain that it is the latter – the dynamic element of agency itself – which guarantees “that empirical social action will never be completely determined or structured” (ibid., p.1004). But this doesn’t mean that agency itself is free of structures. Agency, so we could say, always operates in transaction with environments or contexts. Emirbayer and Mische summarise this as follows.

We content that as actors alter or shift between their agentic orientations, dialogically reconstructing the internal composition of their chordal triad, they may increase or decrease their capacity for invention, choice, and transformative impact in relation to the situational contexts within which they act. (ibid., p.1003)

Three questions for empirical research

For Emirbayer and Mische all this means that empirical research should focus on “locating, comparing, and predicting the relationship between different kinds of agentic processes and particular structuring contexts of action” (ibid., p.1005). For such research they suggest the following three central questions.

(1) *How do different temporal-relational contexts support (or conduce to) particular agentic orientations?*(ibid., p.1005, emph. in original)

The task here is to locate “which sorts of socio-structural, cultural, and social-psychological contexts are more conducive to developing the different modalities of agency” (ibid., p.1005). Is to gain an understanding, in other words, of the conditions (understood transactionally, that is in terms of the *interplay* between individual and context) which bring about or promote a particular ‘mix’ of iterational, projective and practical-evaluative orientations of individuals. What is it, in other words, that engages people mainly in habitual schematic responses? What is it that makes it possible for people to engage in imaginative, projective responses? And what makes it possible for people to engage with the present situation in an agentic way? These are not simply questions about how particular ‘internal’ or ‘external’ processes impact on agentic orientations. These are also questions about how change might result in a ‘shift’ of agentic orientation. And these are questions about learning opportunities and

learning processes if we assume, that is, that changes in agentic orientations can be the result of more or less conscious or deliberate learning. Although Emirbayer and Mische don't mention learning explicitly, they do suggest that changing circumstances can demand or facilitate a reconstruction of agentic orientations which, in turn, can alter the individual's ability to respond to the concrete situation (see *ibid.*, p.1006). Emirbayer and Mische also suggest the possibility that being positioned at the intersection of multiple temporal-relational contexts can result in (which can either mean 'demand' or 'facilitate') "*greater capacities for creative and critical intervention*" (*ibid.*, p.1007; *emph in original*).

(2) *How do changes in agentic orientations allow actors to exercise different forms of mediation over their contexts of action?* (*ibid.*, p.1008, *emph. in original*)

Here the focus is on exploring how changes in agentic orientations "give actors varying capacities to influence the diverse contexts within which they act" (*ibid.*, p.1008). It is important to bear in mind that this should be understood in a transactional or contextualised way. The 'achievement' of agency always depends on the interplay between individual and structure. This means that while individuals may be quite creative and projective in one situation, may have a much more iterative orientation in another situation. It is the 'switch' in agentic orientation in function of particular contexts-of-action which seems to be central, therefore, in understanding how agency is 'achieved.' Again the question of learning is an important one, not in the least in trying to understand the learning involved in shifting one's agentic orientation, which brings us to the third question Emirbayer and Mische suggest.

(3) *How do actors reconstruct their agentic orientations and thereby alter their own structuring relationships to the contexts of action?* (*ibid.*, p.1009, *emph. in original*)

This refers to the "self-reflexive dimension of agentic orientations, that is, the capacity of actors to reflectively reconstruct their own temporal orientations towards action" (*ibid.*, p.1010). In this context Emirbayer and Mische refer to Mead's alleged claim that this is due "to the ability of conscious beings to direct attention and intervention toward their own patterns of response" (*ibid.*, p.1010). (It is important to bear in mind that this should not be understood as a natural capacity of 'conscious beings' but rather as something that is the result of social interaction itself – a point discussed in detail in Biesta 1998; 1999.) Emirbayer and Mische particularly refer to life course research with its focus on trajectories and turning points, "especially work examining the subjective and/or narrative reconstruction of the self through self-interpretive activity during critical life transitions" (*ibid.*, p.1010). This is probably an unnecessarily individualistic way of understanding such learning processes. Although at the end of the day the change in agentic orientation resides in the individual, the processes leading to such a shift may well be predominantly social or intersubjective. Emirbayer and Mische particularly emphasise the role of imagination in such processes, because it is "(b)y subjecting their own agentic orientations to imaginative recomposition and critical judgement [that] actors can loose themselves from past patterns of interaction and reframe their relationships to existing constraints" (*ibid.*, p.1010, *emph. in original*).

Discussion

With their fine-grained analysis Emirbayer and Mische provide a thought-provoking contribution to the discussion about agency. What is particularly significant about their approach is the attempt to theorise agency in its own right (i.e., not simply as the

‘opposite’ of structure), whilst at the same time acknowledging that structures and contexts do matter in the ways in which agency is ‘achieved.’ What is also important is their attention to time, both in their attempt to understand agency itself as a temporal phenomenon and in emphasising the fact that contexts for action themselves are not static. This is all captured in their definition of agency as “*the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations*” (ibid., p.970; emph. in original).

One shortcoming of their analysis is that they pay far more attention to the different ways in which individual actors can engage with ‘temporal-relational contexts’ than with understanding how such contexts ‘engage’ with actors – although they might argue that this is much more an empirical question than one that needs theoretical exploration. (Alheit [2005] provides an interesting take on this issue, partly based on empirical data, but also informed by a further theorising of the significance of and impact of contexts and structures on action.) The other thing that is remarkably absent in Emirbayer’s and Mische’s discussion is explicit attention to the role of learning in understanding how agency is ‘achieved’ – which is particularly remarkable because learning is at least one of the ‘mechanisms’ which could help to understand and explain changes in agentic orientations over time. The point here is not that they make it impossible to focus on learning in understanding how agency is achieved; the point is only that Emirbayer and Mische do not use the discourse of learning to conceptualise and theorise changes in agentic orientations (see below). A third shortcoming, as we mentioned before, is that Emirbayer and Mische focus almost exclusively on the ways in which people achieve agency in dealing with the complexities of the present (which follows from pragmatism’s focus on ‘problem solving’). This makes it more difficult to understand those situations in which people decide to change their lives and work towards a different future in ways that are not meant to address issues in the present. (This is at least a theoretical possibility, although it is an empirical question to what extent such attempts to change the direction of one’s life are not connected to the past of the present. Emirbayer and Mische would probably argue that there is always a connection.)

There are two theoretical insights that we wish to take from – or better: articulate in response to – Emirbayer’s and Mische’s work. The first is that agency should not be understood as a capacity, and particularly not as an individual’s capacity, but should always be understood in transactional terms, that is, as a quality of the *engagement* of actors with temporal-relational contexts of action. The transactional approach here implies (1) that the distinction between actor and environment is seen as an analytical and not as an ontological distinction, and (2) that both actor and environment are affected by the ‘engagement’ (see Dewey & Bentley 1949; Biesta & Burbules 2003). This calls for what we wish to refer to as an *ecological understanding of agency*, i.e., an understanding which always encompasses actors-in-transaction-with-context, actors acting by-means-of-an-environment rather than simply *in* an environment (for the notion of ‘ecology of agency’ see Costall 2000). The second, related, insight is that agency should not be understood as a possession of the individual, but rather as something that is *achieved* in and through the engagement with a particular temporal-relational situation. The idea of *achieving agency* makes it possible to understand why

individual can be agentic in one situation but not in another. It moves the explanation away, in other words, from the individual and locates it firmly in the transaction (which also implies that the achievement in one situation does not mean that it will necessarily be achieved in other situations as well). This also makes it possible to understand fluctuations in an individual's agency over time. Although such fluctuations may have to do with the learning (and un-learning) on the side of the individual, the answer to the question how agency is achieved ultimately depends on the transactions of individuals with particular situations, within particular ecologies. All this implies that agency is not something people can *have*. It is, as we suggest, something that people can *achieve*, and they can only achieve it in transaction with a particular situation. This allows for the empirical possibility that in some cases the achievement of agency requires more effort from the individual than in other cases, something which is connected to the availability of resources (see below). To understand and explain how agency is achieved therefore requires a focus upon the particular temporal-relational ecology of such achievements (which also implies that agency can only be understood and explained *ex post facto*, i.e., after the event).

SEVEN QUESTIONS FOR DATA-ANALYSIS

Emirbayer's and Mische's framework is not only helpful for theorising the phenomenon of agency; it also suggests a set of questions which can be used to interrogate life (hi)stories. The three main questions mentioned above provide the general framework for this, but need some further unpacking and some additions.

[1] The first step in interrogating life (hi)stories in terms of agency follows from using the distinction between the three aspects of agency in a descriptive manner. The idea here is to capture the particular 'composition' of iterational, pragmatic-judgemental and projective aspects of people's agentic orientations, i.e., the particular composition of the ways in which people engage with (the events that make up) their life. The question here is not whether people either engage in a habitual, a pragmatically-engaged or a projective way. The task is, first of all, to capture the particular 'composition' of these three dimensions, the particular way in which the 'agentic chord' sounds.

[2] This is, of course, not a characteristic of the individual, but always of the individual-in-transaction, which suggests that the description of a particular configuration of the agentic orientations needs to be linked to the particular situation in which this configuration is 'active.' It may, of course, turn out that for some individuals the configuration of their agentic orientations is relatively stable across a wide range of situations. From a transactional point of view, this is an important finding which needs further exploration.

[3] Such descriptive work is necessary before it becomes possible to address Emirbayer's and Mische's first question, which asks for an answer to the question how different temporal-relational contexts "support (or conduce to) particular agentic orientations." Their way of putting it is slightly misleading, because it seems to suggest that the achievement of agency is specific for particular contextual situations. Again, the analysis has to be conducted in a transactional way, in order to understand how the transaction between actor and context makes a particular configuration of

agentic orientations possible. This is not to deny that such an analysis can reveal patterns and can help us to better understand how particular circumstances can support or facilitate particular agentic orientations, but it is important to emphasise that agency is not achieved by the individual but always by the individual-in-transaction. This implies that at this step the analysis also needs to *engage with wider questions about structures and structural conditions for action, and with the issue of their reproduction through action*. What Emirbayer and Mische also seem to forget in their understanding of the role of ‘context’ in agency is that a deeper understanding of the ‘origin’ of a particular configuration of agentic orientations should also engage with the temporal dimension of the (trans)formation of such configurations (see also step 7 below). It needs to look at the ways in which the (trans)formation of such configuration is embedded in biography and lifecourse.

[4] Whereas the first three steps focus on agentic orientations, Emirbayer’s and Mische’s second question – *How do changes in agentic orientations allow actors to exercise different forms of mediation over their contexts of action?* – focuses on the ways in which agency is actually achieved. The assumption in this question is that different agentic orientations – or again we should say: a different composition or configuration of agentic orientations – allow for particular mediations ‘over the context of action,’ i.e., particular ways to engage and ‘deal’ with the (present) situation. The task here is first of all a descriptive one, viz., to capture the ways in which agency is achieved in concrete situations. Part of the task here is to characterise the agentic orientations at play. Is agency achieved in a projective way, i.e., do people imagine a different future and does this imagined future allow them to deal with the challenges of the situation in a particular way? Or is their response mainly iterational, based upon established patterns of action and understanding? Or is it pragmatic-judgemental, i.e., do people try to deal with issues in a way that is explorative and experimental?

[5] The task here is not only to describe and characterise the efforts of the individual, but also to focus on the ecology in which agency is achieved. It is here that the question of resources becomes important as well, and one way to characterise the resources is in terms of different ‘capitals,’ including economic, cultural and social capital (see Field 2005). Whether there are other resources at play as well is, again, an empirical question. Whether it is useful to characterise such resources in terms of capital is a question for further discussion. Identity or the narration of identity might be a resource people use to achieve agency (see also below), but whether referring to this as ‘identity capital’ is a conceptual gain remains to be seen.

[6] The description and characterisation of the ways in which agency is achieved leads again to questions of understanding and explanation, that is, trying to understand the different principles and processes at work in the achievement of agency. It is here that Emirbayer’s and Mische’s work suggests some interesting hypotheses and also allows for an exploration of the role of learning. In their second question Emirbayer and Mische focus on changes in agentic orientations and suggest that such changes allow actors to engage in more effective and/or more satisfactory ways with events in their life. This is related to a more specific hypothesis in Emirbayer’s and Mische’s understanding of agency which has to do with Mead’s idea that key to agency has to do with the ability to shape one’s responsiveness to problematic situations (see above). Agency is not about how we act in a particular situation. The agentic dimension lies in

the ways in which we have control over the ways in which we respond to the situation. This is what lies behind Emirbayer's and Mische's emphasis on the importance of changes in agentic orientation – or, to follow their more precise approach: changes in the composition of one's orientations. To focus on the changes as such and to link this to ways in which agency is achieved makes visible how agentic orientations impact upon our agency. To make visible how people actually shape their orientations brings into view how people 'exert' their agency. With Mead Emirbayer and Mische characterise this as a process of 'reflective intelligence' which encompasses 'imaginative distancing' and 'communicative evaluation' (see Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p.971). This suggests two empirical questions for the interrogation of life (hi)stories.

The first question has to do with the extent to which people are able to distance themselves from their agentic orientations, i.e., make such orientations the object of reflection and imagination. It is here that there is not only a direct link with narration, because it can be argued that reflection and imagination require a medium and the narration of one's life does precisely that. (The mediation does not necessarily have to be 'verbal' but can also occur through images, metaphors, or other meaningful practices.) There is also a direct link with the methodology of learning lives since the very articulation of one's life story through interviews provides opportunities for making one's agentic orientations the object of reflection (see also Dominicé 2000). With this in mind we can say that Emirbayer's and Mische's question about the change in and of agentic orientations is basically a question about learning; a question, moreover, which locates the learning involved in agency in reflection upon one's agentic orientations. Questions here are about what is involved in such learning and what makes such learning possible. There are further questions, of course, about whether such learning indeed has a positive impact on one's agency – and one of the important questions related to this is who decides whether the impact is positive. There is also the question whether such learning is always a good thing.

The second empirical question has to do with the communicative dimensions of this process. The question here is to what extent communication is necessary or at least helpful in the reconstruction of one's agentic orientations. Is this something people do with others? Or can they also do it on their own? Does the interaction with others alter the process? Does it impact upon the quality of the process? And how important is the communicative dimension from the point of view of learning?

[7] The final aspect of this analysis is the temporal dimension. There is not only the question how composition of agentic orientations and the actual achievement of agency differ in (response to) different situations. There is also the question how this differs over time. The first aspect of the temporal dimension focuses on the individual and his or her life history and the question here is whether there are changes over the duration of the individual's life and how these changes can be understood. This is partly a question about context: do different situations 'trigger' or 'facilitate' different ways of being – and more specifically: different ways of being agentic. But it is also the temporal dimension which allows for exploring the role of learning in changes over time. It is here that the individual's biography becomes important again as one important 'factor' in the (reflective) transformation of one's agentic orientations. The second aspect of the temporal dimensions focuses on the changes in the contexts-of-transaction. Here the analysis can focus on different time-scales, from short term

transitions in one's life to much longer societal transformations (for the latter see, e.g., Antikainen et al., 1996; Gorard & Rees, 2002). It is here that macro-sociological analyses such as those from Giddens and Bauman (see above) also have their place.

HOW IS AGENCY ACHIEVED? SOME FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

Whereas the seven steps presented above provide guidance for the interrogation of life-stories from the point of view of agency, it is important to acknowledge that an analysis of agency in learning biographies is not exhausted by this framework. In this section we present some further reflections and observations around the idea of agency which are important for a fuller understanding of agency in the life-course.

Overcoming individualism and decentering agency: Hannah Arendt on action

In our discussion of Emirbayer's and Mische's understanding of agency we mentioned that one of the shortcomings of their analysis is that they pay far more attention to the different ways in which individual actors engage with 'temporal-relational contexts' than with understanding how such contexts 'engage' with actors. Although, as we suggested, this is partly an empirical issue, it does result in a conceptualisation of agency that is more focused on the activities of the 'agent' and less about the 'activities' of the context of action. To talk about the activities of the context may sound odd, but becomes an important issue once it is acknowledged that the context for human agency is predominantly a social context, i.e., a context which exists of other human beings and their actions. The fact that Emirbayer and Mische say little about the context as a social contexts highlights that their conceptualisation of agency is rather individualistic. It is in response to these observations that we briefly wish to discuss another way to understand agency, one which situates agency in a more radical way in processes of social interaction. This way of understanding agency can be found in the work of Hannah Arendt (see particularly Arendt 1958; see also Biesta in press[b]).

Arendt's conception of agency is rooted in her understanding of the *vita activa*, the active human life. Arendt's philosophy centers around an understanding of human beings as *active* beings, as beings whose humanity is not simply defined by their capacity to think and reflect, but where what it means to be human has everything to do with what one *does*. In this respect, Arendt's philosophy is an antidote to the mainstream of Western philosophy in which the question of what it means to be human has always been answered in terms of reflection, thinking, rationality and contemplation. In her book *The human condition* (1958) Arendt distinguishes between three 'modalities' of the active life: labor, work and action. *Labor* is the activity that corresponds to the biological processes of the human body. It stems from the necessity to maintain life and is exclusively focused on the maintenance of life. It does so in endless repetition: "one must eat in order to labor and must labor in order to eat" (Arendt 1958, p.143). Work, on the other hand, has to do with the ways in which human beings actively change their environment. It has to do with production and creation and hence with 'instrumentality.' Work brings an artificial world of things into existence, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. It is concerned with making and therefore "entirely determined by the categories of means and end" (ibid.). While labor and work are concerned with the interaction with our environment, *action* is defined as the activity "that goes on directly between

men[sic],” without “the intermediary of things or matter” (ibid., p.7). Action thus has to do with the domain of the social. But what does it mean to act? What does Arendt mean by ‘action’ and how is ‘action’ different from labor and work?

For Arendt to act first of all means to take initiative, to begin something new, to bring something new into the world. Arendt characterizes the human being as an *initium*, a “beginning and a beginner” (Arendt 1977, p.170; emph. added). She argues that what makes each of us unique is not the fact that we have a body and need to labor to maintain our body, nor the fact that through work we change the environment we live in. What makes each of us unique is our potential to do something that has not been done before. This is why Arendt writes that every act is in a sense a miracle, “something which could not be expected” (ibid.). Arendt likens action to the fact of birth, since with each birth something ‘uniquely new’ comes into the world (see Arendt 1958, p.178). But it is not only when human beings are born that something new comes into the world. It happens all the time. We continuously bring new beginnings into the world through what we do and say. This is of course not to deny the role of routine and repetition in our everyday lives. But it is to acknowledge that to a very large extent we indeed do and say things that have not been done or said before – not in the least for the simple reason that they have not been done or said before *by us*: the child who utters her first words, or the student who suddenly understands a mathematical principle. Although action is about invention and creation, we shouldn’t think of it as something exceptional or spectacular. Action can be very mundane. It ranges from scientific breakthroughs and inventions to the ways in which we care for others; it ranges from being a political leader to casting one’s vote – or, for that matter, refusing to vote. Through all these words and deeds we begin, we bring something new into the world, and, most importantly, we bring *ourselves* into the world. “With word and deed,” Arendt writes, “we insert ourselves into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth” (ibid., pp.176-177).

It is crucial to see, however, that ‘beginning’ is only half of what action is about. Although it is true that we reveal our distinct uniqueness through what we do and say, we should not think of this as a process through which we disclose some kind of pre-existing identity. Arendt writes “that nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word” (ibid., p.180). Everything depends – and this point is absolutely crucial for an adequate understanding of Arendt’s notion of action – on how others will respond to our initiatives. This is why Arendt writes that the agent is not an author or a producer, but a subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely one who began an action and the one who suffers from, who is subjected to its consequences (see ibid., p.184). The basic idea of Arendt’s understanding of action is therefore very simple: *we cannot act in isolation*. My activities only exist if they are taken up by others. In order to act, in order, therefore, we need others who respond to our beginnings.

The problem is, however, that others respond to our initiatives in ways that are not predictable. As Arendt reminds us, we act upon beings “who are capable of their own actions” (ibid., p.190). Although this always frustrates our beginnings, Arendt emphasizes again and again that this frustration is the very condition that makes our disclosure, our action and hence our subjectivity possible. The “impossibility to remain unique masters of what [we] do” is at the very same time the condition – and the *only* condition – under which our beginnings can come into the world (ibid.,

p.220). We can of course try to control the ways in which others respond to our beginnings – and Arendt acknowledges that it is tempting to do so. But if we were to do so, we would deprive other human beings of their opportunities to begin, we would deprive them of their opportunities to act. Action is therefore never possible in isolation. Arendt even goes so far to argue that “to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act” (ibid., p.188). Action is not something we can do on our own. In order to be able to act and hence to be a subject, we need others – others who respond to our initiatives and take up our beginnings. This also means, however, that action is never possible without plurality. As soon as we erase plurality we deprive others of their actions, and as a result we deprive ourselves of our possibility to act, and hence to be an agent. This is why Arendt concludes that “plurality is the condition of human action” (ibid.).

The most important conclusion for our discussion is that Arendt provides an approach in which agency is no longer seen as an attribute of individuals, but is understood as a *quality of human action* – which, from Arendt’s point of view, is always *interaction*. Arendt shows us that agency only exists *in action* – “neither before nor after” (Arendt 1977, p.153). This is why she suggests that we should understand action and agency through the lens of the performing arts. The main reason for this is that performing artists need an audience to show their ‘virtuosity’ (Arendt), “just as acting men [*sic*] need the presence of others before whom they can appear” (ibid., p.154). The difference between performing arts and creative arts is, of course, not that creative arts – the arts of ‘making’ – can do without an audience. The crucial point is that the work of art of the performing artist only exists *in* the performance. The script for a play may have endurance just as a painting; but it is only in the performance of the play that the play as a work of art exists.

Arendt thus provides us with an understanding of agency in which the agent is clearly decentred, an approach in which the achievement of agency is not an achievement of the agent alone but of the agent-in-interaction-with-others. What Arendt helps us to see – at least as a theoretical possibility and hence as something which can guide data-analysis – is that the achievement of agency crucially depends on others and the ways in which others respond (in the wide sense of the world) to us, to our actions, initiatives and beginnings. Arendt is, of course, neither the first nor the only philosopher who has contributed to a decentred view of the human agent. Within Western philosophy there is a much longer tradition, at least going back to Nietzsche, in which questions are raised about the idea of the individual as the source and locus of his or her own agency. This should at least act as a reminder of the fact that the discourse about agency is strongly rooted in modern, Western thinking and thus brings with it a whole set of assumptions about what it means to be human which are not to be treated as universal (see Biesta 2006) and which, for this reason, may not even resonate with the stories and interpretations that interviewees will give of their learning biographies.

The ego and its identity as the agentic core of personality structure: Levine

Whereas Arendt’s work pushes our understanding of agency towards the social/intersubjective end of the spectrum, we shouldn’t forget that there are other theorists who defend much more individualistic approaches to agency. An example of an approach which locates agency much more firmly in the individual, and more specifically in the individual’s psychological ‘make up’ is presented in a recent paper

by Levine who, in a discussion of 'post-modern' views of identity asks the question 'What happened to agency?' (Levine 2005). Levine goes back to Erikson's work and some insights from Habermas, Marcia and Mead in order to provide an answer to the question "how to conceptualize the constructs of identity as well as agency" (Levine 2005, p.178). Levine organises his discussion in terms of five constructs: self, self-concept, social identity, personal identity, and ego-identity.

He defines the construct *self* as "others' perceptions of a person's behavioral repertoires" (ibid., p.178). These repertoires can be identified in the enactment of particular roles, in which case we can speak of a 'social self', or they can be perceived as more general attributes of the person, in which case we can speak of a 'personal self' (see ibid.). *Self-concept* refers to a person's "subjective experience of a specific behavioral repertoire performed in a specific context" (ibid.). Levine argues that because such experience "is tied to and constructed from symbolic interactions about the behavior," self-concepts are "contextualized meanings about the self" (ibid., p.179). From this it also follows "that a person has many self-concepts, as many as the number of distinguishable repertoires they reflect on" (ibid.). Self-concepts should be understood as *first-order cognitive reflections* (see ibid) because of the fact that they are derived from and having meaning in relation to specific interactive contexts. But it is important to see that the self and self-concepts are not identities. Levine considers *personal and social identities as second-order reflections* "on the first-order reflective experiences called self-concepts" (ibid.). Personal and social identities consist of "the internalized knowledge of self-concepts" (ibid.) which means that "to be aware of one's ... identity means that one is thinking about and deriving a generalized, transcontextual understanding of the meanings of one's personal and social self-concepts" (ibid.). According to Levine these identities (or 'identity domains') "are the major source of the ego's sense of spatial and temporal continuity" (ibid.). Social and personal identity constructs thus "make sense of" or 'organize; a variety of self-concepts that 'seem' to belong together" and thus produce "a coherent sense of who [people] are 'as a person'" (ibid.).

Levine refers to Erikson to introduce the fifth construct of his list, the notion of 'ego-identity.' Ego-identity should also be understood as a second-order level of reflection, but whereas social and personal identity are second-order reflections on self-concepts, ego-identity, seen as the ability of the ego to reflect on itself, has to be understood as "a second-order reflection on personal and social identities" (ibid.). For Erikson ego-identity is closely related to self-control or agency, understood as "achieving a sense of being the author of making choices in life" (ibid.) "(A) functioning ego-identity enables persons to be aware that they can think about how and what they think as preparation for making meaningful life choices" (ibid.). And it is for this reason that Levine concludes that "the ego and its identity can be considered the agentic core of personality structure" (ibid., p.180). But how do 'the ego and its identity' function in the life of the individual? When, in other words, do 'the ego and its identity' become operational? Although "the ego's agentic role" does play a role in our everyday dealings with problematic situations, Levine suggests that in most cases the problems we have to deal with in 'normal' interaction do not require 'deep' adjustments of our self-concepts. In many cases, everyday problems are not interpreted as challenges to the legitimacy of the self performing a role or behaviour, which means that an adjustment of one's self-concept will suffice. In certain cases such adjustments "could also require the use of the second-order reflection of social and/or personal identity to

maintain interaction” (ibid.). In all such cases ‘the agentic character of the ego’ is involved, although not very strongly “because it is not the meaningfulness of the actor’s personal and social identities that has required adjustment, only certain aspects of their behavior and their awareness of it” (ibid.).

This is different, however, in those situations in which “the meaningfulness of the personal and social identity domains is challenged” (ibid.). In such cases, Levine writes, “the ego experiences threats to its sense of temporal and spatial continuity and must sense within itself, through its own identity, a core being with sufficient competence to initiate the redefinition (reconstruction) of its personal and/or social identity domains an reestablish their legitimacy in interaction” (ibid., pp.180-181). In this context Levine quotes Habermas who writes that ego identity “proves itself in the ability of the adult to construct new identities in conflict situations and to bring these into harmony with older superseded identities so as to organize himself and his interactions ... into a unique life history” (Habermas 1974, quoted in Levine 2005, p.181). It is on the basis of these observations that Levine suggests to conceptualise agency – or to be more precise: the agentic core of the personality – as “the ego and its identity” (ibid.). What Levine is suggesting here is that we should understand agency is some kind of most inner self, i.e., the ‘part’ of the self which is able to construct and reconstruct new identities in response to those (life) situations in which existing identities are no longer ‘functional’. The ‘agentic ego’ is, in other words, the ‘director’ of one’s identity formation. It is the part of the self which is in charge of the reflective and purposeful reconstruction of one’s personal and social identity, it is the essential organiser “of the subject’s relations with the social world” (ibid., p.183).

Levine’s discussion of identity and agency is first and foremost helpful because it broadens the spectrum of conceptions and definitions of agency discussed so far. Levine clearly represents an individualistic account of agency, one which locates agency in the capacity of the individual (ego) to reconstruct his or her identities. This definition of agency does resonate with Emirbayer’s and Mische’s idea that agency should be understood in terms of the individual’s response to his or her agentic orientations although for them agency is much more located in the ways in which individuals engage with their environment, whereas in Levine’s depiction agency becomes very much an internal faculty or function, a function which is supposed to retain a sense of continuity in a world of flux. Although Levine’s ideas can be understood as a psychological account of agency – Levine himself presents it as a form of social psychology – we shouldn’t forget that Levine’s line of thinking which, with regards to agency relies heavily on Erikson, has its philosophical roots in the Kantian idea of ‘apperception’ which is precisely understood as the faculty of the human mind which is concerned with maintaining a sense of connection and coherence in the world of experience (see Allison 1983). If we read Levine’s approach through a Kantian lens it becomes possible to see the transcendental status of the idea of agency in Levine’s exposition, i.e., the fact that in Levine’s account agency seems to be something that has to be assumed in order to explain the continuity of the self for the self over time and across a range of different situations, rather than as something that is simply and (observable) empirical reality. To put it differently: in Levine’s approach agency appears very much as theory rather than as a phenomenon.

Agency and control

Many discussions about agency assume a link between agency and control. In some cases there is a very strong link – e.g., agency as that part of the self which controls the ‘identity-work’ of the self – while on other cases the link is weaker – e.g., Arendt’s idea of agency as being dependent upon the re-actions of others. Although it makes sense to include the idea of control in a conceptualisation of agency, it is also important to acknowledge that control is not an all-or-nothing concept. Not only are there degrees of control; if we think of control in terms of controlling circumstances of situations, it makes sense to make a distinction between situations and conditions that are very difficult to influence (such as physical or mental disability), situations and circumstances that might be influenced (for example those illnesses for which there is a cure; it is important to be aware of temporal-contextual dimension of this, since new therapies may become available at a particular point in someone’s life), and situations and circumstances that *in principle* can be influenced (such as economic resources, although for some individuals or for individuals at some stage in their lives this might be more difficult than for other individuals or individuals in other stages of their lives). For the empirical understanding of agency it is, therefore, important not simply to equate agency with control, but to be aware of a spectrum of possibilities.

Agency: Initiative or response?

The final point we wish to make has to do with the question to what extent we should understand agency in terms of taking initiative. Although the definition of agency as having to do with the ability to exert control over and give direction to the course of one’s life covers a rather broad spectrum, it is important to be aware of the fact that not all instances of agency that would fall under this definition follow from the individual’s ‘own’ initiative. The best example of agentic actions that seem to be more responsive than initiated by the individual have to do with those situations in which people experience a calling, have a sense of vocation, or, more generally feel that there is a certain ‘theme’ or ‘direction’ in their life to which they should respond. (Notions like destiny and karma can also be understood in this light.) It is therefore important for data-analysis to be aware of the fact that agency is not necessarily the same as taking initiative but can also be linked to those situations in which people take control of their life and ‘move’ it into a new direction as a result of a perceived calling or sense of duty. In this respect agency can also be understood as a *response*.

CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing pages we have provided an overview of theories, conceptions and definitions of agency and have suggested a particular way to understand and approach the ‘phenomenon’ of agency. The two key ideas that we have put forward for consideration are (1) the suggestion that agency should be understood in an ecological way, i.e., strongly connected to ‘context’, and (2) the idea that agency should not be understood as a capacity or possession of the individual, but as something that is achieved in particular (transactional) situations. Against this background we have suggested a set of seven questions that might be used to guide data-analysis of life stories in order to gain an understanding of agency in relation to life-course, learning and, to a lesser extent, identity. We have also presented some further observations which should be seen as a reminder that there is more to say about agency than is captured in the seven steps and that this might be taken into consideration in the

analysis of life stories. In the next part of this paper we present an attempt to utilise our approach in the analysis of one life story.

PART II

CASE STUDY: DIOGENES

Introduction

The data for this study come from three interviews with Diogenes³, the first in November 2004 and the others in May and June of 2005. (A fourth interview followed in January 2006.) He has provided detailed information about some areas of his personal life experiences and talks extensively about what he has said and done with service-users and colleagues in the charity for which he works. There are also some areas about which he seems reluctant to talk. At this stage of the research he is aged 60 and has worked with homeless people for 33 years. Between 1972 and 1990 he worked for charities providing for homeless people in London and subsequently for his present employer, a registered charity in the south west of England. The charity runs a number of hostels offering accommodation for up to six months for their service-users and they also operate a number of day centres that provide a variety of different services, in some cases oriented around an inexpensive café and in other cases oriented around medical and health services, guidance or selling 'The Big Issue'. Diogenes was originally employed as the first paid warden of the charity's first hostel and, while the organisation has steadily grown and changed over the years, he continued in that role until an opportunity arrived to do something different in April 2005. He has records of helping nearly 700 people through the hostel over the fourteen years he was warden and he claims success with more than half of the service-users .

Within Diogenes' accounts of his life story there were four transitions that provide an interesting frame within which to consider agency. The data for three of those transitions came from narrative accounts of his earlier life but the fourth occurred between the first and second interviews:

- 1 He joined the Army's Intelligence Corps in 1966
- 2 He became involved in working with homeless people in London in 1972
- 3 He and his family moved to the South West of England in 1991 where he secured employment with a charity for homeless people
- 4 In 2005 he agreed to be seconded from the hostel for which he was warden to manage a day centre in a town 25 miles away

³ 'Diogenes' declined to choose a pseudonym for himself until the third interview. The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion (2003) includes this entry: Diogenes the Cynic (c 412/403 – c324/321 BC) ... He evolved a distinctive and original way of life from diverse, mainly Greek elements: the beliefs (espoused by certain types of holy men and wise men) that wisdom was a matter of action rather than thought; the principle of living in accordance with nature rather than law/convention; the tradition, perhaps sharpened by contemporary disillusionment with the city-state, or promulgating ideal societies or constitutions; the tradition...of physical toughness as a requirement of virtue... 'Philanthropy' (concern for one's fellow human beings) is integral to Cynicism and essential to Diogenes' celebrated concept of 'cosmopolitanism' (the belief that the universe is the ultimate unity, of which the natural and human worlds, human beings, and the gods are all intrinsic parts with the Cynic representing the human condition at its best, at once human, animal, and divine).

The decision-making in those four transitions offers an empirical setting which can be used to explore the approach to analysing agency outlined above, which takes its inspiration from Emirbayer and Mische. They define agency as:

the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p.971)

Within each transition it is possible to identify elements of ‘habit, imagination and judgement’ affecting the decision-making processes in Diogenes’ life and it is also possible to describe such decision-making in social and temporal locations. However, Emirbayer and Mische suggest that ‘agency’ is more than simply a decision-making process that takes into account past, present and future considerations and that leads to a judgement and action. They propose that agency can be conceived as an orientation that combines in characteristic ways an iterative element, a projective element and a practical-evaluative element. Within each of these elements there are dominant and secondary features which, in combination, provide a distinctive tone to an individual’s orientation towards different ‘temporal-relational contexts’, the social settings with which an individual interacts in order to achieve or to effect agency.

The narrative evidence from the life story offers an opportunity for descriptive analysis of decision-making processes within changes or transitions in Diogenes’ life course and the data enable consideration of ‘the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement’ through different environments. Analysis using the fine detail of Emirbayer and Mische’s model, however, requires acts of imagination and interpretation.

Composition and Configuration [step 1 & 2]

The information obtained from interviews about each of the four transitions has varied in depth: the interviews have recorded what Diogenes was prepared to talk about on different occasions. The data suggest that there was an ‘interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement’ which may offer some insight into the composition of iterational, evaluative-judgemental and projective aspects of Diogenes’ agentic orientations in each of the transitions. There follows descriptions of the situations in which there is an attempt to capture the particular components of the ‘chordal triad’ within different configurations for action.

1. Joining Army Intelligence, 1966

The iterative element of Diogenes’ decision to join the army seems to have been founded on formal educational experience and family tradition. Diogenes had been a member of the Air Training Corps at school and, after graduating in history and philosophy from university, he thought it a natural progression to join the Royal Air Force. There was some tradition of men in earlier generations of his family joining the army, during both World Wars and in nineteenth century military excursions. Diogenes also recalled that, in the early years of the 1960s, there was a strong sense of patriotism in the country so perhaps there was a projective element of his attraction to

military service that the decision might be seen as serving an ideal of service to country. Such an action would also have its appeal as a reliable foundation for a man's career. The practical outcome of the decision was not quite as anticipated: Diogenes wears glasses and his sight was not good enough to train as air crew. Instead he applied to join the Intelligence Corps of the Army, attracted by the notion of gathering intelligence about the Soviet Union and its activities in Europe. He signed up for 2 years and eventually saw active service in the Far East and in Aden.

In interviews, Diogenes did not recall the decision to join the army as particularly rational or deeply considered, it seemed to be more a case of following a well-established pathway at the time for men of his ability and background. His agentic orientation might be characterised firstly as strongly iterative: he was effecting action to advance a career consistent with schemas derived from personal experiences and from the experience of people like him. The projective element of his action in joining the army conformed with prevailing notions of what starting a career should mean.

2. Working with homeless people in London, 1972

Asked about how he first became involved working with homeless people, Diogenes referred in the first interview to efforts to trace a family member with psychological problems who had become homeless and how those efforts led to direct contact with provision for homeless people in London. He recalled:

I suppose some people would say a sort of 'road to Damascus' and anyway, I thought, "Right, you need help" and well yeah, "So well, when could you start?" So I said "Where can I hang my jacket up?" (*Interview 1, 26 Nov 04*)

The decision appears to have been instant although it was almost certainly influenced by some of the experiences Diogenes related from his military service in the Far East and in Aden. He talked of the abandonment of civilised conduct in jungle conditions; he talked of witnessing acts of random brutality by other soldiers; he talked of servicemen seeing close friends killed by insurgents. The instant decision to make a commitment to homeless people needs to be considered in relation to the way his thinking and his values had been affected by military service and the learning that had taken place during that service. When he left the army, Diogenes spent three years undertaking Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in Africa and it is likely his ideals of service to others had become substantially different. The iterative element, the patterns of thought and action from his earlier life, had been subject to critical review. The projective element of agency within Diogenes' sudden decision to make a commitment to working with homeless people might be considered as the opportunity that was presented to engage with life in an ethically-informed and moral manner.

At the second and third interviews, the opportunities for learning that Diogenes found through working with a charity for homeless people became apparent. He talked of his involvement with the Simon Community in London in the early 1970s. He mentioned the importance of the founder, Brother Anton, as a charismatic model and inspiration. He recalled how, as a new recruit, he watched other workers to learn about their approach to clients, the language they used, the solutions they found to problems. He referred to literary and media sources as part of the environment within which people

become concerned with issues like homelessness at the time, recalling the impact of television dramas like 'Cathy Come Home'. He commented on shocking experiences of street work in London at the time: meeting a paedophile who wore a church army style of uniform and ran a hostel where young boys were sexually abused; meeting an eleven year old prostitute who thought she might as well be paid on the streets for her sexual favours rather than allow her stepfather to get them for nothing. The importance of Diogenes' early experiences, therefore, reveal the importance of an inspirational model, fellow workers, media and literature contributing to a framework in which he could locate personal experiences with people who were homeless.

3. Moving to the south west of England, 1991

The original involvement of Diogenes with the charity for homeless people in the south west came about as a consequence of family circumstances. A sister and her family had relocated to the area and when visiting her, Diogenes found the area attractive. His wife had become seriously ill while they were living in London and Diogenes thought moving to the south west would offer his family a better quality of life. However, his wife died within a few months of the family relocating. Shortly after, Diogenes responded to an advertisement for a hostel warden placed by a charity set up by some local churches. The charity started as a venture in response to a need identified by some church members to make provision for mainly older homeless men. Initially the work was undertaken by volunteers but, as the demands grew, the need for permanent and professional staff became apparent. With his experience in London, Diogenes was well qualified to bring his experience and professionalism to the undertaking.

The iterative element of this action, therefore, would include the years of experience that Diogenes had acquired in working with homeless people, the knowledge and skills he had developed both in relating to the people themselves and in acting as a mediator between the homeless person and the state and voluntary agencies that provide services to which they are entitled. The projective element might be seen as the necessity to envisage a means of earning a living as a widower with school-age children.

4. Managing a day centre, 2005

At the time of the first interview, Diogenes was the warden of a hostel for six people that he had managed for fourteen years; by the second interview he had been seconded to manage a day centre in a town about 25 miles away. The centre had been in danger of closure after twenty years of existence and the charity had taken it over to ensure its survival. At one level, the issue of agency in this situation concerns how far Diogenes had control of the secondment and how far it was an organisational decision. The charity's senior executive had decided that someone with experience and sensitivity was needed to take on the manager's role because of the problems confronted by the centre. When asked how far he had been involved in the decision-making, Diogenes said that the issues surrounding the day centre had been discussed at a meeting months before and he had signalled willingness to undertake the centre manager role.

The iterative element of agency in this transition centres on the routines and practices he had developed over fourteen years as hostel warden. He said that, in a hostel, the task is to ensure a single homeless person is

equipped to deal with living in the real world, rejoining the job market, umm going back into mainstream education, umm, training, finding employment.’
(*Interview 3, 3 Jun 05*)

For many this requires dealing initially with problems of addiction to street drugs and alcoholism. For each individual in a hostel Diogenes agrees a set programme of work and also helps her or him to learn everyday skills like shopping, cooking and budgeting within a routine that observes a typical working week followed by a weekend.

Diogenes suggested he had become complacent in doing the same job for 14 years, had become accustomed to the routines of hostel management and able to arrange standard solutions for most of the problems presented by the service users. He wanted a challenge:

Although I am 60 years old... I needed that challenge. Umm, I’m not being big-headed now I think I’ve started to find in the last year or so a bit too easy, a bit too easy in the hostel, umm, because after a number of years I’ve got it pretty well off pat. (*Interview 3, 3 Jun 05*)

Several times Diogenes has expressed a critical view of the town where the hostel is located. A conspicuous prosperity and gentrification has followed sustained economic development of the town while the day centre is located in a town where there is more obvious social deprivation and where problems with drugs and drug-related crime present a greater challenge.

Within the projective element of agency, there was some suggestion of nostalgia or a desire to recapture in a new setting the enthusiasm of his first involvement in the field:

I thought it was actually quite a good idea to actually sort of go back to one’s roots and I saw coming here was actually going back to my roots which was like, night shelters, drop ins, day centres and so on, many, many years ago.
(*Interview 3, 3 Jun 05*)

Working at the day centre has not required Diogenes to learn significant new skills or new information although he has had to adapt to a different environment. The staff at the centre provide cheap meals in a café for people who are homeless and they may be able to advice about accommodation matters. The day centre operates at a stage before people arrive in a hostel, when the ‘raw spade work’ is undertaken:

You can find that you open the door a crack, you know, and that’s sort of like talking through the door. Gradually you open the door wider to the point that they’ll sit downstairs and will actually talk to you and unload and then you work out a sort of programme. (*Interview 3, 3 Jun 05*)

Diogenes' years with the charity had established him as a suitable person to undertake the sensitive matter of managing the staff and the clients. He commented that there had been 'some hostility and animosity because people don't like change' and he described some of the problems of ensuring that the rules of the establishment are observed. His perception of the centre, however, was essentially: 'different people, different faces but the problems are the same.'

The iterative element of agency, the habitual component of Diogenes' interaction with the social world, would seem to be the distinctive feature of his agentic orientation after fourteen years of work with homeless people while he had managed a hostel. The circumstances of his employment, the organisational structure, his reputation and standing within the organisation were conducive to maintaining routines and established practices. The chance opportunity of there being a centre under threat of closure created a space in which the projective element of agency gained greater significance. There was a change in 'tone', a different balance: there was the possibility of a working life with a new challenge, of new relationships that might enable Diogenes to 'go back to one's roots'. There was the prospect of working and perhaps eventually living in a new location.

Transaction and Action [step 3 & 4]

In this section, at issue is the question of how different 'temporal-relational contexts' relate to particular agentic orientations. The empirical data relating to the four transitions provide an opportunity to consider how a transaction was effected between Diogenes and different environmental structures. There is an interpretive challenge in exploring the transaction between a particular configuration of agentic orientations and those structures.

In the first transition, the decision to join the Intelligence Corps, it was evident that Diogenes was a well-educated young man in his twenties in the early 1960s. It is likely he enjoyed the optimism of youth, the orientation to the future of a young man undertaking the first steps of a career. Within the social context of Diogenes' family there was a tradition of military service which perhaps made them better disposed than some families to a military career. By attending university he had already made some physical detachment from his family so joining the army was likely to be a continuation of the detachment, a continuing process of his developing autonomy. The specific action required to join the army comprised making an application and that would then have required appropriate adjustments by the family and friends that comprised his social world before the transition. Once he had joined the Intelligence Corps, Diogenes was part of a social structure characterised by authority and hierarchy with the constraints they impose on personal agency. In retrospect, Diogenes is highly critical of the seductive advertising for military service he recalls from the time, the depiction of army life as offering glamorous international travel and an active life style. The meaning he saw in his military service was substantially at odds with that portrayal.

In the second transition, Diogenes made a commitment to working with the homeless. There was not an obvious point of formal commitment as there would have been in joining the army, the nature of the commitment was rather different. Diogenes spoke of it as a Damascene conversion, a sudden epiphany, recognition of a way of working and living that promised to be more conducive for him. Of necessity, sustaining such

a commitment would make particular demands on individual agency. Working initially as a volunteer there was not the same legal structure working for a charity as there had been working for the armed forces. Diogenes' narrative has suggested that there was a powerful iterative impact of his recent military action and of his VSO work and a definite decision not to return to the practices to which he had become accustomed in those environments. However, there appeared to be a continuing projective appeal of service to others but interpreted in a significantly different manner.

In the third transition, Diogenes had moved geographically and was living in another part of the country. The reason given for the move was the necessity to provide a better quality of life for his wife but within a short time Diogenes' social existence was marked profoundly by her death. The significant 'temporal-relational context' with which he effected the transaction to become an employed hostel warden was the organisation set up by local churches to support homeless people. Agency was evident in simple actions like responding to local advertising, attending for job interview, agreeing to the conditions of employment. Agency was also evident in actions taken to establish a permanent hostel and create an environment in which the problems of homeless people could be addressed. Religious organisations provided the 'structural environments' through which such agency was to be achieved.

The fourth transition is the one about which we have most information as it has occurred in the time of the project and has involved changes for Diogenes in his working role and its location. He indicated that the decision to release him from being a hostel warden and second him to the day centre was made by a committee of which he was a member. He gave the impression in interviews that, other than making an offer to take on the role when the matter was aired, and complying with the arrangements when they were finalised, there was little deliberation over the matter. He conveyed little sense of agency: it just happened. However, as we have seen, there were several good individualistic reasons to make the change: a willingness to alter the routines of hostel management and perhaps to restore some of the enthusiasm of his early working life. The social situatedness of this development was also significant. Diogenes is well known in the local area for years of experience and respected for his commitment and dedication. He is sufficiently established in the organisation that he could have declined the secondment if he had not wanted it. The transfer to a day centre was not career advancement, it was not promotion in any conventional terms, but he complied willingly with an internal structural re-organisation. It is tempting to conclude that Diogenes has the potential to effect change, to have control over social interactions within the charity, more fully than he likes to appear.

Ecology of agency [step 5]

The question follows about the nature of resources needed to secure action within different temporal-relational contexts, the access Diogenes had to different forms of capital. It was apparent that Diogenes lives modestly and has few indicators of material wealth. He seemed to value the continuation of a worthwhile job and of leading a life that was relatively uncomplicated. He is vegetarian, no longer owns a car, but smokes quite heavily. He has said that his sisters – who are materially very successful – find his way of life and work incomprehensible. In conversation his views are consistently critical of the materialism of modern life and he seems remarkably

free of concern for material reward. The opportunity to become a day centre manager was not a promotion or career advancement in any conventionally recognised terms. Such a disposition appears to render Diogenes free of the ambition which might be thought an integral part of agency yet willing to accept changes in employment when circumstances allow. It is not personal economic capital, therefore, that plays a part in his achievement of agency; he is dependent more on the capital of the organisations with which he is involved.

In relation to cultural capital, Diogenes is more favourably endowed. He is well-educated, articulate, compassionate. His interest in history and literature are in continuing evidence; reading and documentary television inform the views he expresses about society and the political world. By the age of 60 he had spent more than half his life working with problems of homelessness. He was seen by managers in his organisation as capable of acting sensitively to the staff and users of the day centre to which he was seconded and, no doubt, considered capable of implementing whatever changes were necessary to ensure its continuation. Diogenes holds significant cultural capital within the environment of a charity providing for homeless people and within social networks where such experience and learning have value.

From his long involvement in the field of homelessness it is reasonable to assume Diogenes can access considerable social capital because of his long service and dedication. He is known across a wide geographic area in voluntary and government agencies that work in the field of homelessness and he knows what such organisations can offer to his work or the service-users. Two stories illustrated how he is known among the general public. Firstly, his hostel has been a project supported financially by people from well beyond the town such as the members of a Roman Catholic congregation who made his hostel their favoured charity. He spoke of parents he had never met phoning him for advice on what to do about teenage daughters they perceived as in danger of becoming addicted to drugs. Diogenes appears able to take advantage of social capital founded on his many years of experience and is able to see networks develop based on his local reputation. Such capital is highly significant in Diogenes' capacity to support the homeless people with whom he comes into contact, his ability to exercise agency to their benefit.

Agentic Orientations [step 6]

What principles and processes were at work in the achievement of agency? The four transitions in this study mark changes in the composition of Diogenes' agentic orientations and suggest some of the principles that formed his agentic condition. Prior to joining the army it seemed that conformity, a preparedness to follow almost uncritically in the footsteps of others, was a response that Diogenes would make to some key problems. After his experiences in the army and in VSO he emerged with a much enhanced critical capacity. His level of education would suggest he had a capacity for reflective intelligence but his military career brought that reflective intelligence into contact with the challenging social and political conditions he encountered. A continuing value can be traced of an ideal of service which was conceived perhaps rather uncritically in his youth and constructed as patriotic service to country. The experiences of military life gave a different perspective and Diogenes spoke more of 'service to one's fellow man' (sic; Interview 1, 26 Nov 04) firstly through his period of VSO and subsequently through working with homeless people. There seems to be an indication of a changing agentic orientation as a consequence of

greater critical engagement. The projective element, informed by an idealistic imagination, appears to be a significant element through the second and third transitions.

With respect to the most recent transition from hostel warden to day centre manager, Diogenes' values and ideals provide a central framework guiding the purpose and manner in which agency is deployed within his work. Crucially, he continues to want direct contact with people affected by homelessness, he would prefer to cook a meal, provide a sleeping bag, to give advice on possible accommodation, rather than engage routinely in discussions of policy or of organisational management. He is a significant individual within the organisation and could probably have become a senior executive in that or a comparable undertaking. Within the organisation, though, he has managed to influence the working practices followed by his colleagues by example and advice, he has the ability to shape responses to problematic situations. However, the avoidance of more than cursory engagement in organisational issues lends him detachment and the possibility that perhaps here is an instance of concealed agency.

The temporal dimension [step 7]

Diogenes holds a deep interest in history and will talk at length about periods in which he has specialised, such as the Second World War. He has outlined a historical perspective on issues of homelessness which can be summarised as follows:

- 1970s Optimism that homelessness is a finite social problem that can be addressed and resolved
- 1980s Decline of traditional industries and communities resulting in impoverishment and displacement of large numbers of people, some of whom become homeless
- 1990s Economic depression leading to unemployment and house repossessions contribute to homelessness
- 2000s High price of housing and the decline of family structures contribute to continuing homelessness among some social groups

In considering such change in the context of his biography, Diogenes adopts a dystopian outlook: imaginative anticipation of the future is not an optimistic or positive undertaking. He sees the social problems with which he engages in the context of economic and social change and no longer anticipates any end to them. This understanding shapes the way he responds to the problematic situations encountered with service-users. Although he describes his work in terms of finding individualised solutions for the problems of the service-users, he does not present individualised explanations of their problems.

He thinks his work has become increasingly difficult in recent years and has commented on the different kinds of people who present his work problems. There are growing numbers of young people, particularly teenagers, looking for support from the charity. In his experience, they are more likely to have problems of drug and alcohol dependency. He noted that 'there is a lot more anger about' and commented that he found youngsters less patient, more inclined to be demanding than their counterparts twenty years ago, and far more willing to be abusive. He attributes such developments to their exposure to simulated violence on TV and other communication media.

Perhaps the exercise of agency in response to these changes has been for Diogenes to detach himself from the intensity of residential contact with young homeless people. Diogenes continues to anticipate work with homeless people well beyond the statutory retirement age but the quality of such engagement, the problems encountered, are likely to be significantly different from those he has had to become accustomed to.

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