

# Structure and Agency in the International Student Experience

BALEAP PIM Glasgow – November 2016

Blair Matthews

## Changes in Identity/Agency

- “I wouldn’t imagine having to go through all this, and still be the same person. No way.”

## The problem with intercultural theory

- A tendency in research to emphasise negative experiences
- A tendency to attribute causality to cultural differences (downward explanations)
- An (unintended) deficit model of international students

# A deficit model of international students

- International Students' Cultural and Social Experiences in a British University: "Such a hard life [it] is here" (Newsome and Cooper, 2016)
- International students: a vulnerable student population (Sherry, Thomas and Chui, 2010)
- Loneliness and International Students: An Australian Study (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Rania, 2008)

## Yan and Fitzpatrick (2015: 4)

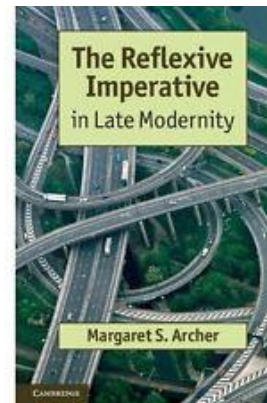
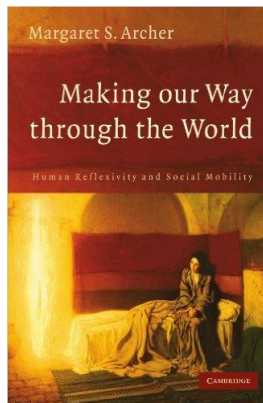
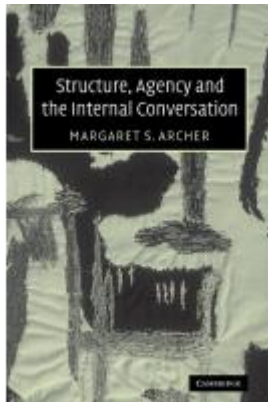
“When I just came here I did not know where to find healthy food, so I ate a lot of fast food, and gained a lot of weight. Later, I noticed other college students they lived pretty healthy life style, I mean they have good diet and they went to gym, and I want to like that [sic]. So I started to search online and ask my friends. Now I am an expert about finding American healthy food.” (Muli, Saudi Arabia)

## Yan and Fitzpatrick (2015: 4)

“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 life style, I mean they have good diet and they went to gym, and I want to like that [sic]. So I started to search online and ask my friends. Now I am an expert about finding American healthy food.” (Muli, Saudi Arabia)

# The problem of culture, structure and agency

Margaret Archer (2003; 2007; 2012)





```
graph TD; Culture[Culture] --> Structure[Structure]; Structure --> Agency[Agency]; Agency --> Time[TIME];
```

Culture

- Globalisation (in particular neoliberal values)
- Cosmopolitanism, ELF

Structure

- Funding, governmental
- Institutional
- Social networks

Agency

- Reflexive deliberation
- What matters to me!

TIME



## Reflexivity (Archer, 1982)

- “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa”
- “an internal conversation”
- ... which mediates between structure (“what’s going on?”)
- ... and agency (“what am I going to do?”)
- ... and actualises the causal powers of social structures

## Research Question

- How does the ISE affect student agency?

## Methods

- Interviews (n=5) with IFP students
- Snowballing technique
- Twice a year (once at the start of first term, once during the second term)
- Between 30 minutes and 1 hour (total about 8 hours)
- Limitations: v. small sample; unrepresentative

## Structural features of the ISE

- Absence of relational goods
- Contextual incongruity
- Shared experiences

## Absence of relational goods

- Marked by a sudden lack of social connections
  - Short and long term, specific and achievable goals (university applications, assessments)
  - A lack of opportunity to “thought and talk”
  - Increasingly, personal concerns become the guide
  - A recurrence of these situations result in habitualised way of engaging with the world marked by purpose and instrumentality
-

- *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 (N, Ecuador)*
- *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. (D, Russia)*

- Tinged with negativity
- *“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.” (H, Vietnam)*

## Contextual incongruity

- Incongruity between socialised norms of the student and those in the new context
- Critical detachment
- Situational logic of questioning the world “why is it like this?”
- Recurrence of these experiences results in interrogative mode of reflexivity
- What matters to me – agency becomes values-based



## A, Libya

- *the situation (in Libya) is quite difficult, you know ::: no one is making the rules or the laws*
- *I try not to think about it, because people who are outside the country see the situation even worse than people who are inside*
- *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*

## M, Libya

- *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'*
- *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*
- *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*

## Shared experiences

- Shared experiences, shared goals
- Comparable others (benchmark, support)
- Result in congruity with comparable others (habitualised, socialised norms)
- “international student habitus”

- *(H, Vietnam)... 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.*
- *(D, Russia) With H? Yeah, that's fine, like, the first term it was really good but now, since I moved and I started going to (his) place more often, H 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.*

- *(H, Vietnam) 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.*
- *(H, Vietnam) 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.*
- *(H, Vietnam) 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.*

## Fractured Reflexivity

- Presence of “relational evils”
- Emotion and Anxiety
- Suppress agency
- Day-to-day

- *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.*
- *sometimes I feel like that's a bit wrong, but no-one complained about this.*

- *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.*
  - *it's like, I want to be friends with (her) 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*
-



- *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*

## Conclusion

- The primacy of reflexive deliberation in transitions
- Social structures shape reflexivity – the recurrence of particular events results in a habitualised mode of reflexivity (way of engaging with the world)