

# Agency and learning in the lifecourse

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**University of Exeter**

A paper for the ESRC/TLRP Thematic Seminar Series “Transitions through the lifecourse: The effects of identity, agency and structure”.  
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## Introduction

The idea of agency has played a central role in education at least since the Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant made an explicit connection between Enlightenment and education when he argued that the “propensity and vocation for free thinking,” which he saw as the basis for autonomous action, could *only* be brought about through education (see Kant 1982, p.699). The idea that education can help human beings to develop their capacities for agentic and autonomous action not only has had a profound impact on the education of children. There is also a longstanding tradition which sees adult education as a major lever for empowerment and emancipation. Nowadays the idea of agency not only figures in normative discussions about what education *should* achieve. It also plays a prominent role in sociological analyses of modernisation. The general thrust of such analyses 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 the self has become a ‘reflexive project’ (Giddens).

Whereas in the normative approach the main argument is that people need to be educated and need to learn in order to become (more) agentic, the empirical line suggests that modernisation ‘forces’ people to be (more) agentic, which then raises the question what kind of learning – if any – is involved in and/or follows from living one’s life under such conditions and also what kind of educational needs – if any – follow from it. It is the latter line of thinking which helps to understand the recent interest of adult education researchers in adults’ life-histories and learning biographies. It also helps to explain the rise of biographical learning itself. One of the aims of the Learning Lives project (see [www.learninglives.org](http://www.learninglives.org)) is to contribute to a better understanding of the relationships between learning, agency and the lifecourse. In this paper we present some ideas about the conceptualisation of agency, which we then use to discuss aspects of the learning biographies of Diogenes and Marie Tuck, two of the participants in our project. In the concluding section we ask how a lifecourse perspective on agency and learning can add to our understanding of the ways in which people deal with transitions in their lives. For the purpose of this paper we take our understanding of transitions from life course research (Elder et al., 2003; Heinz et al., 2003), where transitions are seen as changes in relation to institutionalized pathways and normative patterns (Elder et al, 2003, p.8). Transitions refer, in other words, to changes in role, status or identity, either in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper forms part of ongoing work within the Learning Lives project on the relationships between agency, learning and the lifecourse. A longer working-paper on this topic is available from the Learning Lives website ([www.learninglives.org](http://www.learninglives.org)).

relation to institutionalised pathways (for example, the transition from school to work), or in relation to more general normative patterns and social expectations (such as, for example, the transition from youth to adulthood).

### **Theorising agency**

From a lifecourse perspective agency can be defined as an ability to exert control over and give direction to one's life. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that an adequate understanding of agency must be three-dimensional: it must acknowledge influences from the past, orientations towards the future *and* engagement with the present (the *iterational*, the *projective* and the *practical-evaluative* dimension). To understand agency we must focus on the *dynamic interplay* between these three dimensions and need to take into consideration "how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action" (p.963). In concrete actions all three dimensions play a role, but the degree in which they contribute varies. Emirbayer and Mische therefore speak of the "*chordal triad* of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones" (p.972; *emph. in original*).

Agency thus builds upon past achievements, understandings and patterns of action. This is the **iterational** element of agency: "*the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action*" (p.971; *emph. in original*). Agency is, however, always in some way 'motivated.' It is linked to the intention to bring about a future that is different from the present or the past. This is the **projective** element of agency: "*the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action*" (*ibid.*; *emph in original*). But agency can only ever be 'acted out' in the present, which is encompassed in the **practical-evaluative** element: "*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*). Taken together this suggests that agency is always located between past and future; it has a strong temporal dimension. At the very same time Emirbayer and Mische emphasise the importance of context, in that agency is seen as the "temporally constructed *engagement* with different structural environments" (p.970; *emph. added*). The combination of context and time indicates that it is not only important to understand agency in terms of the individual's lifecourse but also in relation to the transformation of contexts-for-action over time.

One of the implications of this approach is that agency should not be understood as a capacity of the individual but should rather be seen as a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action. Agency is, in other words, not an individual's possession but something that is achieved in action. It is not something that people *have* but something they *do*. This calls for what we wish to refer to as an *ecological* understanding of agency, one which focuses on the ways in which individuals act *by means of* environments rather than simply *in* an environment, and which pays attention to the ways in which contexts-for-action change over time. To think of agency as an 'ecological achievement' helps to understand why people can be agentic in one situation but not in another. It also helps to understand fluctuations in agency over time, that is, in the lifecourse. Such

fluctuations can partly be understood as an outcome of learning (or 'unlearning') but it is important to see that a focus on learning as such is not enough. There is always the question whether what was learnt in the past can be utilised in the present. And it is important to see that the achievement of agency always results from a combination of individual efforts and available resources (such as economic, cultural and social capital).

Emirbayer and Mische do not simply locate agency in the ways in which we respond to events in our life but suggest that agency has to do with "the capacity of actors to critically shape their own *responsiveness* to problematic situations" (p.971; *emph. added*). Central in this process is the (re-)shaping of the *composition* of the three elements that make up one's agentic orientation. If Emirbayer and Mische are right that the ability to change the composition of our orientations may help us to engage 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 can alter our "*own structuring relationship to the contexts of action*" (p.1009; *emph in original*), then the critical question is how people might be able and might be enabled to reconstruct their agentic orientations. On the one hand this seems to require learning about the composition of one's agentic orientations and how they 'play out' in one's life. On the other hand it requires learning about how one might change the composition of one's responsiveness. Emirbayer and Mische argue that 'imaginative distancing' and 'communicative evaluation' play an important role in such learning processes (see p.971), and one way in which this can be done is by telling stories about our lives and sharing these stories with others (see also Dominicé 2000). Emirbayer and Mische thus suggest that it is a particular kind of learning that might help people to be more agentic – a kind of learning we might best characterise as biographical learning (see also Bron 2001). Such learning can, of course, only ever be a necessary condition for agency, but never a sufficient one since the achievement of agency always depends on the way in which one's orientations play out in a particular context, a process which also crucially relies upon available resources. Another important question here is what will 'trigger' and facilitate such learning processes. Whereas Emirbayer and Mische seem to suggest that insight will lead to change, it may well be that it is change that will lead to insight, understanding and learning.

### **Diogenes**

One of our respondents chose for his pseudonym the name 'Diogenes'. Between November 2004 and June 2005 we conducted three interviews with Diogenes, who works for a charity that supports homeless people. In the time covered by our interviews he became 60 and it emerged that he had worked with homeless people for 33 years, first for charities providing for homeless people in London and, since 1990, for his present employer in the south west of England. Diogenes' life story shows him as someone who has been able and continues to be able to exert control over and give direction to his life. There is a strong projective dimension in Diogenes' agentic orientations in that his actions 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 difficult

demands of homeless people who have problems of mental illness, alcoholism, or addiction to street drugs as well as homelessness. While he works for solutions that are sensitive to individual circumstances, he consistently rejects explanations for their circumstances that are individualistic. He repeatedly stresses the importance of being sensitive to the differences between individuals but without blaming them for their plight.

Whereas Diogenes' actions are clearly motivated by his values, ideals and beliefs, his agentic orientation is not exclusively projective but also has 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. In our interviews 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 friend who had schizophrenia and who had been evicted from his home, he went to a local night shelter. He discovered there were 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, this experience appears to have been a sudden recognition of an opportunity to be socially useful. That moment was a turning point with consequences for Diogenes, his family and for the hundreds of people he has worked with subsequently. However, the decision could also be interpreted as manifesting dispositions shaped by the cultural and social structures of which Diogenes was part at that time. Diogenes undertook his schooling in the 1950s and 1960s in a catholic school with a strong moral awareness where he was taught by Jesuits. During his secondary schooling he was a member of his school's Air Training Corps (ATC) and, after studying history and literature 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. However, such postings in the 1960s were to places undergoing political instability and insurgency and Diogenes is able to recount horrific instances of the mindless brutality and casual violence he witnessed on the streets of Aden and in the jungles of Borneo. After leaving the army, he undertook Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in Africa where he could pursue ideals of service to fellow human beings in a different way and it was on his return from VSO that his encounter with the realities of homelessness in London took place.

Early experiences of working with the homeless reveal the formal and informal learning that helped strengthen the value framework within which Diogenes made his commitment. The experiences which particularly oriented his manner of thinking and believing about social and political affairs seem to have occurred during his military career. The projective consequence of his military service included his 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. The decision to work with homeless people was a significant change of career direction and the narrative about that decision used a device of being prepared to 'hang up his jacket' to convey the immediacy and rightness of the decision.

More than 30 years later this decision still sustains the ways in which he deals with the challenges of the present in a way that allows him to continue to achieve agency. But there is more to the story than only the values and beliefs which informed his decision. Diogenes clearly has the cultural capital to be a significant agent within his field of action and has locally become a well-known and respected figure. At the very same time he is less dependent on economic resources. He is detached from the material culture 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. These factors contribute to the ecology through which Diogenes is able to achieve agency. The narrative that we hear from Diogenes today suggests that he effected a significant change in his agentic orientation more than thirty years ago, a change that was further consolidated through his experiences of working with homeless people and which, in retrospect, can be construed as a significant learning experience in his lifecourse.

### **Marie Tuck**

Marie Tuck, a woman in her mid-30s, mother of two children, a daughter aged six and a son aged two, was interviewed four times between December 2004 and November 2005. In the interviews she spoke of some of the problems she was dealing with, including financial difficulties, the challenge of working with other parents on the village playgroup committee as well as the daily demands of bringing up her two 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 the upbringing of their children. Marie's situation helps to understand why here agency has a strong practical-evaluative 'tone'. Her agency operates in the context of concrete responsibility for others and her decision-making is thus strongly oriented to the present.

Marie is not noticeably reflective about the past and yet her narrative has elicited significant experiences and learning from past experiences which frame her decision-making in the present. These are connected with her transition into parenthood, although it is a question for further exploration whether this transition has brought about a change in her 'lifestyle' or whether it was the change in lifestyle of Marie and her husband that facilitated their transition into parenthood. The challenges of being a parent have definitely played a role in Marie's re-evaluation of her own behaviour as a teenager and her relation to her parents, bearing in mind that this re-evaluation should be understood as an emerging understanding rather than as an act of self-conscious reflection.

Within the interviews Marie described how her daughter had reached the age of six and was becoming more challenging in her behaviour. Marie was keenly aware that her own behaviour as a child had been challenging and she was conscious of the irony of her situation. As a teenager, Marie recalled holding non-conventional values, that she was willing to go alone into pubs because she enjoyed socialising and 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 as a 'snagger' and as a road worker. After she met her husband they pursued a common interest in motorbikes for several years and it was only when Marie found herself pregnant that she and her partner married and took on a mortgage to buy their terraced house in an industrial village. 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 agency. 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 a difficulty but Marie was not satisfied with this explanation:

He is alert, he can hear me perfectly well... if he can hear everything going on around him, even when he's not looking at you, if he can hear all that, how is that hindering his speech? (*Interview 2, May 2005*)

This also caused frustration, as Marie felt unable to do anything about the disability that she perceived threatening her son.

Our interviews elicited the significance of Marie's learning, both formally and informally, for her agentic orientation. Her 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 also attended a short course on speech development provided by Sure Start. Informally, the key person

who gave advice on practical strategies to assist her daughter's frustrations and who arranged a further visit to an audiologist for her son, was the local health visitor. Marie was finding out about state structures and systems; not only was she finding ways of navigating the systems so that she could take advantage of particular services but also about dealing 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 and unconventional cultural capital. The family is not affluent and Marie watches out for opportunities for part-time work to supplement their income. In respect of her cultural capital, Marie admits to having achieved few qualifications at school but has acquired numerous other skills from her working life over the years, including a Public Service Vehicle licence, and she has ongoing interests in gardening and recycling. Despite the limitations of capital, Marie has been responsive to the opportunities that have arisen for her over the years and thus displays a level of control over the ways she can respond to the problematic situations she encounters. She finds herself in situations where new opportunities arise and responds intuitively, but such intuition is firmly grounded in her earlier experience and constrained within the context of her material and cultural capital.

## **Discussion**

In this paper we have looked at some aspects of the life stories of two participants in our project through the lens 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 the impression of coherence: after a formative event relatively early on in his life it seems that all his actions and decisions have been informed by a consistent set of values and normative orientations and aspirations. The story of Marie Tuck, on the other hand, seems to be much more focused on the here and now: there is a strong emphasis on her efforts to deal with the problems she encounters in her life, 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 agency is indeed 'located' between past and 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 an important link between agency – which, in a sense, is always orientated towards the present – and what we have referred to as

*biographical learning*: learning from one's life and learning about one's life. Both life stories, although in different ways, give us 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, albeit that in Diogenes case this seems to be much more explicit whereas in Marie Tuck's case the learning has been much more implicit. There is some evidence that in both cases biographical learning not simply has had an impact on the ways in which Diogenes and Marie Tuck respond to the situations they encounter in their life, but that it has impacted on 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 reconstruct their agentic orientations. Emirbayer and Mische emphasise the importance of imaginative *distancing*, the ability to take a perspective on one's agentic orientations. They also emphasise the importance of communicative evaluation. It is at this point that the form and content of the Learning Lives project come together since the project precisely allows for communication – story telling – about one's life (in the project's case the stories are told to the researcher/interviewer), which at least has the potential for participants to look at their agentic orientations from a distance. (In other interviews conducted in the project we are beginning to see how through more precise questioning it is possible to make our participants more aware of their agentic orientations and their possible origins, which gives them a different perspective on their dealings with the present. It is here that we are beginning to see some interesting more practical applications of our approach.)

More generally our analyses suggest an important connection between agency and learning in the lifecourse, although we wish to emphasise – as we have also done in the presentation of aspects of the two lifestories – that agentic orientations as such are never sufficient to understand actual agency, because the extent to which people have control over and can give direction to their lives also depends on contextual and 'ecological' factors and on available resources within a particular 'ecology.' Both lifestories reveal the significance of economic, social and cultural resources and show how the combination of such resources and the agentic orientations of individuals create a certain ecology within which agency can – to a certain extent and specific to the situation – be achieved.

This finally brings us to the role of transitions in our understanding of agency and learning in the lifecourse. We asked whether it is understanding that leads to change or change that leads to understanding. The lifestories of Diogenes and Marie Tuck both contain important transitions – for Diogenes the transitions happened relatively early on in his life and the 'learning effect' of these transitions seems to have been relatively immediate; although Marie Tuck went through several transitions in her life as well, particularly 'identity-transitions', it seems that it has particularly been the transition into parenthood that has helped her to form a perspective on her earlier life-experiences, a

perspective with important ramifications for the way in which she deals with issues and problems in the present. Whereas at a general level our exploration suggests the importance of biographical learning (which, by definition is a form of lifecourse learning) for agency – the ability to exert control over and give direction to one’s life through the capacity to shape one’s responsiveness to situations – the focus on transitions suggests the important ‘trigger’ function of lifecourse transitions for biographical learning.

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