

## On establishing a *modus vivendi*: the exercise of agency in decisions to participate or not participate in higher education

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It is becoming increasingly clear that the notion of ‘removing barriers’ offers a limited foundation for widening participation to higher education. Drawing on realist social theory, we consider how decisions to participate or not participate form part of a process to establish a *modus vivendi* or ‘way of life’ for oneself. We explore factors that affect how individuals pursue courses of action around entry into potentially alien educational contexts. Our analysis suggests that interventions designed to widen participation should take account of different modes of reflexive deliberation, underpinning social and cultural structures, and a range of notions of human flourishing.

**Keywords:** widening participation; realist social theory; reflexive deliberation; higher education policy; equality.

### Introduction

Rates of participation in higher education continue to vary according to socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity, despite longstanding national policy within the UK to ensure a greater evenness (Gorard et al., 2006). Osborne (2003) argues that a similar picture pertains across the European Union. Gorard et al. (2006) further observes that the research literature emphasises a range of barriers to participation in higher education, broadly categorising them as situational, institutional or attitudinal. Woodrow (1999), for instance, argues that financial, institutional and class-based barriers impede the progress of non-traditional students, suggesting that focusing on barriers enables one to avoid concentrating on perceived shortcomings of such students. The tendency is for policy and practice in the field of widening participation to focus on ‘removing’ barriers, as Gorard et al. (2006, 5) also notes.

Critics are, however, increasingly drawing attention to weaknesses in this particular conceptual framework. Gorard and Smith (2007) contend that while introducing strategies and policy to overcome identified barriers may be significant for some individuals, addressing barriers has only had a marginal effect on participation rates. They argue that the research on barriers pays minimal attention to reasons why non-participants do not engage. And where such non-participants are investigated, it is issues other than barriers that emerge as central to their decision making processes. We see this, for instance, in data presented by Fuller et al. (2008). Their research suggests that individuals aged over 21 years old who possess the qualifications to enter higher education but had not yet chosen to enter did not talk in terms of barriers when recounting the influences on their decisions. Sheeran et al. (2007) argue that as a result a measure of deadlock has resulted within the widening participation debate. The tendency is to assume that a barrier is transferred directly to the actions of individuals, rather than to explore more sophisticated models of causation.

There is, though, a growing body of research looking to offer sociological explanations for uneven patterns of participation in higher education. Fuller et al. (2008), for instance, go on to view decision-making around participation in higher education as a socially embedded practice over the life-course. Structural explanations, meanwhile, are paramount in Bourdieu’s theory of practice, which has also been applied in this area by Walker (2007) and others. And additional accounts focus directly on the specific influence of such factors such as class, gender and race, as with Archer et al. (2003), and Hayton and Paczuska (2002). But it is clear that significant variation in decision-making

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around participation in higher education is present even within a given socio-cultural context. Johnston et al. (2000) identified how young people from a disadvantaged neighbourhood in North East England, 'Willowdene', exhibited diverse and unpredictable careers and transitions, despite their similar socioeconomic backgrounds and common place of residence. Part of the challenge is to chart underlying mechanisms that give rise to this variety. It is important to consider the role of individual agency in causal models of decision making around participation and non-participation in higher education.

Furthermore, one of the barriers that has drawn most attention is that of 'low aspirations' among those within under-represented groups. Louise Archer (2007) points out that in the UK we have seen a range of initiatives seeking to change the aspirations and achievement of under-represented groups, as with *Aim Higher*. This national programme seeks to widen participation in higher education amongst those from lower socio-economic groups and disadvantaged backgrounds. She argues that a focus on 'aspirations' is linked to justifications for widening participation that are framed in terms of economic flourishing, as with Department for Education and Skills (2003). Sheeran et al. (2007) similarly identifies a trend to widen participation for the sake of a more economically-able workforce. Archer further argues that the associated rhetoric of 'diversity', 'equality' and 'inclusion' serves to mask a prioritisation of economic concerns. Other conceptions of human flourishing are downplayed, such as those conceptions that are linked to social ideals or to maintaining networks of relationships with friends and family members in a local community. Walker (2008) indicates that as a result the purposes of education are narrowed.

Given these theoretical and rhetorical limitations to the existing discourse of widening participation, it is important to explore perspectives that both offer a comprehensive account of the decision-making processes involved and remain open to the complexities of social justice. Margaret Archer's account of human reflexivity and social mobility (2007) holds out particular promise. In considering the interplay between socio-cultural structure and human agency over time (see also 2000, 2003), she has developed in realist social theory a wide-ranging framework that seeks to explain how agents use their personal powers to act 'so rather than otherwise' in any given social situation (2003, 3). In this article we explore the relevance of realist social theory to the exercise of agency in decisions to participate or not participate in higher education. We begin with an initial statement of Archer's framework, before exploring connections between these perspectives and the exercise of agency in decisions to participate or not participate in higher education. This analysis paves the way for a further discussion on policy and practice within widening participation. In this way we seek to assist in developing a discourse that bridges the divide that Baker, Brown and Fazey (2006) identify between those responsible for sociological explanations and those whose analysis problematises the system of higher education.

### **The pursuit of varied courses of action**

Archer suggests that socio-cultural factors shape the situations that individuals face, constraining or enabling action, and influencing the motivations that they hold. Thus one's prior educational experience and the knowledge that one possesses about higher education are significant factors in determining whether one enters higher education. However, she argues that these factors do not 'produce a uniformity of response from those similarly situated in relation to them' (2007, 19). Rather, we arrive at answers to the questions "What do I want?" and "How will I secure this?" through a dynamic interplay between our own concerns and our context. Similarities are evident here with the theory of decision making around careers advocated by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), which seeks to integrate individual preferences and opportunity structures. But for Archer the interplay between contexts and concerns further involves internal conversation or reflexive deliberation. Archer defines 'reflexivity' as the ordinary exercise of the mental ability by which someone considers himself or herself in relation to (social) contexts. It involves such patterns of internal conversation as 'mulling over', 'rehearsing', 'imagining', 'reliving' and 'prioritising'. As

such, reflexive deliberation provides a basis on which an individual determines future courses of action.

Archer identifies three particular phases to one's internal conversation. The first phase comprises the discernment through which we identify possible concerns. These concerns relate to our well being in three orders of natural reality, namely nature, practice and the social. Nature pertains to our physical well being, employment provides a key focus for practice, and our relationships with others are at the heart of social reality. This initial phase is followed by the deliberation through which we rank these concerns, and then by the dedication through which we decide whether we are able to embark upon a particular way of life, or *modus vivendi*. Alongside this, we progressively specify concrete courses of action, so that concerns lead to projects, and projects lead to stable practices. It is in pursuing specific projects that an individual engages with the constraints and enablements that stem from social and cultural structures. In this we adjust our projects as we perceive their feasibility in the given context. Thus an individual who has begun to experience failure at educational examinations may conclude that they are unable to enter university.

On this basis Archer (2007) traces how experiences of socio-cultural contextual continuity or discontinuity contribute to the development of characteristic modes of reflexivity and the prioritisation of different configuration of concerns. Communicative reflexives share their deliberations with others before deciding on a course of action, in ways reminiscent of the networks of intimacy identified by Heath et al. (2008) as relevant to non-participation in higher education. Archer found that communicative reflexivity was more predominant where individuals remained in the same locality on a long-term basis, were able to maintain stable relationships and had scope to pursue a range of occupations locally (2007, 145). Archer argues that where an individual is able to find satisfying projects within their current context, then he or she is less likely to court a change in context, and thus is less likely to seek upward social mobility. Fractured reflexives, meanwhile, engage in deliberation that intensifies personal distress rather than results in purposeful courses of action. But in order to act as an agent within an open society one has to exercise a functioning mode of reflexive deliberation. Transitions, such as that entailed in entering higher education, particularly demand the exercise of reflexive deliberation, posing challenges for those for whom this triggers anxiety and distress.

Finally, there are two characteristic patterns of reflexivity that Archer suggests particularly develop in response to contextual discontinuity. Such discontinuity characteristically occurs as someone embarks upon a project that involves socio-economic or educational mobility. Autonomous reflexives typically prioritise performance in relation to practice, relying on their own internal deliberations to navigate their way in the world. Archer identifies ways in which autonomous reflexivity develops as an individual prioritises employment-related concerns in the face of contextual discontinuity. Meta-reflexives, meanwhile, are characterised as those whose reflexive deliberations pay critical attention to social ideals; prioritising the pursuit of these in the face of contextual discontinuity. It is such modes of reflexivity that for Archer help to explain the varied ways in which individuals engage with structural constraints.

### **Decision making and establishing a *modus vivendi***

Gaining entry into higher education involves a whole sequence of decisions and activities, and may be regarded as a project that extends beyond the acquisition of a set of admitting qualifications. In addition to meeting entry requirements, one must usually secure information on possible options and select from amongst these, ascertain the process by which one makes an application, and complete a formal application. Each of these stages poses complexity, as with the choice of programme, which varies according to the subject of study, the location of the institution, the character of the programme and so on. One may also need to address how to support oneself, or even others as well, during the period of study. Embarking on a programme may further impact on one's existing relationships, and this too will need to be considered. Seeking entry into higher education evidently involves a substantive personal project that crosses into all three orders of natural reality.

This project, furthermore, may be viewed as part of a wider process to establish or re-establish oneself in a specific way of life. The connection between higher education and realising a specific *modus vivendi* is particularly strong given the role that knowledge now plays within employment and society at large. Completing such a process is a quintessential part of establishing oneself as an adult within society, and is also entailed in many occupational transitions. Gorard et al. (2006) identifies the shift from compulsory schooling for all up to age 16, to a highly selective system of higher education at age 18 as a fundamental issue at the root of the widening participation issue. James (2002, 49) argues that while the differences between different socioeconomic groups towards schooling are only marginal, marked attitudinal variations emerge in relation to higher education. Secondary education is essentially a social norm, but significant choice is present in relation to whether or not to pursue higher education. Viewing decisions of whether or not to seek entry into higher education in this way also helps to expose the wide range of values involved, as one's *modus vivendi* provides a substantive focus for one's fundamental commitments and aspirations.

### *Establishing a modus vivendi*

We now look to see how individuals exercise agency when making decisions around entry into higher education, as set within this wider project of establishing a *modus vivendi*. It is clear that structural and cultural factors do constrain the ease with which it is possible to gain entry into higher education, and affect the extent to which alternative courses of action are realistic. Factors that pertain to the institution are relevant, including how programmes are advertised, the timetabling of classes, admissions procedures, institutional location and so on. Then there are factors that apply to the lifestyle of a prospective learner, such as the costs of the programme that McGivney (1992) highlights and the reduced time available for a social life or to care for dependents. Readiness to enter higher education is also important, as Gibbons and Chevalier (2007) have emphasised. In order to gain entry into higher education it is usually essential to secure the appropriate qualifications or certification, and this would include completing an access course.

According to Archer's model, such structural and cultural factors further influence the subjective concerns held by the individual. These pertain to dispositional factors also identified within the literature, with Gorard and Smith (2007), for instance, highlighting subjective opportunity structures. They suggest that structural and cultural factors can engender a negative attitude towards learning, in which it is perceived as alien and imposed. Prior educational experiences (Gorard and Rees, 2002) and one's family (San-Segundo and Valiente, 2003) constitute a particular influence on these concerns. Participation is strongly related to parents' education, with familiarity with higher education and levels of satisfaction with readily available alternatives all influenced by family background. This will affect the extent to which one is likely to settle on a *modus vivendi* that depends upon entering higher education. Paradoxically, Archer indicates that decisions to participate in higher education stem in part from an inability to frame a satisfying course of action within one's present social context.

But an individual seeking to establish a *modus vivendi* within a given socio-cultural context must still decide upon which concerns to prioritise, and how best to pursue these concerns through specific courses of action, whether or not these involve seeking entry into higher education. According to Archer, reflexive deliberation plays an important role in this progressive specification of courses of action. Communicative reflexivity, and to a lesser extent fractured reflexivity, take on particular importance for our argument as Archer identifies a correlation between lower, or no, qualifications and these two modes of reflexivity (2007, 97). She argues that communicative reflexives play an active role in choosing their own social immobility, avoiding enablements such as higher education in order to prioritise inter-personal concerns. Rather than pursue social mobility, they chose to maintain a web of social relationships. One has to work to pursue a *modus vivendi* that is predicated on taking up employment locally, but in so doing one may sideline inducements to enter higher education. Furthermore, various studies point to the communicative basis for decisions to participate in higher education, with parents and other significant inter-locutors typically representing

a critical factor where young people are concerned. Both Fuller et al. (2008) and Heath (2008), explore how decisions to participate or not in higher education are linked to networks consisting of family members and friends. Johnston et al. (2000) explores how within Willowdene a plurality of informal social networks was in evidence, which assisted individuals to manage their lives, secure employment and generally to experience social inclusion.

Many elements of the process to gain entry into higher education, however, are potentially alien to communities or groups with little experience of higher education. Unfamiliarity may manifest itself in relation to a lack of knowledge (Gartland, 2006), an inability to assess the risk involved in pursuing a programme of higher education (Archer and Hutchings 2000) or so on. Weil (1989) argues that university entry involves a dislocation which is intensified according to the number of ways in which the learner may be identified as 'non-traditional', with class, gender and ethnic difference playing key roles in this. Entry into an elite institution poses further scope for unfamiliarity, as Jary (2008, 112) notes, given the continuing poor performance of elite institutions in recruiting from lower socioeconomic groups. The argument here is not that communicative reflexivity is more prevalent in social categories with low rates of participation in higher education. Archer saw no correlation between one's dominant mode of reflexivity and socio-occupational class background (2007, 96). Rather what is important, we suggest, is the lack of familiarity with higher education amongst those with whom communicative reflexives share their deliberations. Someone who engages in communicative reflexivity from within such a community or group is likely to experience an absence of supportive advice, encouragement of other concerns or even outright discouragement. If the community that provides the basis for a person's reflexivity views higher education as an alien world, then lower rates of participation are to be expected. And this is particularly important given that Archer suggests communicative reflexivity is more prevalent in younger age groups, as contextual discontinuity is only experienced by some later in life, as when attending university in a location different to one's natal context. Archer, though, emphasises that over the longer term it is individual agency that determines whether one seeks upward social mobility. Discontinuity between the group that provides the basis for one's expression of communicative reflexivity and the context of higher education will for some simply delay entry into higher education. The issue is whether someone persists in choosing to prioritise existing relationships over social mobility.

Fractured reflexives also form an important category here in considering the variation that emerges from individual agency. Archer argues (2007, 281) that it is communicative reflexives who are most likely to fracture. Johnston et al. (2000) study identified a series of crucial points in young people's lives such as bereavement, family break-up or the imprisonment of one's father that give rise to particular challenges to advisory services looking to support young people. Such experiences strike at the heart of communicative reflexivity by removing trusted inter-locutors. Pursuing an extended personal project is assisted by the capacity to engage in a functioning form of reflexive deliberation. Someone who waits for events to unfold rather than seeks to shape those events, as is characteristically the case for fractured reflexives, may be less likely to embark on a programme of higher education or even explore the possibility of doing so on their own initiative.

Finally we note that further issues potentially emerge for meta-reflexives and autonomous reflexives. Archer links meta-reflexivity to lateral social mobility, with the pursuit of social values prioritised above maximising performance at work. One might expect that the extent to which higher education allows one to pursue a range of social ideals would affect participation rates for meta-reflexives. Archer, by contrast, specifically identifies autonomous reflexivity as a mechanism for upward social mobility. In this case, rates of participation in higher education from amongst autonomous reflexives might be expected to depend on the extent to which performance in employment is dependent on capacities developed through higher education. While these latter modes of reflexivity are not directly linked to under-represented groups, this analysis assists in filling out our understanding of how individuals establish a *modus vivendi*.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

Our analysis highlights the complexities at play in decisions to participate or not participate in higher education. Fuller et al. (2008, 16) also suggest that ‘patterns of participation in HE are anchored socially, historically and biographically in ways which are far more complex to explain and overcome than the barriers discourse would suggest’. We would specifically suggest that patterns of participation are linked to the ways in which individuals seek to achieve their own *modi vivendi*, pursuing progressively concrete courses of action that are driven by varied forms of reflexive deliberation. Such an approach allows us to consider how an individual actually makes decisions, while still allowing for socio-cultural considerations, but insights also emerge from this analysis to help frame practice and policy.

One possibility is for interventions to target the immediate basis for the decision making process. Walker (2008) similarly suggests that initiatives should look to develop the capabilities of widening participation students to act as strong evaluators, while Greenbank (2008) argues that outreach activity should incorporate practical activities designed to improve decision-making skills. If it is challenging for communicative reflexives to engage in internal conversation in relation to alien socio-cultural contexts, then support can be offered. Widening participation activities can target groups rather than individuals, so that a group of people enter an alien context together and offer each other mutual support in framing suitable courses of action. Alternatively one could look to develop mutual support groups as an integral part of an initiative. Summer Schools, mentoring programmes and online taster courses (Pennell et al. 2005) offer possibilities, although extended activities are likely to be required for any significant shifts to occur. There may be greater scope for genuinely extended activity post-16, with the possibility of offering structured gap years linked in some way to universities. Such approaches would seem important if widening participation activities are to support individuals engage in the progressive specification of courses of action that lead towards participation in higher education.

One could specifically help communicative reflexives develop the capacity to engage in reflexive deliberation that does not involve sharing their thoughts with others before deciding on courses of action. But this represents a questionable strategy that would almost inevitably involve shifting their underlying values and configurations of concerns. Looking to develop the capacity of fractured reflexives to engage in constructive forms of reflexive deliberation is perhaps more justifiable, although in this case communicative reflexivity is likely to be easier to develop than either autonomous reflexivity or meta-reflexivity. Indeed Johnston et al. (2000) suggests that personal advisers will be required where individuals have experienced broken lives, and that these advisers must possess ‘in-depth, detailed and long-term knowledge of young people under their care’ to support an individual or, we might say, to assist deliberation.

Activities not directly linked to higher education may also be relevant. If one learns to specify courses of action within a range of initially alien environments, then it may become easier to establish a *modus vivendi* that is not limited by one’s immediate context. Opportunities may be possible through participation in cultural, sporting or other social settings. Greenbank (2007) points to research which indicates that those from working class backgrounds are less likely to engage in hobbies and broader interests that give them an advantage when seeking entry into the labour market. Such activity may also help to develop capacity to exercise agency within unfamiliar contexts, and thus to widen the potential range of *modi vivendi* to which one might aspire, including those predicated on undertaking a programme of higher education.

But to be fully effective all such interventions need to take account of underlying social and cultural structures, taking us beyond the individualistic focus that Baker, Brown and Fazey (2006) suggests characterises the literature on barriers. We have seen already that we must attend to social structures when looking to support communicative reflexives. An intervention looking to establish a cadre of personal advisers would be advised to consider whether such an approach is realistic within a society that is predicated on instrumental and efficient organisation. Taylor (1993), indeed, argues that bureaucratic approaches which prize economic flourishing above, say, stable trusting communities tend rather to isolate individuals from each other, making the personal knowledge required for such an

undertaking hard to achieve. Or it may well be beyond the capacity of a widening participation team within a university to offer extended opportunities for cultural enrichment, but students unions could open up their sporting, social and cultural life to the local community.

Interventions evidently need to target institutions and communities rather than just individuals, higher education itself not excepted. Decisions to participate in higher education are affected by the structural flexibility of programmes. Offering a programme within a local community may, though, not so much remove a barrier to participation in higher education, as allow students to remain committed to their local community. Such a commitment that may also reflect a cultural, religious or ethnic element, as Pickerden (2002) indicates in relation to Muslim women. This approach may also reduce the complexity of the decision-making process for fractured reflexives. Designing programmes around activity within local communities, particularly where this involves service learning (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2000) would also allow students to retain a connection with their local community. Similar approaches are evident when institutions work with employers, offering programmes of education to groups of employees as envisaged by the Lambert Report (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2003). These approaches require substantive partnerships between universities and other communities or groups, but potentially serve to make higher education more accessible to communicative reflexives and fractured reflexives from groups with low rates of participation in higher education.

Our analysis suggests that universities should take account of wider notions of human flourishing, beyond those directly linked to the economy. But we can ask further, to what extent do curricula incorporate the concerns and priorities held by meta-reflexives who prioritise social ideals, whether in relation to environmental issues or the well-being of others? Kahn (2009) explores a range of ways in which the curriculum might be adapted to reflect such possibilities, or support students in articulating new configurations of concerns to which they might become attached. In this way students may be attracted to undertake a programme of higher education to pursue deeply held concerns. Higher education could thus engage with cultural, religious and ethnic groupings within society. Gorard et al. (2006) specifically identifies a need for studies that consider discrete categories of non-traditional students, including those from different ethnic minorities. O'Brien (2008) suggests that for higher education to take non-traditional students into account more genuinely, academic disciplines themselves need to appreciate the cultural contribution that these students bring with them. This requires us to focus attention on how disciplines themselves are constituted. There is scope here to consider religious as well as cultural underpinnings for higher education. Universities as such were initially religious in orientation, emerging from cathedral and monastic schools of learning that served the mission of the church. Why should someone enter a university if it promotes a *modus vivendi* that is indifferent or antagonistic towards deeply held religious or cultural commitments?

The argument is sometimes made that education based around cultural, religious or ethnic foci plays a divisive role within society. But our analysis suggests that marginalising culture, religion and ethnicity within higher education may contribute to uneven rates of participation. Taylor (1993) further argues that an instrumental mode of life tends to dissolve the intermediate social structures that are a feature of religion, culture and ethnicity. It is instrumentalism that fosters an atomistic outlook within society, as the bases of community identification are eroded. There is thus an argument to support the presence of intermediate social structures within higher education that are rooted in religion, culture and ethnicity; whether programmes, halls of residence or outreach activity. At the institutional level this would be more desirable should some regional or historical synergy exist, but there is scope at national level for policy that encourages initiatives, education and institutions that are predicated on many notions of human flourishing.

## Conclusions

We have argued in this paper that decisions to participate or not participate in higher education should be seen within the wider frame of pursuing a *modus vivendi*. As a result, we see extensive scope for variation in the behaviour of individuals as they countenance the project of gaining entry into higher

education. This variation stems in part from the exercise of characteristic modes of reflexive deliberation, and from commitments to different configurations of concerns within diverse contexts. The complexities of establishing a *modus vivendi* that is predicated on participation in higher education extend far beyond the notion of overcoming a set of 'barriers'. We contend that our analysis offers a way forward both in adapting the system of higher education and in understanding the causal mechanisms involved in decisions to participate or not participate in higher education.

Interventions, we have argued, should take account of different modes of reflexive deliberation, underpinning social and cultural structures, and a range of notions of human flourishing. The challenge in part is to reconfigure higher education itself in a ways that takes greater account of the values held by current and potential students, recognising that these values are not pursued in isolation from associated cultural and social structures. We further see in such reconfiguration one means for higher education to respond to the call from Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007) to take ontology into greater account. Archer (2007), indeed, argues that personal identity is formed in significant part through the configuration of concerns that we chose to prioritise within our actions. A focus on such issues of social structure and personal identity takes us beyond a preoccupation with the aspiration-raising for entry into higher education that Fuller et al. (2008) identified amongst the key informants in their study.

Approaches that address the fundamental issues at stake are essential if higher education is to assist in the transformation of both individuals and societies. We can see why Hartwig (2007, p164) claims that emancipation is paradigmatically to be seen in structural terms. The way that the sector as a whole frames policy and practice within this field does still significantly affect the extent to which individuals are able to establish *modi vivendi* that they themselves find satisfying. Social mobility is not an absolute goal in this, given scope for individuals and groups within society to hold configurations of concerns rooted in priorities other than work and employment, for instance. But in framing the decision making process around entry into higher education as part of a wider project to establish or re-establish one's *modus vivendi*, we see ways to extend widening participation into a movement that is more authentically emancipatory.

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### Notes on Contributor

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