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What is student agency? An ontological exploration in the context of research on student engagement

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce a theory of student agency to the study of student engagement. Student agency refers to the quality of students' self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment. It encompasses variable notions of agentic possibility ("power") and agentic orientation ("will"). The notions of agentic possibility and orientation are temporally embedded, implying that they are shaped through considerations of past habits of mind and action, present judgments of alternatives for action and projections of the future. They are also intrinsically relational and social, and situated in structural, cultural and socio-economic-political contexts of action. The main argument presented is twofold. First, studentship is highly conducive to engagement due to its liminal and developmental characteristics. In other words, students are likely to be "agentic", that is they seek to exert some influence on their educational trajectories, their future lives and their immediate and larger social surroundings. Second, a theory of student agency develops the micro foundations of student behaviour. As such it has the potential to unravel the mechanisms under which students exert their agency in the context of higher education and beyond. An agentic approach could, thus, connect and advance the multifaceted scholarship on student engagement.

Keywords: student agency; student engagement; student experience

Since education is not a means to living, but is identical with the operation of living a life which is fruitful and inherently significant, the only ultimate value which can be set up is just the process of living itself. And this is not an end to which studies and activities are subordinate means; it is the whole of which they are ingredients.

John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1980/1916)

Introduction

In Europe, higher education is conventionally thought of as having four equally important, overlapping and concurrent objectives (Council of Europe 2007: paragraph 5; Bergan 2005; Bergan in this volume):

- to prepare students for sustainable employment;
- to prepare students for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- to cultivate students' personal development;
- to develop and maintain – through teaching, learning and research – a broad, advanced knowledge base.

Accordingly, the roles student adopt while studying are multiple and overlapping. Students are learners in coursework and often also in extracurricular activities. By acting as teachers, mentors and tutors students also contribute to the learning and personal development of their peers. They contribute to the advancement of knowledge as producers of knowledge and invention and of the arts as artists. Students, individually and collectively, seek to influence their higher education environment and conditions of study at all levels of higher education governance: in the classroom, department committees, university senates, in governmental and intergovernmental bodies and initiatives such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). They act as stakeholders, as members of an academic community, as a constituency or as customers depending on the particular rules and norms of governance structures. Finally, studentship does not preclude student political and civic engagement within wider society nor paid or unpaid work in the labour market. Students are citizens, local community members and part of the workforce.

All these roles presume student agency as something students can develop – individually and collectively – through self-reflective and intentional action and through interaction with the environment in which they are embedded. By exercising their agency, students exert influence on their educational trajectories, their future lives and their immediate and larger social surroundings. As suggested by Marginson, higher education can be understood as “a process of student self-formation” (Marginson 2014). The activities students engage in are all in some way or another geared towards changing themselves and their conditions of life, that is they are self-formative (*ibid.*). Yet, through their agency they also contribute to the development of others, development of knowledge and to economic and social development.

Studentship as a life stage and a life world is liminal and developmental. It is a stage of “being free and becoming” (Barnett 2007: 3) and as such is highly “agentic” – highly conducive to action and interaction. Studentship is liminal in the sense of always being a rite of passage to some new role, status or life condition. In a way, all activities in studentship, except for the crudely existential, are in some way oriented towards the formation of the projected future self, towards “becoming”. During studentship the projections of future selves become more concrete and more closely related to immediate study, extracurricular engagements and life experience. Much of student action is self-reflective searching for their identity, their purpose in life, and the meanings in their existence. In late adolescence, students begin to address the roles of adulthood and fully consider what they wish to do with their lives, occupationally and otherwise (Bandura 2006a). Students tend to expand their engagement in the larger social community both in the scope of their activities and in their modes of involvement (*ibid.*). Studentship is also inherently developmental. It is the locus of “higher learning” in formal education and associated with higher levels of cognitive, emotional and practical (in terms of taking care of oneself independently of one's parents) maturity. These conditions are particularly enabling of agency.

As the student population has become increasingly differentiated so have the conceptions of students and studentship become more varied. Students in the age cohort of 18 to 24, who are studying full-time, are no longer the sole type of students in higher education. Political projects of lifelong learning and of increasing access to higher education have improved conditions of study for mature and part-time students in Europe (see Orr, Wartenbergh-Cras and Scholz in this volume). While these changes are reflected in highly diverse conditions of studentship, the fact remains that studentship represents a rite of passage to a different status or different conditions of work and life (or at least so it is hoped) and that actions taken tend to be self-formative in one way or another. Thus, studentship continues to present enabling conditions for student agency even if the focus and the extent of the actions and the interactions will vary significantly across different categories of students. Mature and part-time students tend to engage in different activities and to a different extent when balancing between family, work and study than this tends to be the case for students in full-time education who are free from care of others or from having to work to support themselves. Student agency is at the centre of studentship, and differing conditions and contexts of studentship render themselves more or less constraining and more or less empowering of student agency. Immediate life and study circumstances as much as family background, past experiences and projections of the future all shape how individual students exercise their agency. They also determine how students structure, regulate and evaluate their behaviour and their life circumstances.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce a theory of student agency to the research on student engagement. Drawing from social cognition theory and sociological theories of human agency, student agency is conceptualised as a process of students' self-reflective and intentional actions and interactions during studentship, which encompasses variable notions of agentic possibility ("power") and agentic orientation ("will"). Student agency refers to the quality of actions and interactions (cf. Biesta 2008), and not something students possess. The notions of agentic possibility and orientation are temporally embedded, implying that they are shaped through considerations of past habits of mind and action, present judgments of alternatives for action and projections of the future. They are also intrinsically relational and social, and situated in structural, cultural and socio-economic-political contexts of action.

The main argument presented is twofold. First, studentship is highly conducive to engagement due to its liminal and developmental characteristics. In other words, students are likely to be "agentic", that is they seek to exert some influence on their educational trajectories, their future lives and their immediate and larger social surroundings. Second, a theory of student agency develops the micro foundations of student behaviour. As such it has the potential to unravel the mechanisms under which students exert their agency in the context of higher education and beyond. An agentic approach could, thus, connect and advance the multifaceted scholarship on student engagement. This chapter first presents the existing theories of human agency, which are adopted into conceptualisation of student agency in the following section. The final section offers suggestions on the use of theory of student agency in research on student engagement.

Theories of human agency

Social theory includes ample discussions of the role of structure versus human agency in human behaviour (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992). The central tenets in this sociological discussion are the questions of the extent and the conditions under which actors can exercise agency. In sociological investigations, 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” (Scott and Marshall 1998: 11). In psychology the conceptions of agency also capture the capacity for autonomous intentional social action, which is not bound only by structural factors, but also by the psychological and social psychological make-up of the actor (Scott and Marshall 1998). This dualism in the theoretical agency-structure debate has gradually been overcome in recent scholarship. Bourdieu (1977, 1990) has underlined the importance of cultural capital and habitus (the set of cultural schemas actors use when they act) in actors’ behaviour, as well as reflexive thinking underlying action. Alexander (1988, 1992) introduced the notions of reflexive elements (interpretation) alongside instrumental action (strategising), thus extending the instrumentalist logic of social action proposed by Coleman (1991). Giddens (1991) had significant impact on the discussion with structuration theory, according to which structure and agency are intertwined in a way that structure is simultaneously exogenous and endogenous to agency, and they can both constrain and enable agency. Furthermore, Giddens (1984) introduced the concept of “dual structures”, proposing that in a dynamic interdependent process actors shape structures and structures shape actors’ behaviour. In sum, the contemporary notions of human agency have established notions of “embeddedness”, of agency being “situated” and “in-context”, and of the interdependence of agency and structure, albeit with differing degrees of clarity as to what structure and context actually mean (Sewell 1992). I have found most helpful conceptualisations of human agency from Bandura in social psychology (1986, 2001) and Emirbayer and Mische in sociology (1998).

In his “social cognitive theory” Bandura (1986) subscribes to a model of emergent interactive agency where actors are neither autonomous agents nor simply subject to environmental influences. Unlike the structuralists, the most central mechanism of human agency for Bandura is people’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise those behaviours necessary to bring about a desired outcome. In other words, people have “self-efficacy” beliefs which are about the capacity to exercise control over events, and which are different from individual predictions of the likely consequence of their behaviour. Self-efficacy beliefs operate on action through motivational, cognitive and affective intervening processes (such as mastery experience, positioning against equals, encouragement from others, and physical and emotional states).

Bandura (2001) takes an agentic perspective assuming that individuals have some ability to control their lives, while recognising the chance encounters which often shape one’s life course. When viewed from a social cognitive perspective, the freedom of agents to act is not conceived just passively as the absence of constraints and coercion in the choice of action, but proactively as the exercise of self-influence to realise selected goals and desired outcomes. People who develop their competencies, self-regulatory skills and self-efficacy beliefs can generate a wider array of options that expand their freedom of action. They are also more successful in realising desired futures than those with less developed agentic resources (Bandura 1986). The exercise of freedom involves rights as well as options and the means to pursue them.

Social cognitive theory distinguishes three modes of agency, each of which is founded in people's beliefs that they can influence the course of events by their actions. These include individual, proxy and collective agency (Bandura 2001). In personal agency people bring their influence to bear on their own functioning and on environmental events. In many spheres of functioning, people do not have direct control over the social conditions and institutional practices that affect their everyday lives. Under these circumstances, they seek their well-being, security and valued outcomes through the exercise of proxy agency. In collective agency people share a belief in their collective efficacy.

Since Bandura's theory revolves strongly around the notions of free choice, optimism, conscious influences and uniqueness, I find it particularly helpful in conceptualising student agency. Importantly, Bandura (2001) also notes the cultural conditionality of efficacy beliefs: how they are developed and structured varies across cultures, as do the ways in which they are exercised, and the purposes to which they are put. In short, there is a commonality in basic agentic capacities and mechanisms of operation, but diversity in the culturing of these inherent capacities.

In sociological literature, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) call for a better understanding of the question of mechanisms by which actors exert agency, a question that was left largely unexplored by previous scholarship. They emphasise the temporal embeddedness of human agency as informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities), and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). Accordingly, they define human 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 judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 970).

In other words, agency is temporally embedded through past patterns of thought and action, through imagining the possible future trajectories of action and accordingly configuring the structures of thought and action, and through the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action.

Emirbayer and Mische argue for capturing the dynamic interplay among these three dimensions and consider “how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action” (ibid.: 963). Viewed internally, “agency entails different ways of experiencing the world, by means of which actors enter into relationship with surrounding people, places, meanings, and events,” and, viewed externally, agency entails “actual interactions with its contexts” (ibid.: 973). Grasping the dynamic possibilities of human agency is then to view it as “composed of variable and changing orientations within the flow of time. Only then will it be clear how the structural environments of action are both dynamically sustained by and also altered through human agency” (ibid.: 964). The empirical challenge is that of “locating, comparing, and predicting the relationship between different kinds of agentic processes and particular structuring contexts of action” (ibid.: 1005).

Emirbayer and Mische's theoretical insights on the temporal embeddedness of agency and the dynamic contexts of action are a major contribution to theories of human agency. What their theory does not capture is the mechanisms under which agentic orientations can be changed over time (Biesta 2008: 18), and indeed strengthened (or weakened) through developing

competencies, self-regulatory skills and self-efficacy beliefs, that is with agentic resources that, along with contexts of action, can generate a wider array of options for action, as suggested by Bandura (2001). Indeed, the quality of engagements in particular contexts of action depends also on agentic resources and their changes over time, which are among the mechanisms that can help us understand changes in agentic orientations over time (Biesta 2008).

Conceptualising student agency

Drawing from social cognition theory and sociological theories of human agency, student agency is conceptualised as a process of student actions and interactions during studentship, which encompasses variable notions of agentic orientation (“will”), the way students relate to past, present and future in making choices of action and interaction, and of agentic possibility (“power”), that is their perceived power to achieve intended outcomes in a particular context of action and interaction, but also to self-engagement of a critical reflexive kind.¹

The agentic perspective of student engagement proposes that student behaviour cannot be fully understood solely in terms of socio-structural conditions or psychological factors regardless of which level or unit of analysis of agency is considered and regardless of which temporal proximity of causation is approached (Bandura 2001). A full understanding of student agency indeed requires an integrated causal, but not deterministic² system which is sensitive to the different and changing temporalities of students’ agentic orientations (“the will to act”) and agentic possibilities (“power to achieve intended outcomes”). In other words, the ways in which people understand their own relationship to the past (routine), future (purpose) and present (judgment) make a difference to their actions (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 973). In line with this definition, the theory of student agency, as outlined in this chapter, includes six premises.

First, student agency is something that individual students or collectives of students develop alone or interacting with other people, materials and ideas within a particular socio-structural and relational context of action (Biesta 2008). As suggested by Biesta, agency is the quality of self-reflective and intentional action and interaction, and not something students possess. From an agentic perspective, students are conceived as self-organising, proactive, self-regulating and self-reflecting (Bandura 2006a). The extent to which students hold these dispositions shapes their agency, but it does not define it. Experiences of the past and projections of the future similarly shape their agency, but do not define it. Student agency emerges – is exerted – only when students intentionally act and interact with someone or something, and this includes students’ self-engagement of a critical reflexive kind. To be agentic, students need to act intentionally even if their intentionality is not supported by a clear idea of goals and action plans, but some anticipation of likely outcomes (some forethought) and some belief in one’s efficacy (that one can achieve desired effects by own actions) is crucial (ibid.). What the expected outcomes are varies immensely. Not all desired outcomes involve instrumental reasoning about the effects on study success or employability. Some activities students choose simply for leisure in their spare time or for collective purposes.

¹ The point of students’ self-engagement of a critical reflexive kind I have adopted from the comments on this text made by Simon Marginson, for which I am extremely grateful.

² I thank Simon Marginson for alerting me of the non-deterministic nature of such casual system.

Students often engage in activities without having in mind a definite desired outcome of that activity or being able to fully foresee all of the possible consequences of action. For example, a student volunteers to prepare a class presentation because she thinks this might improve her course grade, but might not be aware that that class presentation might lead her to do her thesis on the topic and that the professor will mention it in a recommendation letter later, and so on. Or, a student joins a basketball team at her university because she enjoys playing basketball and this is how she has been spending several afternoons a week ever since high school. Several years down the line, a hiring team at an investment bank might favourably view her basketball playing in a hiring decision, considering perhaps that basketball playing involves the strengthening of teamwork skills and indicates a competitive disposition. At the time of playing basketball this student was, however, most likely unaware of such long-term advantages of an activity she pursued as a hobby, and was acting under the “veil of ignorance” about the implications for her employability in the future.

Second, in a given situation, student agency can be stronger or weaker. Students may be not at all agentic depending on the situation (Biesta 2008). Having strong agentic resources, such as well-developed dispositions of self-organisation, self-regulation, self-reflection and proactivity can enhance a student’s quality of action or interaction– his or her agency in a particular context of action. Intentional self-development, of which learning is an essential part, has a generic positive influence on strengthening student agency (ibid.). In fact, agency is both a condition of self-formation and an outcome of it.³ Students who have more knowledge, better skills and access to information can make better judgments regarding a particular socio-structural context of action and better decisions on how to act to achieve desired outcomes.

However, many students, when asked how they came to a particular higher education institution, or when they are asked later in life how they ended up in a particular job, will often refer to chance encounters. There is indeed “a lot of fortuity in the courses lives take” (Bandura 2006a: 166). Bandura (2001, 2006a) points out that even fortuity, as an element of peoples’ lives, is not contradictory to the concept of agency, and can be enhanced through personal development. Having knowledge and skills can enable students to make the most of opportunities as they arise, even unexpectedly (Bandura 2001). Exploring different interests, people, places and events of engagement expands the possibility of chance encounters. Cultivating strong social networks and developing cultural capital can strengthen agency in a particular situation as much as it can help identify interesting and fortuitous opportunities. Having supportive and encouraging (and confidence-boosting) friends and family or mentors also has an impact on self-efficacy, which is essential for agency.

Self-efficacy beliefs are closely related to notions of agentic orientation and agentic possibility as they operate on action through motivational, cognitive and affective intervening processes combined with environmental variables. As discussed above, these beliefs can be changed through intentional self-development and ongoing experiences, but as psychological studies inform us, they are also strongly grounded in socio-economic background, childhood and family experiences, past experiences in schooling and beyond, and so on. Students concurrently hold multiple visions of their past, present and future selves, some of them more pronounced than others. This brings us to the third premise of theory of student agency.

³ I thank Simon Marginson for this statement, which I have adopted in full.

Third, student agency is temporally embedded. Different temporalities shape students' sense of what is possible to achieve in a given situation (agentic possibility) and what is desirable (agentic orientation). Student agency includes students' selective reactivation of past habits of thought and action, students' imaginative generation of possible future selves, and students' capacity to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible choices of action (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Actors selectively recognise, locate and implement schemas which have been developed through past experiences and through ongoing and situated interactions (*ibid.*: 975). In the projective dimension of agency actors are able to invent new patterns of thought and action, rather than merely repeat past routines and habits that may constrain them (*ibid.*: 983-4). Students construct new possible images of future selves and along with these projections, the ways to achieve them.

Students also contextualise their immediate social experiences and interactions by connecting past experiences and future orientations to present situations (*ibid.*: 994; Biesta 2008). The key activity here is in forming judgment on the desirability of specific outcomes as well as the possibilities and the courses of action needed to achieve them. It is in this practical-evaluative dimension of agency that the interplay between agency and context is brought out most forcefully.

Higher education is envisaged and designed to be transformative, and students are continuously prompted to construct their purpose and their visions of future directions of self. In the idealised vision of teaching we hope that something we convey as teachers will have created for students a "transformative moment", a sudden change in habits of thought, a new vision of the future – of the desired world, of one's own purpose, role and actions. What we often fail to acknowledge, however, is that for students the transformative moments often happen outside the classroom, in interactions with other students or in activities they pursue while students. There are ample reasons as to why we ought to explore student agency outside of the confines of the classroom, because this is where most student engagement actually takes place and this is where, often, the most lasting effects of studentship on students' life courses happen.

The fourth premise is that student lives are placed and socially developed in contexts of interdependent educational, political, social, economic and cultural conditions that present unique opportunities, constraints and challenges to student agency. Higher education systems vary in terms of political culture (including the role of the state) and educational culture (including how learning and obtaining academic qualifications is valued in a society and how families interfere in students' educational choices). The funding of higher education by the state and the cost of education for students, along with the availability of loans and grants, are crucial conditions that can decisively constrain (or free) student agency. Students who work while studying tend to choose different engagements and tend to have weaker agency in, for example, classroom work or student clubs, due to lack of time, fatigue and other existential concerns. Student freedom is not conceived of only as the absence of constraints and coercion in choices of action, but proactively, involving rights as well as options and the means to pursue them (Bandura 2001). Student agency is inevitably influenced by the distinctive life experiences provided by the eras in which students live (Elder 1994). The state of students' rights in a particular country and institution has a profound impact on student agency – both individual and collective (see Bergan, G. in this volume). Availability of financial support, information and the quality of lower levels of schooling similarly affect student agency.

Structural arrangements are not completely independent of student agency and exogenous to the activities of students. Certain aspects of the political, social and economic context are out of their control and students can do little or nothing to influence them. For example, there is nothing students can do about massification, which raises competition for student places and frequently decreases the relative amounts of state funding available per student. Global financial crises, such as that which began in 2008, have profound implications on students' employability and study conditions, yet there is not much students can do except demand responsible social policies from governments. Armed conflicts and wars have devastating effects on students, both in immediate terms and with regard to their entire life course. In the context of higher education institutions and local communities their agentic possibilities are much stronger and extensive. Students can and do influence social practices and structural conditions within their study programmes, faculties and universities, either individually or through student representatives or collectively through group initiatives or movements. These conditions, in turn, impose constraints and provide resources and opportunity structures for students' personal development and functioning. Students engage also in macro contexts as voters and through political and civic engagement in interest groups or movements. In fact, higher education is seen as helping to cultivate dispositions and competences for active democratic citizenship, or political and civic participation (Bergan 2004, 2005, 2011, 2013; Bergan and Damian 2010; Biesta 2008; Bok 2010; Klemenčič 2010; Bergan, S. in this volume).

Fifth, student agency is inherently relational. Most students would testify that the relationships they developed during higher education and the entire social side of studentship is an important, maybe even the most important, aspect of higher education experience. The people they relate to crucially influence both students' sense of what they wish for and what they can achieve. Students navigate, organise, regulate and evaluate their study and life through a multiplicity of concurrent, overlapping independent social relations and social networks, which can be physical or – increasingly – conducted through the Internet.

Sixth, there are three different modes of student agency: personal, proxy and collective. Students exert proxy agency in areas in which they cannot exert direct influence, do not wish to invest time and resources, or believe others can do better (Bandura 2001). Most commonly students exercise their proxy agency through individual student representatives and student unions. Students ask their student representatives to act on their behalf to solve a particular problem or secure a particular outcome. Proxy agency relies heavily on perceived social efficacy for exerting influence on behalf of others (ibid.: 13). Students also exert collective agency when they pool their knowledge, skills and resources, provide mutual support, form alliances, and work together to secure desired – shared – results. Student movements and non-institutionalised student initiatives are typical forms of student collective agency.

Theory of student agency in research on student engagement

Contemporary students live in a world which is highly interdependent and characterised by flows of information, knowledge, capital, goods and people. The contexts in which students act and interact are increasingly chaotic and subject to multiple concurrent, overlapping and mutually interdependent influences. When structural context becomes less of a given, the importance of student agency to create desired conditions for study and life becomes more important and even necessary (Biesta 2008). The postmodern neoliberal *Zeitgeist* in Europe presents a powerful and

evolving social system which significantly marks students' values, their lifestyles and the skills they seek. It also marks student agency by emphasis on individual choice and control over own learning. Proponents of neoliberal higher education reforms claim that giving students more choice and more control over learning ultimately empowers them: they gain more responsibility over their learning, self-development and thus future life conditions. In many ways technology is seen as further enabling to student agency. Personal student efficacy for self-development has expanded significantly with the Internet. The Internet provides vast opportunities for students "to control their own learning" unrestricted by time and space (Bandura 2001: 10). Critics point out that neoliberal engagement policies are part of governments' "window dressing" to disguise rising social inequalities within higher education and beyond. According to them, uneven distribution of prestige among higher education institutions within stratified national systems hampers the social mobility function of higher education. Students from advantageous backgrounds with strong cultural capital have better chances to be admitted to prestigious universities. In turn, they develop competences and cultivate different "capitals" which render them more eligible for prestigious jobs. Even if students are given more choice and more control over their educational trajectory within the institutional setting that does not change the fact that they are subject to broader societal inequalities. This is not to say that creating formal structures and informal opportunities for student engagement in teaching and learning, extracurricular activities, and institutional governance structures and processes is not commendable and necessary. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that student agency in the context of higher education institutions is also influenced by broader socio-structural constraints, which ultimately shape students' long-term educational trajectories and life courses.

In policy as well as scholarly work, student engagement is promulgated as key to a number of academic and societal goals. Student engagement has been portrayed as a key factor in students' study success (Pritchard et al. 2008; Michael 2006; Carini et al. 2000), in student retention (Thomas 2012) and in employability (Fallows and Steven 2000). Student engagement has also been conceived as a proxy for institutional quality, and as such has been integrated into institutional performance measurements (Gibbs 2010; Trowler and Trowler 2010, 2011; BIS 2011). Beginning with John Dewey's work we find the idea that higher education should focus on the education of enlightened, informed and critical citizens. Notions of student engagement as leading to the development of the dispositions and abilities necessary for engaged citizenship in democratic societies have been since elaborated further (Bergan 2004, 2005, 2011 and 2013; Bergan and Damian 2010; Biesta 2008; Bok 2010; Klemenčič 2010; Bergan, S. in this volume).

Consequent to these normative appraisals, research on student engagement proliferated, however without a common theoretical framework and with little collaboration or even discussion across disciplinary fields. The literature broadly labelled as dealing with some form of student engagement spans three major areas (Trowler 2010; Trowler and Trowler 2010). The most prolific is research on student engagement in learning and teaching (Ashwin 2009a, 2009b; Case 2013; Ashwin 2014), in extracurricular activities (Holdsworth 2010; Stevenson and Clegg 2011, 2012; Clegg, Stevenson and Willott 2010) and student experience more broadly (Kandiko and Mawer 2013; Kandiko and Weyers 2013). Literature on access to higher education (Reay 2002; Reay, David and Ball 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010; Crozier et al. 2008) and student employability (Brenan and Shah 2003; Harvey 2005; Tomlinson 2007; Yorke 2006; Yorke and Knight 2006) is a related strand of the sociological literature on inequalities and the effects of college on students. Student engagement is also addressed within the literature on higher education governance (Klemenčič 2012a, 2012b, 2011 and 2014), quality assurance (Cockburn

2006; Alaniska 2006; Galán Palomares 2012; Zhang 2013; Kažoka in this volume) and institutional research (Klemenčič and Brennan 2013). Finally, there is student engagement literature – that which addresses student civic involvement and political participation in democracy, especially student activism (Altbach 1966, 1979, 1981, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1991, 1992 and 2006; Lipset and Altbach 1966 and 1969; Klemenčič 2014; Altbach and Klemenčič 2014).

Particularly influential has been the scholarship related to the North American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh 2001, 2003). The NSSE seeks to assess “the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience” (Kuh 2001: 2). The underlying assumption lies in positivist thinking that observable phenomena – student engagement and experience – can be measured and validated through quantitative survey questionnaires, and that causal relations (correlation) and time priority exist between specific independent and dependent variables. While student surveys can be helpful in providing data for overall assessment of institutional functions with regard to student experience, and scan for immediate student satisfaction or dissatisfaction with particular student services, this approach has a number of widely acknowledged limitations when broader conclusions as to the effects of college on students are drawn. A methodological flaw that critics most frequently point out is that such surveys provide a “snapshot” view of student experience that does not do justice to its inherently dynamic and contextual, and developmental and self-developmental nature.⁴ Survey questionnaires are based on preconceived categories as to what the institutional researchers expect the correlations to be between educational provisions and university circumstances (the independent variables) and student experience and engagement (the dependent variables). These expectations may not always be accurate given the interdependent and multifaceted factors and interactions that underlie student interactions and thus their experience. Yet another weakness of this approach is its inability to capture student engagement as multidimensional, dynamic and developmental, and the effect of working under the assumption that students exercise rational choice from shared starting points and in undifferentiated circumstances (Sabri 2011). The starting premise of this research has been that student agency is shaped by the institutions, that is “by the structure”: the focus has been on the question of how the institutions organise and use their resources to promote various forms of engagement.

The institutionalist and behaviouralist literature stemming from survey-based research tends to oversimplify what is a highly dynamic process of student choices of engagement simultaneously influenced by a multiplicity of different factors. There exists notable qualitative research which highlights factors other than institutions in shaping student engagement. The socio-economic and cultural background of students is given its due in classical sociological inquiries into how class, race, gender and cultural capital influence student agency. For example, in their investigation of students’ choices of extracurricular activities, Stephenson and Clegg (2011) suggest that the capacity of students to imagine and act to bring about their “future selves” is in fact highly structured by class (*ibid.*). In a study of working-class students, Reay, David and Ball (2005) find that choice of study is not based purely on rational individual decision making by informed consumers in a market, but is influenced by intensely social and familial factors, networks and connections, and the ability to make “distinctions” among the unequal social and educational

⁴ I thank Simon Marginson for alerting me to the two latter aspects.

goods on offer (ibid.; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010; Crozier et al. 2008). Some of this research also points to the importance of socialisation and social relations in shaping student agency. We find more explicit focus on socialisation in the social network literature, for instance in investigations of the correlation between Facebook use and civic participation (Valenzuela et al. 2009) and in the literature on the social nature of learning (Ashworth 2004; Ashwin 2009a). Ashwin (2009a), for example, highlights the dynamic ways in which students and academics influence each other in teaching-learning interactions, and how these interactions are shaped by teaching-learning environments, student and academic identities, disciplinary knowledge practices and institutional cultures. Other researchers focus on the role of emotion in shaping student engagement (Kahu et al. 2014; Beard, Clegg and Smith 2007).

In addition to these approaches, Kahu (2013) has taken an important step with her more integrated approach to the study of student engagement. She disentangles the central variables in student engagement and the relationships among them, highlighting the importance of the broader socio-cultural context along with structural (university culture, policies, curricula, assessment and student background, family support, etc.) and psycho-social influences (university teaching and student motivations, skills, etc.). The engagement itself is then channelled through affect (enthusiasm, interest and belonging), cognition (deep learning, self-regulation) and behaviour (time and effort, interaction and participation). The consequences of engagement suggested by Kahu are dual in temporality (proximal and distant) and in domain (academic and societal). By depicting the complex array of factors influencing a student's engagement, she points to the unique nature of the individual experience and the need for in-depth study of particular student populations (Kahu 2013: 766), a point which I find particularly important. One major shortcoming of this framework however is its inability to capture how different temporal orientations shape student behaviour. The role of past habits and future projections play as important a role in supporting agentic orientations as the socio-psychological influences of students' present judgment of the environment which Kahu's framework covers.

I believe that we need to move even deeper to the micro foundations of student agency so as to capture both the temporality and the multi-level relational contexts of student engagement. It is through such an approach that we can better understand how different conditions that shape student agency interact and play out over time and to what effect. An agentic perspective retreats from the aim of explaining how broad structural conditions within the context of the higher education environment affect students. Rather, by working empirically on smaller units or systems longitudinally, it seeks to uncover and fully capture the specificities of individual cases of student behaviour and experience (see Haggis 2003). It also seeks to address studentship and student agency in context of the life course and life projects (see Biesta 2008; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In this way, propositions about the conduciveness of certain conditions to the exercise of student agency and mechanisms underlying student agency can be suggested, rather than limiting oneself to consideration of causal relationships between predetermined factors and expected outcomes.

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