Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective

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Abstract

This paper is a contribution to understanding the relationship between agency and learning in the lifecourse. The contribution is mainly of a theoretical and a conceptual nature in that a particular notion of agency is used that enables agency to be conceived as something that is *achieved*, rather than possessed, through the active engagement of individuals with aspects of their contexts-for-action. We refer to this as an ecological understanding of agency. On the part of the actor, such engagements are characterised by particular configurations of routine, purpose and judgement. The argument is made that learning about the particular composition of one's agentic orientations and how they play out in one's life can play an important role in the achievement of agency, and that life-narratives, stories about one's life, can be an important vehicle for such learning. We explore the potential of this approach through a discussion of aspects of the learning (auto-)biographies of two participants in the Learning Lives project, a three-year longitudinal study of learning in the lifecourse. The paper concludes with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the approach and an indication of questions for further research.

Keywords

agency, adult learning, life history, biographical learning, narratives

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between agency and learning in the lifecourse. Our contribution is mainly of a theoretical and a conceptual nature in that we advance a particular way to understand and analyse agency. We approach agency as something that is achieved through the active engagement of individuals with aspects of their contexts-for-action. On the part of the

actor, such engagements are characterised by particular configurations of routine, purpose and judgement. We argue that learning about the particular composition of one's agentic orientations and how they play out in one's life can play an important role in the achievement of agency, and that life-narratives, stories about one's life, can be an important vehicle for such learning.

We develop our exploration of the concept of agency in the following way. We start with a brief overview of the role of agency in educational theory and practice, and document the recent rise of interest in the idea of agency. We then present a particular way to understand agency, one which focuses on the dynamic interplay of iterative, projective and practical–evaluative dimensions, which takes into consideration how this interplay varies within different contexts-for-action, and which locates agency in the ability to shape our responsiveness to such contexts. Next we discuss the role of learning in relation to the achievement of agency and explore the role of life-narratives in such learning processes. We explore the potential of this approach through a discussion of aspects of the learning (auto-)biographies of two participants in the Learning Lives project, a three-year longitudinal study of learning in the lifecourse.[1] In the final section of the paper we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of our approach and indicate questions for further research.

Agency, adult education and lifelong learning

The idea of agency has played a central role in education at least since the Enlightenment. Immanuel 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 express the 'motto' of the Enlightenment as '*Sapere aude!* Have courage to exercise your own understanding!' (emph. in original). Kant made an explicit connection between enlightenment and education when he argued that the 'propensity and vocation for free thinking' (Kant, 1982, p. 699), which he saw as the basis for autonomous action, could only be brought about through education. He even argued that human beings could only become *human* through education (*ibid.*). Kant's idea that education is the process through which human beings develop their rational capacities so that they become capable of independent judgement, which, in turn, forms the basis for agentic and autonomous action, has not only had a profound impact on the education of children. There is also a long-standing tradition that sees adult education as a major lever for empowerment and emancipation (see, for example, Mezirow, 1991; Welton, 2005). Whereas in the liberal tradition empowerment and emancipation are basically understood in *individualistic* terms – i.e., in terms of individual development and growth – critical approaches stress that there can be no individual emancipation without societal emancipation (see, for example, Freire, 1970; Mollenhauer, 1983).

The idea of agency not only figures in normative discussion about what education *should* achieve. It also plays a prominent role in sociological analyses of modernisation and the transformation of modern societies into late-, high- or post-modern ones (see Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990, 1991). The general thrust of such theories is that the erosion of traditions and normative frameworks has resulted in a situation in which life has shifted from something that is pre-structured and given to something that has become a task for the modern individual. In the post-traditional society, as Giddens (1991, p. 32) has argued, the self has become a 'reflexive project.' Modernisation thus

forces individuals to become more agentic and 'take control of their lives' (Evans, 2002). For Giddens 'high' or 'late' modernity – the current phase of modernisation – is characterised by an *intensification of uncertainty*, particularly as a result of the intervention of scientific knowledge into the reflexive project of the self. This suggests that agency becomes even more necessary, yet at the same time it also becomes increasingly difficult to achieve. The latter point is emphasised by Bauman who argues that, under the condition of 'liquid modernity', there is a yawning gap between the right of self-assertion and the opportunities for actually controlling 'the social settings which render such self-assertion feasible' (Bauman, 2000, p. 38). According to Bauman this is particularly due to the demise of the public sphere, the sphere where individuals can translate what C. Wright Mills called 'private troubles' into 'public issues' (1959) – a sphere in which adult education has traditionally played a prominent role (see Biesta, 2005, 2006; Martin, 2002).

There is an important difference between 'normative' and 'empirical' interest in agency, particularly with reference to the relationship between agency, education and learning. Whereas in the *normative* approach the argument is that people need to receive education and need to learn in order to become (more) agentic, the *empirical* line suggests that modernisation forces people to be (more) agentic, which only then raises the question of what kind of learning is involved in and/or follows from living one's life under such conditions, and also what educational needs follow from this. It is the latter line of thinking which partly explains the recent interest of adult education researchers in the life-histories and learning biographies of adults (see, for example, Alheit *et al*., 1995; Bron *et al*., 2005; Dominicé, 2000; West, 1996; West *et al*., 2007). It also helps to explain the rise of biographical learning itself, a kind of learning which Alheit defines as the

> 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, and meaning to their life history, and a communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions. (Alheit, 2005a, p. 209)

Despite the growing interest in learning through the lifecourse and in the learning biographies of adults, relatively little attention has been paid to the idea of agency itself and to the relationships between agency and learning from a lifecourse perspective.[2] This reflects a more general tendency in social research where, as Emirbayer and Mische have argued, the notion of agency in itself 'has all too seldom inspired systematical analysis' (1998, p. 962). In their view, this is partly 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. 962–3). This is, of course, not to suggest that agency is entirely an individual issue or that structures do not matter in understanding agency, but it is to highlight that there is important conceptual and analytical work to be done in exploring the notion of agency itself. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) have made an important contribution to this task, and in the next section we present and discuss their ideas which, as we will argue, provide an interesting avenue into understanding the relationship between agency and learning.

What 'is' agency?

The 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 former. In social theory 'agency' is often defined as 'the capacity for autonomous social action' or 'the ability to operate independently of determining constraints of social structure' (see Calhoun, 2002). From a lifecourse perspective, we suggest to see agency as the ability to exert control over and give direction to one's life. But how is this accomplished? An interesting answer to this question has been given by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and in this section we present their analysis.

In their paper 'What is agency?' Emirbayer and Mische (1998) attempt to overcome what they see as the main one-sidedness in existing theories of agency which, in their view, tend to focus on routine, or purpose or judgement. They make a case for a conception of agency which encompasses the dynamic interplay between these three dimensions and which takes into consideration 'how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action' (p. 963). For this reason they suggest that agency should be understood in a 'three-dimensional' way, that is, as a configuration of influences from the *past*, orientations towards the *future* and engagement with the *present*. They refer to these three dimensions of agency as the *iterational*, the *projective* and the *practical-evaluative* dimensions respectively. In concrete actions all three dimensions play a role, but the degree to which they contribute varies. This is why Emirbayer and Mische speak of a '*chordal triad* of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones' (p. 972; emph. in original). Thus they suggest that agency should be understood as a

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

This, in turn, leads them 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.* (p. 970)

Emirbayer and Mische stress that the agentic dimension of action can only be captured in its full complexity 'if it is analytically situated within the flow of time' and if it is acknowledged that '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' (pp. 963–4). Actors are not only embedded in many of such 'temporalities' at once, but 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' (p. 964). As actors move within and among these different and unfolding contexts, 'they switch between (or "recompose") their temporal orientations – and are therefore capable of changing their relationship to structure' (*ibid.*). This means 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.*). This makes it possible to understand '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.*).

Emirbayer's and Mische's ideas about the composite nature of agency are first of all important in that they show that agency does not come from nowhere or, to put it differently, it is not purely voluntaristic, but builds upon past achievements, understandings and patterns of action. This is expressed in the *iterational* element of agency which relates 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.* (p. 971)

Their approach also acknowledges, however, that agency is in some way 'motivated,' i.e. that it is linked to the intention to bring about a future that is different from the present and the past. This is encapsulated in the projective element of agency 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.* (p. 971)

It is important to add that this does not necessarily entail the creation of a situation that is *different* from the present. Particularly under the rapidly changing 'external' circumstances of high or late modern societies, a substantial amount of effort may be needed to keep a situation relatively stable over time, and this requires agency as well, both in terms of orientation and action.

Although agency is involved with the past and the future it can only ever be 'acted out' in the present, which is precisely what is expressed in the *practical-evaluative* dimension. This 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.* (p. 971)

In this respect we might say that agency is always located between past and future. At the very same time, Emirbayer's and Mische's analysis emphasises the importance of context and structure in that agency is seen as the 'temporally constructed *engagement* with different structural environments' (p. 970; emph. added). The combination of context and time highlights that it is not only important to understand agency in terms of the individual's lifecourse, but, simultaneously, to understand transformations of contexts-for-action over time (see Biesta *et al.*, 2005; see also Antikainen *et al.*, 1996; Gorard and Rees, 2002). According to Emirbayer and Mische, such contexts are primarily to be understood as *social* contexts in 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' (p. 974).[3]

Emirbayer's and Mische's answer to the question, 'What is agency?' suggests that we should not understand agency as an individual capacity. Agency is not some kind of 'power' that individuals possess and can utilise in any situation they encounter. Agency should rather be understood as something that has to be *achieved* in and through engagement with particular temporal-relational contexts-for-action. Agency, in other words, is not something that people *have*; it is something that people *do*. It denotes a 'quality' of the *engagement* of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves. We might therefore characterise such an understand-

ing of agency as an *ecological* understanding in that it focuses on the ways in which agency is achieved in transaction with a particular context-for-action, within a particular 'ecology' (for 'transaction' see Biesta and Burbules, 2003; Dewey and Bentley, 1949).

This concept of agency highlights that actors always act *by means* of an environment rather than simply in an environment. To think of agency as achievement makes it possible to understand why an individual can achieve agency in one situation but not in another. It also makes it possible to understand the fluctuations of agency over time, that is, in the individual's lifecourse. Such fluctuations can partly be understood as a result of learning because actors can bring their experiences from past situations (the iterational dimension of agency) to bear on the present, although there is always the question whether what was learnt in the past can be utilised in the present (the pragmatic-evaluative dimension). To think of agency as achievement rather than as a 'power' also helps to acknowledge that the achievement of agency depends on the availability of economic, cultural and social resources within a particular ecology. In this sense we can say that the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural 'factors' as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations. Methodologically an ecological approach to understanding agency thus focuses the attention on the unique configurations of such 'factors.'[4]

Agency, learning and narrative

Emirbayer's and Mische's approach to understanding agency is first of all helpful at a *descriptive* level. On the one hand their distinction between the iterational, practical-evaluative and projective aspects of the 'chordal triad of agency' – between routine, judgement and purpose – makes it possible to characterise the particular 'tone' of individuals' engagement with events in their lives. It can help to identify the extent to which in individual cases people's engagement with events in their lives is predominantly influenced by the past, predominantly focused on the present or primarily oriented towards the future. On the other hand, their approach asks us to relate such agentic orientations to a particular context, time and history. The task is therefore not only to characterise the particular 'composition' of the agentic orientations of individuals. At the same time, it requires a characterisation of the different temporal-relational contexts within which individuals act. Whether individuals display different agentic orientations in different situations and whether the composition of their agentic orientations shifts over time is, of course, entirely an empirical matter. It is conceivable that some individuals will display a similar agentic orientation across a range of different events and contexts and show little change over time. Other individuals may well show substantial variation in the composition of their agentic orientations in different contexts and/or may display significant changes over time. This is why any description of agency not only requires a contextualised approach; it also requires a lifecourse dimension.

However, *understanding* agency requires more than mere description, and here Emirbayer's and Mische's framework suggests some helpful questions as well. One important question is, '*how…different temporal-relational contexts support (or conduce to) particular agentic orientations*' (p. 1005, emph. in original). The task here is to understand 'which sorts of socio-structural, cultural, and social-psychological contexts are more conducive to developing the different modalities of agency' (p. 1005).

The way in which Emirbayer and Mische formulate this question is, however, slightly misleading since it seems to overlook the importance of the interaction between actor and context over time. In order to understand differences between individuals in similar contexts, and differences 'within' individuals in different situations, it is important, therefore, to include both the contextual *and* the temporal dimension in the analysis. It requires, in other words, an understanding of changes and differences in agentic orientations against the background of biography and lifecourse, and against the background of the histories of contexts for action themselves.

Whereas such questions can help us to gain a better understanding of how agency is achieved in particular situations from an 'outsider' or researcher perspective, there is an additional aspect to Emibayer's and Mische's understanding of agency which focuses on the 'insider' or actor perspective. This allows us to say something about the role of learning in the achievement of agency. The point is that Emirbayer and Mische do not simply equate agency with the ways in which we respond to events in our life but to highlight the importance of 'the capacity of actors to critically shape their own *responsiveness* to problematic situations' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 971, emph. added). This suggests that the achievement of agency is inextricably linked with the ways in which people are 'in control' of their responses. Given the triadic nature of agency this means that the achievement of agency is influenced by the ways in which actors can re-organise the composition of their agentic orientations. Emirbayer and Mische put it as follows:

> *(A)s 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.* (p. 1003)

If this argument is valid, the ability to change the composition of our agentic orientations may help us to engage more effectively or satisfactorily with events in our life in such a way that we are able to 'influence the diverse contexts in which [we] act' (p. 1008) and alter our '*own structuring relationship to the contexts of action*' (p. 1009; emph. in original), then the important question is how people might be able and might be enabled to reconstruct their agentic orientations. It is precisely here that we can locate the role of learning.

On the one hand, Emirbayer and Mische's line of thinking suggests the importance of learning *about* one's agentic orientations and how they 'play out' in one's life. Here people may discover, for example, that they predominantly engage with events in their lives on the basis of old patterns and habits and that this is actually holding them back from engaging with the possibilities for action in the present. Or they may come to realise that their 'imagined futures' have no relationship to what they might actually be able to do given their past achievements. On the other hand the approach suggests the importance of learning how one can change or reconstruct the composition of one's agentic orientations.

Emirbayer and Mische argue that such learning processes require 'imaginative distancing' and 'communicative evaluation' (see p. 971). They require that, in some way or form, we distance ourselves from our agentic orientations so as to make them an object of attention, reflection, evaluation and imagination. It is here that we can locate the importance of *narrative*, the importance of telling stories about one's life (either to oneself or to others), since such stories allow for the articulation and evaluation of one's

agentic orientations and can provide a form for the reframing of one's orientations. As Emirbayer and Mische put it: '*(B)y subjecting [our] own agentic orientations to imaginative recomposition and critical judgement actors can loosen themselves from past patterns of interaction and reframe their relationships to existing con-straints*' (p. 1010, emphasis in original). From this perspective the life-narrative at least has the potential to be a 'place' for agentic learning.

The foregoing considerations are helpful in locating and characterising the role of learning in relation to agency and the lifecourse. Emirbayer and Mische help us to see that there is a particular kind of learning that may help people to gain (more) control over and give (more) direction to their life, viz., learning that has to do with understand-ing and evaluating the composition, history and 'ecology' of one's agentic orientations. This can be seen as a form of biographical learning, understood as learning about one's life and learning from one's life.[5] It is important not to forget, however, that such learn-ing can only ever be a necessary condition for the achievement of agency, but never a sufficient one. Whether a change in one's agentic orientations will make a difference in practice, depends not only on one's orientations and engagement with the present. It depends also on available resources and on engagement with contextual and structural factors. The other important question is what will 'trigger' this kind of learning. Whereas Emirbayer and Mische seem to capitalise on the idea that it is insight that will lead to change, we should remain open to the possibility that it is change in people's lives that will actually lead to insight and understanding.

Agency and learning in the life stories of Diogenes and Marie Tuck

The foregoing discussion raises important empirical questions about agency, learning and narrative in the lifecourse. In this section we want to explore the potential of this approach through a discussion of aspects of the life stories of two participants in the Learning Lives project, a longitudinal study into the learning (auto)biographies of adults. With both participants, who chose 'Diogenes' and 'Marie Tuck' as their pseudonyms, we conducted a number of open-ended life-history interviews over a period of 18 and 11 months respectively, in which we invited them to talk about their lives and the role of formal and informal learning in it. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and subjected to thematic, systematic and longitudinal analysis. In this section, we present a reading of aspects of the life stories told by Diogenes and Marie Tuck against the background of our discussion of agency and learning. We highlight, amongst other things, the composition of their agentic orientations and aspects of their agency and the ecological conditions in which they achieved it, and indicate in what ways the interviews themselves provided opportunities for distancing and evaluation.

Diogenes

Between November 2004 and June 2005 we conducted three interviews with 'Diogenes' who works for a charity that supports homeless people. He became 60 during this period and it emerged that he had worked with homeless people for 33 years, first for charities providing for homeless people in London and subsequently for his present employer in the south west of England. Diogenes' life story reveals him as someone who has been able to give direction to his life and who continues to have autonomy in the personal and professional domains of his lifecourse.

There is a strong projective dimension in Diogenes' agentic orientations in that his actions as they are recounted in his life story appear to be informed by a set of strong values, ideals and beliefs. In his role as warden of a hostel for homeless people and, more recently as manager of a day centre, he deals on an everyday basis with the demands of people who have problems of mental illness, alcoholism, or addiction to street drugs as well as of homelessness. He stresses the importance of being sensitive to the life stories of the homeless people he meets and speaks of the unique and precious qualities of each individual. He does not blame them for their plight:

> *I don't lump them together and say, this group of heroin users, or this group of you know, ecstasy users or this group of pissheads…you just see Fred or Joe or Mary or what have you, okay? So, you have to make judgements, but you are not judging them.* (Interview 3, June 2005)

He works within the charity for solutions that are sensitive to the individual circumstances of the service users. However, he consistently rejects explanations for those circumstances that are individualised and instead attributes homelessness to economic and social conditions.

Whereas Diogenes' everyday actions in work are clearly motivated by his values, ideals and beliefs, his agentic orientation is not exclusively projective but has also a strong iterational dimension, which is evidenced by the fact that his values have sustained his actions for a period of at least 33 years. Diogenes was able to evoke a critical moment in his life when he decided to dedicate himself to working with homeless people. He described how, in 1972, while trying to find a family acquaintance who had schizophrenia and who had been evicted from his flat, he went to a night shelter in London. There he discovered many homeless people in need of help and his response was to offer to start immediately:

> *I suppose some people would say (it was) 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, November 2004)

On the face of it, the experience appears to have been a sudden recognition of an opportunity to be socially useful. The story identifies a turning point that had consequences for Diogenes, his wife and children, and for the hundreds of people he has worked with subsequently. The decision can also be interpreted as manifesting a disposition to social care that was shaped by the cultural and social structures of which Diogenes was part at that time and his life story narrative provides some clues to the origin and nature of that disposition.

Diogenes undertook his schooling in the 1950s and 1960s in a catholic school with a strong moral awareness where he was taught by Jesuits. He recalled childhood enthusiasms for subjects like history and archaeology and visits to some of the great London museums. During his secondary schooling he was a member of his school's Air Training Corps (ATC) and, after studying history and philosophy at university, it seemed a natural progression to start a military career that would combine ideals of service to others with service to country. He joined the Intelligence Corps of the army and was posted abroad. He left the army after two years and undertook Voluntary Service Oversees (VSO) in Africa where he could pursue his ideals of service to fellow human beings in a different way. It was on his return from VSO that his encounter with the realities of homelessness in London took place.

Learning from experiences in his life of military service was particularly significant for Diogenes in clarifying his values and beliefs. Postings abroad in the 1960s were sometimes to places undergoing anti-colonial insurgency and Diogenes is able to recount disturbing instances of mindless brutality and casual violence that he witnessed on the streets of Aden and in the jungles of Borneo. He described the frustrations of being unable to talk about such experience to his family during visits home. In retrospect, he says he would have preferred to have undertaken VSO rather than military service and speaks of his continuing commitment to leading a life that does not harm others. The projective consequence of his military service includes a sense of how the world could be different, his abhorrence of the brutality and violence of war; his critical view of a society that found vast resources for warfare but not for addressing problems of homelessness; that condoned material wealth for some but abandoned others to poverty.

Following his decision to start working with homeless people, Diogenes spoke of the environment within which he learned the necessary knowledge and skills. He talked of his involvement with the Simon Community in London in the early 1970s and of meeting 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. Diogenes referred to literary and media sources as part of his cultural environment, recalling the impact of television dramas like *Cathy Come Home*. In his narrative he spoke of working in the streets of London at the time: of meeting paedophiles, prostitutes and abused children.

Through such reflection on his life experiences Diogenes has developed his framework of thinking about social and political affairs within which he undertakes his encounters with homeless people. But there is more to the story than only the values and beliefs that framed his decision. With his education and experience, Diogenes clearly has the cultural capital to be a significant agent within his field of action: locally he has become a well-known and respected figure in coping with homelessness. At the same time, he is not dependent on economic resources. He has detached himself from the materialism of our times: he no longer drives a car, his home is a modest flat, he does not drink and he says his non-material way of life is incomprehensible to close relatives. The interplay between his personal experience, the context within which he works and the resources at his disposal helps us to understand a decision such as his agreement during the time of our interviews to transfer from being the warden of a hostel to being the manager of a day centre. That transfer he explained in two ways: firstly, it enabled him to continue his everyday work in direct contact with the service users and secondly, it enabled him to recapture some of the spirit of his first work with homeless people: '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, June 2005). In such a decision, the distinctive 'tone' of Diogenes' agentic orientation becomes clear.

Marie Tuck

'Marie Tuck' lives in an industrial village and was interviewed four times between December 2004 and November 2005. She was in her mid-30s, the mother of two children, a daughter aged six and a son aged two. She talked in our interviews of some of the everyday problems she was dealing with at the time, including financial difficulties at home, the challenge of working with other parents on the village playgroup committee as well as the demands of her children. Marie is married to a man more than ten years older who has daughters from a previous marriage living in London. His

specialised skills mean that he is often away from home for work so Marie carries most of the responsibility for bringing up their children. Marie's agency operates within a matrix of responsibilities for others and her decision-making is strongly oriented to the present. When she was asked, for example, about plans for the future, where she is likely to be in five years, she responded with uncertainty initially before framing an answer in the context of her family:

> *Oh my god, um I wouldn't like to say. I really can't imagine… I can't imagine that (my daughter) will be ten, (and my son) will be seven, oh that's quite scary! I don't know. I don't know. [Pause] I've no idea. He would have been in full time school for like two years, so I imagine I would be doing something. I'll be very busy. I'll have to be busy, but I don't know what, where, and how really, nah…* (Interview 3, August 2005)

However, the question prompted Marie to imagine what her life could be like in the future and her reflections led her to express a clear agentic orientation towards the kind of employment she would be prepared to undertake and recognition of the limits of her resources:

> *I'm not gonna, after all this gonna do a job that I loathe, no way! Before the children I spent a long time doing jobs I loathed and that's not gonna be happening (…) I do like my gardening um but I wouldn't do it for myself I don't think. I wouldn't be able to charge enough, you know. [Laughs]* (Interview 3, August 2005)

Marie is not intensely reflective in her narrative about the past but our interviews have provided an opportunity for her to construct a narrative about her life that reveals learning from past experiences and how that learning frames her present decision-making. Marie recalled, for example, how, as a teenager, she behaved non-conventionally, that she ventured alone into pubs and enjoyed socialising, that she would drink pints of beer. She spent several years working on building sites, initially as cook and tea lady for a team of road workers, but then also in 'snagging' and as a road worker. In her early 20s she met her husband and they pursued a common interest in motorbikes for several years, sharing an active social life centred on a motorbike club and the pub. Marie was nearly 30 years old when she became pregnant; she and her partner married and arranged a mortgage to buy their terraced house. The transition into parenthood brought about important changes in the lifestyle of Marie and her husband and the challenges of being a parent also seem to have triggered a re-examination and re-evaluation of her own youthful behaviour. Marie described how her daughter, aged six, was becoming more challenging and Marie was keenly aware that her own behaviour as a child had been challenging and was conscious of the irony of her situation. She spoke of the limitations of her personal control over her daughter:

> *I know my parents brought me up with good values, good moral values…to go through life but it didn't stop me being particularly naughty for a while but, I suppose this is why I want to instil it in my daughter's head so that she will behave herself. She's not going out and, you know, running riot with me.* (Interview 1, December 2004)

This is not only an example of the iterational element of Marie's agentic orientation. At the same time experiences from the past, reflectively reworked in the present, provide her agency with a projective dimension: a set of values – or, more accurately, a normative orientation – which seems to inform her evaluations and decision-making in the present. Seen from this angle, it appears that Marie's reflections on her own behaviour

as a teenager have helped her to shape her responsiveness to the particular problems she is having with her daughter.

With her son, the problems were somewhat different. He was two years old during our early meetings and Marie had become concerned about his speech development. When he was a year old she felt that the noises he made were not right, she said he could pronounce the beginnings of words but not the endings. An audiology test indicated he was not hearing low frequencies, which may have contributed to his difficulty, but Marie was not satisfied with this explanation. She expected there to be state agencies that would provide rapid further support for children in her son's circumstances:

> *So I just want it [to] come through sooner rather than later, because it's just, it just feels like limboing [at] the moment, you know. I want, I want, I want somebody to see my son and sort him out. Now! [Laughs]* (Interview 2, May 2005)

Marie felt frustrated by her inability to secure action about the disability that she perceived was threatening her son. Her frustration was exacerbated by a change in the practice of health visitors because it appeared that no longer could Marie expect periodic scheduled visits to ensure the welfare of her child; instead it would be her own responsibility to contact health visitors if she were experiencing problems.

Our interviews elicited the significance of Marie's learning, both formally and informally, for her agentic orientation. Her recent formal learning included attendance of a course at her local primary school designed to give parents insight into their child's numeracy and literacy learning. She had also attended a short course on speech development provided by Sure Start. Informally, it emerged that the key person who gave advice on practical strategies to assist Marie in coping with her daughter's behaviour and who arranged a further visit to an audiologist for her son, was the local health visitor. Marie was learning about state structures and systems; not only was she finding ways of navigating the systems to take advantage of particular services but also how to deal with the gate-keepers and resource controllers who could make a difference to her children's development. Again, this seemed to have allowed her to shape her responsiveness to the situations she had to deal with. But the extent to which such learning allowed her to be (more) agentic was in an important way mediated (and limited) by ecological factors and available resources.

Marie is someone with limited economic capital: the family is not affluent and Marie watches out for opportunities for part-time work to supplement their income. At each interview she stated her intention to find more paid employment when her son is older so that she can contribute more to the family's income. However, she did not know how she would achieve this. Marie told us that she had achieved few qualifications at school but had acquired numerous other skills from her working life over the years, including a Public Service Vehicle licence. She has ongoing interest and considerable skills in gardening and recycling. Despite her versatility, she regrets not finding a specific career that is 'right' for her:

> *(M)y mum's always says, 'One day you'll find your vocation,' you know, or 'Yes, you're very good at everything that you try and do,' you know, … the thing that you love doing and are good at… I just think there's got to be a job out there for me somewhere.* (Interview 2, 26 May 2005)

Despite the limitations of her resources, Marie has been responsive to the opportunities that have arisen for her during her life and thus displays a level of control over the ways

she can respond to the problematic situations she encounters. Marie finds herself in situations where new opportunities arise and responds intuitively and such intuition is firmly grounded in her earlier experiences though always constrained within the context of her material and cultural capital.

Discussion

Although we have only been able to present a fraction of the large volume of rich data that we have collected through our interviews with Diogenes and Marie Tuck, the accounts of their life stories reveal some interesting things about the interconnections between agency and learning in the lifecourse and about the particular ecological 'conditions' under which Diogenes and Marie Tuck were able to achieve a degree of agency.

At first sight, there seem to be some remarkable differences between the story of agency of Diogenes and that of Marie Tuck. The life story of Diogenes gives a strong impression of consistency: after a formative event relatively early on in his life it seems that all his actions and decisions have been informed by a coherent set of values and normative orientations and aspirations and that this is continuing to be the case up to the present day. The story of Marie Tuck, on the other hand, reveals someone who is much more engaged with the here and now. Her attempts to achieve a level of control over her life are related to efforts to deal with the problems she encounters in the present, particularly in relation to her children. It is only when we ask deeper questions about the origins of Marie's approach to current problems that we can begin to discern the iterational and projective dimensions of her agentic orientations. To put it differently: whereas at first sight Diogenes' agentic orientations appear to display a strong projective dimension and Marie Tuck's orientations seem to be firmly rooted in the present – the practical-evaluative dimension – further interrogation of their life stories helps us to see that their agentic orientations carry elements of the past, the present and the future. In both cases, actions and decisions in the present have an orientation towards the future, yet the way in which Diogenes and Marie deal with the present and orient themselves towards a future is linked to events in their past and, more importantly, seems to be the result of things they have learned from past experiences.

This suggests a connection between agency and biographical learning, i.e., learning about one's life and learning from one's life. Both life stories, albeit in different ways, provide us with a sense of the ways in which Diogenes and Marie Tuck have learned something from their past experiences, which they carry with them in their present actions and decisions. There is some evidence that, in both cases, biographical learning not merely has had an impact on the ways in which Diogenes and Marie Tuck respond to the situations they encounter in their life, but it has also affected their ability to shape their own responsiveness to the problems and issues they encounter in their lives. In both cases there is evidence that they are aware and, to a certain extent, in control of the ways in which they respond to and deal with the issues and problems they encounter.

This link between agency and biographical learning is not only interesting from a research point of view but also indicates a way in which people might be able and, more importantly, might be enabled to evaluate and reconstruct the composition of their agentic orientations. For this to happen, as we have seen, Emirbayer and Mische emphasise the need for imaginative distancing and communicative evaluation. It is here that the form and content of the Learning Lives project and the use of life history and biographic-

al methodologies more generally come together because such approaches, through their emphasis on the telling of one's life story, allow for imaginative distancing and communicative evaluation. Telling the story of one's life opens up the potential for participants to gain an understanding of the composition of their agentic orientations and how they have played out in their lives so far. Through the interviews with Diogenes, Marie Tuck – and, for that matter, many others in the project – we are beginning to understand the impact of participation in life history research on people's biographical learning.[6]

Along these lines our analyses are beginning to help us to understand the connections between agency and learning in the lifecourse. We shouldn't forget, however, that agentic orientations and the learning processes related to them are, as such, never sufficient to understand how agency is achieved. As we have argued, the extent to which people have control over and give direction to their lives also crucially depends upon contextual and structural factors and on the available resources within a particular 'ecology'. Both life stories clearly reveal the importance of economic, social and cultural resources and show how the achievement of agency results from particular combinations of such resources and their agentic orientations within particular situations. The story of Diogenes shows that it is not necessarily the case that people need *more* resources to be more agentic. Diogenes actually appears to be able to achieve a level of agency by reducing his dependency on material resources.

The stories of Diogenes and Marie Tuck also reflect some interesting generational differences (see also Field and Malcolm, 2005). Diogenes is clearly part of a generation where the 'right' education – combined with the 'right' cultural, social and economic resources – has prepared him for a life of agency. The 'habitus' acquired through his education, to use Bourdieu's terminology, has allowed for a good fit with the fields of action in his later life. In this way, Diogenes seems to be a successful product of the modern educational project in which education was supposed to make him 'ready' for his future life. Marie Tuck, on the other hand, seems to exemplify life under the unstable conditions of postmodern society. Events in her life seem to 'force' her to be agentic and she learns while achieving a level of agency.

We wish to make one final comment about the role of structures and structural factors in the achievement of agency. As we have argued before, agency is not achieved in a vacuum but always depends on the interplay of agentic orientations, resources, and wider contextual and structural factors. There are, however, two ways in which the impact of structural factors can be understood. One way to account for such factors is to look for their impact on the actions of individuals, i.e. to show how their particular actions exemplify typical classed or gendered ways of doing and being. There is indeed much in the stories of Diogenes and Marie Tuck that can be read in this way. Diogenes' story can be read as stereotypical male, i.e. as a story about self-realisation, an outward-looking projective orientation and a strong urge to have control over his life. Marie Tuck, on the other hand, exemplifies the stereotypical female position, with a concern for the here and now, a clear caregiver's role with primary responsibility for her children and with hardly any time to think about the future. Similarly, Diogenes enters life with abundant economic, social and cultural capital, whereas Marie Tuck has to live her life with far more limited resources available.

However there are also aspects in the life stories of Diogenes and Marie Tuck that do not fit this picture so easily. Although there is a clear element of self-realisation in Diogenes' story, his 'life project' is predominantly altruistic and based on an ethics of care. Similarly, Marie Tuck's life story is also about being a biker, being a road worker and

having a PSV licence. While some might explain this by saying that there is never a perfect fit between structural factors and individual cases, another way of looking at this is to see that structural factors only can have an impact if people actively engage with them, i.e. when they take them up in their biographies in their own, unique ways (see also Archer, 2003).

This interpretation offers a different way to account for the 'slippage' between structural factors and the way they play out in individual biographies. Whereas the biographical is, to a certain extent, the product of the social, we should also take into consideration what Alheit has called the *latent biographicity of the social* ('die *latente Biographizität des Sozialen*'; Alheit, 1990, p. 60, emph. in original). This has to do with the insight that 'the "structural", "objective" reality is both *constitutive and constructed*', which means that 'there is no mere structural influence which determines directly the individual's reaction' (Alheit and Dausien, 2000, p. 410). It also has to do with the fact that 'the reaction pattern is *biographical*, i.e. it has a very particular "history" which is, surprisingly enough, far from being just subjective but it is unique' (*ibid*.). The more important question, therefore, is how such factors contribute to the particular ecologies in and through which agency is achieved.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between agency and learning in the lifecourse. We have presented an approach to understanding agency which does not see agency as an individual 'power' but rather as a 'quality' of the *engagement* of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action. Understanding the achievement of agency thus requires an understanding of the ecological conditions under and through which agency is achieved. This approach to agency highlights the composite nature of agentic orientations – the combination of routine, purpose and judgement – and argues that agency is not simply concerned with the ways in which we engage with our contexts-for-action but rather has to do with the capacity to shape our responsiveness to the situations we encounter in our lives. It is the latter insight which allowed us to articulate a relationship between agency and biographical learning in that learning about one's agentic orientations and learning how to reframe a particular agentic 'constellation' can be important in shaping our responsiveness and hence in achieving agency. For such learning to occur, so we have argued, it is important that actors can distance themselves from their actions in order to explore and evaluate them. Hence the importance of narratives – life stories – in such learning processes.

As we made clear at the beginning of this paper, our intention has been to contribute to the exploration of the concept of agency at a theoretical and conceptual level. In our discussion of aspects of the life stories of two participants in the Learning Lives project we have, however, tried to demonstrate what can become visible when such stories are read through the lens of the framework developed in this paper. Nevertheless, while we hope to have contributed to the understanding of the relationship between agency and learning in the lifecourse, we are also aware of the limitations of the approach presented here. Although we have been able to indicate how particular learning processes might contribute to the achievement of agency, we do not claim that such processes are a *necessary* condition for achieving agency. There may well be other ways in which people can give direction to or gain more control over their lives, ways in

which learning does not play a role. Our intention has only been to highlight those cases in which learning might contribute to the achievement of agency.

We also wish to mention that our approach has an individualistic bias. It helps to understand how individual actors can reframe the composition of their agentic orientations so as to change their responsiveness to particular problematic situations. Whether such a model can also help to understand collective achievement of agency remains to be seen, although it is likely that similar learning processes might be helpful in collective struggles for agency. This, finally, brings us back to one of the observations with which we started this paper, namely that under current societal conditions, individuals are increasingly 'forced' to take control of their lives. The approach presented in this paper at least indicates one kind of learning that could support individuals' attempts to achieve agency under such conditions.

Notes

1 For more information on this project see Biesta *et al.* (2005); see also http://www.learninglives.org
2 The main exception in the field of adult learning is probably to be found in the work of Peter Alheit who, in several of his publications, has tried to understand the individual's opportunities for action in a rapidly changing social environment [see, e.g., Alheit (1990; 1995; 2005a; 2005b); Alheit and Dausien (1999); see also Tedder and Biesta (2007)]. A recent contribution to the exploration of agency in relation to learning at work is Beckett (2006). For a concise overview of theories of agency from different academic disciplines see Evans (2007).
3 For a view that bears some resemblance to this see Archer (2003). See also Cieslik (2006) who has used some of Archer's ideas to understand the (trans)formation of learning identities and practices of adults taking part in basic skills courses.
4 A point to bear in mind here is that the purpose of an ecological approach is not to explain agency but rather to reconstruct the particular contextual conditions in and through which agency was achieved. There is, therefore, an important difference between such an approach and more socio-logically orientated approaches which aim to explain agency through identifying the influence of structural factors on agency, either in a more direct way or, such as in the case of Bourdieu, through the operation of *habitus*. On this difference see also Rancière (2006), pp. 49–50.
5 We do not have the space to review the literature on biographical learning [on this see, for example, Alheit and Dausien (1999); Alheit (2005a; 2005b); Bron (2001); Bron and Lönnheden (2004); see also Tedder and Biesta (2007)], nor to explore the related notion of 'biographicity' [see Alheit and Dausien (1999); Alheit (2005a)]. For this paper we focus on one aspect of biographical learning, viz., the process through which individuals build up an understanding of the composition and history of their agentic orientations and engage in (imaginative) distancing and (communicative) evaluation.
6 A good example of the explicit use of life history approaches to enable forms of biographical learning which aim for the enhancement of agency can be found in the work of Pierre Dominicé (see Dominicé, 2000). Another example, although with quite different theoretical underpinnings, is the work of Coenraad van Houten and the New Adult Learning Movement (see, for example, Van Houten, 1999; 2004).

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