

# University of Stirling

“I wouldn’t imagine having to go through all this, and still be the same person. No way”: Structure and Agency in the International Student Experience

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For my parents.

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## Abstract

Research on the experience of international students often suffers from conflation, in that it uses culture (or nationality as a proxy for culture) as a categorising agent, thereby granting causal powers to cultural differences, and contributing to a deficit model of international students. In this research, I will argue that, while culture and structure both provide new sets of constraints and opportunities for international students, participants are active agents in shaping their own experiences, as they think, reflect and act in response to their situational context. Drawing on Archer's concept of reflexivity, this thesis demonstrates that because international students are often not immediately able to exercise agency through conversation (thought and talk), they find a need to reflect on their experiences and develop a course of action based on greater autonomy (that is, they become more independent). However, while some students make the transition to independence relatively smoothly, for others, it is not so easy, and some participants may find it difficult to convert thoughts into effective action (or displaced reflexivity). Participants in the international student experience confront a situational context marked by four specific features: first, a lack of a sympathetic interlocutor (that is, they find themselves on their own); second, contextual incongruity (commonly conceptualised as *culture shock*); third, shared experiences, which leads to congruity; and fourth, troublesome events, which blocks agential action. This research provides empirical evidence of specific generative mechanisms which contribute to the shaping of agency in the international student experience.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. The Global Context

The number of individuals studying in a country other than their own has increased dramatically in recent years, with over 5,000,000 students abroad in 2015 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017), making them one of the largest groups of non-traditional students at universities. The UK is one of the most popular destination countries for international students. In 2015, there were 428,724 international students studying at degree level or higher in the UK (18.2% of all students in higher education, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017), and this is only expected to increase despite the uncertainty over the UK leaving the European Union. In the UK, by far the largest group of international students are non-EU, particularly from China, with large numbers also coming from India, Nigeria and Malaysia (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). There are also significant numbers of EU/EEA students (see Table 1 and Image 1).

*Table 1: Number of International Students at University in the UK by Nationality (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017)*

Country	Number of Students
China	86,204
India	19,604
Nigeria	17,973
Malaysia	15,583
United States	14,950
China (Hong Kong)	14,693
Germany	13,846
Ireland	11,448
France	11,228
Greece	10,653

The recruitment of large numbers of international students to the UK has provided higher education institutions with much needed finance at a time of government spending cuts. International students' contributions to the UK economy are significant – estimated by the UK Government Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) to be over £4 billion. Universities in the UK may draw between 10-30% of their income from international students, and this is only likely to rise due to the recent restructuring of the way universities are financed. Meanwhile, as economies around the world grow



(particularly developing economies), demand for higher education outstrips supply and opportunities for young people to participate in higher education in a country other than one's own will become more and more accessible. Perhaps indicative of the value of the international student market is the emergence of commercial English language centres in universities, and private, for-profit international pathways providers, which have entered into strategic partnerships with many UK universities to provide international students with preparatory foundation programmes. According to a report by ICEF Monitor (2016), there were 748 pathways programmes in the UK making up 63% of all pathways programmes worldwide – nearly half of which were provided by just five private corporate providers (Kaplan, Navitas, Studygroup, INTO and Cambridge Education Group). In addition to this, one quarter are delivered by universities themselves, while another quarter are delivered in partnership with other institutions, such as Further Education colleges (ICEF Monitor, 2016).

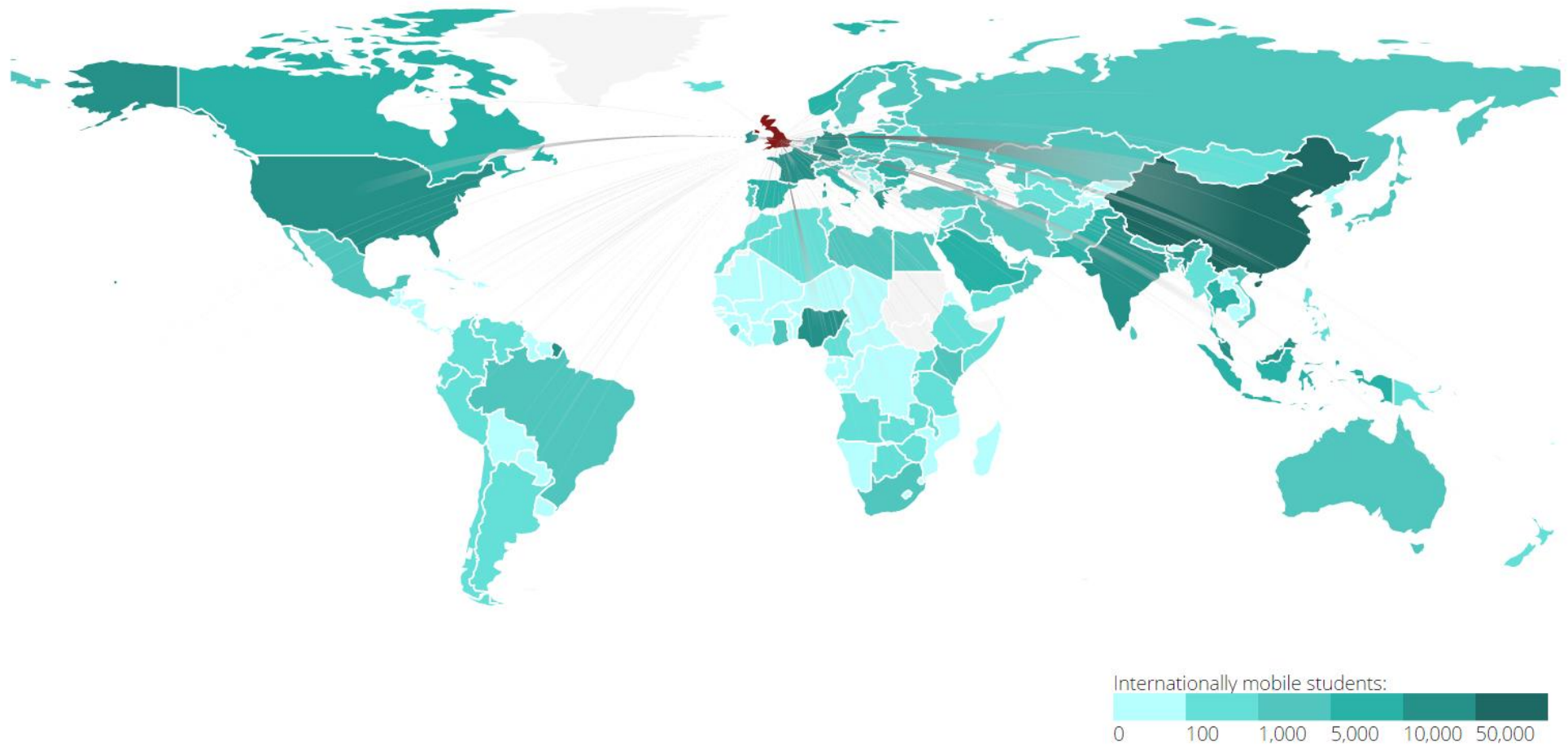
As a result of this expansion, there has been an increased interest in the experiences of international students in recent years. Studies repeatedly demonstrate the significant change in the way that participants engage with the world as a direct result of their experiences as international students (see, for example, Marginson, 2014; Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; Gu and Schweisfurth 2015; Montgomery, 2010; Pham and Saltmarsh, 2013; Hotta and Ting-Toomey, 2013). However, the acculturation models that are used to explain their experiences are subject to conflation in two main ways. First, studies tend to emphasise the difficulties students have. Second, these difficulties are explained using explanatory models which tend to use culture (or nationality as a proxy for culture) as a categorising agent, thereby granting causal powers to cultural differences, contributing the persistence of what some refer to as a “deficit model” of international students (Gargano, 2012; Marginson, 2014; Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010).

The international student experience is also situated in an economic context that privileges a particular view of what it is to be a human – that of an autonomous actor, where society operates according to market rules and actors operate rationally in the marketplace. Education therefore becomes a way that instrumental actors can ‘get

ahead', achieving credentials and skills which gives them advantage in a competitive labour market (Waters, 2006; 2009a; 2009b; Xiang and Shen, 2009). As a result, culture becomes not an explanation of context, rather it becomes a way of explaining why individuals do not operate effectively as autonomous actors. Explanatory acculturation models such as Berry's four-fold model of acculturation (2005) or Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1991) become a way of explaining how cultural differences constrain agency and tend to place international students as *deficit* to local academic and cultural norms.

The autonomy of students is commonly conflated with agency in discussions of student agency and it becomes something that should be achieved and evidenced (see for example, Deardorff's intercultural competence, 2009) without a proper understanding of how autonomy is achieved, or of alternative ways of exercising agency. In fact, pedagogical approaches to teaching international students are often confused. We require students to be autonomous learners, we demand that they approach the world critically and interrogatively and we encourage them to be communicative by way of learning tasks underpinned by social theories of learning. The transition and experiences of international students remain poorly theorised as research using cultural explanatory models must rely on explanations that explain how autonomy is constrained, leaving no alternative explanations for how participants exercise agency. Institutions and university departments, if they address agency at all, tend to do this superficially, by way of tick-box approaches to demonstrating particular privileged (autonomous) behaviours. As a result, agency (and autonomy) become performative, and do not represent a real change in behaviour. There is a need for a deeper understanding of how agency is achieved and how the experiences that international students confront during their time abroad condition how they engage with the world.

*Image 1: Global flow of International Students to the UK (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017)*



## 1.2. Key Terms

This thesis draws on the theoretical framework of critical realism (which is expanded in Chapter 3). According to a critical realist ontology, society is made up of individuals and the relations between them, which build up to have their own emergent causal properties on the individuals who make them up. Different arrangements of social relations require different behaviours, values and language and possess different relational properties, which constrain or enable its participants in different ways. Central to critical realism is that the social world is stratified in terms of causal mechanisms and the causes of all social phenomena can be attributed to one of either culture, structure and agency, as well as other material factors (Archer, 1995). This section provides clear definitions of the three terms:

### 1.2.1. Culture

Culture is a complex term. It may best be understood as a set of shared discourses which develops in a cyclical process, by way of social interaction, which results in the production or reproduction of discourses over time, depending on the conditions (Hartwig, 2015: 110). According to Archer (1996), the prevailing understanding of culture in social theory is deficient because the concept has not had the same attention as structure, and therefore remains poorly-conceptualised in comparison. Archer (1996), drawing on the theory of Jurgen Habermas, notes that culture and structure were inseparable until the Industrial Revolution, when global trade and technological innovation demanded the development of bureaucratic structures (such as corporations and nation states). Although both culture and structure are made up of individuals, they each result from different forms of action.

For Archer (1996), culture exists in an objective sense between the physical world and the mental world. This means that, for culture to exist, ideas, values and knowledge must be shared (“I know what others know”). Archer uses Habermas’ concept of Communicative Action to explain how culture may be formed (which Archer terms “thought and talk”). It is from communication between members of a culture that shared rules and values emerge and subsequently reproduce. Key to critical realist

philosophy is that culture, while being made up of the collective weight of all the social interaction of its members and their preceding generations, itself possesses emergent causal properties (downward causation), which influence its members through social interaction (resulting in shared knowledge and understanding). In late modernity, Archer argues that the conditions for culture to reproduce (thought and talk) are becoming more difficult to maintain. Consequently, culture and social structures are in tension, resulting in accelerating cultural and social change (what Archer calls morphogenesis, see Chapter 3 for more details on morphogenesis).

### 1.2.2. Structure

In Archer's morphogenetic sequence, social structures, like culture, are made up of the cumulation of interactions between its members. Like culture, according to David Elder-Vass (2010), social structures possess emergent causal properties that are "not possessed by any of the parts individually and that would not be possessed by the full set of parts in the absence of a structuring set of relations between them (p. 17)". Elder-Vass equates these emergent powers with the emergent properties found in science, such as the liquidity of water in different temperatures (p. 56). Instead of chemical bonds, though, the causal properties are made up of social relations. This view of structure is comparable to Habermas' System, or the concept of social networks, though they are epistemologically very different (a comparison of these concepts is outwith the scope of this essay). Important to Elder-Vass's conceptualisation of emergent properties, is that these causal powers are always very weak, and can be explained in reference to the parts which make up the structures (Elder-Vass, 2010: 22). The causal powers of social structures, therefore, are separate from the individuals which make the structures up.

Although Archer (1996) argues that culture and structure are analytically separable, they both relate to agency in *precisely* the same way, in that they are both made up of individuals and they possess downward causal properties. Drawing again from Habermas, Archer argues that, since structures are made up of relations for pragmatic purposes (for example, bureaucratic purposes), they require a different form of action

than culture. In a morphogenetic society, since communicative action is becoming more difficult to maintain, Archer argues that other modes of action are becoming pervasive in modern societies (modes of reflexivity, see Chapter 3 for an extended discussion). The international student experience is an example of a social structure which demands a particular form of action from its participants (a change in agency).

### 1.2.3. Agency

In this thesis, agency is best defined as “the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of life (Bandura, 2001)”. Agency is always structured - that is culture and social structures always necessarily precede the development of agential dispositions, as it is within these contexts that agency emerges (Archer, 2003; 2012). Agency, therefore, may be viewed as an emergent phenomenon of social relations. In this sense, agency is not something that an individual possesses, rather it is something that is achieved or exercised (Biesta and Tedder, 2007). Therefore, as culture or structures change, so agency changes in relational terms (and vice versa) as individuals have to conform to new relational conditions. In a morphogenetic society, culture may no longer provide the conditions from which effective action emerges. As a result, individuals must deliberate on the new context and adapt to new conditions, adopting new habits, values and behaviours in order to engage with a changing world more effectively. This idea is central to the thesis of this research: international students must conform to social structures that they themselves were not necessarily socialised into. As a result, the international student experience demands its participants to engage with the world in new ways, and it is the purpose of this research to identify these ways. The concept of agency is dealt with in much more detail in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

### 1.3. Research Questions

This thesis takes the view that the prevailing research on the experiences of international students has tended to emphasise the causal powers of culture over structure or agency (for example, individualist-collectivist explanations, culture shock, cultural learning models). In response, this research aims to explore the specific conditioning effects of the international student experience (structural conditioning) and

the related effects of agential deliberation to these structural conditions.

The particular aim of this research is to explore how subjects change the way that they engage the world as a result of their experiences as international students. In order to do this, I will look at addressing two specific questions:

1. What is the relationship between structural features of the International Student Experience and student agency?
2. How does agency change *over time* as a result of participation as an international student?

I will be using a longitudinal mixed-methods approach to answer these questions, in particular using social network analysis to quantify the observable structures of the international student experience, and narrative research to explore student agency, in particular looking at the subjective features of thoughts, reflection and deliberations of participants and how these change over time.

#### 1.4. The Local Context

The research for the main study took place at the Centre for English Language and Foundation Studies (CELFS) at the University of Bristol. CELFS is a department situated within the Faculty of Arts which offers classes and courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and academic study skills. One of the main concerns of CELFS is the International Foundation Programme (IFP), a year-round programme aimed at mainly non-EU students who wish to study at the University of Bristol, but because of different educational systems, have not covered subjects in their own educational system to sufficient depth to apply for university in the UK directly. The IFP is split in two, providing courses in Science and Engineering and in Arts and Humanities (which includes Law, Social Sciences and Economics).

The International Foundation Programme offers participants courses which last for 27 weeks. In terms 1 and 2 (which both last for 12 weeks each, before and after Christmas), students study compulsory English language modules in Academic Writing and Text Response (a reading and listening module). In addition to this, students study subjects in English related to their discipline. In term 3 (which lasts three weeks) students are given

an individual project, which they work on full-time and which counts as their assessment for Text Response.

IFP Students are mainly recruited from non-EU countries, though there are a few EU students on the programme. The IFP is not eligible for finance from student loans, so all students must have alternative financing arrangements put in place. Students on the IFP are members of Bristol University and have full access to all university facilities and student union membership. IFP students are typically housed in student accommodation near the university.

### 1.5. Situating the Researcher

My background is as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher and I have been a teacher since 2001. I worked in South Korea, Bulgaria and Scotland (Perth College) before starting my career in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at Liverpool International College in 2009, a private pathway college in partnership with the University of Liverpool. While in Liverpool, I studied for an MA in Education (TESOL) at the University of Manchester, exploring the social support of international students for my MA dissertation. It was this idea that I initially wanted to develop for my PhD. However, after looking more at the topic, reading and doing the pilot research project in this study, I observed how international students managed their social relations reflexively, and gradually it was this concept of reflexivity in the international student experience which became more prominent during the research for this PhD. In 2012, I began this PhD and in 2013 I started work at the Centre for English Language and Foundation Studies (CELFs) at the University of Bristol, and thanks to their support and interest in my project, I have been able to complete the empirical components for this study.

### 1.6. Thesis Road Map

In Chapter 2, *Situating the Study*, I will introduce the key concepts behind this study. Chapter 3, *Conceptual Framework*, looks at the work of Margaret Archer's critical realist framework on the analysis of structure and agency. Chapter 4, *Critical Literature Review*, provides a critical overview of the research of international students, looking at the



tendency towards conflation in intercultural research. In Chapter 5, I describe the methods of the research project (mixed-methods). Chapter 6 presents the findings of the study, in particular looking at how relational structures change over time and how these condition how participants engage with the world. Chapter 7 presents a series of vignettes of the students interviewed for this research, exploring how agency changed as a result of their experiences as international students. Finally, in Chapter 8, I discuss the findings, limitations and implications suggesting ways of improving the analysis of intercultural experiences.

## 2. Situating the Study

### 2.1. Agency

Studying abroad is a life-changing event, and opportunities to study and travel present international students with new ways of seeing the world (Schweisfurth and Gu 2009; 2015; Montgomery, 2010). As one of the participants of this study attested, “I wouldn’t imagine having to go through all this, and still be the same person. No way”. Subjects undergo a significant change in the ways in which they exercise action as a direct result of their experiences as international students. The aim of this research is to explore the relationship between the structural features of the international student experience and how these condition agency. In order to do this, there is a need to begin with a clear understanding of the concept of agency.

Agency refers to the capacity of a person to act and think in a way that expresses their individual power. Education is often presented as a way that individuals can achieve power over their lives, and the concept of agency is a central concern in the philosophy, politics, sociology and economics of education. However, there is no agreed conceptualisation of agency. Agency has typically been presented in contrast to social structures (the agency-structure debate), and much of the discussions about agency is concerned with how society operates, especially how social structures constrain or enable agency. Some perspectives view structures as constraining agency (for example, many Marxist sociologists observe the constraining effects of class structures). On the other hand, others observe that it is individual actions that creates social structures, and therefore place agency as the prime causal power (for example, rational choice models of sociology). However, there are theoretical problems with both of these extremes, as an emphasis on one side of the equation denies causality to the other side. An emphasis on structure reduces agency to habitualised responses to events, denying any agency to the individual while an emphasis on agency reduces action to rational decisions, denying the structural constraints within which agency is exercised. The difficulty of placing agency has meant that empirical research has tended towards objective measures of human action which can be more easily measured (for example, Humean/empiricist

views of structure, such as Bochner, McLeod and Lin's functional model of friendship, 1977), or interpretive perspectives of identity (such as post-modernism). Neither of these perspectives provide a way of understanding how agency may be realised.

In recent times, however, theories of human agency have become much more sophisticated, as scholars such as Giddens (1979), Sen (1985), Coleman (1986), Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Bandura (2001) and Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) have engaged with the concept. In his 1986 paper, the American sociologist James Coleman took on the concept of agency in order to explain how society is structured. Coleman correctly points out that previous social research tended to overlook the causal powers of individual actions. Instead, Coleman argues that human agency is what creates social structures. In fact, Coleman claims that agency is the *primary* causal power of society, observing that social structures are created from the cumulative effects of the individual actions of its members. However, Coleman's insistence on the primacy of agency in the creation of social structures is problematic, because by doing so, agency must precede structure. Therefore, individuals are born agential as subjects who actively navigate their social world, which in his perspective follow market rules. Coleman's form of agency sees social relations, not as something which conditions behaviour, but as a form of capital (social capital), which can be agentially accumulated and used to gain market (or social) advantage (Coleman, 1988). However, this view overlooks the constraining and shaping effects of social relations, and provides no way of how individuals become agential. This is inadequate since it places responsibility on failure to exercise agency in an effective way on the agent, rather than acknowledging the constraints within which they operate.

Sen (1985) in a series of lectures on the topic of well-being and agency, also places an emphasis on personal freedom, defining agency as "the freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve (p. 204)". This definition comes as part of a much broader moral argument on personal responsibility. Although Sen situates agency as an individual's freedom to act according to their own concerns, he also distinguishes between two forms of freedom: the freedom to achieve one's course of action (what he calls effective power), and the freedom to choose how

exactly one can exercise agency (procedural control). According to Sen, the ability to exercise personal freedom (choice) depends to some extent on an individual's control of events. In this way, Sen's position, which, like Coleman's places an emphasis on the individual's ability to exercise control over their lives, acknowledges how agency may be conditioned by events beyond the individual's control. Nevertheless, Sen's view of agency presumes the primacy of individual action (until the ability to do exercise agency is blocked by events), and provides no way of seeing how agency may be realised.

However, these perspectives stand in contrast to views of agency such as those of Anthony Giddens (1979), who argues that agency is both structured by and constructs social structures. Giddens begins by rejecting both extreme positions of structure and agency, arguing that while individuals are always constrained to some extent by social structures, their actions also have causal powers in the reproduction those structures (a process which he calls *structuration*). In this way, societal structures have rules within which subjects exercise agency, but those structures also allow innovative or creative actions to occur (in a similar way to how the lexical and syntactical rules of language allow for novel and creative utterances). Giddens was perhaps the first to identify the importance of reflexivity, whereby individuals actively reflect and monitor themselves as part of an ongoing "reflexive project".

Emirbayer and Mische (1998), in their paper 'What is Agency?' develop Giddens' ideas, proposing a model of human agency which they call "the chordal triad of agency" (p. 970), which provides a way of analysing human agency empirically. First, they argue that agency is structured by the past by way of habitualised routines (the iterational dimension). Second, it is oriented to the future by way of imagination (the projective dimension). Third, agency is reflexive as actors have the capacity to make evaluative judgements about the available possibilities open to them (the practical-evaluative dimension). For Emirbayer and Mische, while social structures do not determine action (humans are capable of responding creatively to a situation), agency is *strongly* conditioned by existing structures. Importantly, this model identifies that social structures necessarily predate the individuals who make up social structures (we are born into social structures), which challenges the primacy of agency in creating social

structures (as Coleman claims). These dimensions are analytical, through which researchers can understand how particular features of a social structure constrain or enable individuals in different ways. An individual confronting new sets of constraints and enablements therefore are compelled to reflect on their place in the world and exercise agency in an innovative way. Emirbayer and Mische's contribution to the theory of agency is significant because they provide an analytical lens with which to explore agency and how it is conditioned.

The psychologist Albert Bandura (2001), drawing on Emirbayer and Mische's analytical framework of agency, defines agency as "the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of life". Like Emirbayer and Mische, Bandura identifies a number of core features of agency: it is temporal (in that it requires intentionality and forethought) and it is managed reflexively through self-regulation and self-reflectiveness. However, he observes that the mechanical metaphors of action typically used in psychology tend to draw on concepts that grant individuals little agency. Instead, while Bandura notes how agency operates within broad socio-cultural influences, he argues that the human mind is both generative and creative as subjects are both acted on and act on their environment. In particular, individuals, he notes, can place themselves in situations with the objective of achieving a particular objective. Education is a good example of an event where individuals choose a particular 'stimulation', where they premeditatedly select a course of action related to how they imagine their future selves.

Finally Archer, in her work on human agency has made the generative powers of reflexivity the focus of her later research. For Archer (whose ideas will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 3), society is becoming increasingly fragmented, making it harder to maintain the necessary social relations for social structures to be reproduced. This compels people into reflexive deliberation about what to do instead, and it is this reflexivity which gains primacy in a morphogenetic society. For Archer, reflexivity is an emergent causal mechanism of social structures, which according to Archer provides a link between structural constraints and enablements to agential action. Central to Archer's work is that particular features of social structures lead to a tendency towards a particular way of engaging with the world (a mode of reflexivity). As

subjects encounter the world, the recurrence of particular events elicit ways of engaging with the world which become habitualised over time. It is in this way that a particular form of agency emerges. Crucially, however, agency is conditioned but never determined by structure, and she observes that subjects are always able to be innovative in the way that they engage with the world. Archer's contribution challenges the notion of agency as autonomy, and provides a useful potential explanation of the variation in ways that people exercise agency.

These observations have important implications in how we understand the transition of international students in higher education. Agency is a central concern in the social theorisation of education. Klemencic (2015) argues that studentship is part of a liminal and developmental status, where participants become highly agential as they begin to address their roles as adults and they think about what they want to do with their lives. For Klemencic, university is a time when subjects are likely to exercise increasing control over their lives as they seek to shape their future life course by way of forethought and intentionality. The international student experience is an extension of this as participants studying in a new country must confront a unique set of constraints and enablements, which affects how they engage with the world. For example, opportunities to meet new people or learn a new language provide new ways of exercising agency. At the same time, cultural boundaries or language difficulties constrain agency by limiting access to certain opportunities or resources. Over time, new ways of doing and being become habitualised, representing a new way of engaging with the world as a direct result of their experiences as an international student, which sets participants apart from those who have not experienced the same thing. There is a need to explain how the particular structural features of the international student experience condition how its participants engage with the world. By exploring how international students exercise agency in relation to the new opportunities and constraints they face, this research can provide new light on the transition and adaptation of international students.

## 2.2. Cultural Contexts

The theoretical constructs which are typically used to describe the experiences of

international students often rely on culture as an explanation of why effective action cannot be exercised (see culture shock, Hofstede's intercultural dimensions). However, as Archer (1995) observes culture does not determine action, it merely provides the contexts from which agency emerges. There is a need therefore to understand the cultural context of the international student experience in order to properly explain how agency is realised within these contexts.

The international student experience is situated during a period of history characterised by the increasingly free movement of goods, capital and people. This has resulted in global educational policies which have expanded the available opportunities to travel and study abroad, providing participants with new freedoms with which they can engage with the world and new powers with which they can exercise control over their lives.

While the current period of history has seen a huge expansion of international education, it may be argued that the internationalisation of higher education is an extension of history given that universities have always had an international outlook. As Collini (2012) notes, the transnational nature of inquiry predates the contemporary idea of globalisation. Ever since the first universities were established, institutions have been open to the medieval idea of a wandering scholar travelling from centre to centre in search of learning and enlightenment. The idea of a university as a *stadium generale*, a place where students from everywhere are welcome, has always been present in academia. The modern idea of the university has commonly been associated with the philosophies of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. During the latter half of the twentieth century, international education expanded significantly as it became associated with international aid, typically from Western powers to their former colonies, using the language of egalitarianism and democracy though often restricted to social and political elites (Altbach, 2004). At the same time, student exchange programmes such as Erasmus and Socrates were established in response to the damaging effects of early and mid-twentieth century European nationalism.

Since the 1980s however, the emphasis of international education has shifted "from aid to trade" (de Wit, 2011) and, though the idealism of the *stadium generale* still persists,

the way international education is perceived has shifted significantly as universities and governments and institutions appear to be less concerned with the moral dimensions of education and more interested in the financial outcomes of a globally mobile student population. Economic pressures placed on universities as a result of globalisation have changed the way institutions are financed and administered, resulting in the rise what is called the entrepreneurial university (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997), supposedly more responsive to the demands of the marketplace and certainly more open to non-traditional markets and new sources of finance. This new philosophy has resulted from the institutional response to the downward pressures of globalisation – what Moutsois (2009) describes as the “full submission” of educational policy making to global economics.

The contemporary understanding of the globalisation of education is consistent with the idealism of neoliberal economics. The nature of neoliberal globalisation is characterised by the opening up of markets and the free flow of global capital. Mitchell (2003) notes that neoliberal economics stresses global competitiveness, social reproduction, greater market choice and the creation of hierarchical conditions (stratification of society). In particular to educational policy, global institutions such as the World Bank and the OECD promote decentralised management, greater choice and greater involvement of the private sector, with the aim of developing education systems which emphasise the skills individuals need to participate in a globalised economy (Moutsois, 2009). These institutions use various mechanisms to influence policy making, offering loans and producing data which are tied to a specific policy agenda, tying national education policy into a global policy making framework (Spring, 2016). Mitchell (2003) argues that the philosophy of education has shifted away from a person-centred cosmopolitanism, which predominated in the post-war era, to a skills-based individualism, as educational policy places a greater emphasis on human capital production: the human resources which are orientated towards increasing productivity and competitiveness in a globalised economy. This is reflected in the nature of the degrees taken up by globally mobile students (economics, finance and engineering).

As a result of the downward pressures from these global economic and cultural



institutions, education no longer takes place within a national political framework and the role of governments and universities is increasingly of how these global policies are mediated. In response to these pressures, universities have arguably become more business-like in the way they are run. These changes are significant as they represent a change in the nature of the relationship between the citizen and the state (Mitchell, 2003). Students are increasingly viewed as consumers of education, and education itself is viewed as a transnational service. The choice of courses provided by universities increasingly reflects a standardised form of education aimed at developing human capital. As a result, various governments have framed policy decisions in higher education with preparedness for a future globalised economy.

The dominance of neoliberal philosophy in the development of institutional structures means that a particular form of agency (principally one that reflects Coleman's perspective), where agents use market rationality to negotiate social structures (conflating agency with autonomy), becomes privileged. Gershon (2011) observes that under neoliberalism, structures (which follow market rules) are constructed by agents and as such, subjects are perceived to participate in education in order to accumulate skills and credentials which can be traded in a globalised labour market. As a result of this view of agency, learning becomes a way of obtaining commoditised skills. However, since neoliberalism sees agency in terms of choice, not constraints, this perspective does not recognise how the ability to exercise an effective course of action can be suppressed by structural constraints, nor how agency can be exercised in different ways. According to Gershon (2011), because structures are seen to be a product of the autonomous actions of individuals, culture then becomes not a way of explaining contexts, but a way of explaining identity. As a result, culture and identity become entwined as a way of explaining individuals' behaviour. This can be seen in theoretical explanations of adaptation (for example, Hofstede's cultural dimensions), which reduces agency to cultural explanations of action, denying the ability for individuals to reflect and exercise creativity in the way that they engage with the new context. However, the reification of abstract notions of personal freedom overlooks alternative ways that individuals may exercise agency and leaves culture as an explanation of why autonomy may not be

achieved.

### 2.3. The Structure of the International Student Experience

Neoliberal philosophy, with its emphasis on opportunity, has resulted in the construction of social structures which facilitate the global movement of people (students) and capital (tuition fees, accommodation and living expenses) around the world, according to its values. Financial institutions provide finance, and governmental institutions provide visas. Educational institutions provide classes and issue academic credentials, which become validated and valorised by social networks on return to the home country (Waters, 2006; Xiang and Shen, 2009). This section provides a general understanding of the formal structures related to the international student experience.

The international student experience can be said to be part of a much broader transnational movement of people, characterised as a form of temporary migration marked by either return to their home countries or onward movement to a third destination (Baas, 2013; Rizvi, 2005; 2006; 2008). Rizvi (2008) argues that global mobility has become one of the defining characteristics of our age – even if individuals do not travel themselves, they know people who do. Levitt (2004) conceptualises this movement as a *transnational social field*, which transcends national boundaries. Rizvi (2008) observes that the global movement of students is part of a global process of cultural stratification, which has the potential to transform entire societies, as changes in status (through the acquisition of foreign credentials) and the associated privileges disrupt the traditional social order of their societies. Rizvi observes the emergence of a new global class of people who bring back goods, money, narratives, new values and behaviours as subjects socially reposition themselves in their own communities. The stories people bring back from their time abroad (which are often transmitted by way of social media) engender a strong desire for others to have similar experiences, and the movement of just a few people has the potential to transform entire societies. National communities have become transnationally networked and global, social and technological pressures are moving modern societies inexorably towards a multicultural world.

The international student experience is a significant part of the production of transnational networks. It is widely recognised that individuals invest in study abroad mostly in order to acquire academic credentials that will provide them with an advantage in competitive labour markets. Johanna Waters in a series of studies on international students in Asia (2006; 2009a; 2009b) observes that acquisition of academic credentials from Western universities does bring labour market advantages in domestic labour markets. In a Bourdieusian analysis of the experiences of Hong Kong international students in Canada, Waters (2006) stresses the role of international education as a mechanism for cultural and social reproduction. She observes that *a priori* social structures (in particular family networks, but also institutional networks such as schools) are said to condition future social structures in a process of social and cultural reproduction described by Pierre Bourdieu (1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), whereby individuals (and their families) invest financial capital to accumulate cultural capital (in particular, education), which grants access to social capital (membership of privileged social groups), which provides access to employment opportunities. Waters (2006) observes that the accumulation of certain types of cultural capital (in particular Western academic credentials) are validated and valorised by a dense, complex network of local (to the student) social connections. She demonstrates this by comparing the relative success of Canadian educated students in the Hong Kong and Canadian labour markets, where Hong Kong students, competing with Canadian students for work, are advantaged in Hong Kong but disadvantaged in Canada (and vice versa). Waters attributes this to “place-based transnational social networks”, which allows for the easy exchange of cultural capital into financial capital (by way of a competitive advantage in the *domestic* (to the student) labour market). Waters contrasts these local social networks to the fallacy of a global labour market identifying a lack of smooth convertibility of credentials across borders (2009b: 125). Similar observations of the convertibility of academic credentials have been made in studies of mainland Chinese international students (Xiang and Shen, 2009), Vietnamese students (Pham, 2013) and Indian students (Baas, 2010; 2013).

Specific behaviours, such as academic skills, critical thinking skills and intercultural skills

(however loosely defined) become privileged as it is perceived that many education systems lack these skills. As a consequence, educational institutions in the new context are structured in order to fill this perceived lack of skills, principally by way of providing foundation or pathways courses to international students. In order to explain how these skills become transmitted, there is a need to make reference to an ontology of knowledge. One useful typology of knowledge developed by the sociologist Basil Bernstein (2000) involves categorising features of knowledge into horizontal and vertical discourses, where knowledge is structured differently into *singulars*, *regions* and *generics*. According to Bernstein's typology, university departments (for example history departments, engineering departments) are singulars in that they are typically quite insular and protective of the knowledge within their field. However, they are subject to downward economic pressures placed upon them (to internationalise) but since their knowledge is insular, these departments may have no idea how to respond to internationalisation. Therefore, they may access a centralised (outward looking) point of contact as a way of bringing in students (a region). These middlemen tend to be commercial and market-oriented (such as international centres in universities, or for-profit pathways providers). Because there is a gap between what knowledge the students have and what the departments require students to have (language skills, academic skills and intercultural skills), these brokers are responsible for helping students bridge that gap. This knowledge is subsequently reduced to what Bernstein calls a "generic". This knowledge is typically market-oriented, pragmatic and related to the acquisition of skills. As part of this, language and other academic skills are taught in a way which is stripped of theory, relying on heuristics and tick box approaches to the acquisition of skills, which results in arguably quite a superficial form of learning.

This view has had real implications on practice. Some forms of knowledge may be taught to students differently depending on whether it is part of the singular or the region. For instance, notions of intercultural competence on a degree course would require the study of theory with a lecturer, whereas in the region (for example, on a foundation course), culture may be taught by a non-expert by way of a tick-box acquisition of skills. For example, Deardorff's intercultural competence framework (2009), which is a model

of inter-cultural competence promoted by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), reduces intercultural interaction to a set of behaviours where there is a *correct* and self-aware knowledge of “thinking interculturally”, and cultural experiences become something which is to be achieved and evidenced. This view inadequately captures how agency is exercised or how agency is realised and denies to a large extent the structural constraints from which agency emerges. Similarly, a foreign language student on a degree course may study language in terms of literature and critique, whereas an international student may study language instrumentally in order to pass an IELTS exam, or to make up for perceived problems with academic writing – which results in a deficit model of language learning that does not take into account the potential for language learning to result in an individual being able to exercise more control over their lives. Notions of autonomy are transmitted through these generics as an ideal type of behaviour. Often reflection is a popular mode of assessment of these generics, and as a result, thinking and behaving become a performance as participants aim to show evidence of behaviours which can be documented and used to market themselves in the labour market

The structures of the international student experience are constructed under a neoliberal philosophy of what it is to be a human, which inadequately reflects current thinking of what agency is and how it emerges. In particular, a neoliberal view of agency overlooks the constraining effects of structures that subjects are socialised into, and presumes the ability for subjects to behave rationally and autonomously. There is a danger that participants who do not conform to the ideal type of agency articulated under neoliberal philosophy may be disadvantaged by educational structures, which do not allow for individuals to navigate their own course. While a neoliberal view of education supposedly values diversity, it is interesting to see how it requires a conformity of behaviours from its subjects.

#### 2.4. Human Development Context

While the transition from dependence to independence for international students is well recognised (Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; 2015), there is a question as to what extent

this is a direct result of the international student experience, or is it something that happens in any case when people go to university. Participation in higher education is typically seen as a way that individuals achieve power over their lives, and research does show that young adulthood is a time of maturation (Schwartz, Cote and Arnett, 2005; Cote and Bynner, 2008). While the argument of this thesis is that there are particular features of the international student experience that do condition agency in a particular way, there is still a need to contextualise this with regards to the maturation of young adults.

The international student experience (which typically takes place between the ages of 18-30) is situated during a time of life, characterised for many by uncertainty and opportunity (a time known as emerging adulthood, Arnett, 2000; 2004; Arnett and Tanner, 2007). Arnett (2004) argues that in a post-industrial world, transition from childhood to adulthood has been prolonged and an intermediate stage of human development has emerged from the increased for, and access to, post-secondary education. Increasingly, young people have the time and the resources to delay work and other adult responsibilities, such as parenthood, in order to participate in higher education. This period of life is characterised by change, identity exploration, freedom without supervision and feelings of instability (Arnett, 2000; 2004; Tanner and Arnett, 2009). While the concept of emerging adulthood has been frequently criticised on the grounds that it is not a universal experience, nor does it constitute a completely new stage of the life course, it does provide a useful heuristic for the purposes of this research. It has been the subject of much debate whether or not this constitutes a new period of human development (Arnett, 2000; Arnett and Tanner, 2007; Cote and Bynner, 2008) and the veracity and validity of such claims are not a concern of this study. Nevertheless, these debates have produced much research on the agency and identity of young adults, and present a useful guide in helping to describe the experiences of young adults in this period of history.

Many of life's most important experiences occur during emerging adulthood, particularly changes in relationships (Grob, Krings and Bangerter, 2001). Transition into adulthood has been prolonged in pretty much every post-industrial society in the world,

with young adults increasingly participating in higher education, and delaying the traditional markers of adulthood, such as work, marriage or parenthood until much later in life. The reasons for this are many, from increased income and opportunities to post-industrial decline and lack of alternative work opportunities for an increasingly well-educated population of young people (Arnett, 2000; Cote and Bynner, 2008). Researchers of young adults have given great prominence to issues of agency and identity, and young adulthood is often presented as a time of identity development and experimentation with the social order.

The theory of emerging adulthood emphasises the psychological and subjective experiences that individuals encounter at this age. The experiences that individuals undergo may be integrated into a person's identity more than at any other age as they negotiate the changes and freedoms that they encounter (Arnett, 2000; 2004). Individuals may experience homesickness, isolation and increased personal conflict. Emerging adults may also be more sensitive to emotional stimuli, particularly negative emotions, and psychiatric disorders peak in prevalence at this age (Hefner and Eisenberg, 2009). However, overall evidence shows that emerging adults are generally optimistic and hopeful about their futures (Tanner, 2006).

Arnett (2000; 2004) argues that change in relationships is a fundamental step in the transition to adulthood as individuals undertake the important process of renegotiating relationships from dependence (typically on family) to independence. Tanner (2006) calls this process recentering. Recentering is a three-stage framework where initially individuals renegotiate their family relationships and start making new relationships with those around them that are more identity-based. Secondly, individuals engage in activities typical of this age group, for example identity exploration, frequent changes in friends or partners, full-time study or frequently moving home. Finally, individuals start making the long-term connections that will endure into adulthood. This is not a one-directional process, however, and recentering may be characterised by false starts and non-normative transitions.

Emerging adults are more likely to choose relationships that are identity-based and they

may look for an identity fit with people and a deeper, more personalised attachment (Collins and Van Dulmen, 2006). As young adults move to work or post-compulsory education, friendships from childhood diminish with time and distance, and there is a need for individuals to form new connections. Some may establish deep relationships with those around them, while others may find it more difficult to establish relationships. For some, emerging adulthood may be characterised as a period of loneliness and isolation. It is safe to say, however, that there is a broad variance in how emerging adults form and change their relationships and there is a diversity of patterns and trajectories that people may follow from adolescence to emerging adulthood and on to adulthood (Collins and Van Dulmen, 2006).

One particular criticism of the theory of emerging adulthood is that it is grounded on the experiences of adults in the USA. However, as Nsamenang (2010) notes, more than eighty six per cent of the world's young adults live in non-Western countries. Arnett (2004) concedes that emerging adulthood is not universal – it only exists where adulthood can be postponed, particularly by way of participation in post-secondary education. Another problem in identifying transitions to adulthood across cultures is that different cultures define adulthood in different ways. Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood uses material and chronological markers of adulthood (such as age). However, studies of transition to adulthood in other societies point out that different cultures may use different markers. Some cultures may stress role transitions (such as marriage or parenthood). Other markers may be more subjective, for example, when a person reaches self-sufficiency. A common dichotomy when looking at cultural differences is the distinction between collectivist and individualist cultures (Nelson, Badger and Wu, 2004; Dor and Cohen-Friedel, 2010). Emerging adulthood, it is argued, is a characteristic of individualistic societies and a product of liberal as opposed to authoritarian parenting (Dor and Cohen-Friedel, 2010). Meanwhile, collectivist cultures tend to emphasise the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of society, and therefore individuals may adhere to values which place restrictions on an individual's opportunity to delay adulthood.

The individualist-collectivist dichotomy, however, does not fully explain the different



trajectories towards adulthood and there is no real tension between markers of adulthood typical of collectivist cultures, such as values which relate to personal responsibilities, and the themes of emerging adulthood. In fact, if anything, such subjective views of adulthood typical of collectivist societies, which emphasise the maturation of thought processes and acknowledgement of adult responsibilities, may in fact complement the idea that one can delay adulthood in order to engage in identity exploration or exploring new possibilities. The international student experience normally takes place at this age (though, of course, there are a small, but significant number of mature students as well, particularly at postgraduate level) and the concept provides a useful backdrop for exploring agency.

## 2.5. Summary

The discussions above demonstrate the difficulties in defining and identifying agency and how it is conditioned as a result of particular events. Although agency refers to individual behaviour, it is not something that resides in the individual as it is continuously conditioned by cultural and structural forces within particular contexts. These contexts may remain stable, resulting in a consensus which can reproduce particular behaviours, values and routines, but they are also subject to significant change, which presents new sets of constraints and enablements, which subjects must conform to in some way. It is safe to say that an individual's experiences as an international student has a significant effect on the way they see the world and themselves within it. This research aims to address the question of how agency is realised as a direct result of participation as an international student. But first, there is a need for a conceptual framework which allows agency and structure to be analysed. The next section describes one such framework – that of Margaret Archer's modes of reflexivity (2003; 2007; 2012).

### 3. Conceptual Framework

#### 3.1. Critical Realism

Critical realism is a philosophical approach developed by, among others, Roy Bhaskar (1978) in philosophy, Tony Lawson (2006) in economics and Andrew Sayer (2000), Pierpaolo Donati (2010; 2015) and, the particular focus of this section, Margaret Archer (1982; 1995; 1996; 2000; 2003; 2007; 2012) in the social sciences. Critical realism begins with the rejection of positivism. While much research in the social sciences seeks to identify cause and effect relations between social phenomena, this is typically done using positivist methodologies which seek to identify  $x$  causes  $y$  relationships (see for example, Bochner et al.'s, 1977 functional model of international student friendships or Hofstede's 1991 intercultural dimensions). As a result, much social research tends to identify correlations between social phenomena and infer mechanisms of cause-effect without providing a proper understanding of the generative mechanisms of these relationships. Because of this, some proponents of critical realism hold that much sociological data is empirically deficient. Society is an open system and therefore causality can come from multiple sources. To be able to isolate causal mechanisms to test (as a scientist would test a physical phenomenon) is impossible and as such positivist methodologies must rely on explanatory frameworks to identify causality (which are often wrong). For example, research on the experiences of international students, using large-scale and longitudinal studies (that is, using good data), may show that (for example) East Asian students find it more difficult to establish networks with home students than other demographic profiles. This is useful and important knowledge, of course, but such methodologies fail to provide a way of showing what causes the development (or lack thereof) of social connections, or what effects these lack of connections have. Typically, the causes of such inequalities are generally inferred from the context. In the situation of the experiences of international students, explanations tend to be derived using theoretical frameworks that place emphasis on culture and therefore provide inadequate ways for exploring individual differences.

At the same time, critical realism is also an explicit rejection of interpretivist alternatives

to positivism (such as postmodernism). For interpretivist thinkers, reality is socially constructed, and therefore an objective reality cannot exist. In direct contrast, critical realism holds that social phenomena is real (hence the “realism”) and, therefore, something must have caused it to exist. Critical realism can therefore be understood as a “middle way” between methodological individualism (positivism) and methodological holism (interpretivism) (Tikly, 2015: 243). The purpose of critical realism is to provide a way of understanding the generative mechanisms of cause-effect of social phenomena.

In order to be able to explain these mechanisms, there is a need for a set of parameters within which social phenomena can be explained. As such, critical realism demands a social ontology (defined as the study of the nature of being – that is, what does it mean to exist as a social being? Lawson (2006)). A social ontology is important because it allows for a systematic and structured analysis of social phenomena which can be used to inform practice. One of the most well-known critical realist theorists, Margaret Archer (1998: 194), proposes a blueprint for a critical realist approach to the social sciences: “social ontology (SE) leads to explanatory methodology (EM) leads to practical social theories (PSTs).”

*Table 2: Blueprint for a Critical Realist Approach (Archer, 1998: 194)*

Social ontology	Explanatory Methodology	Practical Social Theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tilly’s incomplete relational realism</li> <li>● Bourdieu’s weak realism</li> <li>● The suture by critical realist philosophy of science</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Explanations based on mechanisms</li> <li>● Connecting positions to dispositions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Field analysis</li> <li>● Critical reworking of the social movement theory agenda</li> <li>● Analysis of capital flows</li> </ul>

Archer (1998), drawing on the work of Roy Bhaskar (1978), identifies three specific premises on which realist social ontology must be based: intransitivity, transfactuality and stratification. First, intransitivity refers to the idea that there exists particular states of being which are independent of their identification, that is, what is observed is not necessarily what exists. As such, events cannot be reduced to what Bhaskar calls the epistemic fallacy, conflating what something is with what we perceive it to be. Critical realism seeks to find out what a phenomenon actually is. Bhaskar quotes from Kant:

“What would have to be the case in order for what we know to be true?”

Second, transfactuality refers to the idea that there exists different levels of reality. Bhaskar identifies three such levels: the real, the actual and the empirical. The real refers to what exists, whether it is an empirical object or not, and whether we understand it or not. The actual refers to what happens once mechanisms are activated. This is the domain of events. Actual events occur all the time, though most of what occurs goes unobserved. Finally, the empirical relates to the domain of experience, that is whether actualised events are observed or not. Transfactuality is important because it provides a way of understanding that what is observed is not necessarily what is real. For Bhaskar, societal structures and their causal mechanisms are transfactual in that they exist at a level beyond our ability to quantify or perceive them. In an open system such as society, transfactual mechanisms may exist without being actualised. As Archer (2012) notes, generative mechanisms at any given time may be inactive, active but not perceived, or active but too weak to generate an effect (for example, if it is counteracted by another mechanism). This means that non-generation of a phenomenon does not necessarily mean a lack of the mechanism that generates it. In critical realism, transfactual causality is accepted as a way of understanding that observable events are products of unobservable mechanisms and it is the purpose of critical realism to explain these mechanisms.

Third, stratification refers to the idea that reality is stratified, both in terms of events (time) and in terms of depth (structures), which must exist for observable events to become actualised. This means that social structures require explanations in terms of time (horizontal explanations) and in terms of their generative relationships (vertical explanations). Stratification provides a necessary temporal dimension - that observable events require antecedents (for example, there is no church without religion - the development of religion necessarily predates the building of churches). At the same time, stratification also provides a way of explaining the necessary conditions within which the generative mechanisms of social phenomena exist. Archer identifies three strata of social structures: culture, structure and agency. At each level of culture, structure and agency there exists causal mechanisms which condition future courses of

action. Archer illustrates this by using the example of African migrants entering Europe by way of extremely risky routes (through war torn countries using traffickers). Poverty (a structural property) is not enough to explain why people embark on such journeys (poverty in itself does not determine action). Archer notes that there is a cultural context (for example a son's duty to provide financially for his family), a structural context (that poverty makes life constraining and brutal) and an agential context (what the actor cares about affects their actions in different ways). At the cultural and structural levels, mechanisms exist which both constrain and enable agency. These properties are imposed on to individuals, which govern their actions, but do not determine them, as individuals continuously find novel ways to respond to their environment, in light of their own personal concerns. Archer elaborates this by drawing again from Bhaskar (1978: 26) who notes that, "the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency" (what is important to the individual).

These premises, which underpin the social ontology, are crucial for a realist approach because, as Bhaskar notes, they determine that existence of social forms are a prerequisite for any agential action. It is crucial to note that this social ontology shows that agents are often unaware of the social structures within which they operate: "some things go on behind our backs and the effects of many that go on before our face do not require us to face up to them (Archer, 1998:199)."

### 3.2. The Morphogenetic Sequence

Archer's realist ontology is exhibited most clearly in her critique of social theory. First, by using a vertical explanation of social ontology, Archer shows that social theory has a tendency towards conflation. In particular, she demonstrates that much social theory often emphasises structure over agency (for example, Marx, Durkheim, Levi-Strauss) and in doing so, it denies agency to the point where individual action is determined by socialised norms and structures (what she calls downward conflation), which, at its most extreme, leaves no room to explain the creativity of individuals to act and respond to their environment. Meanwhile, she notes that other social theorists (such as Ulrich Beck or James Coleman) place emphasis on the role of individuals in the creation of social

structures, thus denying the role of structure as a constraint, and characterising social structures as an aggregate resource of individual actions (what she calls upward conflation). Archer argues that, at the most extreme end of the conflatory spectrum (such as rational choice theory), upward conflation reduces individual actions to neurological chemical responses to the environment (what she calls neurological reductionism), and like downward conflation, provides no way of providing a way to show individuals' abilities to find novel ways of responding to their environment (2003).

Secondly, Archer applies a horizontal explanation to the critique of structure-agency dichotomy. In particular, she looks at one of the most well-known social theories of structure and agency: Anthony Giddens' work on structuration (1984). Like Archer, Giddens argues that if too much emphasis is given to structure, then individuals are robots with no free will. Too much emphasis on agency, then structures disappear. However, Giddens' conceptualisation of social structure holds that structure and agency presuppose each other, and are therefore inseparable. While Archer accepts that Giddens' theory is philosophically sound, she argues that it fails on analytical grounds as it does not distinguish enough between structure and agency (what she calls central conflation), as according to Giddens they are both part of the same process. Archer proposes an alternative approach to the Giddens' theory of structuration by adding a temporal dimension to the analysis of structure and agency. She shows that structure necessarily predates agency as individuals are socialised into a society. The "genesis" of agency occurs within these social structures, as it is structure that provides the constraints and enablements within which agents act.

Social interaction may reinforce existing habitual actions, which in turn reinforce existing social structures (what Archer calls morphostasis). However, individuals can respond creatively to structural constraints and opportunities, which elaborates social structures creating new arrangements of social relations (what Archer calls morphogenesis). In morphogenetic societies, structures change over time due to the cumulative effect of the individual actions of agents which make up the structure. Social conditioning, through social interaction, may involve changes in power relations or reconfigurations of social relations which elaborate social structures, resulting in more or less room for

agential manoeuvre. Therefore, as structure changes, so agency changes in relational terms - what Archer refers to as double morphogenesis. In this way, she shows that structure and agency are intertwined, but separable and can therefore each be analysed on their own (analytical dualism). Archer's systematic analysis of the structure-agency dichotomy provides a way of being able to explore both structural and agential change independently of each other.

Archer notes that historically, culture and structure tended to reproduce and as a result, social structures were fairly fixed. This is grounded on the notion that habitual actions (defined by Camic, 1986:1044 as "... a more or less self-actuating disposition or tendency to engage in a previously adopted or acquired form of action") provide individuals with both an attachment to their culture and with the social and cultural resources appropriate for their context, that is, "I know what others know" (what she calls contextual continuity). Social structures have tended to be reproduced by the habitual actions of individuals, leading to morphostasis.

However, today's society is situated during a period of history marked by rapid social, economic and technological change. In the latter half of the twentieth century, technological innovations such as mobile phones, computers and the World Wide Web have condensed space and time to the point where it is as easy to communicate with someone on the other side of the world as it is with the person in the next room. Opportunities to travel to work or be educated have expanded greatly. Meanwhile, the spread of neoliberal economics since (more or less) the late 1970s, means that traditional, local industries which formed the basis of communities can be transported to different countries for cheaper labour. As a result, we live in a time where an individual's natal context is no longer necessarily a preparation for the world they will enter, what she calls contextual discontinuity. As past certainties no longer present a clear pathway through the life course, and the future world changes too fast to prepare for, individuals are driven to reflexive deliberation about themselves and how they fit into their world, which conditions their actions and results in structural change. According to the rules of analytical dualism, objective changes in structure place agents within different constraints and opportunities, on which they find a need to subjectively

deliberate (in relation to their own concerns). It is this reflexivity, Archer argues, which determines the agent's courses of action in relation to their own context.

### 3.3. The Relationship between Culture and Structure

Archer argues that all social phenomena can always be attributed to one of either culture, structure or agency, but by attributing causality to either culture and agency or structure and agency, one must also always deny causality to the other side of the equation. For example, an emphasis on culture or structure, reduces agency to habitual action (downward conflation), while an emphasis on agency denies to some extent the conditioning effects of cultures and social structures (upward conflation). However, though the two domains of culture and structure are themselves very different, Archer argues that the culture-agency dichotomy can be treated in precisely the same way as the structure-agency dichotomy. That is, in Archer's morphogenetic sequence, both culture and structure have downward conditioning effects of human agency and these effects can be analysed independently of each other.

Archer contends that culture has tended to be treated in an overly simplistic way in social theory because of the emphasis that research has on the workings of social structures. Typically, Archer argues that social theory has treated culture as bound within social structures as part of the process of cultural and structural reproduction. So, while culture has mainly been treated as a stable and integrated phenomenon where there is a consensus, in times of conflict (brought about by rapid demographic, technological and economic change, for example) culture is poorly explained - particularly the conditioning effects of culture. Archer (1996) argues that the conceptualisation of culture within social theory, in general, tends towards conflation in three main ways:

1. Culture is made up of nothing but resources for agential action
2. Culture becomes an explanation of behaviour (e.g. primitive/civilised, individualist-collectivist)
3. Culture is presumed to be homogenous - made up of causally connected components in an integrated system



Central to Archer's theory of morphogenesis is that culture and structure no longer reinforce each other, rather, increasingly they are in tension. In morphogenetic societies, therefore, changing culture contributes to restructuring of social structures (and vice versa) in a positive feedback loop - consequently accelerating social and cultural change. However, Archer argues that the prevailing understanding of culture has no effective way of explaining how individuals respond to tensions or contradictions within the cultural system.

Archer attempts to unpick this problem by drawing on two theorists: Jurgen Habermas and David Lockwood (Archer, 1996). Habermas, in his theory of communicative action, provides a downward explanation of culture observing that the social arena is composed of two distinct spheres: Lifeworld and Systems, analogous to Archer's culture and structure respectively. For Habermas, the Lifeworld is a web of relations which hold the collective weight of all that has been produced by preceding generations. It is made up of the family, culture and social interactions and is the place where people live most of their lives (except for interactions with formal institutions, which are dealt with in Habermas' System). As a result, the Lifeworld requires its constituents to share in its socialised values and meanings in order to perform action. The Lifeworld, therefore, demands communicative action from its constituents, which binds individuals together. The System, on the other hand, is made up of the formal institutions which make up a society, which in modern capitalist societies, demand instrumental action from individuals. This does not necessarily require shared understanding of values or meanings, since the System requires only those strategic actions which fulfils its own specific ends. According to Habermas, the System grew out of the Lifeworld, during the 18th and 19th centuries when modern institutions were being formed. However, in late modernity, Habermas observes that the System is now taking over, or colonising, the Lifeworld, and individuals are finding it much harder to separate their lives from the formal institutions in which they are embedded.

Archer (1996), in her critique of culture and agency, observes that Habermas' theory of communicative action deals with consensus quite well, since the Lifeworld and the System are mutually constitutive elements. However, she argues that conflict within this

consensus can only ever be temporary, since it is outweighed by the strength of social integration (by way of communicative action). This explanation, she argues, tends towards upward conflation as Lifeworld becomes simply a product of social interaction, with none of its own emergent properties or downward influences, therefore providing an unsatisfactory way of explaining how culture conditions the behaviour of individuals in times of conflict (particularly in times when communicative action provides no effective means of action). Similarly, Habermas' System makes no attempt to explain how structures are made up and, therefore, Archer argues the System is downward conflationary - it only has downward effects on an agent's behaviour (by way of instrumental action). Conflict in society can tear up a society. However, the strong social integration which make up the Lifeworld means that it provides no way of explaining how agents might exploit the System's problems. In Habermas' theory of communicative action, individuals are too bound up in the Lifeworld by communicative action, and too independent of the System by way of instrumental action, to be able to explain their ability to navigate their lives within society.

In order to overcome the conflationary tendencies in Habermas' theory, Archer appeals to David Lockwood's (1964) *Social and System Integration* to provide a horizontal explanation of culture and structure (note that Lockwood's *system* is different to Habermas' system, as Lockwood refers to society as a whole operating as a system). Lockwood's critique aimed to provide a way of describing social change, where conflict within a society was a necessary condition for social transformation, but an insufficient condition on its own (Archer, 1996: 679). Lockwood observed that the existence of contradictions and tensions in a system did not always bring about social transformation: the system can no more compel an individual into action than force a horse to drink water. Therefore, the agent requires some sort of independence within the system. Lockwood does this by distinguishing between the parts of the system from the people within the system. In so doing, Lockwood provides a way of explaining how the parts and the people affect each other and, since such an analysis avoids emphasis on either side of the culture-agency equation, it also avoids the associated conflationary tendencies.

Archer sees society as the relations between structure and culture. By combining the two explanations (Habermas' theory of communicative action and Lockwood's System-Social integration), Archer demonstrates that culture and structure can be seen to operate on different strata, and that both culture and structure relate to agency in the same way. Drawing on Lockwood's ideas, Archer provides a way of disentangling agential behaviour and the conditions within which agency is exercised. This explanation has eventually become Archer's analytical dualism, whereby conflation can be avoided by analysing the systemic properties of the structural and cultural systems independently of agential behaviour.

### 3.4. The Reflexive Imperative

The concept of reflexivity forms the basis of most of Archer's later work (2003; 2007; 2012). Archer defines reflexivity as: "... the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all ... people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts." Reflexivity is crucial as without reflexive deliberation, then there can be no social structures, as there are no rules, expectations or obligations (Archer, 2012). Archer finds reflexivity within the separation of structure and agency observing that it emerges from the cumulative experiences of the circumstances that confront an individual. Morphostasis emerges from the recurrence of situations where individuals know what to do, and the repetition of these situations means that these habits become norms. These become second nature to individuals and therefore the exercise of these habits does not require reflection - they are just done without question. These habitual actions can be adopted by and passed on to others (by way of *thought and talk*), which reinforces the structure. However, in times of contextual discontinuity, past actions are no longer compatible with the new situation, and action cannot be performed as second nature. Therefore, individuals find a need to exercise reflexive deliberation (the reflexive imperative). The more that the contexts within which we exist as social beings change, the more there is a need to exercise reflexivity. As such, "what matters to me," becomes increasingly important in guiding actions and consequently shaping morphogenesis (Archer, 2007). Drawing on the American pragmatist tradition (particularly George Mead and Charles Peirce), Archer (2003) conceptualises reflexivity as an internal conversation, defined as

those conversations that people engage with internally (for example “What am I going to do with myself today?”). The internal conversation is the mechanism which mediates between structure and agency. It reflects on the external (“What is going on?”) and informs action (“What am I going to do?”) and actualises the causal efficacy of structures.

Central to Archer’s conceptualisation of reflexivity is that it is exercised differently by different people in different context. She identifies four particular modes of reflexivity: communicative reflexives, autonomous reflexives, meta-reflexives and fractured reflexives. Archer illustrates this with reference to how each mode of reflexivity may approach budgeting (2012: 13). A communicative reflexive exercises reflexivity through the external conversation, as their internal conversations require confirmation by others before they lead to action. Communicative reflexivity tends towards morphostasis as social interaction with “similar and familiars” is more likely to reinforce particular courses of action, rather than provide new ways. Therefore, a communicative reflexive may talk with their partner before making a big purchase. Autonomous reflexivity and meta-reflexivity are two modes of reflexivity typical of morphogenesis, as these result from the different ways agents may confront contextual discontinuity. Autonomous reflexives have internal conversations that exercise action without the need for external validation. They may think about a purchase internally before deciding whether to buy it or not. Meanwhile, meta-reflexives have more interrogative internal conversations. Therefore, a meta-reflexive may deliberate whether to spend their money on something else instead. Finally, fractured reflexives are those whose internal conversations do not allow them to deal with their own personal circumstances. Fractured reflexives are passive agents whose reflexive deliberations do not lead to action. As such, fractured reflexive will struggle to make a definite decision on a purchase (and may buy something on a whim anyway). The important feature of Archer’s concept of reflexivity is that it provides an explanation of how particular modes of thinking leads to action.

In her research, Archer observes a tendency for particular features of natal contexts to explain the variance of different individuals’ modes of reflexivity. Drawing on Pierpaolo Donati’s (2010; 2015) work on relational sociology, Archer proposes a way of

understanding the process of socialisation which informs the development of reflexivity. Donati, who like Archer is a critical realist, identifies the relation (as opposed to the individual) as the principal analytical unit (2010: 126). He notes that each dyadic tie affects each other in three ways. First, there is the effect that the behaviour of one agent has on another. Second, since these behaviours are subjectively received by the other agent, then there is the effect of the response of the other agent to the original agent's behaviour (mediated by reflexive deliberation). Thirdly, there is the effect of their interaction, which Donati describes as "the behaviour that none of the actors 'brings' to the relation, but which results from their mutual conditioning of each other." Donati (2015: 93) identifies this as the generative mechanism of emergent relational goods (similar to the concept of social capital). Relational goods are emergent properties which consist of qualities, such as warmth, trust and reliance (or they can be negative, such as distrust), that exceed social interactions, which are built up over time (within social and cultural constraints), and which are received through the subjective perceptions of agents. These are properties that emerge from social relations, and they cannot be reduced to the actors which the relation consists of. For example, if a bond is broken, these resources cannot be divided between the individuals - the qualities just disappear. Similarly, if a person leaves a group, then they cannot take these resources with them. These resources emerge from the relations between the group's members. Donati (2010: 147) extends Archer's morphogenetic sequence to include not only personal reflexivity, but also the emergent properties of social structures.

Archer argues that the relational goods available in an individual's natal context provides the circumstances within which dispositions evolve that are favourable for the development of a particular mode of reflexivity. For example, a communicative reflexive is born into a natal context with "the generation of sufficient trust and mutual concern for some family member to become an interlocutor upon whom the subject could rely to complete and confirm the distinctive reflexive pattern of 'thought and talk'" (Archer, 2012: 130). As such, an individual in this context would be inclined to recreate those circumstances for themselves, and therefore decide on courses of action, in conversation with others, which result in structural reproduction. Meanwhile, Archer

notes that contextual discontinuity in the natal context can deprive individuals of the trusted interlocutors with which an individual can seek to confirm a course of action and therefore leaves less opportunity for reproducing the natal context. Additionally, external conversations may suggest courses of action that are no longer useful. Either way, individuals find a need to confront contextual discontinuity and the reflexive imperative. As such, an individual may develop a particular reflexive disposition, in relation to their own subjective deliberations of their situational context.

The autonomous reflexive, for example, is characterised by the absence of particular relational goods (often due to one parent not being around) and the natal context cannot be reproduced as there is no consensus to be reproduced. The absence of relational goods in the natal context results in a tendency for individuals to engage with the world independently. Archer observes that the autonomous reflexive confronts this situational logic by making decisions for themselves and notes that they are more likely to choose a life course which leads to material gains and competitive advantage. Meanwhile, meta-reflexives confront a situation in the natal context characterised by a problematic social order (for example, parents who argue a lot). This generates a desire to reject the social order and gives rise to a need to find an alternative course of action. Values and ideas become important to a meta-reflexive, and for some, a need to 'make a difference' is important. Finally, fractured reflexivity refers to those individuals whose internal conversations do not lead to a course of action that results in a satisfactory conclusion. Archer notes that the internal conversation intensifies emotions, rather than producing action. While fractured reflexives may become stressed or anxious, Archer notes that fractured reflexivity does not take any one exact form. The table below summarises the various modes of reflexivity and how they may be realised:

Table 3: Modes of Reflexivity (Archer, 2012: 293)

<b>Mode of Reflexivity</b>	<b>% of sample</b>	<b>Relations with natal background</b>	<b>Relations with home friends</b>	<b>Relations with new friends based on</b>	<b>Career sought for</b>	<b>Career sought in</b>	<b>Response to situational logic of opportunity</b>
Communicative Reflexives	13.5%	Identifiers	Retention	Commonalities	Replication	Family example	Rejection
Autonomous Reflexives	19.0%	Independents	Selection	Interests	Material benefits	Financial and public services	Competitive adaptation
Meta-Reflexives	38.6%	Disengaged	Rejection	Values	Promoting change	Third sector	Embrace
Fractured Reflexives	17.4%	Rejecters	Absence	Dependency	Ephemeral appeal	Uncertain	Passivity

Archer argues that all people display different modes of reflexivity in different situations, though one is dominant.

Archer cautions against reading too much into her empirical research, since the dataset she draws these conclusions from was small, selective and unrepresentative. Nevertheless, the data poses a set of questions as to what extent the natal context conditions reflexivity. While she appeals strongly to the need to base research on empirical evidence, her own work is principally dialogic in nature, and the strength of her theory is the systematic way she deals with the tensions within social theory.

### 3.5. International Students and the Reflexive Imperative

Studying abroad can be characterised as a rite of passage representing a liminal international student status, marked by transition to a new culture, and transition towards independence and a new social status (that of an internationally educated graduate). There is little doubt that international students undergo a significant change in identity during the sojourn. An important concept in Archer's theory is that of analytical dualism: while agents condition structures through participation in social interaction, these structures also condition agency through the conditioning effects of social interaction. I argue that international students must confront a shared experience with particular structural properties, which conditions, but does not determine how participants engage with the world. Since structures necessarily precede agency, before we can look at the shaping effects of the international student experience, there is a need to establish the nature of the structures that exist and how these condition (and are conditioned by) agency over time.

All participants bring with them to the host country, whether they are aware of them or not, their own habitualised norms, values, practices, expectations and so on, which are more or less useful in the new context. On arrival, however, participants must confront a sudden and urgent need to adapt to the new environment and each individual may be better or less ably prepared to participate there. Departure from previous structures may provide individuals with new freedoms to explore their identity and develop their potential. Nevertheless, within this liminal phase, there are also forms that offer new restrictions and constraints. For example, while an individual may be free from parental



supervision, their actions may also be constrained by various institutional and governmental restrictions, which may be explicit, such as visa requirements for attendance, or implicit, such as faculty expectations of participation in seminars. Meanwhile, the international student community itself must produce its own boundaries, which may be based on culture, language or academic discipline (or any other marker of identity). In a large diverse, group such as the international student community, there may exist several overlapping communities which socially construct and mediate their own boundaries. All of these interactions condition agency in some way.

### 3.6. Definitions

#### **Agency**

Agency refers to the ability of an individual to exercise power of their actions. Agency is often described in contrast to social structures.

#### **Analytical Dualism**

Archer uses this term to describe how agency and structure can be distinguished and analysed separately.

#### **Autonomous Reflexivity**

This refers to one of Archer's modes of communications, where an individual's internal conversation does not need to be endorsed by others, meaning that subjects engage with the world in an independent way.

#### **Central Conflation**

This is a logical fallacy Archer ascribes to the work of Antony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu (in particular), where structure and agency are not separated.

#### **Communicative Reflexivity**

This is the mode of reflexivity associated with social and cultural reproduction. According to Archer communicative reflexives require their internal conversations to be validated by others.

#### **Contextual Continuity**

This describes the social conditions for the emergence of communicative reflexivity, where subjects are socialised into the world.

### **Contextual Discontinuity**

Where the opportunity to recreate the existing social order no longer exists. As a result, subjects are compelled into reflexive deliberation.

### **Contextual Incongruity**

A situational context where an individual's socialised actions, routines and values do not provide a fit with the environment (a social condition for the emergence of meta-reflexivity).

### **Downward Causation**

This refers to the causal powers of social structures and culture to condition human behaviour.

### **Downward Conflation**

A logical fallacy common in social theory where emphasis is placed on the causal powers of social structures to the extent that agency is denied to individuals.

### **Fractured Reflexivity**

This is a mode of reflexivity characterised by agential constraints (in particular, emotion or anxiety), which result in a passive mode of engaging with the world.

### **Habitualised Action**

Archer's preferred nomenclature for the socialised routines that result from an individual's upbringing (cognate with Bourdieu's habitus – a concept that Archer rejects).

### **Innovative Action**

The ability for an individual to respond creatively to the situational context.

### **Meta-Reflexivity**

This refers to the one of Archer's ideal types of reflexivity, characterised by a social order that has been problematised in some way. This results in an internal conversation with which subjects engage with the world interrogatively.

**Modus Vivendi**

An individual's preferred way of living. This relates to the future-oriented aspect of human agency.

**Morphogenesis**

This refers to the resultant state of social conditioning which tends towards structural and cultural change of a society.

**Morphostasis**

This refers to the tendency for social conditioning towards social and cultural reproduction.

**Natal Context**

The context in which an individual develops their socialised norms and habits.

**Reflexive Imperative**

The reflexive imperative is the mechanism by which individuals confront contextual discontinuity or incongruity, and can no longer rely on routine action, and are compelled into deliberation on what to do instead. According to Archer (2003; 2007; 2012), the reflexive imperative is the generative mechanism towards a new mode of reflexivity.

**Relational Goods**

These are the emergent properties of human relations (such as trust or warmth), which create the conditions for the emergence of a particular mode of reflexivity.

**Similar and Familiar**

'Similar and familiar' is Archer's nomenclature for homophilous relations, which ensure congruity of socialised norms, values and routines.

**Situational Context**

In contrast to the natal context, this is the new context in which subjects must reflect on and conform to in some way.

**Situational Logic**

This refers to Archer's explanation of how agents make sense of their context, and how their reflections on a particular context may result in a particular set of behaviours through logical reasoning (derived from Karl Popper).

### **Thought and Talk**

'Thought and talk' is Archer's nomenclature for the mechanism for how habitualised actions may be transmitted between individuals (particular between generations). Thought and talk is a necessary condition for communicative reflexivity. (NB. Archer tends to use *thought and talk* as a verb).

### **Upward Conflation**

A logical fallacy in social theory where research emphasises the primary of agency over structure (for example, rational choice theory).

### **3.7. Summary**

This section has provided an overall summary of critical realism, particularly Margaret Archer's framework. The purpose of critical realism is to identify causal and generative mechanisms of social phenomena, which makes it a very suitable framework to explore how international students engage with the world and how this changes over time. Critical realism's strength is its openness to the limitations of social research. The next section looks at the current state-of-the-art on international students considering the generic defects of social research as identified in Archer's critical realist ontology.

## 4. Critical Literature Review

### 4.1. Introduction

According to a critical realist ontology, much intercultural theory (and there are over 100 different theories of acculturation, Rudmin, 2009) suffers from the generic defect of conflation, emphasising the causal efficacy of either structure or agency over the other. In addition to this, there is a tendency for research on the international student experience to emphasise the negative experiences subjects undergo. Therefore, research often unintentionally contributes to a deficit model of international students by emphasising the problems, and then granting causality to cultural differences. This means that much research views culture as a determinant of individual action (or reaction), agency disappears and action is determined by structural and habitualised social norms. What follows is an illustration of the tendency towards conflation in some of the most famous theories of intercultural contact.

### 4.2. Conflation in Intercultural Theory

There is a large body of literature on the international student experience, much of which is small-scale action research type research, with a significant number of large scale and longitudinal studies (see in particular, Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia, 2008; Sovic, 2008; Marginson, 2014; Montgomery, 2010). The aim of much of this research is to improve pedagogical and institutional practice, and in doing so, there is a particular tendency for studies to problematise the international student experience in order to provide solutions. Meanwhile, individual research is often in a critical relationship with previous research, meaning there is a tendency to seek problems out (this research is no exception). The cumulative effect of this is a body of literature skewed towards the negative experiences that participants encounter, overlooking the many positive aspects of the international student experience. Any systematic review of the literature on the international student experience will find a body of literature marked by strife. This is compounded by the fact that most theories of adaptation or acculturation use culture (or nationality as a proxy for culture, Gargano, 2012) as a categorising agent. This means that there is a tendency first to problematise

the international student experience and second, to ascribe those problems to cultural differences, reducing descriptions of the international student experience to what Bhaskar refers to as the epistemic fallacy, conflating what we know about the world (in the case of international students, that cultural differences create difficulties), with what the world actually is (the generative mechanisms).

Moving to a foreign country is often characterised as a source of anxiety as individuals are faced with uncertainty and unfamiliarity. After a while, however, individuals may then adjust to the new culture in a process commonly called acculturation. Acculturation was originally observed in studies of immigrant populations in the US in the 1930s and gained popularity in the 1960s as civil rights movements raised interest in the experiences of minorities. Studies on acculturation were directed towards a “fit” with the new environment. As individuals moved from one culture to another, their ways of doing and being were considered inadequate for the new environment, and individuals were perceived to have a need to adopt the ways of the host community (Hsu, Grant and Huang, 1993). Initially, acculturation was theorised as a process where migrants gradually abandoned their own culture and adopted the host one. Over the past thirty years, however, acculturation has increasingly been viewed as a dual process between the sojourner’s own culture and the ability or disposition of the host culture to accommodate them (Berry, 2005). A number of models of acculturation which predominate in the research and practices surrounding international students have grown out of this research. In particular, models of culture shock (Oberg, 1960; Furnham and Bochner, 1982), cultural learning (Searle and Ward, 1990), Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 1991) and Berry’s four-fold model of acculturation (1980; 1997; 2005) have been commonly used to understand the adaptation trajectories of international students.

The concept of culture shock was developed by Kalervo Oberg (1960) in order to explain the perceived maladjustment of Christian missionaries living abroad. The theory of culture shock holds that individuals moving abroad experience four stages of adjustment which follow a broad U-shaped curve (Furnham and Bochner, 1982). The first stage, known as the honeymoon phase, reflects the strong feelings and “euphoria” associated

with a sudden change in environment. The negotiation phase which follows stresses the anxiety and disorientation that individuals feel once euphoria has subsided. This is followed by an adjustment phase where individuals become accustomed to the new environment, followed by a mastery stage where individuals can participate fully in the host culture. This theory has proved durable and it remains a useful model of cultural adaptation. A number of institutions continue to use this model to inform practice (including the UK Council of International Student Affairs, Harvard International Office, and many others).

However, the theory of culture shock has been widely criticised for its lack of empirical base, and for its use of clinical language, presenting culture shock as a mental health issue (resulting in mental health interventions) (Hotta and Ting-Toomey, 2013). While the culture shock model is still in common use, it has been gradually rejected as there arose an increasing need to better explain the various complexities and trajectories of adaptation, and a desire to explain acculturation in a more humanistic way. Ward, Okura, Kennedy and Ojima (1998), in a longitudinal study of international students in the UK, offered an alternative model of adaptation arguing that sociocultural adaptation followed a predictable learning curve. The initial stages of cross-cultural transition, they claim, are the source of the greatest difficulties, characterised by stress rather than euphoria, with shock becoming the stimulus for acquiring intercultural skills. This model holds that intercultural skills improve over time followed by a gradual levelling off as individuals became more adept in the new environment. A particularly important development of the cultural learning model is the distinction made between the psychological (affective) and sociocultural (behavioural) types of adaptation (the Affective, Behavioural and Cognitive (ABC) model, Searle and Ward, 1990; Ward and Kennedy, 1994). Psychological adaptation refers to the affective responses of individuals (for example, self-esteem), while sociocultural responses refer to behavioural responses (such as the strategies adopted). This has informed practice in so far as the institutional response has been to provide students with instruction on particular adaptation strategies. This cultural learning view has informed practice deeply and provides a theoretical grounding for the concept of intercultural competence, which has become one of the core policy aims of the Higher Education Academy in the UK.

Another common model in the international student experience research is John Berry's four-fold model of acculturation (1980; 1995; 2005), which categorises acculturation strategies in pluralistic societies along two attitudinal dimensions: retention or rejection of an individual's native culture and adoption or rejection of the dominant or host culture. In particular, he identifies four broad strategies of acculturation: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation. Integration refers to the adoption of features of the host culture, while still retaining characteristics of their own culture. Assimilation is where a group or an individual rejects their own culture and adopts the values and behaviours of the dominant or host culture. Separation refers to the cultures who retain their own culture and avoid contact with the host culture. Finally, marginalisation refers to the situation where a group or individual cannot maintain their own culture, yet are excluded by the host culture. Smith and Khawaja (2011: 702), in a review of Berry's model, observe that both cultural factors, such as society of origin or society of settlement, and personal (or psychological) factors, such as personality or coping strategies, affect the acculturation process. However, while Berry's later research (2005) acknowledges that acculturation occurs at both a cultural level and an individual level, the emphasis remains on culture (both the home and the host culture) as the central influencing factor for acculturative stress.

And finally, perhaps the most famous model of cross-cultural interaction is Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Hofstede's model of cross-cultural dimensions is a theory of intercultural communication which aims to quantify observable differences between cultures. This framework proposes a model of a number of dimensions which form the basis of cross-cultural comparisons. These dimensions include power-distance, individualist-collectivist, masculine-feminine, uncertainty avoidance long-short term orientation and indulgence-restraint. Hofstede's research originally came from large scale surveys of 117,000 IBM employees conducted in nearly fifty countries between 1967 and 1973 – at the time the largest body of cross-cultural research ever done. The results of this research are supported by another large scale study made up of six surveys in 28 countries of non-IBM employees between 1990 and 2002 (The Hofstede Centre, 1991). Currently, the model extends to 93 countries (Minkov, 2007) and it has been well-established within the fields of international business and education as a model of cross-



cultural communication. However, there have been frequent criticisms of Hofstede's model. In particular, there is the accusation that Hofstede's view of culture emphasises a particular fixed view of national culture. As Gargano (2012) notes, nationality is a poor categorising agent for culture. Hofstede's model uses nationality as the primary means of categorisation. For instance, as an example of his dimension of *Indulgence v Restraint*, Hofstede compares the importance of time keeping between German engineers (strict time keepers) on a project with Saudi Arabian workers (relaxed time keepers), noting the difference between the two attitudes on the potential success of the project (Hofstede, 2001). This example works relatively well when comparing Germany and Saudi Arabia, since they are each culturally homogenous countries (by and large). However, Hofstede applies his model equally to culturally diverse countries such as the USA, India or China where national identity is used as an indicator of an individual's social action.

While these models may sometimes be useful as heuristic devices for helping people to understand the complex processes of cross-cultural interaction, they all share an emphasis on culture. As a result, much of the research which uses these models draws on reasoning that suggests that the individual is the same as others of the same culture, in contrast to a generalised other (particularly domestic students, but often other international students, too). By using culture or nationality as a categorising agent (often conflating nationality with culture, Gargano, 2012), research must rely on a static view of culture, where the thoughts and actions of individuals are reduced to habitualised social norms. As such, culture becomes "wired" into thought, an individual's actions becomes entwined with their culture, denying agency and leaving no room for the causality of individual thoughts, reflections and actions of actors. This emphasis on structure and the denial of agency reinforces the deficit model of international students, where discussions of student experiences are framed around the difficulties, challenges or struggles that, say, Chinese or Middle Eastern, or even generically "international" students may encounter. Meanwhile, the emphasis on the importance of "strategies" in practice, particularly when using the cultural learning model and Berry's four-fold model, may be interpreted as seeing acculturation as an aggregate of individual actions, granting causal efficacy to individual actions and denying (to some extent) the constraining effects of structures (upward conflation). This means that practice often under-socialises individual

action, failing to distinguish between the autonomous use of acculturation strategies and the process through which agency is realised. Action requires reflexive deliberation which goes beyond merely an instrumental approach to acculturative strategies and current intercultural theory does not provide an adequate way of explaining this.

#### 4.3. Downward conflation in research

The following examples I have used are by no means intended to represent the entire literature of intercultural theory in the international student experience. The intention is merely to demonstrate the tendency towards conflation in some of the research which uses these models.

Much of the research carried out on international students draws on these models to inform research or practice. Tarry (2011), in a series of case studies of Thai international students at a university in the UK, observes that Thai students who are studying overseas become more individualist and reject aspects of Thai culture (particularly religion). Using Hofstede's collectivist versus individualist cultural dimension, Tarry notes that her Thai students' increasing individualism conflicts with the collectivist norms of traditional Thai culture. Tarry sees this as an example of the negative effects of globalisation: that Western cultural hegemony creates conflict with traditional collectivist cultures, such as Thailand. However, Tarry's analysis fails because she relies on a set of assumptions which requires culture to be fixed. While, she correctly acknowledges the very real personal change that her students experienced, she attributes this to the adoption of Western values over Thai values. By doing so, however, Tarry denies the role of agency in this personal change. As students experience new ways of doing and being, they naturally change the way they see the world. Individuals may accept or reject previous ways of doing and being based on their own personal concerns. At the same time, her view also ignores the morphogenesis of Thai culture in late modernity and its ability to adopt, respond to, reject or incorporate the values of the returning students. Tarry also overlooks the existing class tensions in Thailand, claiming that globalisation "erodes hierarchical structures." However, research on the transnational movements of international students shows that the vast majority of international students take part in international education as part of a process of cultural reproduction (Waters, 2006; Baas,

2013; Xiang and Shen, 2009). By using an explanatory framework that emphasises culture (Hofstede's cultural dimensions), Tarry casts her students as passive actors of globalisation, and her view excludes the agential deliberations of international students in negotiating their own experiences.

Yan and Fitzpatrick (2016), in a qualitative study of international students in the US, use Berry's four-fold model of acculturation to explain the health behaviours of international students. Yan and Fitzpatrick begin by arguing that being in a new environment brings both new constraints and opportunities for student well-being in terms of food, exercise and the practice of risky behaviours. In their study, Yan and Fitzpatrick observe that a majority of students do more exercise (which they attribute to more opportunities and time to exercise), eat less healthily (which they attribute to the availability of unhealthy fast foods) and take up more risky behaviours, such as smoking or drinking (which they attribute to peer pressure and increased stress). They also note a tendency for students to implement one of Berry's acculturation strategies, in particular, assimilation (the adoption of local behaviours) or separation (the rejection of local behaviours). However, this explanation only provides a way of understanding student behaviours in terms of structural constraints and opportunities (that is, availability or peer pressure). While Yan and Fitzpatrick draw on qualitative interviews to support their analysis, by using an explanatory framework that emphasises the causal powers of social structures, they cannot provide an explanation for why students take up these behaviours outside of structural explanations. For example, they quote a student, Muli, from Saudi Arabia, who explains why he decided to eat more healthily:

*When I just came here I did not know where to find healthy food, so I ate a lot of fast food, and gained a lot of weight. Later, I noticed other college students they lived pretty healthy lifestyle, I mean they have good diet and they went to gym, and I want to like that. So I started to search online and ask my friends. Now I am an expert about finding American healthy food. I never knew how to cook Saudi food anyway. And I know Saudi food is not healthy. Saudi food is all about fat, fat, and fat. It is very bad and people do not exercise either. (Yan and Fitzpatrick, 2015: 4)*

Despite reporting the reflexive deliberations of the student, Yan and Fitzpatrick attribute the adoption of these positive behaviours to “social pressures.” But in doing so, they do not credit Muli with any agency. He noticed others’ healthy lifestyles, he figured out what made them healthy, he positively evaluated these behaviours in light of his own personal concerns and because of these deliberations, he adopted these behaviours. By using an explanatory model that emphasised the causal powers of structures, Yan and Fitzpatrick had no way of identifying how agency was realised.

Structural explanations also extend into psychological research on international students. Brisset, Safdar, Rees Lewis and Sabatier’s (2010) quantitative study of the experiences of Vietnamese international students in France uses Searle and Ward’s (1990) cultural learning paradigm to explore the psychosocial adjustment of international students. In particular, Brisset et al., focus on attachment and social support as important predictors of psychological stress. Importantly, they identify a connection between psychological personality traits, such as neuroticism and anxiety, and attachment insecurity in adulthood. The students who reported high attachment anxiety (that is, concern about feeling unwanted or unloved) reported higher stress, while those who had lower attachment anxiety reported lower stress. Those who reported high stress also reported lower skills to manage everyday problems in the new cultural context (p. 421). Brisset et al.’s research is important because it makes clear the link between stress (which is experienced internally) and social structures, in the form of attachment anxiety. Meanwhile, they also provide evidence of fractured reflexivity in the international student experience (stress, leading to emotion leading to difficulty in performing effective action). However, the use of quantitative methodology in their study (surveys of 112 Vietnamese and 101 French students) does not provide any explanation of causation. They acknowledge that “anxiety (is) a consequence; it can also be an antecedent,” and also that acculturative stress may also lead to successful adaptation (p. 422). However, while acculturative stress is seen as a mechanism for causing anxiety, no explanation is provided for the successful adaptation of students (apart from low anxiety). Brisset et al.’s research poses some very interesting questions, and they demonstrate an important connection between the internal and the external, linking anxiety to attachment. However, by reducing individual responses to the environment to psychological factors,

Brisset et al, conflate affective response to a situation with action, thus reducing agency to a psychological response to the environment. They do not provide a way of exploring the reflexive deliberations of their sample. Meanwhile, Brisset et al. only provides a snapshot of the experiences of their sample, they do not provide a temporal explanation. In doing so, while they identify that international students appear to experience higher levels of anxiety and stress than home students, they do not provide any data on whether these feelings persist, or what conditions leads to lower levels of acculturative stress. While Brisset et al.'s research provides an important contribution to the understanding of the international student experience - that personal feelings may constrain agency - there remains a need to explain how students successfully negotiate adaptation over time.

#### 4.4. Functional Models of Friendships

Structural explanations of the international student experience often focus on friendship, with much of the research using functional models to categorise students' relationships during their experiences as international students. The themes of social isolation and loneliness in particular have been dealt with extensively within the literature on international students as participants are distanced from friends and family at home. In an early study of the social experiences of international students, Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) developed a functional model of international student friendships which categorised students according to nationality. They identified a hierarchy of three social networks (in order of salience): a co-national network (which offered social support), a host country network (which offered instrumental and academic support) and a multinational network (which offered recreational opportunities). Furnham and Alibhai (1985) tested this model with 140 students representing all continents (at the University of London). While their research supported the classifications presented in the original model, they noted a difference from Bochner et al.'s original hierarchy, namely that multinational friendships were preferred to host country friendships. In research on the social networks of international students at the University of Hawaii, Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011) used social network analysis to explore Bochner's model and found that students who reported a higher number of host national friendships, reported higher satisfaction levels. Schartner (2015) also aimed to replicate Bochner's model, finding that

participants did not establish strong home culture contacts, established “complex” co-national contacts, and displayed a dominance of international ties.

Bochner et al.’s model has proved durable, and their framework remains the most common way of categorising international student friendship networks to this day, with much research focussing on co-national friendships (Brown, 2009), host national friendships (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 2000; Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune, 2011) and multinational friendships (Yeh and Inose, 2003). However, like the other intercultural models, Bochner et al.’s functional model draws on an epistemology which stresses culture as a basis of analysis (a downward explanation). In doing so, correlations such as Hendrickson et al.’s link between host national friendships and satisfaction are given causal powers and this research is used to inform practice. However, causal mechanisms cannot be identified simply by identifying correlations. Bochner’s model does not distinguish between whether more friendships generate the positive conditions for a satisfactory experience or whether an individual’s ability to make effective decisions about their life leads to more friendships. Bochner’s model which is now nearly forty years old, has barely changed since the original study and only provides a simplistic way of quantifying the complexities of social network development.

Nevertheless, Bochner’s model is still used to inform research and practice. One such example is Brown (2009), in an ethnographic study of postgraduate international students (n=13) in the UK, who identifies friendship as a major theme in her study, observing a particular tendency for international students to seek out co-national friendships. Brown problematises this phenomenon as an “inevitable and regrettable consequence of transition.” Brown explains this using a mish-mash of Bochner et al.’s functional model of friendship, Hofstede’s collectivist vs. individualist framework and Berry’s four-fold model of acculturation, arguing that withdrawal into co-national networks was often a response to a need to avoid anxiety. Brown uses particularly strong language to describe these co-national friendship groups, calling them “mono-ethnic ghettos” (p. 188) and claiming that these networks had a “detrimental effect” (p. 191) on the student experience and resulted from “defensive practices” (p. 188). While she acknowledges some value of co-national friendships (particularly instrumental support), she particularly emphasises the

difficulties that arise from these social arrangements, presenting these networks as constraining: “ghettos had formed, and they felt inescapable” (p. 191). Brown’s research can be easily dismissed due to its methodological and analytical flaws. However, it is useful to include it in this review as an example of how weak theory can reinforce a deficit model of international students. In particular, her uncritical use of theoretical frameworks which emphasise the constraining effects of co-national structures lead her to draw conclusions which deny her subjects any agency. She also draws on psychological theories, specifically, Triandis, Leung, Villareal and Clack’s (1985) allocentrism/ethnocentrism dimensions, which she refers to as “the personality equivalent of the collectivist/individualist dimension.” In so doing, Brown is simultaneously guilty of downward and upward conflation, where individual action is determined by both structural constraints (in the form of collectivism) and psychological responses to the environment, denying any agency to her students. Meanwhile, the representation of co-national friendships as “chauvinistic segregation” (p. 191) is way off the mark, placing an unnecessary obligation for the students to conform to the host environment and denying the very real, useful and necessary support that co-national networks provide.

Brown’s research is symptomatic of a lack of rigour in much of the research on international students. However, it is not just unrigorous research that tends towards conflation. Bart Rienties (2013; 2014), in a series of quantitative studies on international students, applies robust, statistical measures to his research. In one study, Rienties, Heliot and Jindal-Snape (2013) observe that students find it difficult to make friends with home students, resulting in a somewhat “forced” social engineering where students from different cultures are made to work with each other. They observed that that after eleven weeks, friendships were strongly predicted by friendships at the beginning of the course, which were mostly co-national. In another longitudinal study of 485 international and 107 home students, Rienties and Nolan (2014) observe “substantial segregation” between international and home students (particularly Confucian Asian students). While there was a clear segregation between home and international students, they note that some students bucked this trend, who built “substantial multi-national friendships”. They conclude by suggesting that institutional interventions may provide an effective way of

increasing intercultural interaction over time and they recommend that learning designers must take intercultural interaction into account in the design of courses. Finally, in an experimental study of 69 students, Rienties, Alcott and Jindal-Snape (2014) divided their subjects into two groups, one where students self-selected partners, and the other where students were randomly allocated partners. They found that first, students who self-selected were typically drawn to students from a similar cultural background. Second, in both groups, learning networks after fourteen weeks reflected the initial group-allocation and friendships. They concluded by arguing that randomising learning networks in the initial stages resulted in more opportunities for learning.

While Rienties' contributions have been very useful, providing rigorous quantitative data on friendship structures of international students, his research still relies on downward explanations of action, providing no way of determining why many students are drawn to co-national relationships, or why some students seem to be drawn to multi-national friendships rather than co-national friendships. His research leaves a lot of room to explore why "some students were *actively* (emphasis added) looking for cross-cultural friendships" (2014: 12) as it implies a significant amount of agency on the part of these individuals. With the absence of a qualitative component to his research, Rienties leaves the role of agency in network development unexplained.

#### 4.5. The Agential Turn

Not all research on international students relies on cultural explanations. Recent studies have taken an agential turn in the analysis of the international student experience. Montgomery (2010) draws on qualitative research of students at Northumbria University to explore the international student experience, which she characterises as a transformative and overwhelmingly positive experience. Montgomery conceptualises the international student experience as a community of practice, where participants, bound by a shared experience, provide important instrumental, informational and emotional support to each other. In particular she observes a process of legitimate peripheral participation whereby students initially participate in a community on the periphery. "Old-timers" pass on information and advice to newcomers and, with time, the new participants become more knowledgeable becoming more involved in the main processes



of the community. New students, she argues, are aided into full participation into the community by other students and a shared identity emerges through their interactions. Particularly important in the formation of a community of practice is the sharing of a common goal (that is, academic success). Montgomery observes that the shared experience that students go through provides a common topic of discussion, engendering close and supportive relationships. Montgomery's research is important because she provides examples of two causal mechanisms which explain adaptation: first, that the shared experience creates bonds between participants; and second, that social interaction, in the form of legitimate peripheral participation, generates social capital, which provides the conditions for successful adaptation. Montgomery takes care to portray the international student experience as a positive one and her research provides a very important way of explaining the generative mechanisms in achieving successful adaptation. However, while she also acknowledges some of the barriers to participation that some students may encounter (particularly language issues), her critical positioning against the prevailing theoretical explanations and her reliance on a small sample and desire to present the international student experience in a positive light means that her research is subject to the same generic problems that much social research suffers from in that she denies to some extent the constraining effects of the contexts they encounter.

Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2010), in an ESRC funded project on internationalisation, explored the first year experience of international students at four UK higher education institutions. In contrast to the prevailing cultural explanations, their research conceptualises the international student experience as a process of maturation and human development, and intercultural development is a part of this process. Gu et al. begin by rejecting the "predominantly quantitative" attempts to find patterns of adaptation arguing that increasing development in attitudes, knowledges and skills both "influences and is influenced by the development of the other (skills)." Gu et al. identify a number of key themes which explain personal development. First, the international student experience is characterised by changing influences, particularly those in the new environment. Second, they observe the conditions for change, in particular academic conditions, such as tutor support, and social conditions, such as the multicultural nature of UK higher education institutions and the specific youth subculture that is being an

international student. Third, they identify change as achievement, specifically the adoption of new values and behaviours which are useful in the new environment. Finally, they note a new locus of self - a change in agency and identity - a part of the development process. Gu et al. provide an interesting perspective to the conceptualisation of the international student experience. However, by emphasising the shaping effects of the academic and social conditions that students find themselves in, they do not provide a detailed account of how agency is realised. Simply being in a new environment is not enough - structure does not determine action. By arguing that the development of the self "is moderated by the environment in which the individual is engaged," they also fall into the trap of granting causal efficacy to structures. Gu et al. do not provide an explanation for the development of agency outside existing in the new environment, only that "the driving force (that) learners require to achieve such 'personal expansion' are more significant and go well beyond cultural models."

Marginson (2013), drawing on over a decade of research from hundreds of students, also rejects the emphasis on structures prevalent in the cross-cultural literature, arguing that such a view places students in deficit to local norms. Instead, Marginson argues that international education is a process of self-formation, stressing the importance of how individuals act agentially within constraints and circumstances that are outwith their control. Marginson argues that the international students demands "especially strong agency" because it requires a significant transformation. He uses Sen's (2000:19) notion of an agent as "someone who acts and brings about change ... (and whose) capabilities depend on the nature of the social arrangements". Sen's view, in contrast to the emphasis on structural constraints prevalent in most intercultural theory, stresses the importance of structure as an enablement in that it provides agents with the conditions within which they can exercise individual freedom. For Marginson, self-formation is characterised as an economic investment, though it goes beyond economic benefits to include the self-formation and self-cultivation of new behaviours, values and beliefs. Marginson's emphasis on agency reflects his desire to characterise international students as active participants in the constructions of their own identity. Importantly, Marginson recognises the importance of reflexivity in guiding the negotiation of identity, as individuals make choices from "what is available and possible". Where opportunities and

constraints change (in structural terms - and in the international student experience, structural changes are significant), then students adjust themselves as they go. However, Marginson, in his desire to move away from a deficit model of international students (correctly, by the way), displays a tendency towards upward conflation in that effective action results from the autonomous thoughts of individuals exercising “an active, shaping and coordinating will”. As such, his view of reflexivity is problematic because he appears to use the term as a synonym for autonomy. While Marginson takes care to note the conflicts and contradictions that individuals encounter, he presents the international student experience as a place where participants have effective control of their circumstances. While Marginson’s discussion on agency and reflexivity in the international student experience is welcome, there is a need for more debate on the precise nature of reflexivity and the different ways in which agency is exercised.

Marginson’s research has been influential. Tran and Vu (2017), in a study of 105 international students in Australia, draw on both Marginson’s concept that international students are “self-forming agents” and Harré and van Langenhove’s (1999) concept of positioning theory as a framework to explore international student agency, observing that “envisaging self-change and mobility often precedes the mobility itself” (Tran and Vu, 2017: 2). According to positioning theory, behaviour is *intentional* as subjects deliberately position themselves in a field in relation to others. While Tran and Vu draw on a large sample of students, they do not define agency clearly nor do they make it clear which conceptualisation of agency they use. As a result, what agency is becomes obscured as they refer to concepts such as “agency as struggle and resistance” and “agency as becoming” without a clear description of what these mean or how these are realised. Although Tran and Vu acknowledge that agency is structured, they insist on the primacy of agency (“agency for becoming precedes and enables transnational education mobility” 2017: 10), and by placing emphasis on the deliberate positioning of subjects within their context, they presume the primacy of autonomous action without being conscious of how autonomy is realised. While Tran and Vu observe the existence of four types of agency, each of these presume the ability of students to engage with the world autonomously. Tran and Vu reject the prevailing view of international student behaviour as culture (like Marginson, 2013 and Montgomery, 2010), and their research is a good example of how

research positioning itself counter to prevailing orthodoxy may also lead to conflation (a shift from downward to upward conflation).

Nevertheless, research does support the claim that the international student experience is part of a process of becoming agential. Cheng (2014), in a qualitative study of international students in Singapore, uses explanatory frameworks which provide both a vertical (Bourdieu, 1986) and a horizontal explanation (Flaherty, 2011) to explore how participants make sense of their experience. It is well-established that international education offers opportunities for social mobility (a levelling-up to a transnational scale of capital conversion, Xiang and Shen, 2009). What Cheng's research brings is an explanation that time is a resource (cultural capital) as participants, he argues, rationalise actions in terms of time. Drawing on the work of Flaherty (2011), Cheng argues that individuals create their own interpretations of time, which are rationalised and manipulated in order to uphold certain actions and values, observing that participants use various temporal strategies to become "Singapore-educated". Cheng identifies four distinct ways of time manipulation: doing less, compartmentalising time, procrastination and "not thinking about it (time)." Individuals employ these strategies in order to navigate the "temporal regime" of education. Cheng provides the example of Nang, a Myanmar student, who rationalised her search for work in terms of how long it took her to complete her education: "I spent so many years studying in Singapore ... so I don't think it will be an issue when I apply for jobs overseas (p. 393)". Nang's time spent abroad provides a way of distinguishing herself from others and, at the same time, she displays a compartmentalising strategy - rationalising time in terms of search for work. Cheng's work (particularly his use of Flaherty's concept of temporal agency) provides potential for new perspectives of the international student experience. Time, he acknowledges, places obvious constraints on people. However, time also enables certain freedoms and opportunities for certain properties to emerge. This research provides an important example of how subjects use resources agentially over time.

Increasingly, research is beginning to incorporate temporal explanations to changes in identity and agency. In one small-scale study, Pham and Saltmarsh (2013) identify a connection between identity and social networks, observing that students in a new

environment find a need to negotiate relationships in the new environment. As such, their research focuses on how students develop self-reflection and agency in a process of ongoing negotiation between individuals and their social networks, observing that an individual's norms and behaviours are shaped by their social networks. Where an individual participates in a different set of social relations, they find a need to adjust to this group. Identity, therefore is continuously being negotiated by individuals in their social context. Drawing on Stuart Hall's research on culture (1996), Pham and Saltmarsh provide an way of understanding how the imposition of norms, values and behaviours are accepted or rejected by individuals. Pham and Saltmarsh support their ideas with a series of six case studies of Vietnamese students in Australia. They observe that students displayed increasing maturity with time, and that students compared themselves to and benchmarked themselves against others, which facilitated the change in identity. Pham and Saltmarsh's explanation combines a vertical explanation (that is, structure shapes identity) with a horizontal explanation (that identity changes over time). Importantly, they identify the role of self-analysis and reflection in this process and how this shapes the pragmatic choices students make within their social context. These choices are drawn from the social resources available to students, both family and cosmopolitan networks, which shape identity in different ways. Family relationships provide a foundation from their home culture, whereas cosmopolitan networks offer new ways of seeing the world. The values and behaviours from both networks are accepted or rejected over time. Although Pham and Saltmarsh do provide some empirical basis for their ideas, their argument is essentially dialectic. Nevertheless, their idea of structural influences and agential decision making in shaping identity presents an interesting and valuable way of exploring the international student experience.

Similarly, Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013), in a qualitative study (n=20) on the development of identity of international students, also link agency to social networks, observing that as an individual's identity changes, so their position in the social structure changes in relational terms as they become more or less included in the social context. Furthermore, they identify a recurring pattern of a "need to do something" (p.556), such as communicate differently or change behaviour, noting in particular how identity change resulted from the realisation of the need to modify expectations or adopt new

behaviours. They provide the example of Yiping, a student from China reflecting on her own personal change:

***You need to show your opinion.** But in my culture, you just listen and just memorize what the professor or the teacher said. . . . this semester, I have a class that requires a lot of discussion. . . . **you must talk to get your points.** . . . So if you don't talk, you lose one-third of your points. **So you have to talk.** . . . **You need to say what you think about it.** But we never think in my country, you know. You don't need to think; you just remember. Just understand what the teacher said. But **now you really need to think on what you believe, why you believe this.** (p.556, emphasis added)*

While Hotta and Ting-Toomey emphasise the importance of student agency, this excerpt reveals how the new experience effectively narrows selection for participants, compelling subjects into personal change. Hotta and Ting-Toomey identify a generative mechanism which explains intercultural adjustment, arguing that where individuals confront stress or conflict, they work out new ways of handling them and, as such, gain experience which opens themselves up to identity growth and change over time. As international students confront a new situational logic, they find a need to adopt new behaviours, mindsets, expectations and communication styles. Therefore, the situation shapes their identity (though does not determine it). Meanwhile, they note that as identity changes so an individual's position in the social structure changes in relational terms as they become more or less included in the social context. Hotta and Ting-Toomey's research here provides an explanation in the form of a reflexive imperative: the confrontation of a new situational logic, as a mechanism which gives rise to a change in social action (agency).

#### 4.6. Summary

While the literature on the international student experience provides a large body of literature, much of this research displays a tendency towards downward conflation, placing causal powers on and culture. Students are often categorised by culture or nationality, granting these categorisations causal powers. However, nationality and culture are worthless predictors of social action. Meanwhile, economic explanations of intercultural adjustment have the opposite problem (upward conflation), reducing social

action to an affective response to the environment. In both cases, the causal efficacy of agency, and the associated conditioning effects of social structures, are under-theorised and there is a need to explore this in more detail.

The stress experienced and the anxiety felt by individuals who study in a country other than their own is real and there is a large body of research where this phenomenon has been objectively observed. Similarly, intercultural contact does give rise to conflicts, tensions, misunderstandings and even outright hostility. The existence of these phenomena is self-evident. However, a number of other emergent properties arise from intercultural contact, including maturity, a change in the view of the world and a change in identity. Acculturation is a complex process and individuals may experience a range of adaptive trajectories (Hotta and Ting-Toomey, 2013). However, the tendency towards cultural determinism and relativism in intercultural theory reduces individual action to sets of socialised and habitual norms or functional strategies. As such, these theories provide only very simplistic ways of understanding an individual's capacity to adapt and respond creatively to their situational context. Social structures are not fixed (as much intercultural theory demands) and are constantly changing (even if only very slightly). Individuals reflect and respond to their circumstances in continuously novel ways.

The international student experience presents participants with a context where norms and habits are no longer useful - they do not know what others know and the sojourner's habitualised norms and behaviours are no longer useful in the new environment, which can result in difficulties converting thoughts into actions. This is essentially the basis of much intercultural theory - that we interact with other cultures with our own values and ways of behaving in mind with varying degrees of success. However, individuals, when faced with a need to confront a new situational logic, do so consciously and often creatively. Adaptation, therefore, is reflexive. Individuals who find themselves in a new culture are forced to consider themselves in relation to their situation. The gaining of experience provides individuals with new abilities or dispositions to deal with a new situational context in a more effective way. As such, the experience conditions social action, but does not determine it, and as participants gain experience, so their structures change in relational terms.

## 5. Methods

### 5.1. Introduction

In this study I aim to investigate the changes in structure and agency that participants experience during their time as an international student. Archer (2003; 2012) acknowledges that the study of agency is “necessarily subjective”, but it is conditioned by the objective conditions of social structures. Therefore, in order to investigate the shaping powers of social structures during the international student experience, there was a need to capture information on both the objective changes in social structure and the subjective deliberations of participants in response to those structures.

This chapter begins by considering why a mixed methods approach was necessary for this study. I will then look at approaches to social network analysis as a quantitative measure of social structure, its use in studies of international students and practical considerations and limitations. Then I will look at research of agency, how research has approached capturing the experiences of international students, and practical considerations and limitations of these studies. I will then describe the approaches to data gathering and analysis employed in the design of this study.

### 5.2. Statement of Research Methods

The study of agency is necessarily subjective though it is conditioned by objective features of social structures. In order to identify and investigate the conditioning effects of social structures, this paper employs a mixed-methods approach: social network analysis to capture information on the relational structures of the international student experience and unstructured interviews to capture information on changes to agency. A combination of these two methods allows information on both perspectives to be gathered and compared.

### 5.3. Mixed-Methods Research

Educational inquiry is principally dialogic in the sense that there are various descriptions and explanations of the social world which are discerned from different theoretical perspectives, and evidence is gathered to test, explore, confirm or build on these ideas.



All research questions are part of a much broader ongoing dialogue in social theory, which build on existing ideas and anticipate future inquiry. In particular, much educational research is often concerned with the relationship between students (agents) and the structural properties of systems in which they operate (such as institutional or political structures). This duality between structure and agency has a long history in social and educational theory, though it provides a number of challenges for the researcher.

Researching the relationship between agents and the structures in which they are embedded is difficult because social research operates in an open system (in contrast to the “hard sciences” such as Biology or Physics), which means it is impossible to isolate or identify particular social phenomena as a biologist or physicist could (however, there is debate even within the hard sciences about the extent to which this is possible). For educational researchers, social phenomena may change over time, they may be different in different contexts, or they may be subject to external conditions which have the possibility of being realised in different ways (Scott, 2005). Data collection methods may be time-consuming, invasive or limited to small data sets, and therefore provide only incomplete or unreliable data. Moreover, as Scott (2005: 635) observes, error is always possible in social research. Researchers may mistake appearance for reality, or use inappropriate methods, or they may conflate correlation with causation.

Research design is therefore key and each study must consider its own approach to data collection and methods based on its own objectives and it must be honest with the limitations of these approaches. In an acknowledgement of the weaknesses of individual approaches and methods, it is common for research methods in the social sciences to be combined into mixed-methods studies. Mixed methods research refers to an approach of research design which combines quantitative and qualitative approaches in one research project. This is often justified in two ways. First, using a combination of measures allows researchers to validate data across data sets, and therefore improve the accuracy of the study (triangulation). Second, mixed methods may also be used to gather different perspectives on a particular research question, for example to compare the objective features of social structures with the subjective features of human agency.

However, all research methods are fallible and may be replaced by a different set of

methods and there is no consistency on the questions asked or the methods used. This makes it very difficult to directly make valid or reliable comparisons between studies, since each study may draw on different epistemologies, use different methods and different data collection instruments. Furthermore, the researcher is also positioned within a fixed place in the world, and is embedded in a critical relationship with previous explanations and descriptions of the social world. Therefore, it is useful for empirical research to be underpinned by a meta-theory in order to provide a set of principles that describes what is acceptable or unacceptable as theory.

According to critical realist ontology, social reality is stratified between the real (the power generating structures of society), the actual (what happens when the causal powers of structure are actualised) and the empirical (what can be observed). The real and the actual are part of the things that Bhaskar describes as being independent of our knowledge about them - the things that exist outside our ability to perceive them. Therefore, our ability to identify the existence of these phenomena is reduced to questions about what we are able to know (Mateus and Resende, 2015: 432). However, critical realists argue that it is possible to investigate the generative power of social structures by observing their effects on the world: observation may be able to shed light on what becomes actual and what might become actual. By combining two research methods which provide different ways of observing the world, it is possible to affirm explanations of what exists beyond what is possible just by using one set of methods, for example, the explanation of a process (the change in human agency) by means of a description of the phenomenon which produce it (that is, the social resources which constrain and enable it).

The objective of this research is to explore the shaping effects of structure on agency in the international student experience. Therefore, there is a need for a set of methods which can quantify the observable properties of social structures and identify changes in agency and identity. In order to achieve this aim, a mixed methods approach has been used, where social network analysis is employed as a quantitative measure of social structures alongside qualitative data on the subjective deliberations of participants in the form of student narratives. Critical realism provides a particular useful framework for

analysis, in particular that social reality is stratified (culture, structure and agency), structure and agency are separable (analytical dualism), structure necessarily predates agency, and the internal conversation (reflexivity) acts as a generative mechanism (the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency, Bhaskar, 1978).

#### 5.4. Researching Structure

Social network analysis was employed to look at changing social support structures during the sojourn for a cohort of students on an international foundation programme at a university in the UK. The following section describes what social network analysis is, its limitations and how it has been used in the research on international students.

##### 5.4.1. Social Network Analysis

Social network analysis refers to a set of techniques which aims to quantify the observable features of social structures. It is being used in this study as a measure of social structures both visually and statistically and to observe how these structures change over time.

Research into social networks may be viewed as a type of structuralism, where the way that a network is arranged determines its properties. In a social network, actors are arranged in socially directed connections which combine to make up large, complex, interconnected networks which vary in size, diversity and density. These network ties link together to form paths, thereby providing a way for its constituent actors to affect each other indirectly (Borgatti and Ofen, in Daly, 2010; Christakis and Fowler, 2007). Central to social network analysis is that the arrangements of ties facilitate the emergence of certain network properties, such as trust, warmth and reciprocity, commonly conceptualised as social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001) or relational goods (Donati, 2010; 2015). Importantly, social interaction within social networks establishes socialised norms and sanctions, valorises behaviours and experiences, and entrenches symbolic boundaries.

The structural properties of social networks are manifested at the dyadic and triadic levels (the basic analytical units of social networks). A dyad is a pairing of two actors (also known as nodes), which are connected to each other in some way (the connections may

also be known as ties or edges). An actor may be an individual, an institution or other social grouping. In social network analysis, there are two types of dyadic relationships. The first is a two-directional connection (or reciprocal dyad), which typically indicates a close or equal connection. The second is a one-directional connection (or directed dyad), which indicates a relationship that is asymmetric or hierarchical. Dyads are unstable because they require the efforts of both participants in order to be maintained. Research into social network analysis tends to categorise dyadic relationships by their relative strength, namely weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 2001) or strong/close ties (Krackhardt, 1992, Nohria and Eccles; Coleman 1988). While there is no consensus on what constitutes either a weak tie or a strong tie, the strength of ties may be measured by emotional intensity, frequency of interaction or the number of common connections that two actors share, which are difficult to quantify.

Dyadic ties are embedded in triadic relationships, where connections are transitively connected to others in the network. A triad can be defined as the dyadic arrangements of three actors. As with dyadic connections, triads can be reciprocal or directed. However, triads are much more complicated (and less stable) than dyads in terms of behaviour, as the addition of an extra actor increases the permutations of possible arrangements (Wasserman and Faust, 1994 note sixteen possible arrangements of triads). One particular arrangement that is important to note is the reciprocal triad (also called a Simmelian tie, after the anthropologist Georg Simmel (1890), who first identified them), which indicates a relatively stable cluster as each actor is reciprocally linked to each other. Identifying Simmelian ties is important as they indicate the presence of the emergent property known as transitivity, where everyone is connected to everyone else. The identification of triadic relationships is important since it tells us about the extent to which an actor exists in a tightly bound network.

Network ties refer to the connections (or edges) between nodes. These can also be used as an analytical unit in that is network ties that tell us about the nature of the relationship. Network ties also have their own emergent properties, such as warmth or trust, sometimes conceptualised as social capital or relational goods (Donati, 2015). Ties can be directed, indicating the flow of information or goods within a network. Ties can

also be undirected, in that the direction of the tie is not given. It is common to rely on undirected ties in social network analysis because of the problems gathering data on network ties - it is difficult to ascertain directionality in a network, because of the unreliability of the data gathering methods (for example, self-report data).

Dyadic and triadic relationships build up to create large, complex, interconnected webs of ties which change over time. An actor may be embedded in a number of social arrangements (for example, work, friendship, family or study), which may be more or less durable, strong or dynamic. Tensions and contradictions between social arrangements and individuals who make up these arrangements mean that network structures are in a process of ongoing production and reproduction as network ties are continuously broken, made or readjusted. Over time, social structures may either reproduce existing structures, where there is a consensus to be reproduced (morphostasis) or create new structures, where there is no consensus to be reproduced (morphogenesis, Archer, 2003; 2012).

Social network analysis can be used as a complement to Archer's work on structure and agency. Social network analysis provides a way of quantifying structures, whereas critical realism provides an explanatory framework which describes the generative mechanisms of structural change. Critical realism emphasises the importance of social relations in explaining social phenomena. However, while critical realism explicitly rejects positivist and other reductionist models (such as rational choice models), social network analysis has been associated with positivism from the outset - the first person to develop sociograms (Moreno, 1934) drew extensively from Auguste Comte (the father of positivism). However, as Buch-Hansen (2014: 321) argues, while some social analysis techniques are associated with positivism (in particular, inference, hypothesis testing and predictive (or stochastic) modelling), social network analysis can be used in a non-positivist way. While social network analysis may not be able to, on its own, identify causal or generative mechanisms, these techniques may be used to identify features of social structures that are not observable using other methods.

#### 5.4.2. Limitations of Social Network Analysis

While social network analysis does provide a robust set of analytical tools, there are a

number of limitations, both with the concept of social network analysis itself, and with the various individual methods which make up this approach. In particular there are a number of issues surrounding data collection methods. There are almost as many collection methods as there are studies, and many researchers may develop their own data collection instruments for their own research. Some methods require participants to list as many contacts as they can think of, whereas others ask participants to select names from a list (for example, Taha and Cox, 2016). Still others ask participants to respond to a prompt or a question (Hendrickson, 2011). This makes comparisons between studies extremely problematic (or even invalid) as different methods will emphasise what it is that the researcher is looking for.

Another major problem with social network analysis is that it requires participants to rely on self-report data. This means that completion of any data collection instrument must rely on the subjective interpretation of the participants and their memories making the raw data incomplete and messy.

Finally, critical realists hold that statistics have limited value in explaining causal relationships (Sayer, 1992). One problem with identifying causality using social network analysis is that structurally equivalent actors may not in fact be similar to each other. There may be any number of pressures which create certain types of structure, and structural equivalence does not mean that a particular network is the result of a particular set of actions, or possesses a particular set of properties (Doreian, 2001: 102). The value of social network analysis is not in its ability to identify causality. Its value is in its ability to visualise social connections that may not be observable using any other method.

#### 5.4.3. Social Network Analysis Methods in Studies of International Students

In the earliest studies into the social networks of international students, it is quantitative methodology that dominates, particularly in the form of surveys. Bochner et al.'s (1977) seminal study into the friendship networks of overseas students drew on a survey of a small number of participants (n=36). Furnham and Alibhai's (1985) replication of Bochner et al.'s study expanded this to 140 participants.

In a large-scale study, Yeh and Inose (2003) use quantitative methods in the form of a

survey (n=404) to quantify the relationship between acculturative stress, social connectedness and social support. The acculturative stress section of the survey required students to respond to a series of 36 prompts which students ranked on a Likert scale. Social connectedness data were gathered from a similar survey, which asked respondents to rank eight items on a Likert scale to indicate their level of social connectedness. Social support data were gathered from the Social Support Questionnaire (Short Form, Sarason et al. 1987), which required respondents to rank their satisfaction with their social support on a Likert scale. Yeh and Inose received a response rate of 94% from paper surveys (383 responses) and data were analysed statistically using ANOVA. While Yeh and Inose provide a good measure of the link between social connectedness, support and stress, they do not provide a measure of the types of relationships available to students during their sojourn (that is, the type of social support). The Social Support Questionnaire does allow for a network sub-scale, where respondents may list a set of names for a particular type of social support (for example, where do you go if you feel lonely?). This could be used with social network analysis allowing measures of social connectedness and acculturative stress to be compared with measures of network structure.

In contrast, Montgomery (2010) used qualitative methodology to explore the social networks of international students. She collected data using both semi-structured interviews with 11 students (four in a pilot and seven in the main study), and an extensive shadowing scheme, where participants were shadowed and observed over two full days or four half days. Data were analysed through a coding system (NUDIST 5). The methodology that Montgomery used has the advantage of providing an in-depth look at the nature of social connections themselves, rather than just how many connections that participants have. While relationships may be objectively observed by way of quantitative data, they are subjectively perceived by participants, and Montgomery's research provides an enlightening insight into the relationships of international students. However, the lack of a quantitative element means that some of the macro-properties of student relationships may not be captured, and comparisons with other studies may be difficult.

More recently, however, improvements in the development and availability of software has made it much easier to map social networks, and there have been a number of

studies which explore the social experiences of international students. Taha and Cox (2016) use social network analysis as a quantitative method within a mixed-method study. In particular, Taha and Cox use cohesion and centrality as measures of social networks. They developed their own data collection instrument, based on Wellman and Haythornwaite's (2008) research on social learning, which categorises networks into four types of relationship. Taha and Cox developed a set of questions which participants had to complete by writing a name of another student on their course from a list (with student photographs in case they did not know the name) of people they had interacted with at some point during the course. Taha and Cox acknowledged the difficulties with this instrument, since participants could not remember other students' names or the precise interaction they had had with them. Taha and Cox therefore relied more on the qualitative methods in their analysis of social networks because of the weakness of the qualitative data collection methods.

Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011) in a study of the experiences of international students at the University of Hawaii, surveyed 84 international students using a data instrument which they had developed based on the social connectedness scale (Lee and Robbins, 1995). At the time of the study, there were 1,620 international students at the University of Hawaii, so the sample size was tiny. They recruited participants by email from a database of students who may have been actively interested in seeking multicultural ties, and was therefore subject to significant self-selection bias. The survey itself consisted of eight items which measured various relationships in terms of distance or connectedness on a Likert scale (for example, "I feel disconnected with the people around me"). This instrument aimed to measure number and strength of student relationships. Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune argue that this method is generally reliable. Nevertheless, they did acknowledge a number of limitations with the instrument, particularly the small sample size and the fact that the survey was an online survey. The data were analysed statistically using SPSS, but not visually.

Rienties, Heliot and Jindal-Snape (2013) surveyed a cohort of students (n=207, 148 international students and 59 home students) on a postgraduate course over the course of a semester. Rienties et al. used a "closed-network" analysis (that is, only measuring the



network ties within the class) over a term, surveying students in weeks 4 and 11 over a 12 week module. Students were asked to complete sentence such as “I am a friend of ...” or “I have learned a lot from ...” selecting from names of other students from a list provided to them. Response rates were 89% and 84% for the week 4 survey and the week 11 survey respectively, though their article fails to mention how the surveys were distributed to get such a high return. The data were statistically analysed using UCINET and visualised using NetDraw. Rienties et al.’s data collection methods show a significant improvement in sophistication over other quantitative studies on the social networks of international students.

In a similar study, Rienties and Nolan (2014) used social network analysis longitudinally to explore the change in social networks over time. This time, data were gathered from an entire cohort of undergraduate and postgraduate business students (n=592, 484 international students, 107 host students and one with no nationality data), of which 247 were undergraduate students and 345 were postgraduate students over a full academic year. Students were given the same data collection instrument as in the Rienties, Heliot and Jindal-Snape study described above, in the initial stages of the module. However, this time students underwent some social engineering according to three different groupings. One group of students were put in randomly assigned groups, while another group were allowed to choose their groups. A final group were allowed to develop networks, then tutors reassigned groups to ensure culturally diverse groups (though based on initial network formation). Students were required to complete the social network survey again in week 11, with response rates of 83% for both the initial and week-11 surveys. The data gathered were analysed using UCINET and the more traditional SPSS packages. This study, however, used quantitative methods exclusively, without any qualitative component, meaning that any causal mechanisms had to be inferred from quantitative data alone.

In a study on the transnational friendships of international PhD students in Germany, Bilecen (2014) used social network analysis as a way of quantifying friendship networks. She used a snowballing technique, where she employed semi-structured interviews to interview 35 international PhD students at two German universities. These students were

asked to complete a “name generator question” with five students who were also international PhD students. Questionnaires were then distributed to the students named in the name generator, asking respondents to answer a series of questions about the relationship. These ego-networks were analysed in UCINET 6.0 and visualised using NetDraw for properties of ties, cohesion and components. Bilecen notes a number of limitations of this method. First, data was only available for a small number of students and therefore not generalisable to the general student population. Second, the study was not longitudinal and therefore only provided a snapshot of a network. Finally, interviews were conducted in German, French or Turkish (the languages of the researcher) and therefore, there was a selection bias towards speakers of those languages. Meanwhile, Bilecen’s research only focussed on ego-networks and not broader social networks. Therefore, there were no measures provided of meso- or macro-level networks, meaning that there were no measures of broader social patterns. This is a major weakness of this research, since ego-network analysis provides no way of quantifying network properties.

Overall, paper surveys, such as those in Rienties et al.’s studies, seemed to have higher response rates than online surveys, such as Hendrickson et al.’s. Online surveys received response rates of around 10 per cent, compared to over 80 per cent of surveys distributed by paper. Data was better collected when students listed social connections rather than selecting them from a list (as in Taha and Cox’s study). Visualisations tended to reveal more interesting data. Data was better collected when students were given prompts (for example, a question or an open sentence). Data collection tended not to be longitudinal. Sample sizes were generally small and therefore were often triangulated with other methods due to the inherent weaknesses (that is, self-report data, small sample sizes).

### 5.5. Researching Agency

The international student experience presents participants with a significant and sudden change in what is available and possible to individuals, and therefore the habitual dimension of agency may not provide participants with the routines that serve them well in the new environment. Participants are consequently driven to reflexive deliberation about their circumstances and therefore must respond creatively to their surroundings in

order to achieve their goals. These changes may then become assimilated into an individual's identity as they become habitualised. The purpose of this research is to explore how participants negotiate these new experiences, and how these experiences conditions how participants engage with the world (a change in agency).

In order to get a better understanding of the effects of the international student experience on student agency, there is a need to examine empirically how international students perceive their social world and look at their own place within it. Therefore, there is a need to collect data on the participants' lives. This is necessarily subjective, based on the participant's subjective interpretations of their own experiences, and there is therefore a need for a means of data gathering which is able to capture the reflexive deliberations of individuals.

One particular method is narrative inquiry (or narrative research). According to Manion and Cohen (2011), narrative inquiry refers to a set of methods which has its philosophical roots in post-modernist and social constructivist modes of inquiry, where the experiences of individuals are co-constructed and negotiated between subject and researcher in order to capture the complex and multi-faceted nature of human life. According to Smith (2007), narratives are a type of social action which reveals how people understand themselves as part of their world.

Smith (2007: 394) links narrative inquiry to routinised or habitualised action, particularly Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, arguing that narratives are constructions "sourced from the past (p. 395)". He argues that there is a continuity in the narratives people construct about their own experiences - people tell the same stories over time – and an individual's dispositions, values and routines may be revealed in these narratives. Changes in narrative may reveal something about changes in identity, perspective or maturity, and as dispositions and values change, these may emerge from the stories people tell about their lives. Therefore, narrative inquiry is an ideal method for capturing agential change.

Interviews are by far the most common tool research method of narrative inquiry. Research on the agency of international students reflects the subjective nature of reflexive deliberations. However, the major limitation of narrative inquiry is that it relies on subjective interpretation of events by both the subject (of their own experiences) and

the researcher. As a result, much effort in analysis of interviews is made in order to make sure that the analysis is as objective as possible. While it is impossible to remove all subjectivity from analysis, there are some measures that can be taken to reduce bias. The most common way of doing this is by using a system of coding.

The purpose of coding is to provide a systematic method of analysing interviews or other texts. A code is defined as “a word or abbreviation sufficiently close to that which it is describing (Manion and Cohen, 2013)”. Typically, the researcher reads the text (or texts) a number of times to identify key themes and creates a set of codes under which these themes may be grouped. Codes can emerge from the data, for example grounded theory methodology requires researchers to read and re-read the text to ensure that codes are consistent (also known as the constant comparison method). Alternatively, codes may be decided a priori to the research, for example, if the researcher wants to apply a theory or test previous research.

Much of the effort in coding aims to remove researcher bias by being systematic and providing a basis for objectivity. The obvious problem with this method, however, is that precise codes are up to the researcher, who may bring with them their own biases and expectations. It is very difficult to completely disengage from the research, and the subjective nature of this type of inquiry raises the possibility that different researchers may discover different things, emphasise different themes or interpret interviews in different ways. It is impossible, by way of interviews and coding, to produce repeatable, observable and falsifiable data as required by the scientific method. Smith (2007) observes that narrative research may be placed on a spectrum from systematic coding of transcribed interviews by way of coding to a much less systematic and “playful (p. 392)” way of working with narratives, where plausible judgements may be generated from a much more open interpretation of ideas and narratives. Since strict coding may still display significant bias, it does not provide the necessary conditions to be produce completely objective observations.

Therefore, it is important to be able to refer to a conceptual framework, such as Archer’s critical realist framework. For Archer, events necessarily pre-date reflexive deliberation. Narrative inquiry allows the analyst to be able to identify events, and the thoughts of the

subjects in relation to those events. This can be recorded longitudinally, so that deliberation on the same (or similar events) can be compared over two or more interviews in order to show how reflections may change, and actions may become habitualised. This can be compared to the quantitative data on social support structures, to see how these conditioned reflections.

#### 5.5.1. Researching Agency in Studies of International Students

In a UK-based study, Gu et al.'s (2009) research on maturity and interculturality in the international student experience used a mixed-method approach in order to explore the experiences of her participants. First, a survey was distributed to 1,288 students (with a return rate of 19%) at four universities in the UK to provide a baseline description of student experiences. This was followed up by interviews with 10 students to act as case studies. Narrative methods were employed by way of structured and semi-structured interviews, plus other communications such as emails and diaries, and a final focus group. A final survey was distributed to the same student population as the first survey in order to assess the extent to which findings from the narrative research could be generalised to the wider student body. Gu does not detail the precise analytical methods that she and her colleagues used other than to say that it "aimed to increase validity and reliability within the limitations of the study".

However, even though Gu et al. were exploring maturity, there was no longitudinal dimension to their study – that is, interviews were not followed up after a period of time to re-examine participant's maturity (even though there was a follow up focus group, the aim of this was to generalise to the broader population, rather than investigate agential change). Gu et al. acknowledge that their methods, although extensive, are indicative only, and their findings could not be generalised to represent the experiences of all international students.

In one of the largest scale studies of identity and agency of international students, Marginson (2013: 9) draws upon a huge bank (over 200) of semi-structured interviews. Marginson rejects the dominant methods in cross-cultural research (namely quantitative survey methods) on the grounds that they do not provide the necessary tools to capture changes in identity, agency and reflexivity. Although interviews are less precise, he argues

that they also provide significantly more depth. However, there may come a point in such large scale studies where the qualitative-nature of the data is lost as it becomes simply too difficult to analyse.

However, most studies remain very small scale. For example, Gargano (2012), in a study on the experiences of international students in the US uses portraiture (a form of case study). Portraiture refers to a method of inquiry in the social sciences, which is used to “(capture) from an outsider’s purview – an insider’s understanding of the scene” (Lawrence Lightfoot & Davis, 1997: 25). In this way, Gargano was able to describe salient points regarding how her participants engaged with the world.

Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) utilise an interpretive methodology to examine the adjustment narratives and friendship stories of 20 international students. Analysis and coding of interviews involved between 25-30 hours per interview (p. 555), using a grounded theory methodology. The purpose of grounded theory is to identify new ideas, concepts or themes from sociological data. Grounded theory requires rigorous reading and re-reading of transcripts in order to identify emergent themes (Manion and Cohen, 2011). However, a criticism of Hotta and Ting-Toomey’s approach is that, despite their extensive and time-consuming transcribing, analysing and coding, they seem to have identified themes that relate to Ting-Toomey’s previous research on agency, indicating that they perhaps set out with an a priori theory in mind.

Pham and Saltmarsh (2013) used a case study approach involving in-depth interviews with Vietnamese students in Australia (n=6) to observe changes in identity, on the grounds that this method allowed the researchers to explore the sociocultural influences on the identities of their participants. Their approach was informed by narrative inquiry, where in-depth accounts would emerge, providing rich, rather than superficial accounts of the student experience. Interviews were analysed “holistically and individually”, though Pham and Saltmarsh do not detail how this was done. Emergent themes were identified from these interviews, though again, there is no indication on how these themes were identified.

Montgomery (2010) in her research on the experiences of international students, also used qualitative methodology in the form of interviews and an extensive shadowing

system, where the researcher followed a sample of students around over the course of a day, while taking field notes. The shadowing system allowed the researcher to observe interaction between the participants and others during the sojourn, which provided an extra layer of depth onto the research.

Overall, while interviews provide the clearest way forward to explore agency, researchers were required to rely on subjective data from small datasets. There was, naturally, a tendency towards interpretivist methods, in particular narrative inquiry or grounded theory. However, while interviews provided the necessary depth to explore identity, agency and reflexivity, their limitations must be acknowledged, and care must be taken not to generalise too much to larger populations. There is also a lack of longitudinal research in studies of identity change of international students. There is a need to look at how students' reflections change over time, in order to identify changes in outlook, maturity and agency.

## 5.6. Design of Study

This study has been divided into three parts of a mixed method study: a pilot study to inform the design of the main study, a quantitative study using surveys and social network analysis to quantify and observe social structures, and a qualitative study drawing on unstructured interviews to explore student agency and reflexivity. The study took place in three stages. The pilot study took place between July 2013 and March 2014. The quantitative study took place from September 2014 to May 2015. The unstructured interviews took place at two points, in November 2014 and February and March 2015.

### 5.6.1. Pilot Study

The aim of the pilot study was to gather data to inform the design of the main study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with international students (n=8) at two different universities in the UK (the University of Liverpool and the University of Bristol), representing seven different nationalities (Uganda, Japan, China (x2), Norway, Chile, Kuwait and Kazakhstan). Questions were designed to elicit different types of relationship based on Cole and Swami's (2012) study on institutional structures and international students.

Volunteers were requested to participate by way of email of various cohorts of students, including foundation students, ERASMUS students, pre-Masters students and international students taking English exams (IELTS). Respondents were asked to give an hour of the time to be interviewed and recorded. Interviews took place in the universities between July 2013 and March 2014 and were each digitally recorded. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. All participants were over 18 and had agreed to participate. Participants were informed that their responses may be used in future publications and that all names would be changed. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Interviews were manually transcribed and analysed.

Analysis of the interviews suggested a number of common characteristics of social relations in the international student experience. These could be categorised into four main themes: making connections, distancing oneself, symbolic boundaries and making do (bricolage). Participants arrived in a new context with a strong desire to establish new connections. These connections were linked to an individual's personal concerns (what matters to me?), and how they imagined their identity as an international student. At the same time, although networks developed from the attraction to others based on desirability, similarity or popularity, *others* also referred to connections not to be pursued or to be avoided (Carlson, 2013). The act of distancing oneself, like the act of making connections, was identity-based. Boundaries were often clearly defined (nationality, language, programme of study), but could also be more subtle. Often students wanted to establish boundaries with the people situated most closely to them - classmates and flatmates. For example, while participants had the opportunity to establish connections with other classmates, with whom they shared the same physical space and routine, non-action betrayed the boundaries that had been created.

*You're probably walking back to your accommodation or something, that's the only time you would interact. You would never meet up with them (classmates). (J, Uganda)*

Finally, moving to a new country is a profound experience. This made individuals feel unsettled or uncertain.



*In class, you are a little bit timid so you don't have the courage, you fear that you'd be inferior (J, Uganda)*

*I can make friends but I'm relatively passive maybe. If someone talks to me I'm very happy and I try to be friends with someone. (K, Japan)*

Moreover, as students become more adept in the new environment, they also found it more difficult to establish connections as networks and boundaries became established over time, and the dynamic of network closure became entrenched.

Participants employed strategies in order to make up for the lack of desired relations, drawing upon social resources that were easiest to maintain. Individuals became less likely to distance oneself from others, making do with the connections that they come into most contact with or with pre-existing connections in order to access the social resources available from those connections. Making do (from the French for *bricolage*, Levi-Strauss, 1966; Duncan, 2011) is a response which comes about from the pressures that arise from the need to access social resources during the time abroad.

These pilot interviews informed the development of quantitative and qualitative methodology because they showed that social relations developed over time, constraining and enabling agency in a variety of ways. Therefore, there was a need to be able to identify how these social relations changed *longitudinally*, and how participants reflected on these relations. Research design needed to be able to quantify social relations in some way, and in particular, how these relations changed over time. Research also needed a way to capture the reflexive deliberations of participants in order to examine how they made sense of their situational context. Therefore, I aimed to capture the changes in social relations using social network analysis, and I aimed to capture the reflexive deliberations of participants through narrative case studies (by way of interviews).

#### 5.6.2. Quantitative Study

There is no consensus on the best approach to gathering social network data. Educational research using social network analysis has tended to be used inconsistently. Some studies, such as Taha and Cox (2016) and Rienties et al. (2012), require participants to

choose names from a list. However, this means that important social relationships outside the cohort are overlooked. Other studies, such as Christakis and Fowler (2007), ask participants to write a list names from a prompt (such as “who are your friends?”). However, this means that the researcher has to rely on self-report data and all of its associated problems. Meanwhile, the majority of studies are not longitudinal, in that they tend to rely on one survey at one point during the academic year. This means that results are nothing more than a snapshot of a network at a particular time, and this provides no way of understanding how the networks developed over time. Relationships may be influenced by any number of outside influences, and therefore, it is important to gather longitudinal data in order to strengthen the data.

There was a need for a data instrument which provided a way of gathering information on social relationships both inside and outside the cohort, which was reliable and valid, yet relatively easy to administer, so it could be distributed over a period of time. I opted for the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ6) (Sarason et al. 1983; 1987), used in Yeh and Inose’s (2003) study on the social support of international students. While this instrument was not intended to be used to gather social network data, it does provide a valid and reliable way to collect data on an individual’s network, which can be combined with other individual’s responses to create network data.

Sarason’s social support questionnaire (SSQ6) is a shortened version of their original (1983) questionnaire, which had 27 questions. In a study on the validity of the shortened questionnaire, Sarason et al. (1987) found that the SSQ6 correlated closely with original SSQ survey. That is, responding to six questions provided very similar results to responding to 27 questions.

This study had to rely on convenience sampling, relying on what was available to the researcher. A cohort of students were surveyed at the place of work of the researcher. There are obvious problems with this, of course. However, it was a cohort of students that was easy to access and easy to get permission for. All the students in the cohort were given a set of three surveys - once in induction week (September 2014), once at the end of the first term (December 2014) and once at the end of the academic year (May 2015).

The survey is divided into three parts. The first part provides demographic information of

the student: their age, nationality, programme of study, gender and length of time that they have been in the UK. The second part provides data on the people that participants can turn to in a time of need. These questions relate to different types of social support: questions 1, 4 and 5 are designed to elicit connections typical of the support provided by close relationships (for example, emotional support), whereas questions 2, 3 and 6 (in bold) are designed to elicit connections typical of the support provided by weak ties (for example, informational support). Sequenced in no particular order, they are:

1. Who do you consider your closest friends?
2. **Who do you go when you need information for your studies?**
3. **Who do you go to when you need information about life outside university?**
4. Who can you rely on most when you need help?
5. Who do you go to when you feel lonely?
6. **Who do you go to for career advice?**

In the survey, participants were required to write the name of a person they went to for support, their relationship, and the medium through which they communicated. The totals for this were added to give a perceived availability score. The third part measured the individual's degree of satisfaction with the perceived support available in a particular situation (satisfaction score). Subjects indicated how satisfied they were on a 6-point Likert scale from Very satisfied (6 points) to Very dissatisfied (1 point). The totals were added to give a satisfaction score.

The surveys were distributed by class tutors and were completed in class. Data were manually inputted into a comma separated values (.csv) formatted spreadsheet by the researcher. Participants were required to tick a box on the front of each survey to agree to participate for each survey (Sep 2014, Dec 2014 and May 2015). Participants were required to provide their real names, but were informed that these would not be used in any future publications.

Criticisms of using the social support questionnaire included the fact that social support does not necessarily match to a network - there may be individuals in a network that a respondent would not perceive as being a source of social support, so this information is

difficult to capture properly. The social support questionnaire also relies on self-report data, making it subjective and open to interpretation by those surveyed. This study also relied on convenience sampling (the place of work of the researcher). While this is not ideal, it was the best way to capture a large amount of data.

Data were analysed using the social network analysis software GEPHI. Gephi is a free, open-source software package developed in 2009 by Bastian, Heymann and Jacomy which allows users to create social network visualisations. GEPHI also allows users to gather statistical data on social networks. A spreadsheet was uploaded to GEPHI with the social network data, and this allowed the researcher to visualise the whole network. GEPHI also allows users to analyse social network data longitudinally.

A number of problems arose with the data collection and analysis. First is that the format of names were used inconsistently. Many students did not use their birth names, using nicknames instead (this is particularly true for East Asian students). Moreover, common names (for example Mohammed) were also problematic, because they were inconsistently spelled and it was difficult to establish which Mohammed was being referred to (for example). These problems were not insurmountable (other information from the survey such as *relationship* and *medium* could be used to ascertain the precise nature of the relation), but it was time-consuming to clean up all the data.

### 5.6.3. Quantifying Social Network Data

Three measurements of network structure were taken: modularity, centrality and cohesion. Modularity is a measure of the division of a network into communities. Networks with high modularity, have dense connections between nodes within the community, but fewer connections with nodes in other communities. The concept was developed by Newman (2006) who observed that it was typically the choice of the analyst to determine where the division between communities within a network should be placed. This was often done by identifying the point between networks with the minimum number of edges (or the “minimum cut” approach). However, Newman rejected this method because it is an arbitrary measure of community - not only was the analyst determining where the division was, but also the size and number of the communities. Newman argued that this method of division was trivial and the division

between networks may therefore have been placed at any place in the network with equal efficacy, observing that simply counting edges was not a good way of quantifying community. As an alternative, Newman proposed that community structure was not only determined by identifying where the fewest edges were, but also by identifying where there were fewer than expected edges (that is, fewer edges than by chance). This means that by identifying where the divisions are less than what they would be had they been determined by random chance, then something interesting must be going on. On this basis, Newman developed a modularity algorithm which measures the number of edges in a group by the number of edges expected if edges had been distributed randomly. This can provide either a positive or a negative value, where a positive value indicates a possible division. This approach allows analysts to look for community divisions which have positive (and preferably large) values of modularity.

The resolution of the modularity refers to how communities can be detected. Put simply, a lower resolution results in a higher number of communities while a higher resolution results in fewer communities. Much like a scientist looking through a microscope, resolution does not have to be the same across different datasets. What is important is the clarity of the communities. However, one weakness of the measure of modularity is that it has a resolution limit - that is, it is not a good way of identifying very small communities (Fortunato and Barthelemy, 2007). Nevertheless, it has been proved useful as a way of detecting community structure in social networks as it takes the division out of the analyst's hands - as long as there is a positive value for modularity, divisions between communities can be detected.

Centrality in social networks refers to how connected a node is relative to the overall structure of the network. Measures of centrality do not only take in those who are the most "central", but also those who are on the periphery of a network (an equally important measurement). Scott (2012: 83) distinguishes between two types of centrality - local centrality and global centrality. Local centrality refers to a node with ties to its immediate environment, for example, direct contacts. Global centrality, on the other hand, refers to a node that is strategically placed within a larger network somehow. While local centrality is concerned with measurements expressed in terms of the number of

connections a node has, global centrality is concerned with measures in terms of distance between various other nodes. A node is locally central if it has a high number of connections relative to other nodes (degree centrality). Meanwhile, a node can be said to be globally central if it is within a short distance of other nodes in the network (closeness centrality). In this study, we will only look at degree centrality as a measure of centrality, as the relative density of individuals is of no concern.

Cohesion in social networks refers to features of the macro-structure of a network which tells us the extent to which members of a network are tied to each other, either through direct contact (that is, they have a tie to each other), or as part of a group membership (actors are indirectly tied to each other). Social network analysis provides a means for quantifying and observing the cohesion of a network. Measures of cohesion include what is known as the clustering coefficient, an algorithm that quantifies the tendency for nodes to cluster together. The clustering coefficient can quantify clustering for the entire network, or for the embeddedness of a single node. In this research we are only concerned with the clustering coefficient for the network, because it is only macro-structure that is being explored (not micro-structure, or ego networks).

Network data was collected from each of the three surveys (September 2014, December 2014 and May 2015) and uploaded to Gephi (in a .csv format) to make separate graphs for each period. In order to create a clear graph, data was filtered by giant component (that is, only the main connected component was visualised and all nodes not connected to this component was filtered) and by degree range (all nodes with only one connection were filtered).

Once the filters had been applied, the modularity score was calculated for different resolutions (1.0 to 5.0 in increments of 1) in the statistics menu by clicking *Run modularity* and ticking the boxes randomize and use weights. Because modularity is calculated by comparing the actual graph with a random graph, each time modularity is run, a different modularity score and number of communities is calculated. The data for this research is calculated by averaging 10 runs of modularity. Once modularity was calculated, it needed to be visualised. In the *Appearance* workspace, under *nodes > attributes*, the modularity attribute was selected and applied to highlight the communities in different colours. This

is a very useful and clear way of visualising modularity. However, colours are allocated to communities in a random way. Therefore, the three diagrams use different colour schemes, meaning colours are not a guide for comparison – though they do provide clarity to the graph. The size of the nodes represents the degree (number of connections). This was visualised in the Attributes workspace by clicking nodes > attributes > degree in the Size workspace. Cohesion was calculated by selecting *Clustering Coefficient* in the *Statistics* menu for the three datasets. The graph was undirected.

Centrality was calculated by clicking *Run Network Diameter*. Again, the graph was undirected. Statistical data on modularity was downloaded from Gephi by moving to the *Data Laboratory*, clicking *Nodes* in the data table, then clicking the *Export table* button. The resulting data was downloaded as a .csv file.

#### 5.6.4. Qualitative Study

This study also relied on convenience sampling for the qualitative interviews. Participants were asked with the first survey if they were willing to participate in interviews. Only two people responded positively so a snowballing technique was employed to find more participants, whereby participants were asked to nominate somebody they knew. In the end, five people agreed to participate in interviews. All five were female, and aged between 18 and 19. All five were on the science and engineering pathway (two studying computer science, one studying psychology and two studying biochemistry).

Participants were interviewed at the university at two different points during the academic year, once in November 2014 and again in February and March 2015. These were unstructured interviews, and recorded on to .mp3 format using a voice recorder. The interviews were manually transcribed and coded by the researcher. Interview data were analysed using coding based on Archer's conceptual framework. Events were identified, and reflexive deliberations related to those events were coded according to the mode of reflexivity.

#### 5.7. Demographics of the Study

In total, 109 students took part in the main study (five of whom were interviewed), out of 127 on the International Foundation Programme, representing 28 nationalities. China was

the largest source of students (44) followed by Oman (12).

Demographic information on programme of study, gender and age is summarised in the table below:

*Table 4: Demographics of Cohort*

Average age	<b>19.13</b>
Number on science/maths pathway	<b>41</b>
Number on arts/humanities pathway	<b>57</b>
Number of males	<b>51</b>
Number of females	<b>58</b>
Number of Mainland Chinese	<b>44</b>

### 5.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical consent was granted by the University of Stirling and cooperation and access to students was granted by University of Bristol (though ethical consent did not need to be acquired). The Centre for English Language and Foundation Studies (University of Bristol) was happy to be named, though in subsequent publications, the institution has been anonymised. The research followed the agreed research design for the project as detailed in the ethical consent form.

No students aged over 18 were involved. If an under 18 student was included (in the survey) they were removed. All surveys required students to write that they agreed to participate, students were told they could withdraw from the process at any time and all data were anonymised (see Appendix 2). Surveys were distributed by class tutors during class time and participants were given an explanation of the purpose of the study and information on how to participate and the right to withdraw. A small number of students chose not to participate in the study at all, while other students chose not to submit a survey in either the second or third wave, though the return rates still allowed for a reasonable analysis. All names of participants and of their social connections were known to the researcher, but anonymised in this thesis and subsequent articles. One issue arose where one class tutor took it upon herself not to distribute the surveys because she



herself did not approve of the survey, but after the research was explained to her and that ethical consent had been granted, she allowed her students to do the survey. However, response rates did seem to be influenced strongly by the attitude of the teacher to the research. Nevertheless, response rates overall were strong enough that reasonable inferences could still be made.

As part of the first survey, volunteers were sought to participate in interviews. Only one student responded positively, so a snowballing technique was employed where the volunteer asked her friends to take part. In the end, five people agreed to participate, all from the same circle of friends. All interviews required consent (by way of email) and participants were told beforehand the structure of the interviews. One student initially sought for the interviews had to be rejected because she was aged under 18. Interviews took place in the Centre for English Language and Foundation Studies and were all recorded. Interview participants were emailed the analysis of their interviews for comment or approval (which appear in Chapter 7 of this thesis), though only two responded, and no changes were requested. Interviewees were explained the purpose of the study and of their right to withdraw at any time. All names have been changed to protect their identities. The Centre for English Language and Foundation Studies were aware that the interviews were taking place and time, space and facilities were granted to hold the interviews. Appropriate safeguarding measures were taken in that interviews took place in a room that was in full view of others (with an internal window), during work time and the interviews were all recorded. The university also provides counselling services to students, so if something serious did arise then there were mechanisms where this could have been dealt with. However, no such circumstances arose, and the service was not used by participants.

When reporting the data, effort was put in to make sure that sensitive information was not reported without consent from participants. Students shared personal information which was useful to the exploration of their identity and personal change. However, some information was withheld because of the sensitive nature.

A potential conflict of interests arose in that as an employee at the Centre for English Language and Foundation Studies, I knew all the participants of the study and this may

have influenced how students responded to the surveys and how interviewees responded to interview questions. Interview and survey bias is always a problem in social research and there is no completely effective way to mitigate this. Opportunities for anonymous gathering of data were not available to the researcher, and the nature of social network research required that the researcher knew who the participants were in order to map their connections. All subsequent articles and publications anonymised this information.

All data have been stored on a password protected online storage space (Google Drive), and only the researcher has access to the data.

### 5.9. Reflections on Methods

Due to the small-scale nature of the study, it is difficult to make serious generalisations about the experiences of international students. However, it is possible to derive indicative patterns of the interplay between structure and agency, which can inform future research. Although the social network analysis was useful, and shed light on some features of social structure, there were a number of problems, particularly with data gathering methods (common to all social network data gathering methods). The quantitative nature of social network analysis meant that results were descriptive rather than explanatory. Social network methodology on its own was not enough to explain changes in social structure. Also, because of the weaknesses of the study, this analysis could only ever be indicative of emergent patterns and it could not be used in any way as a definitive analysis – there are just too many weaknesses with the data.

Meanwhile, the unstructured interviews turned out to be very rich data gathering instruments. Participants were given the freedom to openly talk about any aspect of their experiences, and conversations took surprising and enlightening directions. Even mundane descriptions of their lives turned out, on analysis, to have merit. One particular advantage (a product of the snowballing technique) was that the participants all knew each other, and they all shared many of the same experiences. This meant that they provided different perspectives to the same incidents. Moreover, they all talked about each other, triangulating in some way the subjective perspectives of the individual (talking of themselves). This was really beneficial, and provided explanations that would not have been observable had the participants not known each other.

## 6. Results Part I

### 6.1. Introduction

This results section is divided into two parts: structures (and how they change over time) and agency (and how it changes over time). This has been organised this way in order to distinguish between the causal efficacy of social structures (downward causation) and of agency.

The aim of Part I is to explore how the international student experience conditions student agency. This section is divided into four parts, which relate to the process of agential change: the reflexive imperative, changes in social relations, changes in meta-structures and satisfaction with social support. These themes are causally linked. On arrival, participants are confronted with a context they are unfamiliar with ('I don't know what others know'), which necessitates reflexive deliberation ('what do I do?'). Students must develop new social connections based on both availability and their own personal concerns ('what matters to me'). These new relations coalesce to form new meta-structures that participants must conform to in some way. The final mechanism is identification, where participants identify to a greater or lesser extent with the context in which they are embedded, ensuring congruity. This creates the necessary conditions for the adoption of new ways of doing and being (a change in agency).

Part II looks at the experiences of five classmates on the international foundation programme at the University of Bristol. Their interviews are analysed using an Archerian framework, in order to explore how the interviewees negotiated and reflected on their experiences. All participants underwent a significant change in identity, reporting being more independent and more confident.

### 6.2. The Reflexive Imperative

A necessary condition for a change in agency is the reflexive imperative. For Archer, the reflexive imperative is a feature of a morphogenetic society as opportunities for "thought and talk" diminish as a result of contextual discontinuity, and subjects are compelled into reflexive deliberation on their own. This mechanism has genuine causal powers as it compels subjects into a new way of engaging with the world. According to Archer, the

reflexive imperative is not an extension of reflexivity – individuals do not become ‘more reflexive’ – it involves a change in modality (Archer, 2014: 111). Innovative action may become habitualised, leading to a tendency towards a particular mode of reflexivity. For international students, contextual discontinuity is clear and incongruity between the agent and the structure in which they are embedded is unambiguous – it is a characteristic of the international student experience that participants must confront and conform to new ways of doing and being. There is a need to identify this mechanism and the conditions from which it emerges. In order to explore reflexivity in the international student experience, interviews were coded and analysed for features of reflexive deliberation, students’ own reasoning, and participants’ recollections of conversations with others (thought and talk).

Initially, all interviewees initially displayed some aspect of cultural reproduction (by way of thought and talk). Four of the five interviewees were intending to study on programmes that would qualify them for at least one of their parents’ occupations, while two had parents who had studied abroad (including the student who was studying a different discipline to the parents). All five interviewees had close relations with their families, and had the financial and cultural resources to gain access to the opportunity to study abroad. For all the interviewees, the initial decision to go abroad was taken in discussion with close family and other institutional structures (such as schools or scholarship programmes). However, all participants were confronted with a situational context which compelled them into reflexive deliberation.

Reflexive deliberation provided the basis for overcoming incongruity. For example, Stacy, who was intending to study Computer Science at university, talked of how her experiences had helped her become more mature:

*I feel I am more adapted to life ... when you get in a situation and you don't know what to do, **you just use your imagination and try to fix it** [emphasis added] ... I'm happy with it that actually with time you have to realise about yourself, about life, and just, like, how to behave.*

Stacy's reflections allowed her to respond creatively to her new context, which in turn allowed her to develop habits and routines which meant she could negotiate her situation

effectively. Her reflections were an important part of gaining experience, which allowed her to become more proficient in exercising agency over time. This is the causal power of reflexivity. The recurrence of events which necessitated reflexive deliberation gave way to a new habitualised mode of engaging with the world.

Interviews revealed how subjects faced a situational context where selection was narrowed as what was available and possible to individuals reduced. For example, Estefania, who was intending to study medical microbiology at university, had parents who were both doctors. She had studied at a private school in Quito, Ecuador, which prepared students for study in medicine. She had won a scholarship to study in the UK, along with her boyfriend, who was doing the same subject, and a friend from the same school. Estefania's older sister was also studying medicine at a university in Ecuador. Estefania displayed a strong tendency towards social and cultural reproduction (typical of communicative reflexivity).

However, Estefania's situational context denied her a smooth pathway to her preferred course of action. In the interviews, Estefania said that while she had wanted to study medicine in Ecuador, she had never intended to win the scholarship to study in the UK (which she got unexpectedly). Although this was a fantastic opportunity for her, it also narrowed selection - she was not eligible to study medicine abroad (medical school in the UK is very difficult to enter) so she chose a cognate discipline instead (medical microbiology). The stipulations of her scholarship meant that she could only apply to three universities in the UK for this degree course (UCL, Bristol and Glasgow) and she and the two other Ecuadorian scholarship students chose Bristol.

*(Bristol) wasn't my first option really. I was trying to apply for UCL but I didn't get accepted ... so my second option was Glasgow, but they were asking me to take the IELTS exam ... they wouldn't give me an acceptance letter until I gave them my IELTS score. I didn't want to do IELTS, so I applied to Bristol, and they said OK, just come with your TOEFL score, you don't need to have an IELTS, and I was like 'yay', OK, I'll go to Bristol.*

Estefania had chosen medical microbiology at Bristol because selection had been narrowed by institutional barriers, making the decision to do so the most convenient

option (the path of least resistance).

*BM: But you want to be a doctor ...*

*Yeah, I want to, so I decided to study medical microbiology. I mean, I don't know, it's like the best career to study medicine was biomedical sciences, but I was thinking that if I chose to, or I decided that I don't want to study medicine, what would I do with a degree in biomedical sciences. It's like you have a degree, but you can't do anything with it.*

As structures had narrowed selection, advice from her trusted interlocutors were no longer useful for her to find an efficient way of becoming a doctor (as she had ambitions to do). Instead of thought and talk, it was internal conversation which powered her course of action within the constraints she was operating. As a result, she relied on reflexive deliberation in order to negotiate her experiences. These deliberations helped her gain experience and made her more confident, resulting in increased autonomy.

*I still want to study and prepare for myself. So I feel that, like, makes me more mature and more independent actually ... you just got be responsible with your things ... it does really make me more responsible.*

As a lack of a clear pathway compelled subjects into deliberation about what to do, increasingly, it was personal concerns which became the guide. For example, Zoe, whose father was a politician in Hanoi, Vietnam, commented that she wanted to work in public relations, and had originally wanted to do a degree in communications to pursue this, but had chosen psychology after discussing her future with her school counsellor and parents. As a result, Zoe deliberated on her choice of study, deciding on a course of action in conversation with others, but oriented towards her own personal concerns. Zoe used others as (useful) guides, but it was 'what matters to me?' that was the engine behind the action:

*At first I picked communication studies, that's what I liked ... (but) I heard a rumour about how some people really despise communication degrees in a way, cos they thought it was too broad and they think any people go there and they only party and they don't really study [sic] ... I bring it to my counsellor and ... she told me,*

*you are the kind of person who prefer to play rather than study right? I was like what? No! ... so then I do a little research [sic] on communication and I was like maybe it's really not specific. My dad actually asked "what do you want to communicate?" and I was like, I don't know I just want to talk. So that moment I decided that, whatever I want to study in university, it has to be a science major because I believe that's the only field that you have to actually study.*

Zoe's internal conversation here demonstrates the link between structural constraints and enablements and her action. As structures narrowed selection, Zoe was compelled into reflexive deliberation about how to navigate these structures. However, she was increasingly responsible for her own actions, which created uncertainty. The theme of uncertainty was present throughout both of Zoe's interviews, and it was this which necessitated sustained reflexive deliberation. Zoe continued to benchmark herself against those around her, which shaped her own decisions, though her deliberations also provided her with justification for her decisions ("I do have an argument to back me up, so I feel like, yeah, I'm confident in where I'm going"). As she gained experience, she became more adept at negotiating a course of action.

Overall, relational structures in which participants were embedded shaped decisions (what was available and possible), but institutional structures also narrowed selection. For the interviewees, the decision to study abroad was taken in conversation with others particularly parents or friends, but also schools, sponsoring bodies, educational agents and other institutional structures, within a set of limitations and constraints, based on availability of courses, affordability and opportunity.

The natal contexts that students were born into – stable, loving family homes – are features of communicative reflexivity. Participants identified with their natal context and aimed to recreate it to some extent. However, for the interviewees of this study, contextual continuity (the opportunity to recreate the natal context) was not available. All of the interviewees had to confront contextual discontinuity in some way, compelling them into reflexive deliberation about the decisions they made about their own lives. Choosing to study abroad, choosing a degree course, choosing a university, managing their social relations - all of these decisions were made by way of reflexive deliberations

within the constraints and opportunities available to them. While all students had a range of opportunities available to them, all of them also demonstrated how selection had been narrowed by institutional and practical constraints (particularly availability of courses and tuition fees). Nevertheless, all of the choices were made by the students in relation to their own *modus vivendi* (how they saw their future lives). It was personal concerns that increasingly guided reflexive deliberation. Opportunities to 'thought and talk' tended to diminish over time, which necessitated subjects into reflexive deliberation on their own. It is this reflexive imperative that triggered a change in reflexive modality.

The sample size was only small (five students on one foundation programme), and it is difficult to generalise the extent to which that their experiences are typical of foundation students in general, or even of this cohort of students. Nevertheless, this research does show how the interplay between structural constraints and enablements and personal concerns (by way of reflexive deliberation) conditioned participants' actions. This section has identified the reflexive imperative and some of the conditions from which it emerges (a change in context, narrowed selection, lack of opportunity to thought and talk). The next section looks into the effects of reflexive deliberation on how subjects negotiated social relations.

### 6.3. Social Relations

As subjects confronted a new context, they faced a need to consider themselves in relation to their situational context, a process which they were not able to do by way of habitualised action (Archer, 2012: 7). One such reflexive practice is the development of new social connections. A characteristic of the international student experience is that participants must undergo a significant change in social relations during the sojourn. Not only are participants distanced from close relations at home (particularly family and friends), they are also thrust into a context where they must share experiences with others who they may be very different from. Moreover, the international student experience takes place during a time of life (emerging adulthood) characterised by identity exploration with regards to close relationships (Collins and Van Dulmen, 2006).

The management of social resources is done reflexively – individuals deliberate on the social relations, what effort to put in to maintain relations from home, and how to



establish new connections in the new context. In order to identify the nature of the change in relationships it is important to be able to quantify social relations in some way. In a paper on the social support of international students, Adelman (1988) developed a model of student relationships in terms of the type of support that they provide. According to Adelman, friendships can be categorised according to the relative strength of ties (close ties or weak ties). Close ties refer to the strong emotional connections that an individual has, such as close friends or family, and are important for providing instrumental and emotional support. Weak ties can be a link to anyone that someone has intermittent contact with, from landlords to teachers, student services staff to other people at college. These ties are important since they are a source of informational support and they serve as bridges between groups and provide access to information and resources (Hendrickson et al. 2007:4). Granovetter (1983) argues that individuals with fewer weak ties will not have access to the same support as those with more weak ties as they will have less access to information and resources. Adelman also adds another dimension: comparable others, observing that the support from people going through a comparable experience is significant. Not only do they provide important informational, emotional and instrumental support, but they also provide a benchmark to which participants may compare attributes, performance and affirm self-evaluation (Adelman, 1988). Students may check grades with each other, either as a measure of progress or to seek reassurance over poor marks (Brooks, 2007:701). Comparable others may be close or weak ties.

Table 5 shows the various connections a typical student may have based on Adelman's framework. This is divided up into close and weak connections, comparable others and categorised according to home and in-country connections.

*Table 5: Student Relationships (Adelman, 1988)*

In-country ties		Home ties		Close friends and family
Family in-country		Parents and close family		
Family (e.g. brother/sister)		Close friends at home		Comparable others
Close friends at college		Brothers/sisters		
Flatmates		Cousins		
Classmates		Classmates from school		

Members of societies/clubs Friends of friends	Friends	Weak ties
Teachers Student services Landlords Neighbours	Contacts at home (e.g. sponsoring bodies)	

Data was gathered from the social support questionnaire. A total of 109 students completed at least one survey over three points of time during the sojourn (Sep 2014 n=95, Dec 2014 n=83, May 2015 n=72), representing 1,237 individual connections. Each connection was categorised by the source of support and assigned a number according to the list below based on Adelman's (1988) categorisations of social support (bold is in-country ties, italic, home ties):

- 1. Close friends and family**
- 2. Close friends and family (comparable others)**
- 3. Weak ties (comparable others)**
- 4. Weak ties**
5. *Close friends and family*
6. *Close friends and family (comparable others)*
7. *Weak ties (comparable others)*
8. *Weak ties*

This data is presented for each category for the whole cohort, over the three surveys. This data is supported by interview data from a small sample of students (n=5) from this cohort. Interview data was transcribed and manually coded for social support and satisfaction with social support using Adelman's (1988) categorisations of social support. Table 5 below show the changes in relationships for the whole cohort (as per Adelman's, 1988 categorisations). Table 6 shows the egocentric networks of the students interviewed (note that two of the interviewees did not complete a final survey). The colours used reflect Adelman's categorisations of international student relations in egocentric networks.

Table 6: Changing Relations over Time

Sep 2014 (n=95)

In-country ties	Home ties	
0	87	Close ties
155	352	Comparable others
2	0	
42	13	Weak ties

Dec 2014 (n=83)

In-country ties	Home ties	
0	97	Close ties
358	259	Comparable others
3	1	
71	11	Weak ties

May 2015 (n=72)

In-country ties	Home ties	
0	71	Close ties
358	181	Comparable others
2	0	
89	10	Weak ties

This table (Table 5) shows how students drew on different relational resources as the year progressed. In general, the pattern which emerged was that, over time, students increasingly drew on social resources in-country (particularly comparable others) and less on ties from home (particularly close ties). These new ties allowed the formation of new habits, routines and values to form. Table 6 (overleaf) shows how relational resources changes on an individual level.

Table 7: Recentering Networks – Egocentric Networks

<b>Zoe</b>																			
Sep-14	○	○	○	○	○	○	○												
Dec-14	○						○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
<b>Estefania</b>																			
Sep-14	○	○	○	○	○														
Dec-14	○	○	○			○	○	○	○	○	○								
<b>Hauwa</b>																			
Sep-14	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○										
Dec-14	○	○	○		○	○	○	○	○	○									
May-15	○	○	○		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○					

## Rania



## Stacy



Key: ○ – continuity anchors

○ – decayed ties

○ – new ties

The results showed that international students in this cohort experienced a significant change in social relations during the sojourn, which had an impact on the support that they receive. This can be summarised as:

1. Continuity of support from parents (and other close members of the family)
2. Increase in support from comparable others (close ties) in-country
3. Decrease in support from comparable others (close ties) home
4. Increase in support from weak ties in-country (institutional support)

Reporting of close friends and family who were not comparable others remained more or less steady (only slight fluctuations in the reporting of social support from those ties). This suggests that the support from this group (which was made up mostly of parental support) remained valuable throughout the sojourn, acting as continuity anchors for participants. The support from family ties (particularly family) was crucial, as it was parents who provide emotional, instrumental and financial support during the sojourn. In the interviews, Zoe talked about how the support of her parents endured, despite the distance: “I found out that my parents were the only relationship that can always be there, you know, like no matter what happens, they won’t kick you out, they won’t despise you, when you (need them) they’ll be there”. However, while for other students parents remained a source of support, they were not a particularly strong presence. For example, Estefania talked about how much she missed her parents, but this was in the context of her own increased independence: “I feel like this year, because it’s the first year, I just really want to go back and spend there the summer [sic] but for the rest of the years, I’d really like to go abroad”.

The most significant change, however, was that of comparable others who were close ties. The first term (September 2014 to December 2014) saw a significant increase in the numbers of comparable others, close ties in-country as sources of social support. Over time, while there still remained a significant number of comparable other, close ties from home, this number had dropped dramatically (from 352 in Sep 2014 to 181 in May 2015). This is important because it is these new relations which condition social action.

Data on the egocentric networks of participants are presented as a sociogram to visually

represent the changes in those networks over time. It is already well-established that emerging adulthood is a time of significant relational change as subjects “recentre” their networks away from family towards new ones, based on personal concerns “what matters to me” – (see Archer, 2012 and Tanner, 2007). This research shows that participants formed new relations from those available in the new context. While relations with continuity anchors (for example, parents and close friends) endured, it was comparable others who subjects connected to the most in the new context. Relations with comparable others are important because they provide important types of support, such as instrumental support or emotional support, or as a benchmark for comparison. The properties of the new networks possess real causal powers, as the new forms of relational goods which form in the new context may influence the development of the internal conversation. For example, subjects who developed close relations in the new context may have been more likely to identify and subsequently may have been more likely to conform to the norms, values and habits of the community. Those who were less engaged, on the other hand, may have had internal conversations that intensified disorientation.

The acts of making connections and distancing oneself from others are reflexive, and the mechanism for doing either results from reflexive deliberation relating to the personal concerns of the individual (Archer, 2003; 2007; 2012). Interviewees talked of how friendships from home diminished with time. For example, Hauwa talked of her close friends from school: “(she) is one of my best friends ... the problem is that she is always busy working and studying in Libya and I’m here studying so we don’t talk as much as we used to”. Moreover, because of the problems in Libya, local support became more important as home support become more difficult to access and also less useful. Opportunities to thought and talk with comparable others from home were no longer useful in the new context, which made these connections subject to decay.

This was also true of friendships that had come with her to the UK. Hauwa had come to the UK with two other friends - and although they remained very close during the foundation year, these friendships were weakening too, “I think we’re not going to be so close during the next years, because we’re gonna have a busy schedule”. In place of her

friends from home, Hauwa was increasingly spending more time with people studying on the same course: “I think my friends are more from other classes, because they’re studying with me in Chemistry and Maths tutorial, so we get along and we hang out more”. Connections with people sharing the same experience gradually became more prevalent over time. Conversations with these connections were more useful with regards to shared goals (that is, passing exams).

These acts of distancing oneself and making new connections were universal among participants. Stacy talked about how her close friendships from home contrasted with the friendships she had made in Bristol: “there are some people who are close to me and some, they are in Russia, but we didn’t talk that much actually”. She lamented how her friends from home didn’t understand the experiences she was having in the UK: “I’m not sure if it bothers me that much, but they (friends from home) don’t really ask me how I’m doing or what’s new, how is my studying, how is my life ... it kind of upset me a little bit, cos it seems like they don’t care”. Stacy was somewhat disparaging of her home town “if you look a bit differently [sic], people will look at you, they might judge you, they might admire you, you don’t know. And most of them are grumpy. When you walk on the street, not much of them smiling [sic], which is like really different from here”. In contrast, Stacy’s perspectives of her friends from home were very different from the way she saw the friendships she had made in Bristol, which she viewed extremely positively:

*And some other people who are here ... they became closer to me ... all of us get on well, like really well, and for me it was hard to find people like that in Russia. I had friends, obviously, but it wasn’t the same.*

She talked about the conversations she had with comparable others in the UK, which were identity affirming:

*... sometimes, when we are walking or we are talking, we joking about random stuff [sic], or doing something that other people will see as basically dumb or stupid, but that’s basically who we are, and we enjoy this and that’s what makes us closer as friends. And when we talk about something deep, we can still talk about deep stuff and be funny at the same time. I don’t know, it’s good, like, I really enjoy this.*



Incongruity brought about exposure to alternative ways of doing and being. While there was evidence that cross-cultural friendships required more effort to maintain, cultural differences were also opportunities for learning. Estefania remarked that:

*I'd like to have more deep conversations with Arab people ... I feel their culture is like really different and interesting. It's like when I hear (Maithah from the UAE) and Tom (from Taiwan) talking about what is a sin and what is not ... I find that really, really interesting.*

Nevertheless, incongruity between people of different cultures did form the basis of symbolic boundaries between communities. For example, Hauwa talked about being the only Libyan in her class:

*If you've noticed, all the Chinese are gathering together. They're not open with other people. They try to just relate together so it's pretty difficult to get along with them ... Even in class, they all sit together ... so it's kind of difficult. (Our class) is divided themselves into two parts, like Chinese and Omanis ... and it's quite difficult to make friends with others ... **you cannot be the same as them because they know each other for a long time and they have common things because they come from the same country and the same culture** (emphasis added).*

This last comment revealed a structural boundary, based on congruity and incongruity between students' a priori socialisations. Some of these boundaries were crossed when participants shared common goals (in particular exams). However, these boundaries tended to endure throughout the sojourn. These boundaries may also be the source of tension, and research shows that individuals make sense of these boundaries by way of categorisation and stereotyping (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). However, over time, as Hauwa demonstrated, interaction with others from different backgrounds broke down these boundaries to some extent.

*OK, before I didn't like Chinese at all, but when I came here I got close to many of them, I mean before I thought that all Chinese were hard workers, they only study, they have no friends, they don't have a social life ::: but now, I mean, they were funny, they were talking, they were telling jokes, and I could react with them and find topics that are about with them [sic]. My idea about Chinese has changed.*

There was also a significant boundary between international students and home students. Students shared accommodation with home students, and occasionally shared classes with them (particularly Chemistry students – who took classes with first year undergraduates). However, remarkably, there was no evidence of any strong connections being formed between home students and international foundation students during this study. These boundaries were very difficult to bridge, and perceptions of home students were often negative:

*I think some (English students) are nice but others are not because we have some classmates who are English in my class. Some of them don't even look at you, but others are really helpful and nice (Hauwa).*

The international foundation student experience is a differentiated experience. Participants reported feelings of being in-between:

*I mean it's like, I am here but we're not really part of the university. (Estefania)*

Interaction with flatmates who were not foundation students rarely (if ever) resulted in anything more than weak ties:

*Every time I see them (flatmates) "we should go together somewhere" and we don't do it. We keep talking about it, thinking about it, but we don't do it ... We don't know why. (Stacy)*

*Like when we're cooking and stuff we do talk to each other, but I don't really like to ... they go out and drink and smoke and that kind of things. I'm not the person who likes that kind of thing. (Estefania)*

While students reported a desire to make friends with local students, boundaries were very different to cross.

*(I've met) a couple, like one or two on our Physics course but they're quite into their own circles. We see them a lot but I haven't had the opportunity to mix with English students yet. (Hauwa)*

Opportunities to break down these barriers were not available, and these boundaries tended to persist.

*I had an interview with a rock band so I did that for a school society and that was the first time I recognised so much the distance I still have with my English ... I get nervous when I speak English to a native although I'm quite confident. (Zoe)*

Meanwhile, on some occasions, participants reported more worrying incidences, such as racism:

*Throughout seven months in Cambridge and two months in Bristol, it was one in Cambridge and two in Bristol. The first one ... was a racist comment from someone ... I was standing near the bus stop, I wasn't really paying attention, so she said like 'make room for me, just go there' and I looked at her because I thought she could have said it in a nice way, so I gave her a strange look, she looked back at me, she was with a man, she said 'what are you going to do about it, are you gonna bomb me?' That's when I had no reply. I almost cried actually cos I mean, you still don't know me, I've never met you, you don't know what I do (Raina).*

These encounters were significant and, while Raina was able to manage these situations (in conversation with her friends), they had an obvious impact on how she identified as a Libyan (and a Muslim) in the UK. Her experiences at university were thankfully overwhelmingly positive, but these kinds of events have the potential to turn positive experiences into negative ones. Raina was able to cope with this because of her strong and supportive relationships with others. However, other students may be less able to cope and the emotion or anxiety caused by this may impede the development of an effective course of action.

Overall, what the evidence suggests is that participants confront the new context reflexively, but within structural and cultural constraints. Students undergo a transformation in social networks as they are distanced from, and distance themselves from, previous relations. They are also compelled into forming new relations, which are more likely to be identity-based, but these relationships also depend on what is available and possible to them in the new context. These new relations may bring profound joy, as was the case for Stacy, Zoe and Rania, who developed very deep and close personal attachments with others on their course. At the same time, others may experience continued incongruity with their surroundings as symbolic boundaries between

communities may become difficult to cross. Participants were strategic with their social relations, forming strong connections with those sharing the same experience. These relations were necessary in the new context as they provided support and advice with which to negotiate the new context. These changes in relationships were conditioned by reflexive deliberation in response to being in a new environment. These relationships also had shaping power themselves, as incongruity challenged expectations and norms. The participants in this study all enjoyed strong relational goods, which acted as buffers to negative experiences.

#### 6.4. Network Structure

The reflexive act of recentering relations in the new context has a causal impact on the macro-structure of the international student network, as the development of new relationships and the decay of old ones result in new communities being formed. In the previous section, a process of recentering relationships was identified, whereby some relationships diminished with distance and time, and new relationships were formed in the new context. According to the tenets of analytical dualism, these new relations will constrain or enable participants in different ways. Of course, these will not be the same for all students – some may establish strong connections, while others will not. The purpose of this section is to explore how this affected the macro-structure of this cohort of students over time. Social network analysis techniques provided a means of quantifying the meta-structures of social networks, while critical realism provided an ontological framework for exploring how objective changes in social structure affected agency.

Research using social network analysis with international students is relatively new. Hendrickson et al.'s (2011) research emphasised cultural differences as the chief organising agent of social networks, observing that friendship networks could be categorised into same-culture, host culture or mixed networks. Meanwhile, in a series of studies using social network analysis to observe international student networks in the EU, Rienties et al. (2012; 2013; 2014) observed that, while culture was a predictor of community, other institutional factors (such as mixing study groups by nationality) may have also conditioned community development. Taha and Cox (2016) used social network

analysis to explore the development of social networks for one class, noting that while social networks were predicted by culture initially, these relations did not necessarily shape networks overall. However, these studies were only small in scale or, where they involved a larger number of students, were not longitudinal. In this research, I aim to follow the network of an entire cohort of students over an academic year in order to capture how networks develop over time.

Of 127 students registered on the International Foundation Programme (IFP), 109 students completed at least one survey (Sep 2014, n=97; Dec 2014, n=85; May 2015, n=72). Three measurements of network structure were taken for this study: modularity (represented by colours in the image below), degree centrality (represented by the size of the nodes) and the clustering coefficient (. The results for the three surveys are visualised below:

*Image 2: Macro-structure of Student Social Support Networks*

Sep 2014 (n=95)



Dec 2014 (n=83)



May 2015 (n=72)

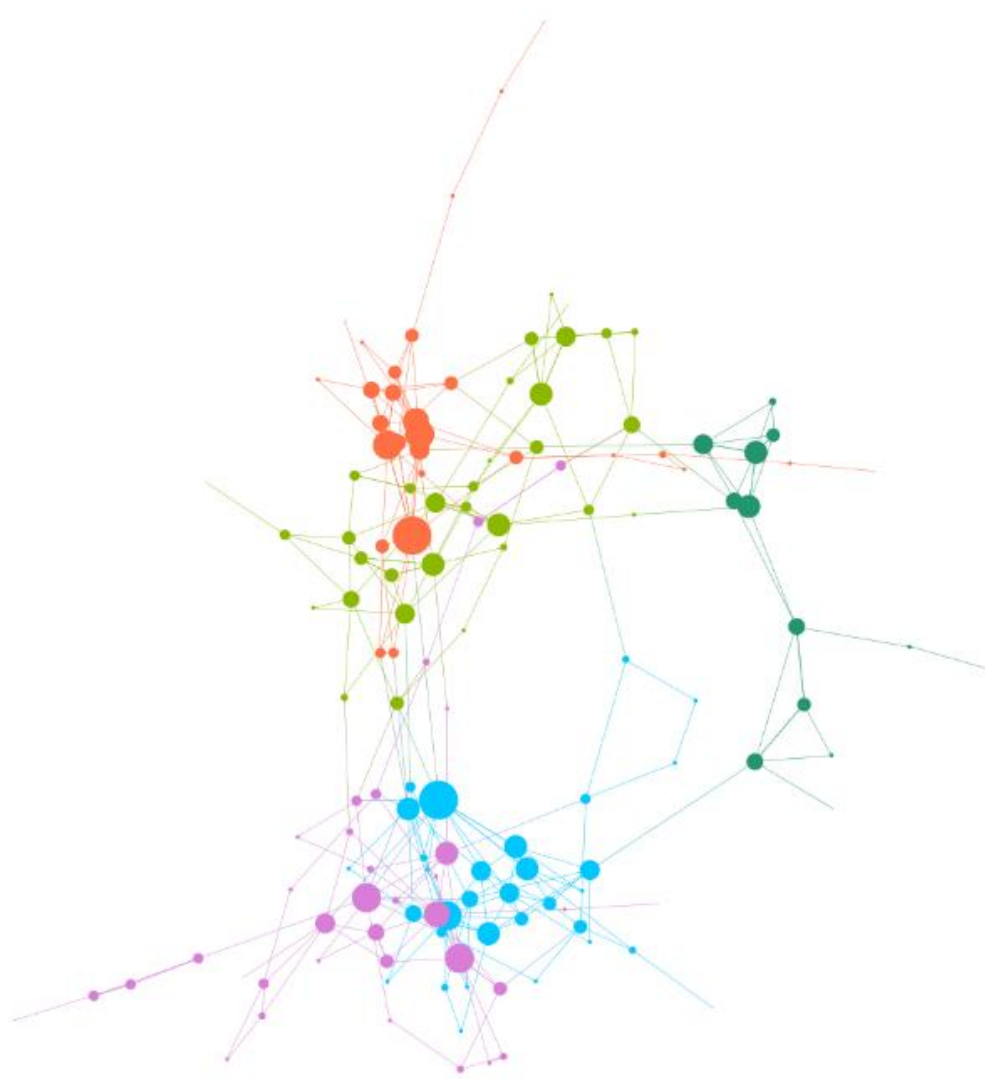




Table 8: Statistical Analysis of Student Social Support Networks

	Sep 2014		Dec 2014		May 2015	
	Number of nodes = 126 (20.93% visible) Number of edges = 168 (26.71% visible)		Number of nodes = 128 (24.66%) Number of edges = 258 (40.06%)		Number of nodes = 140 (24.52%) Number of edges = 305 (41.72%)	
Resolution	Number of communities	Modularity	Number of communities	Modularity	Number of communities	Modularity
1.0	10	0.778	10	0.636	8	0.671
2.0	7	0.761	5	0.605	5	0.655
3.0	5	0.693	3	0.547	4	0.592
4.0	5	0.661	3	0.523	3	0.553
5.0	4	0.635	3	0.392	3	0.545
Clustering Coefficient	0.065		0.123		0.154	
Average Degree	2.667		4.031		4.357	
Graph Density	0.021		0.029		0.028	

Notwithstanding the inherent weaknesses of the data gathering instruments (common to all forms of social network data instruments), a number of patterns emerged over the datasets, which are stronger than the weakness of the data. The data showed a significant change in community between the three datasets. In the September 2014 dataset, communities were small. These initial communities were largely predicted by a priori networks, in particular same-culture ties, as participants were initially drawn to similar and familiars. The largest community was made up of Omani students, all of whom had been sponsored by various Omani ministries, and many of whom had already spent up to a year in England studying English. The second largest community was made up of a group of Chinese boys studying engineering and sharing accommodation. Other communities also represented same culture ties, based on similarity and familiarity.

The second dataset displayed significantly different communities. While at lower resolutions of modularity, same-culture or same-nationality ties were still strongly evident, at higher resolutions, the communities detected were related to the programme of study. As participants negotiated their social resources during the sojourn, new relations were drawn from those sharing the same experiences, typically people in the same class or from the same accommodation.

Finally, the May 2015 dataset shows much more distinct communities. This final survey was distributed in the final week of teaching before exams started. As students were studying for their crucial exams, social networks reflected their shared objectives (that is, to pass their exams). These communities were made up of more individuals (calculated by average degree), had denser connections (calculated by graph density) and were more distinct from other communities (as calculated by clustering coefficient). New ties did not involve the creation of new networks, instead they involved the creation of new ties within existing network. In particular, communities reflected academic discipline, though same nationality and same culture networks became apparent at lower resolutions.

The development of community structures over time reflected the development of a small-world network (Watts and Strogatz, 1998), characterised by dense communities (more dense than by chance) linked with other communities in such a way that all members of the network could be reached by a small number of steps. The process

through which this is achieved is well described by Lune (2007) in a study of HIV activism networks in California, who described a process of splitting, whereby networks were divided into communities as subsets of the network concentrated their efforts on a shared goal or project. These communities were linked with each other through weak ties which acted as indirect bridges between communities. I argue that this was the case with the sample network in this study. Initially students were drawn to similar and familiar (mainly same culture ties or same nationality ties), but in time new connections formed within the networks as participants reflexively negotiated their experiences. The social network analysis also empirically shows the symbolic boundaries identified in the student interviews, whereby a priori socialisations, such as nationality, evidently form boundaries between communities. While these boundaries endured to some extent, it was the shared goals of the community that predicted later networks, as participants spent most of their time with each other while they working together to pass their exams.

These features of network structure are important because different structures may give rise to different conditions in which agency may be realised. For example, a small world structure facilitates the flow of information and resources through a network. The dense network ties that form around a common concern provide the conditions for socialised beliefs, values and dispositions to form. With this cohort of students, communities at the end of the year correlated more closely with programme of study, indicating the emergence of a collective identity within this cohort.

### 6.5. Identification

According to Archer, the communities in which individuals are embedded have real causal powers. The value one places on social relations is important since it provides an indication of the extent to which an individual identifies with their context. According to Archer's ideal types of reflexivity, identifying is a social condition for the emergence of communicative reflexivity. The presence of strong relational goods leads to a situational logic where the individual identifies with the context that they have been socialised into, ensuring congruity with its norms and values, and narrowing selection in such a way that social structures are reproduced (Archer, 2012: 99). Conversely, low valuation of social support satisfaction may indicate the presence of relational 'evils', indicating a miserable

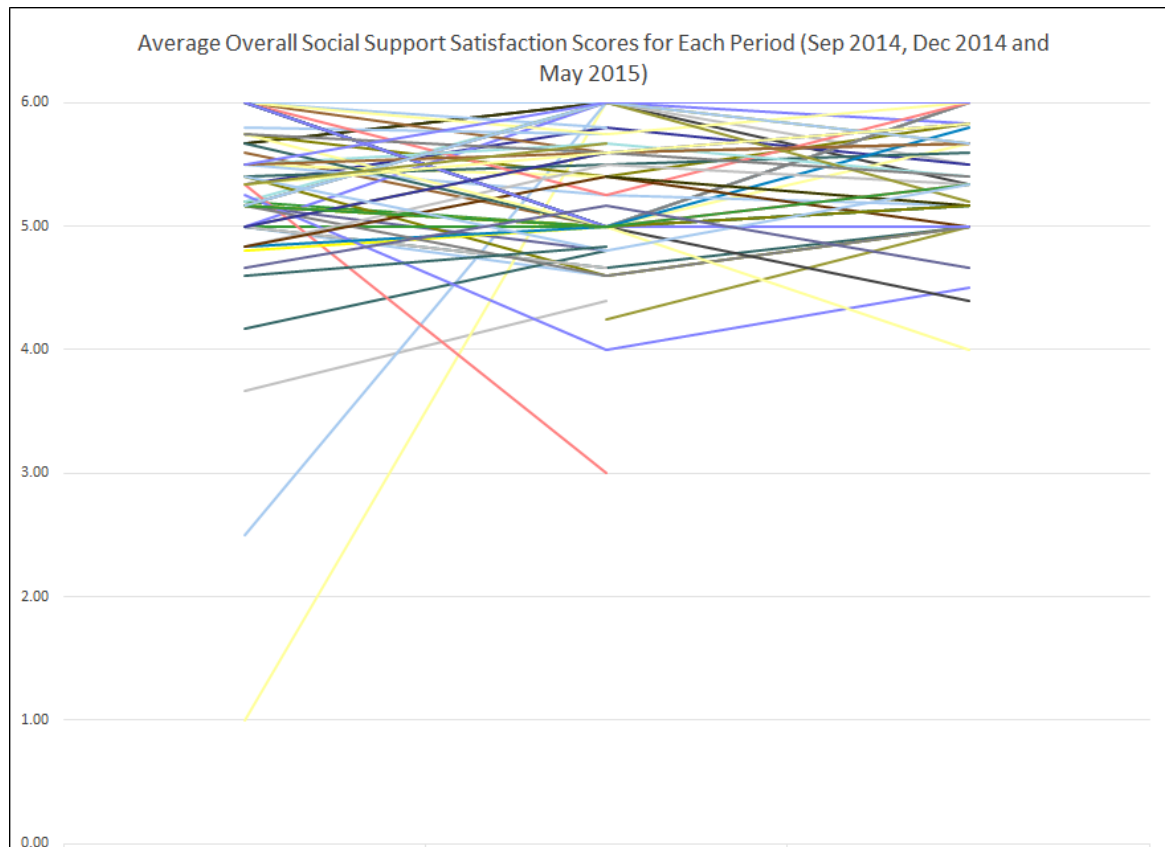
experience, and a situational logic of rejecting the values and norms of the community.

Research on the experiences of international students tends to emphasise the difficulties students have. Yeh and Inose (2003) surveyed 359 international students in the US, observing that students tended to evaluate their experiences as stressful. They particularly noted that students from non-European backgrounds were more likely to report stress than European students, arguing that, since US higher education has its roots in the European enlightenment and European culture, non-European students faced a greater need to adapt, which was considered stressful. Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia (2008), in one of the largest studies of the international student experience, interviewed 200 international students in Australia and found that most participants reported loneliness at some point during their sojourn. They conclude by arguing that institutions should encourage stronger bonds between home and international students (granting causal powers to these ties). Sherry, Thomas and Chui (2010), in an online survey of international students at the University of Toledo (n=121) characterise international students as a 'vulnerable population,' attributing this to cultural differences, financial problems and language difficulties. Following this situational logic, it would therefore be expected that participants would not identify with their current context, resulting in a tendency for participants to reject norms and values of the new context (following Archer's arguments). However, this does not seem to be the case in reality, and there is a need to explore participants' attitudes towards their experiences in order to identify the conditions through which agency is realised in the international student experience.

The social support satisfaction scores provided an indication of the value that individual assigned to their social relations, which cumulatively could be used as a measure of the evaluation of relational goods in general for this community. This was triangulated with data from interviews to explore how participants evaluated their experiences. In the social support questionnaire, participants were asked to write the names they went to for various types of social support, then asked to rate the value of this support on a Likert scale from 0 (very dissatisfied) to 6 (very satisfied), at three different points during the academic year. A total of 109 participants provided information Response rate (Sep 2014,

n=95; Dec 2014, n=83; May 2015, n=72). Interview data was also analysed to provide depth to the quantitative data, and explore what effects the valuation of social support satisfaction had. Evaluation of relationships were manually coded from the transcripts of interviews.

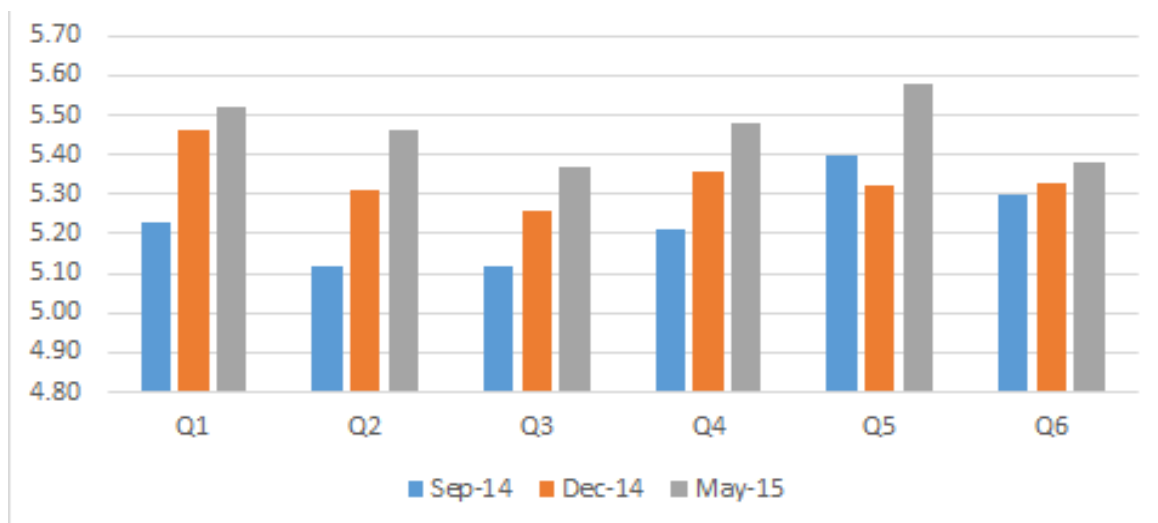
*Table 9: Average Social Support Satisfaction Scores*



Results showed that satisfaction with social support was very high, and increased throughout the sojourn. When the results are broken down for each type of social support, results showed an increase over the three periods for each type of social support (apart from a slight dip for Q5 in Dec 2014). This showed a consistent pattern that the valuation of social relations increased for all types of social support during the year.

Table 8 shows the average social support satisfaction scores for all participants at three times during the year. This graph shows significant individual variation, but the general overall pattern is upward, as subjects valued their relations strongly. Table 9 (overleaf) shows a comparison of the average satisfaction scores for each type of social support for the three periods.

Table 10: Average Social Support Satisfaction Scores by Different Types of Social Support



By valuing their relations highly, participants were demonstrating that they identified with their new context. Identifying is a social condition which ensures congruity between an individual's social behaviour and the context in which they are embedded. This would imply that the norms and values that are established within the community are also valued, and therefore more likely to be adopted by participants.

This high valuation of social relationships was supported strongly from the interviews. The international student experience was a profound one, which had real effects on how individuals conformed to the new context. Participants valued their experiences highly. For example, Rania:

*I have changed a lot, but is the experience that's definitely gonna make me change, like, I wouldn't imagine coming here, having to go through all this and still be the same person. No way.*

Despite the troubles in her home country of Libya, Rania was extremely positive about her experiences, and she developed strong personal relationships with others.

*I am pleased with it, what I expected was not as exciting as I found it to be [sic].*

As Rania confronted a new context, these opened up alternative ways of doing and being. While she did not positively evaluate all behaviours during the sojourn, she tended to conform to the dominant practices and values of the community:

*I feel more attached to the institution and my classmates, and I'm more*

*familiarised [sic] with the educational environment in the UK*

There were two mechanisms at play – cultural and structural differences, which exposed participants to new routines, values and dispositions, and the high value placed on the experience, meaning that participants were more likely to adopt these new values and dispositions. This was illustrated in the following example of Zoe's experiences.

Zoe had gone to state school in Vietnam and was very conscious of the advantages she had in comparison with others she had grown up with. She evaluated her experiences and her relationships extremely positively, but this was not without its problems. For example, Zoe (Vietnam) and Stacy (Russia) became very close friends immediately, but different expectations created tensions. According to Zoe:

*Stacy, she's a great person ::: but I think it's culturally different that I expect her to be a close friend of mine, and only together, like a special position [but] she actually told me that she's closer with different people in different periods of time ... I was shocked after that sentence, she always tell me that I just have to accept other people's mindsets.*

From Stacy's perspective:

*With Zoe? Yeah, that's fine, like, the first term it was really good but now, since Juan moved and I started going to (his) place more often, Zoe started getting a little bit mad at me, yeah, that I'm not spending much time with her, but I don't know, we're fine. We still talk and everything.*

Zoe attributed this to difference in expectations as to what constituted close friendships:

*Friends, I can do a lot of things for them but that will come with an expectation like you want them to do the same ... but then she wouldn't do the same and then ::: (I just feel) like this is not OK.*

Later, however, Zoe's reflections revealed how this experience had changed how she viewed subsequent friendships:

*I know that my other friends (in Vietnam) like really expect you to be there all the time and that kind of thing, but I don't expect that ... So, yeah, I think my social outlook has changed.*

These thoughts demonstrated how reflection on experiences conditioned her social behaviour. Zoe's logic at feeling rejected did not reinforce her expectations of what friendship was. Rather it opened up the possibility of alternative expectations, which she reflected on, and gradually adopted as a normative expectation herself. Noticeably, Zoe adopted the norms of the group. Cumulatively, these changing norms, expectations and routines gradually began to set Zoe apart from comparable others at home. In her second interview, when Zoe reflected on how she viewed Vietnam she stated:

*I feel like I'm more perceptive of everything going on, like, because we have more students abroad and they come back, they bring their own train of thought ... you know, the style of talking and what we're interested about, fashion taste is different.*

Her experiences developed into new sets of behaviours, values and tastes, which distinguished her from those who had not experienced what she had. This provided Zoe a certain amount of privilege at home – part of a new social status consisting of other Western-educated people. This contrasted with how she characterised those from home:

*People are still really close-minded. A lot of people are adopting trends from abroad ... what is trending over there (abroad), but it doesn't really help your country develop.*

This created incongruity between those educated abroad and those educated at home.

*I've been abroad so sometimes when I talk to my friends I really want to tell them like, you know, where do you see yourself do you want to travel ... (but) they don't have the financial circumstances to do all that kind of thing [sic] ... I feel like I'm really, really lucky because I can see at night at the top of the building, I can see further, I can feel I'm going further than them and that I feel like what my friend could go is only there, there's like a boundary that they can go [sic].*

Zoe identified herself as a Western-educated person, adopting habits, routines and dispositions which set her, and others like her, apart from those who had not studied abroad. This resulted from the downward pressures from the social structures in which she was embedded while she studied abroad, which imposed on to her an internationally



educated habitus that distinguished her from others at home.

Participants valued their experiences strongly. This meant that participants were more likely to conform to the routines, practices and values that predominated in the new structures, ensuring congruity with these structures. Since participants (and their families) invested so much time, money and resources into studying abroad, the situational logic was to conform in order to smooth the passage into their chosen university. The rewards for successful students were great, and therefore so was the pressure to conform. These habits became norms which distinguished participants from others at home (even in a short time).

## 6.6. Conclusion

These results describe the experiences of a handful of students on one foundation programme in the UK and it is difficult to say the extent to which these experiences may be generalised to international students overall. Nevertheless, what the research does show is how the experiences that participants undergo condition how they engage with the world significantly. By exploring the interaction between the social structures in relation to the reflections of the participants, it is possible to infer the generative mechanisms of a change in agency.

In summary, as participants confront the new environment, their habits, dispositions and routines may no longer be useful as a guide to successfully negotiating the new context. Therefore, participants are compelled into reflexive deliberation about how to manage their situation instead – and it is their personal concerns which begins to guide action. These actions shape future social structures. Initially, participants are drawn to those individuals who are “similar and familiar” to them, as it takes less effort to develop and maintain relationships with people who are similar, than to people who are very different. Over time, however, participants reflexively recentre their relationships to reflect their shared goals (primarily of passing their exams). As a result, new structures form, within institutional constraints, which privilege certain values and behaviours. Interaction with others within the new context impose onto participants these behaviours, which become adopted as new socialised norms. These new norms distinguish participants from those who have not experienced the same things, meaning

that international students are set apart (privileged) on return to their home country.

An interesting outcome of this research is that habitualised actions, values, dispositions etc. do not typically emerge from the vertical institutional structures (though some do). Instead, the adoption of new routines and values tend to come from sideways, imposed from the relations in which participants were embedded (comparable others).

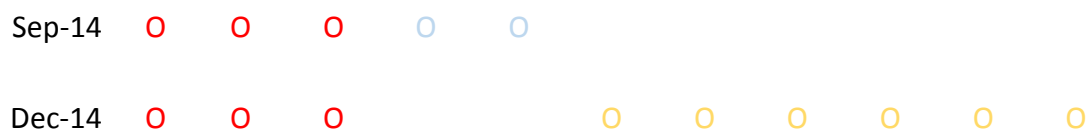
## 7. Results Part II

### 7.1. Introduction

The second part of these results take the form of a series of narratives of the participants who were interviewed in this study. Each individual has a unique experience and, while the collective experiences of participants may lead to a tendency towards particular socialised beliefs, values or dispositions, it is not a deterministic system, and different people will make sense of their own experiences in their own way. The aim of this section is to provide information on the subjective experiences that individuals underwent during their time as international students in order to identify a change in modality as a result of their experiences during their time as international students.

### 7.2. Estefania

#### Estefania



Estefania Ramirez (19) was a student on the International Foundation Programme (IFP) at the University of Bristol. She was from Quito in Ecuador studying in the UK on an Ecuadorian government scholarship to do Medical Microbiology. She wanted to be a doctor but her choice of degree was determined by what was available to her, that is, what she could get sponsored to do and what she could access. It is very difficult for international students to enter medical school in the UK. According to the terms of her scholarship, Estefania could apply to any of the world's top 175 universities (the Ecuadorian government keeps a list of universities which they will sponsor students for). The scholarship was available to the top performing high school students in Ecuador. Students were required to do a preparation course in Ecuador, before going abroad. Estefania was in England with two other Ecuadorians on the same scholarship one of whom was her boyfriend.

Estefania reflected on the strategy of study as a way of getting into medicine: "I was just

really, really trying to get 800 over 1,000 (to enter medical school in Ecuador) and when I got my results back I was like one of the best scores from my country ... so I got like 956, so it resulted that all the guys who got over 900 were awarded with a scholarship.” The idea of going abroad was not in Estefania’s mind at the time of her exams. Once Estefania was on the scholarship, however, all her energy was put into this ‘project’. The scholarship programme she was on was generous, involving a foundation year, plus full educational fees for her degree, air tickets plus a modest stipend. Estefania and the other scholarship students were also required to take a six month preparation course before going abroad, including time spent studying subjects such as Chemistry, Maths or Economics in English and a period of work experience “cleaning parks, so yeah, it wasn’t fun.”

Estefania began the course as a communicative reflexive, and she was initially marked as passive agent needing validation from others in order to find the correct course of action for her. When asked about how she dealt with new experiences, she was often vague: “I really feel like I should keep a friendship with him (Pablo), but I don’t know why I’m not doing that really.” In this respect, she may be characterised as what Archer describes as an “identifier” a subcategory of communicative reflexivity made up of individuals with strong family relational goods and who are indifferent to new experiences, yet nevertheless confront the reflexive imperative. While Estefania gradually became more confident as the year went on and her future plans became more concrete, she displayed agential passivity throughout both sets of interviews:

*Yeah, I mean I didn't come with any expectations actually ... I don't know why, but it was like I'm just going to study there and I don't care if it's nice or not, I'm just going to study so I didn't come with any expectations.*

Estefania’s past provided important resources for the ability to negotiate the present. In particular, while Estefania negatively evaluated her own English language ability, she was a proficient English speaker, and she was streamed into the top set for her English modules in the IFP. Estefania had studied in a bilingual English-Spanish programme in her primary school, and had taken extra English lessons during high school. She had also taken Chemistry in English during her preparation course and, while she lacked

confidence in her chemistry ability and had criticised the quality of the Chemistry course on the preparation course in Ecuador, her experiences studying in English had undoubtedly improved her ability to participate in Chemistry in the UK and she was significantly advantaged over other students, who struggled much more with lectures and seminars, despite their abilities in their subject in their own language. While she lamented the quality of instruction of her teacher in Chemistry in Ecuador, she later acknowledged the usefulness of this course: “actually because I have chemistry in English in Ecuador like this teacher teaching us in English, I'm really comfortable with all of the classes that I've been to :: I really understand English and that kind of thing”. She had never intended to study abroad, nevertheless, her past had provided her with a strong set of resources with which she could negotiate the international student experience.

The international foundation student experience presents participants with significant contextual incongruity. However, despite her agential passivity, Estefania was particularly well prepared to take advantage of the situational opportunities in her path. Estefania did not face the need, comparative to other students on the international foundation programme, to exercise “innovative action” (Archer, 2012: 125). Her routines and habits provided Estefania with the resources she needed to negotiate the new experience effectively.

Estefania gradually became more autonomous as she confronted a situational context where her communicative reflexivity provided no effective course of action and her project became more personal. In her second interview, Estefania demonstrated how carefully she did things, wanting to experience things before making a decision. She talked about perhaps getting a job: “I think I wanted to feel how it is with study.” She also talked about how experience may change her plans for her summers, and in getting involved in university societies. Her strategy in the face of contextual discontinuity often seemed to be ‘wait and see’. Her experiences were marked by uncertainty about the future and about how things work. However, in time she gained experience that enabled her to make more concrete plans.

Estefania remained predominantly communicative throughout the year and her personal project was similar to others around her (Felipe and Andres, and her new friends on the

Chemistry course). As a communicative reflexive, Estefania drew on support from home, her broader support from her scholarship programme (to a lesser extent) and particularly in country support from other students on the same programme. Estefania was on a course with two people she already knew from home, Felipe, who she had been at high school with and who was now her boyfriend, and Andres who she had also met in the preparation course in Ecuador. There were also a handful of other Ecuadorian students who were on the same scholarship programme scattered throughout the UK and Europe. Her two Ecuadorian colleagues provided particular support during the year. While she was not so close to Andres, they were studying the same course, so they spent a lot of time with each other. However, Estefania's relationship with Felipe was particularly strong, particularly for emotional support, and they spent most of their time with each other. These relationships provided Estefania with important continuity anchors, providing a link between her past, her present and her future.

Although she talked warmly of her parents, they became less important as interlocutors over time and she envisaged much less reliance on her parents in the future: "in Ecuador, I always rely on my mum and dad ... but here I have no-one to tell me what to do, so I do it by myself [the reflexive imperative]." Her own personal concerns became the guide, "It's like you set your priorities ... so that makes me more mature, and more independent actually." Meanwhile, her new relationships provided opportunities for dissonance: "actually, I'd like to have more deep conversations with Arab people. I don't know why. I feel like their culture is like really different and interesting ... when I hear Tom and Maithah talking about what is a sin and what is not ... I find that really, really interesting." Cultural differences are characterised as a "shock", yet are opportunities to learn and develop. However, while she shares accommodation with some (male) English students, she rejected behaviours that did not fit her *modus vivendi*: "but I don't really like to ::: well, I mean I'd like to go out but they are like ::: they go out and drink and smoke and that kind of thing ::: I'm not the person who likes to do smoking or drinking or that kind of things".

Estefania talked of sleeping a lot yet this was not what she was actually doing. In fact she was exercising reflexivity, thinking about her new social world and her place in it. This

provided Estefania a space for reflexive deliberation on her experiences in relation to her own personal concerns. In Estefania's situation, this reflexivity reinforced her own pathway through the life course set out for her. Her pathway to success was highly structured by her family, her scholarship, her institution and her friends, and she was very fortunate (this level of structure is unusual in late modernity). This buffered her from the "shock" of contextual incongruity somewhat and she appeared well adjusted to university.

Institutional structures played a part in helping students to foster social support. Estefania talked of how the 'link classes' provided a space for social interaction (link classes were extra language classes (not assessed) which provided students with classes on the vocabulary of their discipline physics link, economics link and chemistry link, for example). These classes were taught by language teachers, using communicative language teaching methodology, where social interaction is embedded in the course design. This contrasted with the methodology used for subject modules, which Estefania described as a place where "everybody just (took) notes and stuff". However, the link class provided students with the opportunity for more interaction "here we (are made) to interact with each other, but in labs and tutorials we don't ... before it was like 'Hi, bye' but now we can talk and it's just better."

Estefania's status as a scholarship student brought associated pressures. The expectations and practices of institutional, familial and peer structures placed pressure on Estefania to behave in a certain way, that is, she had to study and get good grades. She was up to the challenge, of course, but those pressures conditioned her action: "I'm always thinking like, no I have to study or do this because if I don't, I have to pay back all the money they've given me and it's a whole lot of money, so yeah it adds a lot of pressure to that." She also noted how being a scholarship student set her apart from others, "if they (other students) fail the year, they don't have a problem because most of them are paying with their money so, they don't really care about it, but being on a scholarship adds a lot more pressure."

Estefania frequently benchmarked herself against comparable others around her (other international students or home students in her accommodation). This reflection both

enabled self-affirmation and self enhancement, “I feel also that little disadvantage [sic] (compared to others). I mean, I know if I study and put my effort I can be in the same level as they are [sic].” Meanwhile, family expectations (though imagined) also conditioned Estefania’s actions, “It’s not like my parents were watching over me to study and everything but I always felt like I have to study otherwise they will get mad at me. They never did that actually, but I just felt that way. I mean here it’s like I know they won’t say anything but I still want to study and prepare for myself.” Estefania’s behaviour is typical for a communicate reflexive, about whom Archer (2012: 130) notes combines “personal uncertainty and sometimes apprehension with a countervailing desire to make their parents or a parent proud of them.”

Estefania did not have to work hard to ensure compatibility with the new environment. Nor did she have to work reflexively on maintaining the social relations she had, since in a sense, they came with her in the form of the continuity anchors of Felipe and Andres. While she had to confront a number of contextual discontinuities, she did not have to alter her mode of reflexivity. Estefania was a success story an able and competent student who has achieved academic excellence and contentment with her life so far. Her natal context provided her with the strong relational resources on which she was able to find an effective course of action she continued on to her course at the University of Bristol with her Ecuadorian colleagues and with the small group of friends she made during her foundation year. For the majority of international students, the maintenance of strong relationships takes a lot of hard work, but for Estefania, this has been much less stressful. There was a consensus to be produced, supported by her institution her sponsors and her family and friends Estefania has found herself on a relatively smooth pathway through the early life course.

Archer (2012) argues that communicative reflexivity is not well suited to late modernity, since the need to rely on ‘thought and talk’ with sympathetic interlocutors is so difficult to maintain during a time of significant contextual discontinuity. Archer warns that “this mode of reflexivity is relationally formed and needs to be relationally maintained” (p. 164) requiring the efforts of those in the network to sustain contextual continuity. Archer argues that this mode of reflexivity is declining and it is surprising to see this in the

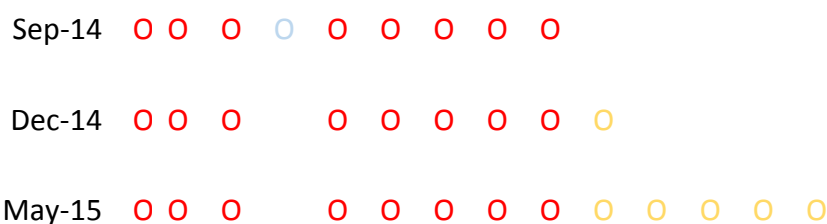


international student experience (an experience characterised by contextual discontinuity and incongruity). In fact, Archer argues that this mode of reflexivity may place individuals at a disadvantage as the reliance on others as a guide denies the individual agency and places them in a passive role (p. 165).

Estefania demonstrated a significant amount of agential passivity (characteristic of communicative reflexives). When asked to reflect on how she has changed during her time on the foundation programme, Estefania acknowledged that she did feel more independent, though it is pretty low level stuff. She provided the example of having forgotten her homework in school, and her parents bringing it to her reflecting that “you just got to be responsible with your things and like, remember to keep everything in order and do things to deadlines.” She also notes her own increase in confidence “I was a bit shy in Ecuador ... like you go to a store or something, I was so shy, I didn’t want to, but know I have to do it. So yes, I am more confident.” However, Estefania demonstrated her own relative passivity to situations, “I haven't really been interested in making friendships here so I think that in the future I'd really like to feel, I mean if I get to feel more sociable”. The international student experience did provide some contextual discontinuity, but not in such a strong way that Estefania had to exercise a new mode of reflexivity.

### 7.3. Hauwa

#### Hauwa



Hauwa, 19, was from Tripoli in Libya and studying on the Chemistry pathway of the international foundation programme. She had arrived in the UK in 2013 (a year before the interviews) on a Libyan government scholarship to do a BSc in Pathology and Microbiology. The scholarship included a year of English, a foundation year and a Bachelor’s degree. Hauwa was in the UK with her best friend Rania (who was also

interviewed for this research) and another friend, Marwa. Hauwa's father was a pharmacist and her mother was a housewife, who had taught biological statistics in a high school in Libya. She had a younger sister and two younger brothers. She had very close relationships with her family and her friend Rania, who she had known since childhood. She had attended a specialist life science high school in Libya and had achieved one of the highest grades in the country (and as a consequence had been offered the scholarship).

Hauwa and Rania were extremely close. They had been friends since primary school, and had been living together in the UK. Rania (who had already met the English language requirements for her degree) had delayed entry into university by a year in order to accompany Hauwa on her English language course. Their parents had wanted them to be together and, although they were on different pathways, they spent much of their spare time with each other. She also spent a lot of time with another Libyan scholarship student who was on the same course as her and they all fulfilled important roles as each other's sympathetic interlocutors, providing important continuity anchors between their past, the present and the future.

Hauwa wanted to become a pathologist and to work in research on cancer, and she had a very clear idea about how she was going to get there. After her degree she planned on doing a PhD in Pathology "in Britain, or maybe in the USA". As a result, Hauwa's natal context displayed a tendency towards a communicative mode of reflexivity, as she had a clear and structured pathway into adulthood, socialised into this by her parents, her school and institutions (social reproduction through participation in education). Although she had been an outstanding student, she had never had to work hard reflexively to get where she was. Moreover, she was enjoying her studies and the city and she was looking forward to her next few years as a student.

However, Hauwa's home country of Libya was facing considerable challenges. While Libya had been able to maintain its scholarship programme, at the time of the interview, there was effectively no government in Libya. Hauwa reported that "the situation is quite difficult, you know :: no one is making the rules or the laws". Hauwa had been an active participant during the Libyan revolution, volunteering as a medic, "because of the revolution (foreign) doctors travelled outside of the country because they were scared of

the situation, so they asked for volunteers to help them in first aid session, so I joined them. It was tiring and it was a little bit scary sometimes because you find people who are covered with blood. My cousin was a doctor at the hospital so he helped me a lot”.

Such difficult circumstances interrupted her communicative reflexivity because, although she had avoided much of the worst of what was going on by her opportunity to study abroad on her scholarship, war and revolution had meant that there was no longer any certainty about her future.

The war had affected her deeply and, at one point, her cousin was kidnapped (though safely returned a few days later). Hauwa’s situational logic in these circumstances was to avoid the situation, “I try not to think about it, because people who are outside the country see the situation even worse than people who are inside”. Her family provided considerable support and acted as a buffer against the worst that was going on at home, “whenever I call my mom and ask her about something in the news, she says, ‘no everything is alright, try not to think about it, just focus on your studies’”. Nevertheless, it was a source of considerable anxiety. She remained optimistic about the long term future in Libya, but the war had meant there was no longer any continuity between her life in the past and her future.

As a result, Hauwa was compelled into reflexive deliberation. She was no longer a communicative reflexive Hauwa could not replicate her natal context, because the opportunity to do so did not exist. She was not autonomous, since she still relied on support from her family, her friends and institutions, nor was she fractured since in her own words she “(needed) to be strong and I have a strong personality”. Hauwa had been on a pathway of social reproduction, but contextual discontinuity meant that there was no longer a consensus to be reproduced, and she was compelled to reflect on the alternatives. For these reasons, I argue that Hauwa was emerging as a meta-reflexive.

The key to meta-reflexivity according to Archer (2012) is that the social order is problematised, therefore meta-reflexives follow the situational logic of opportunity. Archer argues that it is familial relations that are the key to the development of meta-reflexivity (2012: 208), however this was not necessarily the case for Hauwa. Though she hinted at conflict in her natal context (“we (her mother and her) used to fight a lot”), she

had had contextual incongruity imposed upon her by the Libyan revolution, and the opportunity to replicate the natal context no longer existed. Hauwa was compelled into reflexive deliberation by her circumstances, and she confronted the world interrogatively rather than through a set of internalised routines, “before I used to think about the day, only the present. Now I’m thinking about the future. Every step that I do now, I think about its consequences”. As a result, Hauwa followed the situational logic of opportunity, demonstrated by her desire to focus on her studies “my most concerns are to get good scores and finish my studies [sic] ... the thing I’m most concerned about is my study”. For Hauwa it was her studies that was her main project, and even close relationships were subordinate to this.

The challenges that Hauwa was required to confront and the subsequent reflexive deliberations on her situation manifested themselves in a way that was critical of the world around her, demonstrating a critical detachment from her peers. For example, as part of her chemistry course, she (and the other foundation students) were required to take a first year university module with a number of home students. She found them difficult to relate to, commenting that “I think they don’t like foreigners because I have English classmates ::: they’re always together. They’re not even trying to be nice with us”, though she acknowledged that the English people she had met were not representative, “I can’t take an overall idea about all English people from three or four people I met. I can’t judge”.

Meanwhile, she was also critical of the way that nationalities tended to stick together, “it’s a little bit difficult to get in touch with them because ... they came in the beginning from their groups, so you’ve got your Libyan group and the Latin American group”. The new relationships she did make were all related to her study. Not only was she closer to Marwa, “we stay together even more than Rania because we’re studying the same course”, she also made friends with others on her Chemistry course drawing on their shared experiences and difficulties, “we need to cope with it ... we are using other sources like Khan Academy and online lectures (and) we have a schedule over Easter to study as a group, me, Marwa, Lambert and Andres”.

At the same time, maintaining relationships with people from home had become difficult

and distance and time resulted in some relationships , “the problem is that (they) are always busy ... and I’m studying here, so we don’t talk as much as we used to before ... I’m happy, but things are missing, you know, family, friends and all that”. However, it was unclear over the interviews the extent to which Hauwa was playing a role in distancing herself from others. She was also gradually experiencing dissonance in her relationship with Rania. Although they remained close, there were already signs that they were drifting apart. They were spending less time with each other as their interests were different, “I think we’re not going to be so close during the next years, because we’re gonna have a busy schedule, like we’re spending most of our time studying, but we’re going to live together and we’re going to stay best friends”.

Contextual discontinuity also gave rise for Hauwa to deliberate on her own position in the social order. Libya was changing rapidly in particular (and this preceded the downfall of Muammar Gaddafi) the changing roles and expectations of women. Hauwa discussed her relationships with the opposite gender at length, “in my country, it’s not easy ::: not as easy as here to meet with other people, especially with opposite gender”. As she confronted contextual discontinuity, she managed her relationships reflexively. For example, in the first interview, Hauwa had talked about her plans to marry her boyfriend after her degree (“actually in my country, you do not get into a relationship unless you’re sure you’re going to get married”), but by the time of the second interview, they had broken up, “I figured out we are not good for each other and now I’m not thinking about this anymore. I’m just a single lady [laughs]. I think that’s better”. While she acknowledged that Libya was still a very conservative society (“even holding hands is not something familiar”) she observed that attitudes were changing, “it’s a little bit, a slight change, before it was rare to find two people in a relationship, it was something strange to see. But now most of them (students) have boyfriend and girlfriend, maybe because universities are mixed and schools are mixed as well. Libya is not like the Gulf”. Her approach to relationships was endorsed by her family; there were no pressures by her parents to get married, “I think it’s the opposite. For my parents, the most important thing is to get a good education, then to get married”.

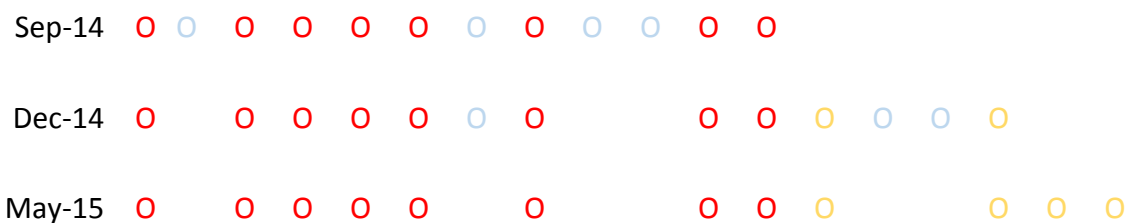
Archer (2012: 210) observes that the critical detachment displayed by Hauwa was very

different from the kind of enforced independence experienced by autonomous reflexives. Hauwa had a secure and loving family life, characterised by strong relational goods. Her parents were supportive of her choices and her relationships. However, while she was critically detached, her desire to work in cancer research betrayed a desire to help people status and money were not her motivations, rather it was a desire, in some way, to make a difference, “I’ve always wanted to know about (cancer) and maybe I can do something to help people who suffer from cancer or this kind of chronic disease ... and another thing is we don’t have so many pathologists in my country”. Archer (2012: 210) recognises that this kind of reasoning is typical of meta-reflexivity, “‘loners’ who seek to devote themselves to others”.

Her ‘project’ was her studies and she put all her energies into this. Since there was an unclear path to her future, she reasoned that she needed to achieve a good degree in order to do postgraduate study. When asked about how she saw her future she replied, “Quite difficult question. First I need to do my Master’s degree ... because you know undergraduate degree doesn’t really matter in like to get a good job [sic] ... but then I’m not sure, I might stay here or go to Libya ... the important thing is to get my Master’s degree and a good certificate to get a good job to either stay here or I want to live in Libya”. She was very well supported in achieving academic success her friends, her parents and her institutions all provided support, and she was very driven. Nevertheless, she had faced the reflexive imperative and in time, she would need to deliberate reflexively on what was important to her and her future.

#### 7.4. Rania

##### Rania



Rania, 19 at the time of the first interview, was an international foundation student from Tripoli in Libya, intending to study Computer Science on a government scholarship. The

scholarship included a year of English language, which she studied at a language school in Cambridge, a foundation course and a Bachelor's degree. Rania was in the UK with her best friend Hauwa (who was also interviewed). The generous scholarship was offered to the highest performing students in Libya. Rania had received the second highest grades in Libya. Rania's father was a doctor in Tripoli, who had studied in Germany when Rania was young (and where she had spent some time), and her mother was also a doctor.

Rania was close to her family and her friends. The most important person in Rania's life was her best friend Hauwa, who was also studying on the international foundation programme, and they had known each other since primary school, "Hauwa is my best friend. Our friendship has been based on achievement and what I want to do in my future ... it was pretty much not the typical kind of friendship". Rania deferred an entire academic year to come to the UK with Hauwa, so that Hauwa could get her English to the right level (Rania had already reached the required English requirements for her foundation programme), "I actually sacrificed a whole year for her", but this turned out to be useful as Rania worked towards and passed an English proficiency exam. Hauwa wanted to study Pathology – only Bristol offered a foundation course with a pathway to Pathology, and as a result, Rania followed Hauwa to Bristol. If Hauwa did not meet the requirements for Bristol, "even if I was accepted, and I get the grades and everything (for Bristol), I will have to move, because we can't be separate". Her description of her relationships suggested a tendency towards communicative reflexivity, which was reinforced by parental and wider cultural pressures, where young Muslim women travelling abroad are required to be accompanied by a male relative. Neither Rania nor Hauwa had a male relative who could accompany them, so they came to the UK on the understanding that they would remain together. She was also good friends with another Libyan scholarship student on the international foundation programme.

Her natal context was characterised by close and supportive relationships with her family and friends, "I was quite pampered at home, like kind of a spoiled girl, my parents would go to work and there would be a maid taking care of the house and I wouldn't worry about anything. I would just get up, eat and go out with my friends". Her early life ... such that she had never had to ... a situational logic of reproduction, supported by familial and

institutional structures. Rania frequently displayed tendencies towards communicative reflexivity – her desire to find work in Libya, the close relationships and sacrifices she made with those close to her and her tendency to make decisions in relation with Hauwa.

Rania had studied at a specialist life sciences secondary school, but had never intended to follow her mother and father's footsteps into medicine. Instead, Rania had decided to choose to study Computer Science for her Bachelor's degree after taking a short business course in Libya, "I really enjoyed this more than anything else ... so I said if the scholarship worked, then Rania, these have been signs for you to like, put your head straight and try that".

*"Throughout my experience, starting with primary school and secondary school and everything, I have realised that I am the kind of person who is more into numbers and puzzles ... I like to thorough think about stuff [sic] and analyse them rather than read."*

Her reflections indicated the extent to which it was Rania's personal concerns which drove her decisions and she was relatively unconstrained in choosing her discipline ("it was my personal choice"). Institutional support from her scholarship programme was strong, remaining so despite the Libyan revolution and subsequent civil war. She received financial support (including a stipend) from the department for education, and she received social support from other students on the scholarship programme, who were scattered throughout the UK and Europe, "we actually have this online community where we all share announcements or something. Sometimes we arrange meetings ... I went to Sheffield to meet two of them. It was so nice". These supportive ties were important because it was often difficult (or impossible) for many Libyan students to return to Libya in the short term because of the war.

However, such contextual continuity became more and more difficult to maintain in a time of significant change. The contextual incongruity between life in Libya contrasted dramatically with Rania's life in the UK, and her situational logic was, naturally, to avoid the former because it was so upsetting, "I don't have Facebook and news is one of the reasons why I don't have it, like when I see my friends, 'oh, someone was killed here, someone was kidnapped there'". Her parents and friends remained well, but their safety



was a source of real anxiety, “I really cared so much and I was like crying and so worried and actions and praying [sic]. But at a point I just gave up, like, I'm helpless, I cannot do anything here”. Her family, friends and institutions, both in the form of the university and the sponsorship programme, provided strong buffers and Rania was optimistic about her personal future, “even if you tell me five years' time, it will be okay”.

Despite the challenges facing Libya, she still felt a deep connection with home, and she imagined her long-term future in Libya, “I really want to go home. I want to work back in Libya and participate in something or at least have a role in something, but I think this may be too difficult”. While Rania was initially marked as a communicative reflexive, she was necessitated into selection by her situational context. The quest for similarity and familiarity which characterises communicative reflexivity no longer existed, as she had contextual incongruity imposed upon her by the situation in Libya. The imperative to select a course of action resulted in Rania following a situational logic of opportunity, conferred onto her by the structures in which she was embedded. She was fortunate to have been offered a generous scholarship to study abroad, which she was appreciative of (“they are spoiling us”).

Rania was compelled into reflexive deliberation about her future due to the lack of a structured path in the long term. Her reflections on life after study often saw her imagining herself working abroad, “maybe Canada” but she maintained a strong preference for returning to Libya. She worked hard reflexively to maintain close relationships, particularly with her boyfriend, “it's basically like my work to keep the relationship going cos he's free and it's me who gets busy and might be distracted so I'm trying my best to keep it as close as possible”. Rania repeatedly demonstrated a tendency towards a communicative mode of reflexivity, but it took her a lot of energy to maintain. Her boyfriend was doing well at his job (“they want him to be a director”) and it was difficult to see how Rania could maintain this relationship in the long term and continue with her *modus vivendi*. At the same time, she and Hauwa were spending less time with each other, “we're not going to go our separate ways. She's gonna have her own world, like, career-wise and I'm gonna have mine, but we'll still be friends”.

As a result, Rania exhibited the emergence of a meta-reflexive mode of reflexivity, where

an individual confronting contextual incongruity means that they cannot reproduce their imagined way of life, so is necessitated to select a course of action based on their own personal concerns. According to Archer (2012: 206), meta-reflexives generally experience a problematic social order in the natal context, resulting in an openness to the situational logic of opportunity. For Rania, there was no opportunity to reproduce the social order, despite her desire to do so, and she was compelled into reflexive deliberation about what to do instead. Fortunately for Rania, she received the opportunity to study abroad, “this is an opportunity no-one should miss”.

Meta-reflexivity is characterised by a tendency towards critique of the social order, often by distancing oneself from others. Rania demonstrated her own meta-reflexivity in contrast with others on her course, in particularly, the mostly male students on her Computer Science course. She reflected on the computer science open day she attended at the University of Bristol, and on her own position in relational terms.

*“There were so many guys there and most of them, I could tell, were not that friendly, not that sociable. It was just me and the girls talking together and the guys were separated ... I don't want computer science to be restricted to men and socially awkward guys who don't interact with people. I actually want to do the subject and encourage people after time to go and explore ... like some girls, I mean, to do the subject ... I'm not terrified of that at all, I've thought about it, but I don't think it will cause me any trouble in the future”.*

Moreover, meta-reflexives have a tendency to embrace a cause, which provides a 'testing ground' through which any future course of action may be articulated (Carrigan, 2015). A repeated theme in both interviews, was Rania's desire to help women in computer science, “like female computer engineers are a minority back home, so I would really want to be an addition to them”. However, a direct pathway to achieve this was difficult to imagine, “like reflecting from now, I think it will be more difficult for me. It would be less flowing than the ideas in my head [sic]”. While her personal concerns drove her decisions, structural constraints prohibited this pathway. Nevertheless, she was strongly motivated to 'make a difference', “My main goal is to go home in Libya [sic] and ::: I'm not sure what I really want to do, but I want to do something that motivates women and

computers and have their role”. While a precise course of action was difficult to imagine, the values underpinning her choices were unambiguous. Her 'proto-commitments' were becoming more and more refined during her time abroad, and they were beginning to play a role in shaping her life.

Rania was not typical of a meta-reflexive in Archerian terms, since Archer argues that meta-reflexives tend to be 'loners rather than individualists' (2012: 208). Rania was neither, she worked hard on and valued her relationships. She was extremely gregarious and popular with other students. Rania's meta-reflexivity was grounded on the lack of opportunity to reproduce the social order. The pursuit of similarity and familiarity which is typical of communicative reflexivity was no longer possible, and Rania had selection imposed on her. Although she acknowledged that she had become more independent during her time abroad, her instinct was still to make decisions relationally, in consultation with others. However, this was becoming increasingly difficult to do. Instead, for Rania it was her values that increasingly determined her decisions.

Rania acknowledged that she had changed a lot already during her time abroad, “but it is this experience that's definitely gonna make me change, like, I wouldn't imagine coming here having to go through all this and still be the same person. No way”. She made friends easily and she evaluated her experiences positively

*“Socially, I find I've developed great and strong friendships with my friendship ... I think it has to do with the diversity in the class. For example, if one third of a class, or half of it, was from a certain nationality then they would basically form a group and they would be more close, but each of us is from a different country ... so we're kind of enforced to befriend each other ... can I just say we clicked just like straight away, like none of us had any difficulties with anyone else”.*

These relationships provide Rania with the opportunity to engage the world in new ways, and she was able to experiment with the social order. At the same time, Rania had strong and durable support from her parents and her friends, which provided Rania with strong relational goods. These relational goods provided Rania with useful resources with which to negotiate her future. However, since there was no longer a consensus to be reproduced, it was Rania's values that were shaping her future life. Her immediate short

term was well structured, funded by her government and supported by her friends, family and institutions. She and her friend Hauwa both progressed onto their programmes at the University of Bristol without any problems. She will have three more years at university to experiment with the social order and develop a course of action that is useful to her.

## 7.5. Stacy

### Stacy

Sep-14    ○ ○    ○    ○    ○

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Stacy (18 at the time of the first interview) was from Yekaterinburg in Russia and had one sister, 17 years younger than her. She studied on the Maths and Psychology pathway, with the intention of going on to a BSc in Computer Science at the University of Bristol. Her parents worked in IT (they have their own company). Her grandparents paid for her university fees (her grandfather is a builder), while her parents paid her living expenses. While she considered herself (and her family) “high middle class” in Russia, money was a primary concern throughout her foundation year, “definitely middle class could not afford this”. This contrasted sharply with how she perceived her social status in relation to her peers on the international foundation programme, who “are more like top of the middle class, high upper class. There are a lot of people who don’t worry about money”. In relation to others, she saw herself with a different status, placing herself “at the bottom of the middle class”. Status was associated with wealth, but also with behaviour: “some of them, like, behaving posh [sic] and some of them are normal people”.

Stacy was classified as a meta-reflexive, a mode of reflexivity which Archer (2012) states is characterised by a problematic social order, rather than internalised (for communicative reflexives) or normalised (for autonomous reflexives). Meta-reflexives experience contextual incongruity, a feature of late modernity where an individual’s natal context does not provide them with the resources to transition to adult life smoothly. As a result of this lack of consensus between the natal context and the individual’s life, the meta-

reflexive is driven to reflexive deliberation about what to do instead.

Stacy's response to contextual incongruity was to study abroad: "since I was 14 or something like that, I was thinking about going to study abroad, because I really wanted this, it's like ... everything is different and I find it more interesting and I kind of wanted to explore and enjoy the different way of life". Stacy's life was conditioned by the situational logic of opportunity, and, since there was no consensus to be reproduced, she embraced the unfamiliar and sought out new experiences.

She chose to study computer science, having some experience designing websites for small businesses in her home town, because it is "quite applied, you can create something and you feel accomplished when you do it and it really works". Archer observes that the meta-reflexives in her study chose their degree not through instrumental rationality, but because it fitted in with their own personal concerns and what they cared about most. This is true, too, of Stacy, who reflected on what she would do with her Computer Science degree in the future: "Maybe some time after I'll do a Masters or a PhD whatever, I'd like to continue the education. I'm not sure I'll be also computer science or maybe a change to something else." Work is not the end, but the means to the end. Stacy was still uncertain about her place in the world, but studying abroad was very much part of her project, as was study, though she aspired to study something she was interested in. In her second interview, Stacy elaborated on her long term plans: "I also want to study something like literature or psychology, or philosophy, which is just basically for myself, for what I am interested in and I'll do this, but just later, when I'm able to sustain myself". She chose computer science because it was creative and would give her the opportunity to fund her ideal lifestyle (*modus vivendi*).

When she reflected on her experiences, she remarked on how well she had adapted in relation to others: "I know I feel I am more adapted to life than some people, when I compare." She also talks of how she confronted the reflexive imperative and how she deliberated on her social world:

*"Here there is no one to control you and you have to think carefully and be aware of your actions. Not all can do this, and this might be the way I grow up ... I was even more adapted to life. When you get in a situation and you don't know what*

*to do, **you just use your imagination and try to fix it** (emphasis added)". She compared herself to others around her, who "don't know what to do, they just get lost".*

These reflections were important to her. Reflexivity possesses genuine causal efficacy and the interplay between Stacy's nascent concerns and the structural constraints or enablements in which she practices conditioned how she viewed herself, "before I was the same person but I didn't have the chance to show my personality, like, to actually be myself. And now, when I'm feeling comfortable with the people I have I can do it, like, I can be who I am and I really like it".

However, Stacy did not always find an effective way through the situational context. There were times when the difficulties she faced meant she was unable to exercise an effective course of action (a feature of fractured reflexivity). For example, Stacy had chosen as one of her options an undergraduate module in Psychology, despite not needing to, and not having studied Psychology before. Because of this she struggled academically in this subject: "I don't really go to (psychology) lectures, but at the same time, I'll be reading the book and I'll be doing my own research on, like, something interesting". Her own internal conversation provided no effective course of action, and the lack of opportunity for "thought and talk" meant that she had to confront this situation on her own. Stacy ultimately failed this module, and as a result, did not meet the requirements for entering her chosen course at university.

Stacy's reasoning was typical of meta-reflexives, who, Archer notes, tend to search and experiment with the sociocultural system." It is this that defines a meta-reflexive and leads to a tendency for them to embrace a cause, however, vague. Stacy's cause was the international life. She had no plans to return to Russia permanently, "Hopefully, I'll stay. Actually it depends where I take the degree, if it's not going to be in the UK after I finish I'll maybe move to the UK because I plan to get the citizenship ... I don't see a good reason of going back to Russia." Stacy had reflexivity imposed on her through a mismatch between her concerns and her context and this situational logic led to her embracing difference. Her interests and values became more refined during her foundation year, and, while they still remained vague by the end of the year, she saw her future away from

Russia.

When reflecting on her life in Russia, she often placed herself in contradistinction with others (her similar and familiars). For example, in her second interview, she talked of her experiences on holiday with her family. “When I was in Dubai with my parents, it was like a horror story for me, cos they always tend to comment something or do jokes (about Arabs) in kind of a bad way for me. They were even getting mad at me for this”. Archer (2012: 207) observes that there is “(almost) nothing that (meta-reflexives) seek to replicate from their natal background”. Although Stacy was close to her friends from her hometown, she distanced herself from them (or noticed a distance between them) over the course of the year: “people back home might change the way they see me ... I don’t know, we don’t really talk”. This contrasts sharply with how she described her friends from in the UK: “some other people ... they became closer to me, so, like, I can count on them and I trust them ... I’m really happy I have these guys ... that’s like the kind of friendship (I have) been basically looking for”.

Making connections or distancing oneself is reflexive. Exploring who and why an individual makes or maintains connections with reveals something about their reflexivity ... Stacy made decisions about her life often explicitly in contrast to others, and the perceived static life in Russia was viewed as something to be avoided. For example, while she acknowledged that her high school grades were not good enough to enter a top university in Russia, she rejected the alternative her hometown university (the state university) as being too provincial: “in my city, the university, a lot of people from my province’s school go to study there as well and I don’t quite enjoy seeing their face every day”. Studying on the international foundation programme (although she had completed the equivalent in her home country) was a strategy first, to avoid the perceived torpidity of her home country, and second an opportunity to engage in her international *modus vivendi*.

Although Stacy embraced her independence, she acknowledged that it was her parents and grandparents who paid for it, and that, while she was in the UK, “(they) have to worry more, like much more to pay for me and that’s not quite good”. She also acknowledges that she has obligations to them for this:

*If I stay here and get the degree, I'll earn like twice more than they can, so if they probably stay in Russia, I've got to pay for them, I can afford them whatever I want. That's how I feel, they don't really tell me 'you'll have to pay for us in the future', but I feel like I will have to because they pay for me quite a lot and that's why I feel like I have to do it.*

These pressures do not necessarily condition her actions in the short term, though they do play a part in how she reflects on the longer term. In order to justify her parents' investment, she felt the need to get a job that made it worthwhile, so she could pay them back in kind. Nevertheless, Stacy evaluated her experiences very positively, particularly her friendships. While Archer notes the tendency for meta-reflexives to be loners (2012: 222), she acknowledges that most meta-reflexives are eager for new experiences and new people with whom to share them. Stacy made strong and deep friendships very quickly. She was very close with a group of four friends, R from Thailand, Zoe from Vietnam and Juan from Colombia and they spent much of their spare time with each other. However, these friendships still needed negotiating: "since Juan moved and I started going to R's place as well, Zoe started getting a little mad at me, that I'm not spending much time with her, but like we're fine we still talk and everything." Moreover, Stacy was very conscious of the difference in status between her and her close friends, with cost of living being a real concern and she found it difficult to maintain their pace of life:

*I'm basically poor and they don't say anything about it, because how the world works, there are people who have money and you, you don't have that much money and there's people who usually drag you to expensive places, restaurants and like, they're not paying for you, and you have to struggle and ask money all the time, and this is really difficult. If they ask me to go somewhere with them, they'll actually give £1 to me, and I have to add £1*

These unequal relations conditioned how she perceived herself in relation to others and she came to strange arrangements with her friends. "If they know I don't really have food or anything, I'll become like, for example with R, how it works, for me it's perfect and for him probably as well, we have like a studio room, it's with a kitchen and he just buys



food. I cook the food, I clean after myself and after him and I clean the whole kitchen. So he basically does nothing.” When asked how she felt about this, she acknowledged, “sometimes I feel like that’s a bit wrong, but no-one complained about this.”

Despite her problems with money and her need to get a job, her actions were ineffective and her deliberations were a little naive. When asked if she was looking for work to help fund her studies, the contextual incongruity, her lack of knowledge and experience about applying for work in the UK and the lack of opportunity to ‘thought and talk’ again meant she had to confront this situation on her own, and she was unable to find work. “I went to the website and there’s like jobs and most of them is like paralegals or something really hard to get cos you either have to work their full time and you need to have experience, which I don’t have”. Visa restrictions meant she was only able to work for ten hours a week, while most part time jobs required people to work for twelve hours. Stacy did not have the social or cultural capital to find the kind of job that she needed.

Her desire to stay in Bristol for her undergraduate course with her friends meant she was ill prepared for not progressing, “when I applied to universities, it was like basically for nothing ... I was quite confused of my choice. Some people have universities they can go to if they fail, and I don’t”. For these reasons, there were times when Stacy displayed tendencies that were typical of a fractured reflexive, a mode of reflexivity characterised by an internal conversation which intensifies disorientation. However, this did not become Stacy’s dominant mode of reflexivity. In this sense, she may be best characterised temporarily as a displaced reflexive (Archer, 2003: 305-313), where she had yet to fully develop her dominant mode of reflexivity. Stacy was able to exercise reflexivity, but the short term demands of the international student experience (particularly academic concerns and financial concerns) did not allow her to impose any longer term plan of action, and the difficulties she encountered temporarily delayed the development of her meta-reflexivity.

Stacy’s relational goods did not provide her with the resources necessary to successfully realise an effective course of action in the short term. Nevertheless, Stacy was overwhelmingly positive about her experiences and the friendships that she made (which were central to her project), and she acknowledged the effect these had had on her

character, “I’m happy with (my experiences) actually, with time you have to realise about yourself, about life and just, like, how to behave”. And despite struggling at times during her course, she remained optimistic about her future, “I’m really optimistic about it because all that I have now, it gives me motive [sic] to go for it and to move so I’ll be able to get what I want. And I know that I’ll get what I want. If I want this, I will get it.”

At the end of the year, Stacy’s close friendship group was separated while they had all planned to remain close friends once they were at university, only one of the group of four made it on to their intended course. Stacy did not get the grades required to get into Bristol, while another of her friends, Juan from Colombia, could not afford the fees after the collapse in value of the Colombian peso made it twice as expensive for him. Stacy’s closest friend, Zoe, chose instead to go to Manchester because the course was better suited to the career she wanted. Stacy ended up going to study Computer Science at Sheffield University after entering clearing, and therefore was still able, through structural enablements conferred on to her by the social structures in which she was embedded, to have the opportunity to realise her short term aspirations.

#### 7.6. Zoe

##### Zoe

Sep-14 

Dec-14 

Zoe, from Hanoi in Vietnam, was 18 at the time of the first interview and was studying on the psychology pathway intending to study the subject at university. Zoe’s parents were both successful in Vietnam her father was a governor “quite high up” in the Communist party in Vietnam, while her mother was a banker. She had a younger brother (four years younger than her), who was in middle school in Vietnam. She aspired to work in public relations, but had decided to study psychology, because of the perceived higher status of STEM subjects in comparison to media studies or communication studies. She was the only Vietnamese student on the foundation programme.

Zoe had strong familial relational goods in her natal context; she was close to both her

parents, and her extended family provided her with support and advice. Individuals with strong family relations typically follow the situational logic of identifying with their natal context. In her early years, the opportunity to 'thought and talk' with her parents negated the need to confront the reflexive imperative, and she grew up into a world she was well prepared for. As a result, Zoe's dominant mode of reflexivity in her natal context was communicative reflexivity, "my mother made decisions for me until I was like 15 ... It was a case of, I have everything, I don't need anything, I just stay here and have a TV, go downstairs, you have food, you go upstairs, you have a bath what else do you need?"

Since her family provided her with everything she needed, Zoe had never had the opportunity to face contextual incongruity until she was in high school. However, Vietnam was developing fast, and the structural constraints and opportunities imposed on to her by her position in her social world placed pressures on her which compelled her into reflexive deliberation. Zoe reflected on how quickly Vietnamese society had changed, "I don't know how for the other people [sic], how the country progress, but for me that's quite quick, like there are more cities now and my city I live in is expanding". These rapid changes brought about new opportunities for her family, which they were well placed to take advantage of. Her father had progressed in politics and her mother ran a bank, "he's more like power and she's more like money".

In light of the contextual discontinuity of Vietnam in the early twenty first century, and the conflicting pressures this placed on her family, Zoe received mixed messages from her parents. She demonstrated this by often contrasting her parents when talking about them, "my father and my mother stand opposite politician idea [sic]", "he knows a lot of people and my mom is who hands the financial [sic]", "my mother makes more, but my dad is better with people". The conflicting messages she received from her parents meant that there were no agreed expectations for Zoe, dictating a need for her to exercise her own course of action. However, there was never any bad feeling between her and her parents, she remained close to both of them, but in terms of her own project, it was Zoe's personal concerns that drove it, "you know, there's two parts like my head keep thinking like, I need to be on my own, independent, but consciously I still depend on them ... if I'm really the person I think I am, I think I have to do more".

She reflected on her youth, when her family, despite their relative status, “used to not have a car” and how this had changed. Such rapid change imposed a need for Zoe to reflect on herself.

*I think I never really grow up in my self-awareness (at school in Vietnam) because my parents just gave me what I need. I don't need anything, I don't feel I need anything so I was like just OK with everything. And at one point I started questioning things. Like in Grade 10 so I don't know what I was studying for ... and I was like what am I doing this for?... everything's okay but there was one point I was like what is the worst thing that could happen if I fail?*

Her deliberations came at a time of relative opportunity for Zoe and her family, leading her to imagine her future life, “I started to see YouTube and I saw people going places, doing stuff ... it's like, why am I here? How far can I go with this? Where do I see myself?” and her mother, who had gone to university in Bratislava in her youth, suggested that she study abroad “and I was like yeah”.

Zoe went to a private all girls' Catholic high school in Boston when she was 15. She liked it at first, but her experiences quickly turned sour, “I actually hated that school so much ... I'm really good at making jokes about my negativity so people don't think it's that severe, but I really hate that school”. Zoe experienced loneliness and disorientation at high school in the US, and she was bullied by other students. She talked openly and at length about the depression she suffered while she was there. Nevertheless, she excelled academically thanks to her teachers (“some were really, really awesome”) and she was offered places at top universities in the US. Despite this, she decided to go to the UK, mainly because the tuition fees were much lower. Her decision to come to Bristol was made in conversation with a friend she knew from Italy. “I actually talked it over with a guy ... and he told me that don't put too much effort in your undergrad study because they gonna look at your graduate study, so then I was pushing for like why I want this school so much”. This interaction hinted at the emergence of an instrumental motivation for decision making.

Zoe made deep and strong friendships with others on her course very quickly, and they spent a lot of time in each other's company. These friendships were really important to her, “I'm really scared about my future because all I've been through ::: it's all traumatic

back in America. Right now, I'm studying really well, I know I can be part of it because I have the emotional support from my friends and I have friends right now, so I want to keep studying and stuff so I don't get affected."

However, while Zoe had made friends in Bristol, she continued to feel lonely, "actually I always feel lonely because :: I don't know what is a really good relationship :: I don't know what is not alone". As a consequence of this, Zoe demonstrated features of fractured reflexivity throughout both interviews, where her anxiety manifested itself as anger:

*I like to sleep, because when I get tired I feel more critical about other things I would get more aggressive ... I kind of push people away, and that's when I feel most lonely ... so after I sleep I get more positive energy and everything back to normal.*

Zoe reflected on how her loneliness had affected her, "I think it's a good thing if you have to be independent in a way, but like sometimes it's just there are people who are there to fill a gap about you feeling lonely. So I think that's loneliness. It's always there."

Zoe approached close relations with caution, "it's like, I want to be friends with (Stacy) but I also want to keep my distance with her ... I'm kind of scared that she's gonna go away if I don't do this right". While Zoe attributed her conflict with Stacy to cultural differences, her feelings went beyond this "I expect her to be a close friend of mine, and only together, like, a special position". Zoe's experiences abroad allowed her space to experiment with relationships, but conflict gave rise to emotion. When Stacy started spending more time with other students, Zoe reflected: "I just feel like being replaced you know :: I tried to calm it down, I tried to think that I'm wrong, I tried to be normal about it, but it's emotionally raging up and I was like, this is not OK". In the new context, Zoe was not able to articulate her thoughts, and subsequently they emerged as emotion. This affected her relationships, "I got really aggressive (with Stacy) who's like closest to me ... I feel guilty," and Zoe tried keeping her distance from those who she felt close to for fear of being hurt.

However, she showed resourcefulness in negotiating her experiences. At the end of the two interviews, she was asked how she had felt she had changed during her time on the

foundation year, commenting that “I think my social outlook changed, and also I became more rational, so like anything wrong I would say ‘why has this happened; why am I feeling this way?’ I would try to work it back, which I would normally just emotionally do”. This is evidence that her internal conversation can overcome her fractured reflexivity, and she was able to make positive decisions about her life, despite the negative emotions.

While she demonstrated features of fractured reflexivity later during both interviews (characterised by emotion and anxiety), I argue that her dominant mode of reflexivity thus far was an emergent form of autonomous reflexivity, as a result of a high degree of separation and the absence of relational goods in the natal context (particularly her experiences in high school in the US). According to Archer, autonomous reflexivity emerges from a situational context characterised by a lack of relational goods, rather than the presence of relational evils (as is the case for fractured reflexives). Zoe had independence thrust upon her, to become what Archer calls an ‘enforced independent’ (p. 168). As a consequence, there was no normative consensus to be reproduced and she was confronted with a need to engage with the world independently. Whereas fractured reflexives avoid the social order and meta-reflexives problematise the social order autonomous reflexives embrace it. According to Archer (2007), autonomous reflexives meet selection head on. This is evidenced in Zoe’s case by how she made decisions about her life.

While Zoe took advantage of opportunities to thought and talk, rarely were her courses of action determined by others. While her closest friends all planned to remain in Bristol after the foundation year, Zoe’s instrumentality led her to alternative plans, “so the ranking for Psychology in Manchester is not that high but the programme is more suitable for what I want to do. So, Bristol has a really high reputation for psychology, but it’s experimental ... but after I did a little research on the coursework in Manchester, I think that would be more suitable”. Zoe’s deliberations are frequently benchmarked against others: “people have really weird reactions about (my ambitions) cos like I want to go to psychology undergrad but then for graduate I wanna ... something more involved with interaction than just the brain”. She displays an ability to use her internal conversation to rationalise her thoughts and decisions “I have kind of a logical argument for my decisions

so I don't feel shaky about it ... I'm confident in where I'm going". Although Zoe sought to work in PR in some way after her degree, her long term plans remained unclear and the future was a source of anxiety. Nevertheless, Zoe was able to reflect methodically and logically about her future, "I think about (my future) too much ... but when I'm actually there, I kind of find that it's not what I thought it can be ... now I know the future is a result of the present, so what I want from my future I sort of have to do here now". Through her reasoning, Zoe is able to rationalise her situational context and develop a course of action based on her own personal concerns that is effective for her.

Although she was studying abroad, and enjoying her life abroad, Zoe's long term future was in Vietnam. However, Zoe also reflected on her changing social status as an internationally educated student. Research has noted the effect of international education on the social stratification of societies in Asia (Pham, 2012; Xiang and Shen, 2009). Vietnam has been undergoing an unprecedented economic and social change. Zoe's family was riding the wave of that change and were considerably more advantaged in comparison with others. Zoe had attended a state school in Vietnam "more like middle, working class ... most of the students were from the countryside".

However, with time, Zoe observed the growing differences between her and her peers, noting in particular the relative good fortune she had in contrast to others in Vietnam, amid the huge social and economic changes in Vietnam. "Some of my friends, they don't have the financial circumstances to do all kind of things ... I feel like I'm really, really lucky because I can see at night at the top of the building, I can see further, I can feel like I'm going further than them ... and that what my friend could go is only there, there's like a boundary". The educational opportunities that she was afforded reinforced the advantages she already had. She talked about how internationally educated students in Vietnam constituted a new social status, "so after they stay here (abroad) and they learn the new way they have the open minded they come back [sic] ... so there's a whole new class of people, like students who travel, and they think really different from students who stay". She also noted some conflict between her and her similars' new worldview in contrast to others, "people (in Vietnam) are still really close-minded. A lot of people are adapting to trends from abroad, but I don't think they're integrating". The leitmotif of a

'different way of thinking' was repeated in both interviews:

*I'm more perceptive of what's going on (in Vietnam), because we have more students abroad and they come back, they bring new train of thought back ... it's like diversity now.*

Zoe is both critical and defensive of her new status. While she readily acknowledges how lucky she is, she also asserts her that, "a lot of people see us students who travel abroad; they just think 'oh they're rich'. OK, so we actually have studied to get a degree you know, not like we're rich and we just paid for our degree, kind of thing".

Zoe's pathway to adulthood was situated during a period of history characterised by rapid change and considerable uncertainty. There was a noticeable tension between the autonomous reflexivity that emerged from Zoe's reflections on her social circumstances and the contextual incongruity and the relative constraints of those who remained in Vietnam. These tensions will have an unpredictable effect on Vietnamese society in the future.

Zoe's deliberations, in response to a changing world, and her experiences in Boston and in Bristol gave rise to a mode of reflexivity based on independence. However, while she often felt anxious about her future, she engaged with the world in an independent way. Although she had experienced significant contextual incongruity, and she often felt anxious about her future, she came across as a confident, independent and happy young woman. During her Easter break, Zoe flew to Rome and travelled back to Bristol across Europe by train on her own, stopping off in Switzerland to try skydiving. She ended up going to Manchester to study psychology, but regularly returned to Bristol to keep in touch with the friends she had made here.

## 7.7. Conclusion

What this chapter demonstrates is how participants reflected on their experiences as international students, and how these reflections affected how they thought about the world, and how they acted within it. Subjects (of course) did not arrive as blank slates, and were already well on their way of developing their own reflexive dispositions. However, the evidence does support the claim that the particular structural features of



the international student experience have a significant effect on how subjects engage with the world. In particular, participants must confront a new context to a greater or lesser extent on their own (some students may be able to rely on close relationships during their sojourn, but many events must be confronted independently). This results in a reflexive disposition where participants must confront the world in an independent way. Meanwhile, subjects must also confront a new context characterised by habitualised routines, values and expectations which are very different from their own. This means that subjects must confront the new context interrogatively, questioning the new context and their place within it. Finally, the international student experience is a profound one, which is charged with strong positive and negative emotions. This has an important effect on the extent to which the subject may feel included (or not) in the new context, and strong emotions may constrain the ability for an individual to negotiate the new context.

## 8. Concluding Chapter

### 8.1. Introduction

This thesis began by arguing that much of the predominant intercultural theory emphasised the causal powers of national culture to explain the adaptation trajectories of international students. The tendency to use culture as an explanation of behaviour is as a result of a particular philosophical world view (neoliberalism), which presumes the primacy of individual actions. According to this perspective, humans are born with agency as they negotiate their social world instrumentally. Culture, therefore becomes an explanation of why action cannot be exercised effectively. This can be seen in the main theoretical explanations of inter-cultural contact, where individuals are categorised by their culture, their nationality or by the characteristics of their culture (for example, individualism-collectivism) as a way of explaining behaviour or adaptation.

However, as was argued earlier, the theories of cross-cultural transition do not provide an adequate way of explaining the experiences of international students, because of first, the tendency of research to emphasise the negative experiences that participants undergo, and second, the tendency to ascribe those difficulties to cultural categorisations. This means that often discussions around the experiences of international students follow a deficit model, which, though often challenged, endures. However, the international student experience is transformational in terms of behaviours, values and the way that subjects exercise control over their lives, but the prevailing explanations do not capture this in any useful way.

### 8.2. Summary of Key Findings

#### 8.2.1. Vertical and Horizontal Explanations

This study provides both vertical explanations of the international student experience (culture, structure and agency) and horizontal explanations (how structure and agency change over time). Archer (1982) demonstrates that as structures change, so agency changes in relational terms as structures condition agency (what she calls double morphogenesis). This concept allows researchers to separate out culture, structure and agency and investigate how they affect each other temporally.

The international student experience can be separated out into its three strata, operating at the cultural, structural and agential levels, each of which possess emergent causal powers. First, culture relates to the values of a society. The international student experience is situated during a time of rapid economic, social and technological change, characterised primarily by the philosophy of economic neoliberalism (Mitchell, 2003; Moutsios, 2009; Spring, 2016), which emphasises the free movement of goods, people and capital. Even though future economic growth is expected to come from the so-called *Global South* (in particular, the BRIC countries of Brazil, Russia, India and China), it is a Western form of neoliberalism that currently predominates. A neoliberal view of education aims to prepare individuals for a globalised economy. This is reflected in the most common degree destinations for international students (typically, finance, management and economics, or engineering). Particular values are privileged in neoliberal education. In particular is a liberal education, based on a scientific view of the world (grounded on the ideals of the European Enlightenment). Related to these ideals is the use of English as a *Lingua Franca*, and education in the medium of the English language is particularly privileged. Most significant, however, is the neoliberal view of agency. Neoliberal economics views the individual in a particular way: as an autonomous self that is “a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business” (Gershon, 2011: 546), a view which conflates agency with autonomous action.

At the structural level, neoliberal values result in the development of particular structural features which actualise these values. In the international student experience, there exists a number of institutional structures that facilitate the global movement of people (that is, students) and capital (principally student fees, living expenses and accommodation expenses). Higher Education Institutions recruit either directly, or more commonly, via networks of educational agents in countries across the world. Financial institutions provide financing arrangements (typically in the form of long-term loans) to students studying abroad. For a few lucky students, governmental or private institutions provide various types of scholarships (from partial to full funding). Governmental institutions issue student visas (and in some countries, like China, students require exit visas). Educational institutions impose the predominant values through the provision of

classes, and assessments, which are legitimised by issuing credentials at the end of the degree. These credentials are privileged in local labour markets (see the work of Johanna Waters, 2006; 2009a; 2009b; 2012) as dense, local social networks validate the experiences and valorise the credentials in the local labour market place. Research shows that Western academic credentials do provide labour market advantages in the local (to the student) labour markets (Xiang and Shen, 2009).

However, at the agential level, the prevailing view of students as autonomous beings is problematic on three grounds: first is that it denies the constraining effects of social structures, and subsequently does not offer an explanation of how autonomy is achieved. Second, it does not recognise other ways of engaging with the world (alternatives to autonomy). Finally, by denying structural constraints, this view of agency is not able to be critical of itself, it presupposes the value of autonomy. This research's contribution to the conceptualisation is to explore how agency is realised in the international student experience, in particular, what are the generative mechanisms of agential change and how these mechanisms condition agency during the sojourn. In particular, I observed a sequence of agential change from the initial stages characterised by a disruption to routine action, followed by a structural context which narrows selection, imposing on to subjects a particular situational logic, namely: *absence of relational goods*, which leads participants to engage with the world independently, *contextual incongruity*, which compels participants to question the world, *shared experiences*, which leads to a convergence of behaviours and values, and *troublesome events*, which may block effective action. All of these, I argue, are typical of the international student experience (though obviously care should be taken when making generalisations from a single study).

#### 8.2.2. Routine Interrupted

Participation in the international student experience typically leads to a disruption in habitual action (commonly conceptualised as culture shock) as subjects must confront a new context with different socialised norms, routines and values. Habitual action (and its many cognates) has a long and central role in social theory. However, despite its importance, the concept remains problematic (Kilpinen, 2009). In particular, the dominant view of habits in social theory (that derived from Humean philosophy, where

routinised action takes no account of consciousness or intent) provides no way of explaining how habitual actions are realised. Meanwhile, psychological (or cognitive) explanations of habitual action, similarly, do not provide a way of explaining how agency may be realised. Neurocognitive studies into habitual action suggest that congruity between our mental schema and our environment facilitates the smooth running of social structures (thereby providing an explanation of the importance of habitualised actions – see Balleine and O’Doherty, 2010; Seger and Spiering, 2011). However, this research (though useful) unfortunately does not go beyond rationalistic explanations of action, neither providing an explanation of how action may be realised, nor how habits may be transmitted in social groups.

Archer’s contribution to the structure and agency problem is important, principally because she aims to solve the problem of how agency emerges. Archer’s concept of reflexivity provides a way of describing how habits may be formed (through situational logic). For Archer (2012: 48), habitual action is “blocked by problematic circumstances”, and it is within this context that reflexivity achieves primacy as individuals are compelled into modifying their habitualised behaviours, which over time become habitualised into new routines. Innovative action (mediated by reflexive deliberation) takes up more energy, meaning that these experiences may be more stressful, or they may be more exhilarating. Over time, however, these innovative actions become habitualised as individuals adopt new behaviours and values that are more congruous with their new environment. As an individual finds themselves in a new set of structural constraints, selection is narrowed and subjects must engage in reflexive deliberation to find an effective course of action from the opportunities available.

Particular features of social structure may elicit a particular situational logic, and from a recurrence of these events means that over time, a new way of engaging with the world emerges. In this way, disruptions to habitual actions may result in the adoption of new habits, values or dispositions (the causal power of reflexive deliberation). This explanation does not rule out an emotional response to the environment altogether, though. A disruption to habitual action may intensify emotion or anxiety, meaning that an effective alternative course of action may not be found (possibly further intensifying emotion or

anxiety).

This has strong implications for intercultural theory. The tendency in intercultural theory for cultural explanations of social action reduces agency to habitual actions, and does not currently provide an adequate way of explaining the variety of responses to the situational context, how individuals may exercise innovative action in the new context or how the emergence of agency may be impeded. Archer's research provides a way of explaining the genesis of those habits (that is, an individual's ability to act creatively and innovatively to a new context).

The disruption of habitualised action for international students is clearly evident in the literature (though not always properly recognised). Structures in the new context, such as linguistic boundaries or cultural boundaries, constrain agency in the new context, narrowing selection. Conversely, learning a new language or studying for a degree presents participants with new ways of engaging with the world. Participants must confront these new events reflexively, over time resulting in a change in the way they engage with the world. However, this research shows that while these mechanisms may not always have been strong enough to effect a change in the dominant mode of reflexivity, they did condition agency in some way.

### 8.2.3. Recentering

According to critical realist philosophy, structure necessarily precedes agency as it is structures that provide the conditions for behaviours to emerge. This research demonstrates that subjects underwent a significant change in social networks, where changes in social structures involved changes in the triadic relations in which individuals were embedded, which in turn provided the conditions for agency to emerge.

Familial or other close relational triads tended to remain relatively stable throughout, acting as continuity anchors during the sojourn. While, interviews demonstrated that the nature of close relations changed over time as participants became more independent, these ties tended to endure. However, triadic relations with comparable others changed significantly. A social network analysis of ego-centric networks revealed a process of *recentering* (Tanner, 2006) as individuals negotiated their relations during their sojourn. Initially, individuals were embedded in reciprocal triads with close friends from home. As

subjects prepared to move abroad, they underwent a ritualistic process of saying goodbye to friends (involving the setting up of electrical communications of remaining in contact through social media). After the student travelled abroad, these relations began to diminish with distance and time, making these triadic relations unstable. Meanwhile, new relations were created in the new environment with comparable others sharing the same experience. Relationships with comparable others from home weakened as participants engaged with their immediate experiences.

These new relations provided new constraints and enablements from which new ways of engaging with the world emerged. According to Donati's (2010; 2015) relational sociology, network connections possess genuine causal efficacy in the form of relational goods (such as warmth, trust) or evils (such as distrust). According to Donati, relational goods are subjectively received by individuals, on which they reflect and respond to. The reiteration of these reflections and responses over time become routinised and it is from the recurrence of these reflections that a new mode of reflexivity may emerge. This research shows that participants confronted a new structural context, unique to international students marked by an absence of relational goods, particularly in the initial stages, where subjects were compelled to engage with the world independently. However, over time, networks develop based on homophilous ties (the "similar and familiars", in particular same culture and same discipline ties), which also formed the basis of symbolic boundaries between groups. Over time, networks reflected the development of a small world network (Watts and Strogatz, 1998), where communities developed around shared experiences and goals, and the relational goods that emerged from these communities formed the basis from which engagement with the world emerged.

#### 8.2.4. Generative Mechanisms

These new structures provided room for agential actions that were often either habitual (in the form of routines) or innovative (in the form of reflexivity). One of Archer's main contributions to the structure-agency dialectic is to demonstrate how particular features of social structure lead to a tendency towards a particular routinised way of engaging with the world. This process of recentering resulted in a number of specific features of

the international student experience which conditioned the agency of its participants: namely, an absence of relational goods, contextual incongruity, shared experiences and troublesome events, all of which conditioned agency in some way,

#### 8.2.4.1. Absence of Relational Goods

Perhaps the most salient feature of the international student experience is that, particularly in the initial stages, the experienced is marked by a sudden lack of available social resources, as participants become distanced from established sources of social support. This research shows that participants began their experience abroad marked by a lack of social connections, before new communities formed within specific structural constraints, such as linguistic or disciplinary boundaries. The academic literature on the international student experience also bears this out, with a large body of research going back nearly fifty years on the difficulties that international students encounter in establishing social connections in the new context (see for example, Bochner, et al., 1977; Hendrickson, et al., 2011; Adelman, 1988; Yeh and Inose, 2003; Sawir, et al. 2008; Sovic, 2008; Coles and Swami, 2012). This has typically been viewed in interventionist terms, as research often makes recommendations in order to help students develop social connections in the new context (see, for example, Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune, 2011; Rienties et al., 2012; 2013; 2014). This is useful and necessary, but there is no research on how the absence of social relations affects how participants engage with the world.

According to Archer's ideal types of reflexivity, an absence of relational goods is a necessary social condition for the emergence of an autonomous mode of reflexivity. A lack of opportunity for "thought and talk" with sympathetic interlocutors compels individuals (on their own) into subjective deliberation about their lives, within their situational context and, in the absence of others, it is the personal concerns of the subject which becomes the guide. Archer argues that individuals who confront a context marked by a lack of relational goods are compelled into a situational logic whereby they must engage in the world independently. Subjects find a need to actively engage with the world in order to actualise their deliberations, reflecting on their context, in relation to their own goals and interests and they subsequently develop a mode of engaging the world, which is characterised (in the absence of others) principally by self-interest.



The quantitative component of this research showed how the participants of this study reported social networks in the first instance marked by a lack of connections, where they had independence thrust upon them in a way that they may be characterised as what Archer refers to as “enforced independents” (2012: 168) – those who must exercise agency autonomously, because there is no alternative. The experience was also marked by events such as homework tasks, classroom tasks and assessments which led into longer-term goals such as final exams or graduation, which were specific and achievable in the short-term, and which resulted in a context marked by competition as participants competed with and compared themselves with comparable others in the new context. The repetition of these events resulted in an emergence of an internal conversation that become more purposeful and instrumental.

All the interviewees in this research reported being more independent as a result of their experiences. In particular, subjects displayed autonomous action in their management of time, relationships and choice of degree courses. However, autonomy may also be fallible, and can be characterised by false starts and difficulty, particularly initially, in exercising action effectively. Meanwhile, because participants have had independence thrust upon them, this autonomy may be tinged with negativity. However, this mode of reflexivity only became the primary mode of reflexivity for the one of interviewees (and she arrived as an autonomous reflexive), as participants confronted other events which conditioned behaviour in different ways. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to say that all the interviewees displayed autonomous attributes to some extent.

#### 8.2.4.2. Contextual Incongruity

A second feature of the international student experience is that participants enter a new context marked by contextual incongruity, or “I don’t know what others know”. Archer observes that individuals who confront a social order which is problematised in some way experience a critical detachment from their context. It is this disassociation between subject and context which provides the conditions for the emergence of meta-reflexivity. During their time abroad, international students must confront contextual incongruity in a number of ways, creating a liminal sense of being “in-between”: in between childhood and adulthood (for many); in between dependence and independence and of being

between cultures. While participants have been successfully enough socialised in their home context to have opportunities to study and travel abroad (and all the cultural, social and financial capital that entails), their habitualised socialised routines may no longer be useful in the new context. This mismatch between the socialised norms and values of the individual and the environment means that participants must reflect on the social order in order to successfully navigate it. As subjects reflect on their context, this invites the question “what’s going on?”, which in turn prompts the response “why is it like this?”. The recurrence of events where subjects are made to question the world results in an internal conversation which reflects on the world interrogatively rather than through routine.

Subjects who find themselves within a new social order have the opportunity to create their own meaning of this space, and for meta-reflexives, it is this critical detachment which opens up individuals to the situational logic of opportunity. Departure from previous structural constraints (such as parental constraints) provides participants with the freedom to experiment with the social order and, since there is no consensus from the natal context to be reproduced, subjects are compelled into selection based on their own personal concerns. According to Archer, these concerns take on particular significance, as they become the guide for action. Although the desire to explore can mitigate negative feelings, individuals may feel a sense of non-belonging or outsideness.

Contextual incongruity may also lead to a tendency for subjects to achieve congruity between themselves (either consciously or unconsciously). This may be due to a number of mechanisms. One is induction, that is a spread of behaviours from individual to another, for example if one student works until midnight on their homework and gets a good mark, then another student may view this as a behaviour they should be engaging with. If enough people adopt this behaviour, then it becomes a norm for the community. Another mechanism is opportunity structures, where new behaviours result from exposure to new structures, for example opportunities to participate and offer opinions in seminar discussions may mean that subjects are more likely to challenge opinions they do not agree with. Cumulatively, subjects confront particular events where they face a need to achieve congruity. This results in new habits, routines and dispositions being formed

among participants which set them apart from individuals who have not confronted the same experiences.

All of the participants interviewed in this research displayed features of meta-reflexivity, with three of the five interviewees demonstrating meta-reflexivity as their primary mode of reflexivity. It is difficult to say to what extent the international student experience *caused* this change, however, their time abroad provided a place where subjects could experiment with the social order. The international student experience presented participants with a liminal space, where previous sets of rules and constraints no longer applied. For some participants the liminal space is temporary, as they are expected to return to their previous structures (though with a change in status). For these subjects, the international student experience was part of a process of social reproduction, and the habits, values and dispositions that emerged from participation as an international student, set them apart from others at home. For other participants, the international student experience involved the production of new structures, as previous structures (in morphogenetic societies) no longer existed, or had no way incorporating international students into them. For these students, the international student experience opened up alternative ways of doing and being, and their time abroad was characterised by critical questioning of the world around them, and experimentation with the social world (meeting new people, trying new things).

#### 8.2.4.3. Shared Experiences

A third structural feature of the international student experience which conditions student agency deviates from Archer's description of reflexivity. For Archer, reflexivity achieves primacy in morphogenetic societies, as a lack consensus to be reproduced compels subjects into reflexive deliberation about what to do instead – accelerating morphogenesis. However, what this research finds is that a consensus did exist in the international student experience as a result of the shared goals and shared experiences of participants and, as a consequence, behaviours, routines and values seem to converge during the sojourn. Participants come from very different backgrounds, but had all chosen a similar route into adulthood (that is, higher education in the UK). How was this consensus achieved?

Consensus can be found in Archer's communicative reflexivity as subjects need an internal conversation that needs to be confirmed by others. For Archer, communicative reflexivity is a feature of morphostasis. Communicative reflexivity is the glue of social structures as it is confirmation of action by others that reinforces socialised norms and behaviours. However, certain social conditions must be met in order for consensus to emerge. First, communicative reflexivity requires access to sympathetic interlocutors with whom individuals' concerns can be validated or completed. Archer refers to the homophilous ties with "similar and familiars", who validate the internal thoughts and concerns of others, thus reinforcing the agreed upon socialised norms and conventions. Subjects also need an investment in their context through which attachment can be achieved, thus creating the conditions which ensure congruity between the subject and their context. Moreover, there also needs to be sufficient relational goods for identification and attachment to emerge. All of these conditions were met in the experience of the participants in this study.

This research shows that the international student was a profound experience. Moreover, participants evaluated their social relations very highly, and all had a significant investment in the experience all of which ensured congruity. However, this created conflicts with home – their experiences may have made participants no longer congruent with their natal context. Relations with others going through a similar experience have an important conditioning effect on how participants engage with the world. First, these relations provide vital emotional support during the sojourn. Close relations were also used as guides – informational and instrumental support – providing advice and information to each other, which informed action. Students also benchmarked themselves against comparable others (either close ties or weak ties). For example, how much effort others were putting in conditioned (but did not determine how much effort an individual put in. Differences between individuals also gave rise to an awareness of other ways of doing and being, some of which were rejected on reflection, while others were adopted on reflection. Cumulatively, these relations provided the conditions for the development of a convergence of values, habits and behaviours.

A useful way of explaining this is Victor and Edith Turner's concept of *Communitas* (1969;

2012). In order to make sense of the conflict that underlies a change in status, Victor Turner (1969) developed the idea of *communitas* to describe the intense community spirit that refers to feelings of equality, solidarity and togetherness. Turner argues that *communitas* emerges from the shared experiences that participants undergo and accepted differences, such as race, gender and class become de-emphasised or ignored. A new temporary social structure, rather than recognised hierarchy, may be formed under *communitas*. When individuals share experiences, they are freed from the constraints of the previous social structure, and may form deep bonds with each other based on common beliefs and shared experiences, which may form a basis for their new phase of life. According to Turner, individuals in *communitas* may experience heightened states of joy and authenticity in relationships. Meanwhile, the changes that individuals undergo represent potentially new and previously inaccessible behaviours and values, which are transformative, irreversible and integrative (Meyer and Land, 2006). Edith Turner (2012), in her book on *communitas*, extends Turner's concept to explain transition across a number of experiences.

The reason I include *communitas* in this discussion is because I argue that *communitas* may be viewed as an emergent property of social relations, and a condition for agential change. The collective joy which resulted from shared experiences provided the conditions for attachment or identification with a group, meaning that members of this group were more likely to adopt the habits or values of the community. Edith Turner observes that *communitas* occurs through *alignment*: "the sense of everybody being in the same boat. Then everybody starts pulling in tandem. They become aligned ... 'something' seems to have pulled human souls together". The question is how is alignment achieved? Unfortunately, neither Victor nor Edith Turner provide any methodical attention to this question.

However, in this study, something akin to collective joy was observed. Interviewees reported profound joy with their experiences which was attributed to the diversity of the group. However, *communitas* may not be universally experienced - not all participants shared in the collective joy. In the final few pages of her book on *communitas*, Edith Turner offers an explanation of sliding off alignment, an *interrupted communitas*, though

this remains inadequately explained. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that those who shared in the collective joy of the international student experience tended to be more likely to conform to the values and routines of the community. Those who were not aligned may be more likely to be excluded from those values.

#### 8.2.4.4. Troublesome Events

This research also showed that participants confronted events that provoked affect and constrained agency. Fractured reflexivity is a mode of reflexivity where events tend to intensify stress or anxiety so that reflexive deliberation is unable to bring about an effective course of action. The key characteristic of fractured reflexivity is that the internal conversation exacerbates emotion rather than leading to a satisfactory conclusion of events. In this way, Archer notes that individuals whose dominant mode of reflexivity is fractured may only ever “engage in anything more than the survivalist’s day-to-day planning (2012: 248)”.

The necessary conditions for the emergence of fractured reflexivity are events or circumstances which provoke stress or anxiety. Archer provides the example of university students struggling to adapt to the new environment, and unable to find a sympathetic interlocutor who can validate the internal conversation, are compelled into introspection which intensifies negative emotions. These leads to strategies of avoidance. While fractured reflexivity may become the dominant mode of reflexivity for some people, Archer observes that individuals may become temporarily fractured due to certain events, before returning to a previous mode of reflexivity (who she calls displaced reflexives) or developing a new one (impeded reflexives). Alternatively individuals may develop a way of engaging with the world which relies on emotional responses (gut feelings) to the environment (expressive reflexives). The international student experience may be characterised by events which provoke both strong negative and positive emotions which may intensify disorientation and participants may find it difficult to exercise and a course of action that can resolve problematic events.

Much of the research on the international student experience focusses on the apparent disorientation of participants, though this is often characterised as culture shock or learning shock (Sovic, 2008; Schweisfurth and Gu, 2015). The contribution of this research

is to resituate the concept of *shock* as part of a wider context within the life course, where contextual discontinuity results in the need for subjects to reflexively deliberate on the new context. While, this may result in a new way of engaging with the world, this research does not provide enough examples of fractured reflexivity in order to be certain about the extent to which this is a feature (or not) of the international student experience. The interviewees in this study were a rarefied group – high achieving and proficient in English and mostly on scholarships. This is far from typical of international students however, an interrupted habitus did constrain agency to some extent (albeit temporarily – what Archer refers to as *displaced reflexivity*). It is a weakness of this study that the small sample of students did not allow for a proper investigation into the presence of fractured reflexivity in the international student experience, and it can be safely said that many participants do struggle to find an effective course of action. There is a need to explore this more deeply.

### 8.3. Significance, Limitations and Implications

#### 8.3.1. Original Contribution

Much of the research on the international student experience emphasises the causal power of either culture or structure over agency (see, Brown, 2009; Bochner, McLeod and Lin, 1977; Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune, 2011) or agency (the “active coordinating will” of Marginson, 2013; Tran and Vu, 2017) over structure and culture, explanations that deny causal powers to the other side of the equation. The original contribution of this research is to demonstrate how culture, structure and agency interact during the international student experience, how agency may be constrained or enabled and how subjects may exercise power within these constraints and enablements.

In particular, this research identifies specific generative mechanisms behind the change in agency, identity and maturity of international students: what the structural features of the international student experience are, and how these structures condition agential change over time. In particular, this research supports the premise that it is structures which provide the conditions for agency to emerge, and suggests particular structural features of this group of students which conditioned how they engaged with the world. Looking at how agency may be conditioned by the constraining or enabling effects of the international student experience can provide much better explanations of adjustment

and transition of international students. Archer's concept of analytical dualism provides a way of demonstrating how habitualised ways of engaging with the world emerge from the recurrence of particular events.

What this research also demonstrates is the importance of reflexive deliberation in adaptation. While culture provides differing values, and structures present constraints and opportunities, it is reflexivity that drives agential action. The international student experience presents participants with a particular structural context in which participants are compelled into reflexive deliberation ("I don't know what others know"). As a result, students must work hard reflexively to negotiate their experiences. Over time, these deliberations become routinised, developing into a new mode of reflexivity (a new way of engaging with the world). This research provides empirical evidence to show how the agency of participants was conditioned by events they confronted as international students.

### 8.3.2. Limitations

There were a number of limitations of this study in terms of both practical and methodological aspects. One of the most significant limitations was that this study was subject to significant observer-expectancy bias (the cognitive bias where participants of a study are influenced by the fact that they are taking part in a study). Specifically, interview bias suggests that subjects of an interview are influenced by the interviewer, in that they may consciously or unconsciously offer explanations of events which they think is what the interviewer is looking for. This was compounded in this study by the fact that I knew the students being interviewed. Interview bias can influence responses significantly and, while I took reasonable steps to limit bias by way of coding of interviews and using a clear analytical framework, it was impossible for either the researcher or the subjects to remain completely detached. Anonymous processes of interviewing and social network analysis were not available to the researcher.

This study was also subject to design bias, whereby the data gathered by the researcher is what the researcher seeks. Initially, I aimed to quantify the social support of international students, and consequently opted for the social support questionnaire as a measure of social structure. However, in doing so, participants were not given free range to name



social connections, meaning that social network analysis only reflected the networks that the survey prompted for. Although, the survey was written to elicit six different types of social support in recognition of this potential bias, prompts were chosen by the researcher and many types of social connections were not elicited.

Furthermore, data for social network analysis was gathered in only one location in one academic year. This means that the survey reflected only the social structures that existed in this single location for this period of time. As a result, generalisations made to the entire international student experience are difficult, and different conditions in different environments may lead to different experiences.

Another unavoidable issue due to the small sample size for the interviews was the potential for participant bias. The subjects of the interviews were all female, all proficient English speakers and all knew each other. This was obviously non-representative even of the cohort of students in the survey, but also of the general international student population. One significant issue is the effect that a lack of linguistic proficiency had on how subjects engaged with the world was missing from this research. This is a significant omission, given that a large proportion of international students are below proficiency level (as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference and measured by English language exams such as IELTS). While limiting interviews to a small number of participants who were able to articulate themselves clearly in English allowed for a more in-depth study, this was countered by the fact that it made generalisations difficult, if not impossible. The marginality of subjects is often only evident by their absence (for example, by withdrawal). Those who are not exercising effective power over their lives are less likely to participate in a study and less likely to be accessed in the first place.

A final issue is that the critical realist view of the relationship between structure and agency, like all analytical methods, is open to criticism. While it provides a very useful way of analysing the causal effects of social structures on agency, there may be some aspects that are missed or not fully interpreted. Archer's conceptual framework is still being developed fully. At the same time, by using a single analytical framework, this research is still subject to the epistemic fallacy: while evidence for causal relationships between structure and agency has been sought, this research still relies on inference to identify

cause and effect. While I argue that critical realism is the epistemology that is most honest with its own limitations, nevertheless direct causal relations can never be definitively identified since generative mechanisms can never be isolated, tested or falsified. Moreover, the implications of this research have been deduced from the results, and have not been implemented or tested.

### 8.3.3. Implications

The tendency of intercultural theory towards upward or downward conflation can be approached in two ways – either by developing new models of acculturation, or by improving the models that are already widely used. Tempting though it is to dispose of 80 years of research on acculturation (and over 100 models of acculturation, Rudmin, 2009), since the tendency is for intercultural theory to share the same defects, it is perhaps a more elegant solution to identify and improve on the limitations of existing models.

Archer's solution to the generic problem of conflation in social theory is to add a temporal dimension to the analysis of agency and structure and to employ reflexivity as a generative mechanism. In this way, we can see that events necessarily precede action, and action is mediated by reflexive deliberation:

*Image 3: Heuristic*



This simple heuristic (rule-of-thumb) can be used to enhance existing intercultural theories by adding the dimensions that are often overlooked. By offering a temporal dimension, researchers can see how events condition behaviour, and by including a dimension on reflexive deliberation, researchers can explore how agency emerges. By applying this simple heuristic to some of the most well-known models of intercultural contact, it is possible to improve our understanding of the acculturative experiences of students. I will demonstrate this by applying this heuristic to two of the most famous concepts in acculturation theory: Hofstede's individualist-collectivist dimension and Berry's four-fold model of acculturation.

First, the individualist-collectivist cultural dimension is perhaps Hofstede's most famous contribution to comparing cultures. According to Hofstede et al. (1991), individualism can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social network in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families. Its opposite, collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly-knit network, particularly extended family ties. However, descriptions of intercultural contact that use this dimension tend to attach these traits to national categorisations of culture as an explanation of behaviour, reducing members of that nation to habitualised behaviours (for example, categorising say East Asian society as a collectivist culture). It also requires culture within those nationalities to be fixed (and therefore their behaviours). What this research adds (and owes to Archer) is the addition of a temporal dimension. In so doing, it is possible to see how cultures may change over time along an individualist-collectivist spectrum. Collectivist cultures rely on close social relations between similar and familiars which hold together a consensus and enforce sanctions for those who break the consensus. However, in morphogenetic societies, technological, social and economic forces make the social relations necessary for collectivism to emerge much more difficult to maintain, meaning that it is much more difficult to achieve consensus. Therefore, morphogenetic societies may tend eventually towards individualism as the close ties necessary for the maintenance of collectivism become too difficult to maintain. This being the case, collectivist and individualistic cultures are less in conflict with each other, as they are within themselves (the internal conflict of morphogenetic societies).

Participation in education (particularly international education) has the effect of either reinforcing existing hierarchical structures in morphostatic societies or of accelerating societal change in morphogenetic societies. As Rizvi (2005) notes, the transnational movement of just a few people is enough to disrupt existing hierarchies in the home country. This makes it much more difficult to maintain the social relations which underpin the consensus required for collectivism, and old values, habits and dispositions may be replaced by new ones. What this research shows is how interviewees all felt themselves set apart from their home cultures in some way, either through conflict in their home countries (which they were not a part of) or as a result of experiences in the new context. Each of the interviewees reported how social relations in their home context were

increasingly difficult to maintain, and, as a result, personal concerns increasingly became the guide. In this way, participation in education abroad may be seen as a mechanism for societies to tend towards individualism. The close social relations and shared values essential for collectivism either became too difficult to continue.

Second, adding the prism of reflexive deliberation to Berry's four-fold model of acculturation can provide a way of explaining how individuals may approach or respond to a particular situational context, thereby explaining habitualised social behaviours. Berry's four-fold model of acculturation is one of the most famous theories of acculturation. This model allows for the categorisation of acculturation strategies along two dimensions, the first of which asks "is it considered to be of value to maintain one's identity and characteristics?" and the second asks "is it considered to be of value to maintain relations with the host society?" Acculturation strategies may then be categorised into four general groupings: assimilation, integration, segregation and marginalisation. The disposition of the host culture may also be categorised in a similar way (integration, melting pot, segregation and exclusion). The combination of the individual's acculturation strategies and the host culture's dispositions allows for 16 different permutations of intercultural contact.

However, while these categorisations may form the basis of policy or practice, such empirical models are problematic on the grounds that they are subject to the epistemic fallacy – by placing acculturation strategies into groupings, analysts are not able to see the effects of these strategies. What the heuristic brings is a way of enhancing these categorisations in order to be able to see analytically how cultural behaviours may emerge within these contexts. For example, an international student may arrive in the new context with an integration orientation in mind; that is they aim to adopt some of the values and behaviours of the host culture, while retaining values from their home culture. This would imply that subjects hold both the host culture and home culture in high esteem. However, in the new environment participants may experience a context which exhibits a segregationist strategy. Research on the experiences of international students repeatedly shows the boundaries between home and international students, and it can be said with a fair amount of certainty that the host culture does seem to

demonstrate some tendencies towards segregation – students are often classified by their fees status (international, home or EU) and treated accordingly, visa restrictions constrain free movement to some extent (for example, requirements for attendance) and areas near universities become student-lands. This heuristic allows the relationship between the reflexive deliberations of the subject and the context in which they are situated to be approached analytically. While participants may arrive in the new context with openness to new ideas, but also their own socialised expectations, they may be presented with a series of events which excludes them somewhat (perhaps not deliberately) from other communities, particularly the host culture. Using the heuristic, it can be demonstrated that the recurrence of events where participants feel excluded may result in a socialised situational logic, shared by those having the same experiences, which gives rise to an internal conversation characterised by critical questioning (“why is it like this?”). Interviewees in this research all mentioned the challenges they had interacting with home students. This tension may give rise to a situational logic of critical questioning towards the host culture, which may result in a disposition to not engage with it.

This research has practical implications, too. In particular is the way that institutions approach the concept of autonomy. Autonomy is a privileged mode of behaviour in higher education and is included as a course aim in many of the programmes delivered at universities in the UK (it is certainly true for the University of Bristol). This is problematic for two main reasons. First, autonomy is often conflated with agency. Moreover, agency is often confused in practice as institutions may require that students become autonomous, while also at the same time demanding a critical and interrogative way of engaging with the world by means of social (and communicative) approaches to learning, overlooking the relationship between behaviour and the structures from which behaviours emerge. Meanwhile, autonomy is treated as an ideal type of behaviour, which must be achieved and evidenced as if it were one of Bernstein’s generics, completely overlooking how agency is realised. This research shows that institutional structures may not necessarily lead to a tendency towards autonomy, as subjects may instead develop alternative ways of engaging with the world as they confront and reflect on events unique to them according to their own personal concerns.

While this research does not recommend any particular classroom applications, it can inform institutional practice. Tick-box approaches are not useful, and since they are performative, do not, in any case, provide an effective measure of behaviour. Similarly, the privileged position of autonomy also needs to be questioned (autonomy is conflated with independence – we all want our students to be independent). Without privileging any particular mode of reflexivity, students need to have a range of opportunities to engage with the world in order to find their own way, and institutions must offer the maximum scope possible for students to experiment with the world around them. Of course, universities already offer many extra-curricular activities (which are key to university life). However, research shows that opportunities for students to engage with university life tend to come at the beginning of the year – a time when international students are still acculturating to their new environment. Coles and Swami (2012: 93) observe an interesting paradox where international students report improved confidence in their new environment as opportunities to participate in student life diminish. There needs to be more opportunity to offer international students (or any student who experiences initial disorientation) the widest range of opportunities possible to participate in university life. This is particularly important for private pathways providers, many of which do not offer opportunities to the same extent as universities do.

#### 8.3.4. Future Research Potential

This research supports the idea that structural features condition how participants engage with the world. However, the findings are restricted to one cohort of students at one university in the UK. In order to develop models of practice that can be generalised to wider student populations, more research needs to be done in a range of contexts. In particular, the presence (or not) of fractured reflexivity is lacking in this research, and there is a need to be able to explore the experiences of students who find themselves constrained in the new environment. In order to do this effectively, interviews need to be done in the mother tongue of the student. Moreover, there is a need to explore the experiences of a broader range of students, such as disabled students or mature students, in order to investigate how structural features condition how they engage with the world. There is a need also to develop practical applications. A good understanding of the

relationship between structure and agency is useful, but often practice is developed in isolation from research (and vice versa). There is a tension in the way we approach student agency (synonymously with autonomy), and this does not reflect the way that agency is achieved. The development of practical applications that are solidly underpinned by good research will allow institutions to provide students with an environment where they can achieve effective power over their lives.

Finally, there is a need to continue developing Archer's framework to improve its explanatory powers. This involves expanding, developing and experimenting with different data gathering methods (such as Social Network Analysis) and challenging inconsistencies within her framework. One particular issue is the proliferation of the identification of different modes of reflexivity. On top of Archer's (2003) original three modes, more have been observed and sub-modalities have been observed also (see for example, we-reflexivity, Donati, 2010; vulnerable fractured reflexives, Scambler, 2012; co-reflexives, extended reflexives and restrictive reflexives, Kahn, 2014). Care must be taken not only to identify different modes of reflexivity, but also to identify the contexts from which they emerge (their generative mechanisms). Without identifying their generative mechanisms, these observations stop being realist, and instead become empiricist. Although it is possible to identify as many modalities as there are human beings (since we all confront a unique set of circumstances), in so doing, the explanatory powers of Archer's realist ontology are lost.

## 9. Appendices

### 9.1. Appendix 1 Semi-Structured Interview Questions (Pilot Study)

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
  - Where are you from?
  - What are you studying?
  - Why did you decide to come to the UK?
  - What are your plans for the future?
  - How do you feel about your experiences so far?
2. Tell me about your studies.
  - How satisfied are you with your studies?
  - Do you work well with others in your class?
  - Where do you go if you have problems with your studies?
3. Tell me about what you do in your free time.
  - Have you joined any clubs or societies?
  - Do you have any hobbies?
  - How important is it to feel part of a college community?
  - Where do you go if you feel lonely?
4. Tell me about your accommodation.
  - Who do you live with?
  - Is there much to do?
  - Do you plan to find other accommodation at any time?
  - Where do you go if you have problems with your accommodation?
5. Tell me about your friends and family from home.
  - How do you keep in touch with friends/family?
  - How important is it to keep in touch with people from home?
6. Tell me about your friends in the UK?
  - Have you made many friends?
  - Have you made many UK friends?
  - Have you made any international friends?
  - How important do you think it is to participate in local culture?
  - How important do you think it is to feel part of an international community?



## 9.2. Appendix 2 Social Support Questionnaire

### Social Network Questionnaire

#### Participation and Consent Form

This questionnaire is being delivered as part of a study on the social networks of international students and how they may change over time. If you are an international student, can you help me by completing this survey?

*This survey consists of six questions and should take about ten minutes to complete.*

Please indicate your willingness to participate by answering these questions:

1. I understand the purpose of this research and why I have been asked to take part.

**Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

2. I agree to participate in the survey. I understand that my replies will be kept confidential since I will not be identified in any report that is based on the findings of this survey.

**Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

3. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time during the survey in which event my participation will immediately cease and any information I provide will not be used.

**Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

4. I am a student from outside the UK

**Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of this research project, please contact me:

[blair.matthews@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:blair.matthews@bristol.ac.uk)

**Part I**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Programme of study:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:**

Male ☐

Female ☐

**Nationality:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Parents' Occupations:** \_\_\_\_\_

**How long have you been in the UK?** \_\_\_\_\_

## Part II

The following questions ask about how people around you provide you with help and support. Each question has two parts. For the first part, please list the people you know (not including yourself) who you can rely on for help or support. Give the person's name, their relationship and the medium which you communicate with (see example).

For the second part, circle how satisfied you are with the overall support you have.

If you have had no support for a question, write *no one*, but still rate your level of satisfaction.

Please answer all questions as best you can. All your responses will be confidential.

### Example

Who do you consider your closest friends?

Name	Relationship	Medium
Mary	Friend	Face-to-face
Dan	Brother	Facebook
Sally	Friend	Face-to-face

How satisfied are you?

1. Very  
satisfied

2. Fairly  
satisfied

3. A little  
satisfied

4. A little  
dissatisfied

5. Fairly  
dissatisfied

6. Very  
dissatisfied

**1. Who do you consider your closest friends?**

Name	Relationship	Medium

How satisfied are you?

1. Very  
satisfied

2. Fairly  
satisfied

3. A little  
satisfied

4. A little  
dissatisfied

5. Fairly  
dissatisfied

6. Very  
dissatisfied

**2. Who do you go to when you need information for your studies?**

Name	Relationship	Medium

How satisfied are you?

1. Very  
satisfied

2. Fairly  
satisfied

3. A little  
satisfied

4. A little  
dissatisfied

5. Fairly  
dissatisfied

6. Very  
dissatisfied

**3. Who do you go to when you need information about life outside university?**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Medium</b>

How satisfied are you?

1. Very      2. Fairly      3. A little      4. A little      5. Fairly      6. Very  
satisfied      satisfied      satisfied      dissatisfied      dissatisfied      dissatisfied

**4. Who can you rely on most when you need help?**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Medium</b>

How satisfied are you?

1. Very      2. Fairly      3. A little      4. A little      5. Fairly      6. Very  
satisfied      satisfied      satisfied      dissatisfied      dissatisfied      dissatisfied

**5. Who do you go to when you feel lonely?**

Name	Relationship	Medium

How satisfied are you?

1. Very  
satisfied

2. Fairly  
satisfied

3. A little  
satisfied

4. A little  
dissatisfied

5. Fairly  
dissatisfied

6. Very  
dissatisfied

**6. Who do you go to for career advice?**

Name	Relationship	Medium

How satisfied are you?

1. Very  
satisfied

2. Fairly  
satisfied

3. A little  
satisfied

4. A little  
dissatisfied

5. Fairly  
dissatisfied

6. Very  
dissatisfied

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