**Reflexivity and agency: Critical realist and Archerian analyses of access and participation**

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**Introduction**

It is often claimed that higher education represents an emancipatory project. Barnett (1990) argued that the overall project of higher education entails students learning to engage in critical self-reflection and to question what is taken for granted. Significant intellectual and personal growth can accompany participation in higher education. There have been suggestions also that society as a whole benefits. Gutman (1987), for instance, claimed that higher education has an important part to play in establishing and maintaining democratic societies consisting of free citizens. It is evidently thus a cause for concern when rates of participation in higher education vary according to socio-economic status or ethnicity, for instance, given the inequalities that are likely to occur on a range of levels.

Such variation in participation is, indeed, widespread. There are significant differences in participation rates in the UK that result from socio-economic background (Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, Goodman, & Vignoles, 2013). The participation in higher education of Black male students in the United States remains a particular challenge (Harper, 2012). Sally and Spreen (2014) have highlighted how inequality is pervasive across higher education in South Africa. Van Der Pol, Chien and Montjourides (2015) pointed out that rates of participation in higher education vary from one region of the world to the next, and that rates of female participation are particularly low in countries with limited resources.

At the same time, though, various researchers have argued that the overall purpose of higher education has shifted towards the pursuit of economic ends. Bok has suggested that higher education now primarily serves to prepare students employment. Lynch (2006) has argued that students are increasingly seen by institutions as consumers of education. Such shifts have also been seen in relation to policy designed to widen the participation of under-represented groups. Archer (2007) suggested that there has been an emphasis on the economic benefits of participation in higher education in widening participation policy within the UK. She argued that a focus on ‘aspirations’ within one national programme could be linked to justifications for widening participation that have been framed in terms of economic flourishing. Sheeran et al. (2007) similarly identified an agenda that sought to widen participation for the sake of a more economically-able workforce. Emancipation, though, involves far more than an economic flourishing. Bhaskar (1993) argued that emancipation pertains to desired rather than undesired sources of determination. Emancipation occurs when needs are identified by individuals or groups on their own behalf, rather than when they are determined for them by others. It can hardly be assumed that an economic focus is always best suited to the diversity of students’ aspirations, responsibilities and needs.

It is also clear that significant weaknesses remain in what might be termed the dominant approach to explaining and addressing levels of participation in higher education. Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett and Slack (2006) demonstrated that the research literature in this field emphasises the notions situational, institutional and attitudinal barriers to participation in higher education. They have identified a tendency for policy and practice in the field within the UK to focus on ‘removing’ barriers. Critics, however, have drawn attention to weaknesses in this conceptual framework. Gorard and Smith (2007) contended 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 argued that the research on barriers pays minimal attention to reasons why non-participants do not engage. Where non-participants are investigated a different picture can emerge, as in research by Fuller, Paton, Foskett and Maringe (2008). This study illuminated ways in which participation is rooted in complex social, historical and biographical factors. One can assume that a barrier is transferred directly to the actions of individuals, rather than look to explore more sophisticated models of causation. It remains the case, though, that a focus on barriers can be straightforwardly framed and addressed through an economic lens.

**A critical realist and Archerian contribution**

It is thus 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. Critical realism (Bhaskar, 1986) constitutes a paradigm that is predicated on explanatory critique in relation to social structure, with criticality stemming from the underlying focus on emancipation that non-reductionist analyses allow. As a field, critical realism offers a non-reductive explanatory critique that draws attention to the underlying basis for the actual events that we experience. Critical realist studies seek to identify the mechanisms that give rise to events and to our subjective experience of those events. A mechanism is said to be real in the sense that it constitutes a causal tendency, while still allowing for the possibility that a mechanism will not necessarily be triggered in any given setting. Sayer (1992) contrasted this notion of causality with one in which discrete events are linked together in a direct relationship of cause and effect. The notion of explanatory critique is important, as Bhaskar (1986, 169-179) argued that ‘accounts of social reality are not only value-impregnated but value-impregnating’ and that this provides social science with an impulse towards emancipation. The field is ‘critical’ in the sense that it is attuned to isolating grounds of error, focusing first of all on explanatory critique in relation to social structure rather than, say, on exposing the will to power. In identifying structures and mechanisms in play, it will then be possible to consider the varying ways in which identified sources of determination might be desired. It is clear that this determination can occur on a communal as well as an individual basis. The use of the terms ‘wanted’ and ‘desired’ by Bhaskar (1986) in relation to sources of determination implies a reflexive awareness on the part of the subjects concerned in relation to what they do want or desire.

Critical realism primarily represents a meta-theory rooted in philosophy, with a need to develop directly applicable theoretical frameworks. In particular, the sociologist Margaret Archer has developed a set of mediating frameworks under the banner of realist social theory (Archer, 1995, 2000, 2012). This chapter explores Archer’s account of the interplay between social structure and human agency. Her account seeks to explain the ways in which agents use their personal powers to act ‘so rather than otherwise’ in given social situations. Her approach takes seriously the uncertainties that are present in all decision making, highlighting the reflexive basis on which actions are progressed. This chapter further presents an approach to adapting and developing this framework proposed by Kahn (2009, 2014), in order to help explain interplay between personal and socio-cultural factors that relate to student access, participation and engagement in higher education. What is it that determines whether a student seeks to engage with higher education, initially in taking the application process forward or in engaging with their studies as a university student? The argument here illustrates the power of a critical realist approach to the field of widening participation, in considering issues that relate to research and practice on access and participation.

**The pursuit of varied courses of action**

Archer (2003) suggested that there are a range of socio-cultural constraints and enablements that exist in relation to one’s actions as an agent. For instance, 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 argued that these factors do not ‘produce a uniformity of response from those similarly situated in relation to them’ (Archer, 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. Interplay between contexts and concerns is mediated by internal conversation or reflexive deliberation. Archer defined ‘‘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 rehearsing, imagining, reliving, projecting ahead and prioritising. As such, reflexive deliberation provides a basis on which an individual determines intentions in relation to possible future courses of action. It is clear that any account must deal with the range of variation that does indeed exist. For instance, Johnston, MacDonald, Mason, Ridley and Webster (2000) identified how young people from a disadvantaged neighbourhood in North East England exhibited diverse and unpredictable careers and transitions, despite their similar socioeconomic backgrounds and common location of residence.

Archer (2003) identified three phases to one’s reflexive deliberations. 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 most directly with the constraints and enablements that stem from social and cultural structures. 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) traced 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. Archer (2007) traced how different modes of reflexivity could be linked to different outcomes for social mobility. As a result of pursuing a particular mode of reflexivity, she argued that individuals remake their own social worlds in different ways. In particular, she identified the following modes of reflexivity within the subjects that she researched:

* Communicative reflexives share their deliberations with others before deciding on a course of action. Someone for whom communicative reflexivity dominates their internal deliberations might be more likely to take much greater account of the views of close friends and relatives before making a decision on whether or not to apply for university entry. The exercise of communicative reflexivity has links with the networks of intimacy identified by Heath, Fuller and Paton (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).
* Autonomous reflexives typically prioritise performance in relation to practice, relying on their own internal deliberations to navigate their way in the world. Archer identified ways in which autonomous reflexivity develops as an individual prioritises employment-related concerns. She further argued that the pursuit of such concerns typically leads to contextual discontinuity, as one moves locations in order to realise one’s ambitions. We can illustrate this with reference to a decision to embark on a university degree: an autonomous reflexive might be more inclined to consider comparative data on several different possible degree programmes or institution, optimising their decision on the basis of their aspirations for a successful career in relation to the data.
* Meta-reflexives are characterised as those whose reflexive deliberations pay critical attention to social ideals. Experiences of contextual discontinuity also play an important role in the development of this mode of reflexivity, as one sees that it is possible to pursue different social ideals. A meta-reflexive might give serious consideration to the consequences for others of a decision to study, or to how studying for a particular degree might affect his or her capacity to make a difference in the world.
* Fractured reflexives, meanwhile, engage in deliberation that intensifies personal distress rather than results in purposeful courses of action. The transition that is entailed in entering higher education effectively demands at least some exercise of agency, posing challenges for those for whom this triggers anxiety and distress. Archer (2012) suggested that students pursuing this mode of reflexivity are still admitted to university, but that process by which this occurs is relatively closely dependent on circumstances or on the initiative that others take.

It was through such modes of reflexivity that Archer sought to explain the varied ways in which individuals engage with structural constraints as they pursue those concerns that matter to them.

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. This chapter now looks to draw out the implications of this overall account as to how individuals exercise agency when making decisions around entry into higher education. The chapter concludes by considering the agency of those already participating in higher education.

**Decision making around access to higher education**

Structural and cultural factors constrain the ease with which it is possible to gain entry into higher education, and affect the presence or absence of alternative courses of action. The discourse within the field around barriers to participation does acknowledge these constraints quite directly. There are constraints that are linked to institutions, as with the nature of the programmes that are offered, the timetabling of classes, admissions procedures, institutional location and so on. There are factors that apply to the desired 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. Whether or not one possesses the requisite qualifications to enter higher education is also important, as Gibbons and Chevalier (2007) have emphasised.

According to Archer’s model such structural and cultural factors operate as barriers in significant part because they influence both the subjective concerns held by the individual and the projects that are then pursued or not pursued. The subjective concerns connect to dispositional factors identified within the literature. Gorard and Smith (2007), for instance, highlighted subjective opportunity structures. They suggested 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.

However, the way in which an individual takes forward subjective concerns remains central to the exercise of agency. An individual seeking to establish a way forward in his or her life 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 (2003), reflexive deliberation plays an important role in this progressive specification of courses of action, such that employing a given mode of reflexivity will lead one to prioritise different concerns and thus pursue different actions. Archer (2007) argued that communicative reflexives seek to prioritise their relations with others in making decisions. There is a tendency for those engaged in communicative reflexivity to give close attention to the needs and aspirations of the partners in their dialogues. Autonomous reflexivity, meanwhile, is associated with the prioritisation of concerns that are centred on performative achievement. Concerns that are related to the pursuit of higher education thus fall naturally within the purview of such deliberation. Archer (2007) specifically identified 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. As well as taking a concern for the nature of their own reflexive deliberations, meta-reflexives are characteristically concerned about the pursuit of a set of values. Archer (2007) linked meta-reflexivity to lateral social mobility, and to a prioritisation of social values above performance in employment. 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, with scope for participation rates to vary given the extent to which higher education serves the needs and aspirations of given groupings of students. If the focus of higher education narrows further towards economic priorities, though, then further tensions can be expected.

Communicative reflexivity and fractured reflexivity, furthermore, both take on particular importance for access to higher education, partly as Archer identified a correlation between lower, or no, qualifications and these two modes of reflexivity (2007). She argued 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 choose to maintain a web of social relationships. One has to work to pursue a way of life that is predicated on taking up employment locally, but in so doing one may side-line 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 interlocutors closely involved. Both Fuller et al. (2008) and Heath et al. (2008) explored how decisions to participate or not in higher education are linked to networks consisting of family members and friends. Johnston et al. (2000) investigated 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. Weil (1989) argued 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) has noted. We have seen poor performance of elite institutions in recruiting from lower socioeconomic groups on an on-going basis since then in the UK (Chowdry et al., 2013). 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, we would suggest that what is important 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 a social setting that is unfamiliar with higher education may well experience an encouragement of other concerns or even outright disdain. This is particularly important given that Archer has suggested that communicative reflexivity is more prevalent in younger age groups, as contextual discontinuity is often only experienced as one becomes an adult.

The large differences in HE participation rates that Chowdry et al (2013) identified at high status universities by socio-economic background may be related to the particular difficulties that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may face in pursuing communicative reflexivity in settings that stretch beyond their familiar context. If we draw on the notions from Bernstein (2005) of restricted and elaborated codes, then capacity to engage in communicative reflexivity will be affected according to the capacity of prospective students to communicate with others on the basis of an elaborated code that does not assume understanding on the part of one’s interlocutors at the outset. Such communications across difference is an integral feature of engaging with bureaucratic institutions such as universities.

Fractured reflexives also form an important category in considering the variation that emerges from individual agency. Archer (2007) argued that it is the reflexivity of communicative reflexives that is most likely to become fractured. The study by Johnston et al. (2000) 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 interlocutors. 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 explore the possibility of entering higher education on their own initiative, unless personal support is available.

**Understanding student engagement in higher education**

This model of the interplay between social structure and human agency can also be used to frame the engagement of students in their studies, as Kahn (2014) has argued. According to this perspective, student engagement is framed as that process by which learners establish concerns within given educational settings, and translate these concerns into projects and practices as learners. Kahn (2014) suggested that educational settings specifically include requirements for students to engage with specific sets of tasks and social relations, so that the agency entailed needs to be considered on a corporate as well as an individual basis. As such, the way that students exercise agency is relatively tightly constrained. Macfarlane (2015), indeed, has highlighted how students are expected to comply with rules on class attendance, actively interact with each other in order to succeed, and display desired forms of emotional development.

Archer (2003) suggested that the prioritisation of different sets of concerns alongside experiences of social continuity or discontinuity can lead one to adopt a distinctive mode of reflexivity, with different outcomes for social mobility emerging as a result. An empirical study by Kahn, Everington, Kelm, Reid and Watkins (2015), though, saw that a specific group of learners needed to manifest a range of modes of reflexivity in response to structural constraints rather than rely on a single dominant mode of reflexivity as Archer (2007) had seen in her more open setting. For instance, if an academic task requires students to demonstrate competence in group work, then there will be advantages in place if a given student is able to engage in communicative reflexivity with their peers. If one does not share a common social background with the main body of one’s peers, such reflexivity may well be harder to establish. Archer (2003) indicated that communicative reflexivity is integrally linked to the presence of common understanding, relations, values and so on between the interlocutors; as manifested also in relation to one’s capacity to employ an elaborated code in communication with others.

Kahn (2014) further highlighted the collective dimension to student learning more widely, with university study often involving the exercise of corporate agency as an integral feature of what is required to address required tasks or to navigate one’s way within educational environments. Archer used this term of corporate agency (2003, p. 133) to refer to the way that a group of individuals articulate a set of aims and develop organisation to realise those aims. Particular constraints are thus again present in relation to corporate agency if one’s own interests are disdained by a large majority of the other students, with scope to affect whether or not one remains in higher education.

This study by Kahn (2014) also explored the scope for students to manifest modes of extended reflexivity, contrasting this with both the restricted reflexivity that involves formulaic stances and the fractured reflexivity that does not directly progress intentional courses of learning. Kahn (2014) argued that there is a clear element of uncertainty in the way that students respond to such tasks and social relations, and that this allows for a range of responses. Archer (2003) specifically highlighted the role that uncertainty plays in generating the need for reflexivity. There may be different ways, though, in which educational actions are directed away from the intrinsic uncertainty that is associated with learning, as when taking what might be regarded as a short cut in relation to a required task. Mechanisms may exist, though, that trigger the exercise of fractured reflexivity, for instances, from students who are from minority groups within higher education. Burke (2015) argued that pedagogical relations that involve misrecognition have potential to shame students. We would highlight the implications of such misrecognition for reflexivity on the part of students, and for their capacity to act as agents in educational settings. Flann (2010) has identified ways in which relations of domination constitute an important factor in silencing reflexivity more widely. More widely, though, choices may remain as to whether one remains as a student and how much time is devoted to one’s studies; and these are also underpinned by one’s willingness to engage in reflexivity. This touches on student aspirations in relation to learning, so that weaker retention might be expected from students who find themselves unable to act as agents, or who choose other priorities above learning.

**Access and participation in a wider perspective**

This chapter has argued that one particular explanatory framework offers significant insight into issues of access and participation in higher education. There is scope for those considering entry into higher education, and for students, to act so rather than otherwise in their given structural settings. It is clear, though, that the reflexivity exhibited in these settings is itself influenced by structural constraints. Such influences on reflexivity represent an additional element that extends beyond the immediate restrictions afforded by a structural constraint. The analysis here offers a way forward in understanding causal mechanisms that relate to access and participation in higher education. The complexities of establishing and sustaining a *modus vivendi* that is predicated on participation in higher education extend far beyond the notion of overcoming a set of ‘barriers’, with a value in considering wider frames of reference than one simply predicated on economic concerns.

The analysis has implications for practice, policy and research into access and participation. The account has highlighted the importance of reflexivity in the interactions between structure and agency as far as access and participation are concerned. Kahn (2009) offered a range of ways to support the reflexivity of individuals within the practice of widening access to higher education. In this there will be scope to consider further the role that social relations play in shaping reflexivity, given recent critical realist theorizing in this area. Donati (2011) has argued that interpersonal relations frame the reflexivity of the subjects involved. He argued that this is particularly so where a reciprocal dimension is present to the relation, given that this helps to sustain the reflexivity. It is already clear, though, that social relations have an important role to play in the field. Johnston et al. (2000) suggested that, in cases where one is looking to widen access to higher education to individuals who have experienced broken lives, advisers with detailed long-term personal knowledge are required in order to support their reflexivity. Thomas (2006) similarly noted the need for personal tutors for students in the target groups for widening participation. There will be ways to strengthen the extent to which given individuals, such as personal tutors, supervisors and departmental administrators, maintain a longstanding and personal knowledge of their students.

Alongside this, it will be important to explore further the corporate basis for access and participation in higher education, something that is relevant also to the way that one’s needs and aspirations are framed through a social lens. A greater awareness of the importance of corporate agency has potential to open up avenues to participation, while recognising that may jar with many current stances in policy and practice. Taylor (1993) argued that bureaucratic approaches typically prize economic flourishing above stable trusting communities, thus isolating individuals from each other. Widening participation activities, approaches to student admissions or the way that learning is configured within higher education could be predicated in part on groups rather than individuals, as when a group of people enter an alien context together and are thus able to offer each other mutual support in framing suitable courses of action. Mountford-Zimdars (2015) highlights how such an approach has long been a characteristic of admissions practices in private universities in the United States.

Kahn (2009) explored a range of ways in which higher education might be adapted and restructured on the basis of collective considerations that align with our analysis of interactions between structure and agency. It would be possible to develop curricula so that there is greater scope for programmes of higher education to align with concerns held by students, including those based around notions of human flourishing that extend beyond a preparation for employment. There is scope to develop curricula that address the concerns and priorities held by meta-reflexives who prioritise social ideals, as in relation to environmental issues. Taylor (1993) argued that an instrumental mode of life tends to dissolve the intermediate social structures that are a feature of culture, religion and ethnicity. Our analysis suggests that there would be value in establishing structural features within higher education that pertain, for instance to programmes, halls of residence, outreach activity or so on. Such approaches require substantive partnerships between universities and other 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. However, at the same time, there is scope for an approaches that build in social relations across difference, as the hermeneutic tradition has long argued (Gadamer, 1989). The value of including difference within a cohort of students, for instance, has developed as a particular feature of the cultural system that is associated with higher education, as has Harrison (2015) argued. However, it also offers scope to challenge pre-judgments of all those involved.

One analysis points to the limitations of relying solely on structural considerations in seeking to widen access and participation within higher education, as when focusing primarily on barriers to access and participation. The theory of practice developed by Bourdieu (1977), for instance, has been widely employed in studies on widening participation, but it downplays any significant role for reflexivity. Meanwhile, while sociomaterial perspectives (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011) have not been widely applied to studies around widening access, there is scope for further applications from this field. Sociomaterialism highlights ways in which education is determined by dynamic networks of actors, resources and surroundings. As a whole, however, the field similarly downplays human intentionality. A critical realist account would acknowledge the constraints under which students operate, but would recognise further that some scope remains for the agent to act so rather than otherwise in any given situation.

It is helpful to frame both issues of access to higher education and participation in learning through a critical realist lens. There is significant scope to make use of further theoretical resources that have been developed from within critical realism. An extensive range of theoretical constructs have been developed by Archer in recent years that extend beyond the role of reflexivity in interactions between structure and agency, to include theories of personal and social identity (Archer, 2000), morphogenesis of social structures (Archer, 1995) and social relations (Donati & Archer, 2015). Beard, Clegg and Smith (2007), for instance, draw on such perspectives to consider the importance of the affective domain in the lifeworld of students, without reducing the discussion to therapeutic consideration alone. Case (2013), meanwhile, draws on these constructs to account for student success in higher education in ways that go beyond a consideration simply of inputs. In opening up the possibilities for non-reductive explanatory critique, critical realism offers significant scope for theorising to assist in the advancing the emancipatory agenda around widening participation in higher education.

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