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The development of agency in first generation learners in higher education: a social realist analysis

Kathy Lockett* and Thembi Lockett

Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a formative evaluation of the mentorship support programme run by the Maskh'iSizwe Centre of Excellence for recipients of its bursaries. Learning theory traditions have typically been divided into those that prioritise individual cognition versus those that prioritise the context in which learning occurs. In both these traditions, the individual agent is dissolved. This paper interrogates the ontological assumptions held by dominant learning theories regarding relations between individual and society that neglect agency in the learning process. Archer's social realist ontology offers a way forward by reinstating the full properties and powers of learners as agents. Archer's social theory supports theories of learning that emphasise ontology and practice, as well as epistemology. It is therefore suggested that support programmes for undergraduate financially disadvantaged learners ensure that they first develop a sense of personal identity and social agency as a pre-condition for succeeding academically and developing a professional identity.

Keywords: social realism; agency; learning theory; higher education

This paper critiques the ontological assumptions of dominant theories of learning in which agency is neglected in the learning process. Ontological assumptions have direct consequences for the way in which learning contexts and processes are constructed (Wheelahlan 2007). The paper focuses on learner agency of financially disadvantaged students on the Masakh'iSizwe programme. Firstly, the paper introduces the work of Margaret Archer (2000, 2003, 2007). Secondly, it locates the bursary programme within the context of the current skills crisis in South Africa. Thirdly, an analysis of the data is presented drawing on Archer's theory of agency and modes of reflexivity. In the light of this analysis, recommendations are made with regard to the importance of the development of identity and agency for support programmes in higher education.

Theoretical framework

Traditions of learning theory are divided into those that prioritise individual cognition on one hand and those that prioritise the context in which learning occurs on the other, e.g. activity theory and situated learning theory. In both of these traditions, the individual agent is dissolved. We argue that by restoring the full properties and powers of learners as agents, Archer's (2000) social realist ontology offers a way forward.

The traditional cognitive paradigm has been established in Western rationalist thought since Kant and Descartes proposed an isolated thinking subject, separated from an objective, independent world. It remains hegemonic in higher education institutions. Both cognitive and constructivist views of learning focus on the accumulation of knowledge and the development of mental mechanisms in individual minds at the expense of non-cognitive issues. Thus the multiple properties and powers of agents are conceptualised as epiphenomena of cognition. This reductive move erodes the emotional and non-cognitive complexities involved in the learning process. Furthermore, the social context in which learning takes place is neglected and an understanding of learning as a relational process between individual and society is lost.

In contrast, socio-cultural theories of learning focus on the internalisation or appropriation of cultural tools and knowledge. Learning thus becomes a process of joining 'society's conversation' (Archer 2000). The danger of this tradition is that the learner is reduced to a passive agent in which the learner's active role in understanding and creating new knowledge is ignored (Vosniadou 2007). The causal properties and powers of individual learners are hollowed out, relegating the learner to a product of social forces. Such theories tend to focus on the context or environment in which learning occurs (Wheelahan 2007).

The theoretical position adopted here is that learning in higher education should embrace the practical and ontological, as well as the epistemological aspects of learning. It is suggested that it is possible (and necessary) to hold together both the cognitive-constructivist and the socio-cultural traditions. Learning is understood to involve not only acquiring new knowledge, thinking and conceptual change, but also new ways of doing things and new ways of being (Barnett 2004; Barnett and Coate 2005; Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007). A view of learning that involves 'deep transformation' of cognitive structure, identity and social structure is proposed.

Following Packer and Goicoechea (2000), this view, based on Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky, understands learning as a process of becoming, that occurs through purposeful activity in a cultural and social context that is constitutive of identity and being. Learning and identity formation are understood as emergent properties that occur through mental and practical communal activity that happen in relationships of desire and recognition, motivated by a search for identity and the need to play a social role. Learning to know about the world is understood to be an integral part of participating and relating in a learning community; this includes negotiating a personal and social identity (Packer and Goicoechea 2000). This suggests that participation in supportive relationships that offer learners recognition and status are vital contributors to academic success and professional development. This may especially be the case for first generation university students who often are not in a position to receive appropriate support and social and cultural capital from their homes and primary socialisation. These ideas are developed below using Archer's (2000, 2003, 2007) theory of human agency.

Archer (2000) sets out to recover human agency, which she believes has been 'ontologically undermined' (2) to no more than the effects of discourse and society by post-structuralist and post-modernist social theorists. In the South African context, her position is important for moving away from a 'victim of apartheid' attitude that interpolates those who remain structurally disadvantaged in post-apartheid society. Archer identifies the problem of the relationship between structure and agency as the

most pressing contemporary sociological challenge. She avoids both 'upwards conflation' (agential voluntarism) and 'downwards conflation' (structural determinism) by insisting that structure and agency be kept analytically distinct, each bearing different and irreducible causal powers and properties. Regarding structure, Archer (2003) distinguishes between structural and cultural emergent properties, according both; temporal priority, relative autonomy and causal efficacy with regard to agency. She reinstates human agency by setting up the following dialectic between objective structure and subjective agency: firstly, temporally prior structural emergent powers distribute material resources and positional, organisational and institutional power differentially. Similarly, cultural emergent powers distribute differentially cultural resources and symbolic power, such as ideas, theories, doctrines and languages (ways of thinking and ways of speaking). These structures possess generative powers of constraint or enablement. Importantly, she views these structures as wielding only potential powers that are contingently activated only when a human project (intentionality or agency) comes up against them. In other words, structural effects are triggered only when agents act on the basis of their subjectively defined 'concerns, projects or practices'. The latter get defined in individuals' 'internal conversations' as people juggle and prioritise their need to engage with three orders of reality: the natural, practical and social orders.

When agents act, the effect of social or cultural structure is not deterministic. Archer (2003) proposes that when confronted with structural constraints (or enablements), agents deliberate reflexively through internal conversations and decide how to respond or react to objective circumstances that are not of their own making. Thus for Archer, human reflexivity (self-talk) is the mechanism that mediates between objective structure and subjective agency (we learn to deliberate about ourselves as both subject and object). Archer (2007, 4) defines reflexivity as 'the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their social contexts and *visa versa*'. She suggests that reflexivity is a pre-condition for playing a social role and that it is a necessary condition for the working of any society: 'The establishment of successful social practice is dependent upon the adaptive ingenuity of reflexive subjects' (Archer 2007, 10).

Social context and skills development programme

The research reported in this paper was conducted in the context of the skills shortage currently experienced in South Africa. The critical shortage of skills in the quantitative, engineering and built environment professions is threatening the sustainability of economic growth. Government initiatives such as the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative and the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition together with the Department of Labour's National Skills Strategy and Skills Development Fund are seeking to address this crisis. One strategy is to increase the enrolments and graduation rates of higher education programmes in the 'scarce skills' fields. A recent national cohort study (Scott, Yeld, and Hendry 2007) shows that only 22% of students who enter three-year mathematical science programmes, 24% of students who enter three-year life and physical science programmes and 32% of those who enter four-year engineering programmes, graduate in the minimum time.

The Masakh'iSizwe bursary project seeks to address this situation. It is jointly funded by the Western Cape provincial government's Department of Transport and

Public Works and the National Skills Fund, in partnership with a range of private sector construction companies. Currently, the project grants full bursaries to approximately 300 disadvantaged learners. The programme's recruitment policy prioritises financially disadvantaged learners, women and learners from rural communities (Masakh'iSizwe Centre of Excellence 2007). The project aims to develop cohorts of professionals in the engineering and built environment fields who are academically successful, lifelong learners and critically constructive citizens committed to service (Masakh'iSizwe Centre of Excellence 2007). It hopes to achieve these ambitious goals by providing supplementary support programmes to enhance students' academic and professional development. In 2007, three support programmes were launched: a mentorship programme; leadership programme; and a life-skills programme. The mentorship programme proved to be problematic. One of the authors was commissioned to conduct a formative evaluation on the project's support programmes. This paper focuses on the evaluation of the mentorship programme.

The mentorship programme targets students undertaking in-service training. Students from rural areas and those assigned to a 12 or six-month in-service training period from universities of technology were given priority. Mentors were selected on the basis of their having appropriate professional qualifications and experience; many are retired engineers. In 2007, 51 students were assigned to 11 mentors. Both mentors and mentees were trained at a three-day workshop. It was agreed that mentors would meet with their mentees once a month for three hours. Students were encouraged to keep learning journals to track their learning.

Methodology

The evaluation of the mentorship programme was undertaken in the following manner.

Sixty-three students and 12 mentors participated in the mentorship programme:

	Gender		Race			
	Female	Male	African	Coloured	Indian	White
Completed questionnaire (n 051)	22	29	24	21	3	3
Interview participant (n012)	6	6	6	3	1	2
Journal entry (n 010)	7	3	7	3		
Completed questionnaire (n 012)	1	11	1	3		8
Interview participant (n04)	1	3		2		2

Three qualitative research methods were used to collect data on the mentorship programme. Firstly, structured and semi-structured questionnaires were given to both mentors and mentees. Secondly, in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with students on in-service training and with their mentors. Thirdly, journal entries were collected from the same group of students, who volunteered to allow the researchers access to their journals. It is important to note that the data were gathered for the purpose of evaluating the mentorship programme. They were not elicited deliberately to prove the validity of Archer's theories. Rather we found that there was sufficient

evidence in the data to suggest the usefulness of Archer's framework for informing both practice and further research.

The interviews and journal entries were transcribed and coded using NVivo software. Apart from categories set up to capture data directly related to assessing participant satisfaction with specific aspects of the programme, additional categories were created to capture data related to the development of student agency: background and history; outlook on the future, including career; key current concerns, ultimate concerns; and reflection on personal strengths and weaknesses. The latter data sets are used below to illustrate the potential of Archer's theory of human agency for understanding the processes of learning and professional development.

Analysis and discussion

Responses from both mentors and mentees suggested that the mentorship programme has achieved only limited success thus far (42% of all mentees felt that the mentorship programme was not beneficial to them). Some students called for 'caring mentors' to be available when they are on campus, as well as on site. A key issue for students appeared to be the mentor's ability to relate to and care for mentees. For example, one of the most highly rated mentors was not an engineer, but took a strong personal interest in the students, assisting them with life skills, such as drawing up CVs, the use of IT and study methods. On the basis of these findings, it was recommended that the issue of whether or not mentors should have relevant professional and disciplinary expertise be explored further. It was recommended that, given the students' preference for mentors with strong interpersonal skills and a caring attitude, the programme should consider recruiting two types of mentors: 'personal mentors' to give students personal support throughout their academic careers; and 'knowledge coaches' to assist students with their academic work and to adjust to the workplace. It was proposed that all students be assigned a personal mentor, whilst knowledge coaches be assigned only to those senior students who request them (Poole and Lockett 2007).

An application of Archer's theory of agency to learning

The findings of the evaluation of the Masakh'iSizwe support programmes and in particular, the data gathered from student journals and in-depth interviews, highlighted the need for a finer theorisation of identity formation and social agency in order to inform the re-conceptualisation of the mentorship programme to better meet students' needs. We present this data using Archer's (2000, 2003, 2007) stages of development and differentiation of four types of reflexivity in the coming sections.

Archer (2000) links the internal conversation to identity formation and to how we function as social actors in particular social roles. She suggests that through self-talk we form and monitor our key values, desires and concerns, which develop into projects and then into practices, ultimately defining our identity. She outlines a developmental path for identity formation that moves through the stages as shown in Figure 1.

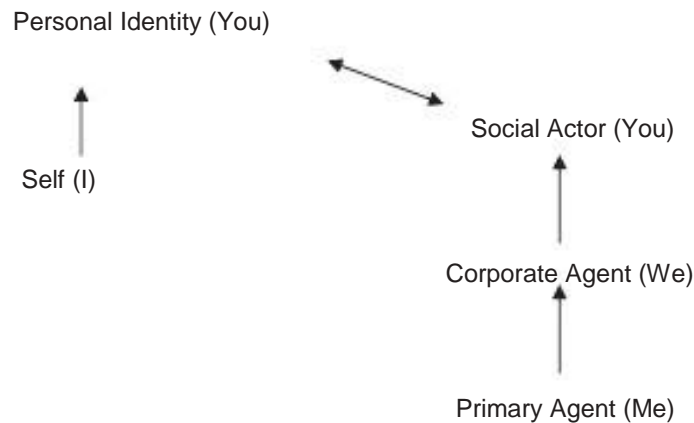


Figure 1. Stratified personal and social identity in a dialectic relationship.

Archer's staged development of agency

Archer (2000, 2) argues that individuals experience 'a continuous sense of self' that is ontologically inviolable, based on early practical activity in the physical environment prior to sociality and language. The achievement of this stage is assumed in higher education. Archer (2000) proposes the development of 'personal identity', which depends on an individual's capacity to reflect on and prioritise concerns (regarding physical well-being, performative achievement and self-worth) which in turn relate to the three orders of reality (the natural, practical and the social). Individuals have to work out the dialectic between answering the questions, 'what do I want?' and 'how do I go about getting it?' (Archer 2007, 19). As discussed earlier, Archer suggests that personal identity emerges through this internal conversation that leads to a 'unique pattern of commitments' (2000, 241), which she argues is the content of personal identity. This involves emotional as well as rational evaluation and commitment.

However, critiques of Archer (see Meyers 2003) suggest that her map of selfhood may be too materialistic, individualistic and monological. We agree with Meyers that the achievement of selfhood and personal identity are not solitary achievements, but rather forged through interpersonal relations and dialogue. The notion that the quality of an internal conversation can be refined, sharpened and strengthened through articulating it with a trusted significant other who gives considered feedback, is taken up later in the paper.

There is evidence from the data gathered to suggest that the majority of the research participants from the Masakh'iSizwe project are still at the level of working out their concerns, commitments and emergent personal identities:

I see myself going towards my goals, making my dreams a reality although I haven't succeeded . . . I know I can, or should I say, I will succeed. (Journal 3)

The biggest challenge is that I want to prove to myself that I can finish this degree. It is a long-time dream. The disappointment will be huge if I don't complete my studies. (Interview 13)

Now I know what's left for me is to grab this opportunity with both my hands and focus on my school work because not everybody got this chance that I have. So I need to strategize how am I going to do my work in order for me to be successful and I need to set my goals, aims and my way forward. (Journal 7)

I want to be very successful, having my own practice in quantity surveying, build a big palace for my family and take my younger sister to university. I want people to recognise

my work and I want to produce beautiful work that will take commitment. I don't want to be productive only in South Africa, but also worldwide. (Journal 7)

Archer (2000) views social identity as a sub-set of personal identity. This is where individuals must confront and deal with the social and cultural structures in which they find themselves. According to Archer's schema, this is where we experience ourselves as 'primary agents' (the 'me' – one's involuntary collective positioning in social groups that share objective life chances with access to varying degrees of material and cultural resources). Some students on the programme showed a sharp awareness of the limitations (and possibilities) of their objective life chances:

First of all my parents are not like educated, so they know nothing about tertiary . . . Even when I passed my Grade 12, my mother told me 'You must go to work because we don't have money'. So I went to work for the first year. Then I got the bursary from you . . . We're staying in an informal settlement. So there, you can see that there is no future. (Interview 7)

There is not a lot of black people in this building environment . . . in this profession. You find them only in the lower ranks. So I know that is one thing that motivates me. (Interview 9)

One student recognised the disadvantage of her/his positioning as a second language speaker of English:

You know the answers . . . but you are afraid how you gonna say it . . . You don't actually need a Xhosa lecturer, but it's your way of expressing things. And then someone is answering and you say 'I was gonna say that'. It's a matter of not being confident. (Interview 7)

Key to Archer's (2000) theory of human agency is the possibility for individuals to change their positioning by society through individual and collective action. When individuals respond voluntarily to their structural situations, they reflect upon their objective positioning in society (the 'me'). Reflection takes place via conducting internal conversations followed by practical action. The data suggest that some students might benefit from externalising their internal conversations with trusted and significant others in order to gain confidence, reflect critically and refine their plans for action. For example, this student would probably benefit from discussing her fears with a mentor in order to increase levels of confidence:

I feel comfortable [in her workplace experience], but I still have a lot of proving to do as a woman in industry. Obviously I'm still a student, I'm only a girl. (Interview 10)

A number of students indicated that they had reflected upon their objective positioning in society and are now undertaking practical action to achieve individual mobility within the social order:

I used the life skills course to help plan the future. I like planning the future and . . . every time when I see myself passing a degree and I see myself there . . . I want to be this person . . . I want to get over all these obstacles. I know one day I will become an engineer and design something, to help this world in some way. I want to make my mark on the world. (Interview 8)

I want to see myself having a family, having an Engineering company. I want to become a qualified engineer who must be able to handle big projects. (Journal 1)

I grew up in a very disadvantaged family where no one has higher education or exposure to the education that we are having today. So it became difficult to actually know if

I will make it. But I had this feeling that one day things will turn around my way . . . Somehow even my parents are jealous of this bursary. But Department of Public Works became my second parents, to them I am a child. The reason why I'm saying this is that I've realised that if you want something, you need to stand bold for it, especially if you don't get motivated by your family. Now I'm sure why I chose this career and I am honoured to have Public Works as my encourager. (Journal 7)

'Corporate agents' ('we') are formed when individuals develop groups to critically reflect on their situation and engage in strategic co-ordinated activity to change society. Thus social action acts back on reality and human reasons become causes. Only a few students articulated collective goals, but believed that they would achieve these as individuals, suggesting that they do not yet fully understand themselves as corporate agents:

In future I want to be a quantity surveyor, to be able to help those in need, as I am one of those being helped now. (Journal 8)

I also want to see myself helping my community, for example fighting crime, creating facilities around our township so that I can be this person who can be recognised for his involvement. (Journal 1)

Two female students, however, showed the beginnings of the development of deeper understanding of the need for corporate agency. They articulated an awareness of the need to challenge patriarchal structures in order to achieve their personal projects:

In future I see myself as a Black Strong Woman in engineering . . . proving what my Mum says, 'Engineering is NOT a Man's World'. (Journal 3)

I was travelling in a taxi and this guy asked me what course are you doing and I told that I am doing building. Then he said 'That's man's work' and I said 'Who said so?' because he said 'Woman always work in the office answering the phone and stuff'. So I said to him 'No, I wanted to try this one'. Because it's not like we can't do it, but they don't want us to do it because they think we are weak, but we are stronger than them. (Interview 7)

Archer (2000) argues that social identity is fully achieved when individuals align their social roles with their personal commitments and concerns. As an individual 'social actor' ('you') one is able to personify social roles. The active selection of certain social roles and the ability to shape these according to one's life commitments and projects leads to an alignment between 'personal identity' and 'social identity' – thus enabling individuals to fully realise their causal powers as agents. The data suggested that no students in the study had yet reached the stage of being social actors. This suggests that first generation learners in higher education need assistance in realising their full properties and powers as agents.

Our tentative positioning of students' texts at different stages of agency in Archer's (2000) schema, suggests that not all students have the same needs for support and advice as they 'make their way through a world not of their own making' (Archer 2007). Our interpretation of the data suggests that some students are well on their way to becoming social actors and developing a professional identity, whilst others are still in the process of forging a personal identity. Learners have varied needs according to their differential negotiation of the three orders of reality and their establishment of personal projects. This suggests that the development of agency, as the student forges an identity and career path, is of critical importance in higher education. Furthermore, it is important to take into consideration the extent to which learners' objective

positioning in society constrain or enable the development of agency (Wheelahan 2007). It is important to conceptualise learners in their full complexity and therefore gain a more nuanced understanding of their needs beyond the transmission of skills and knowledge:

The implications [of Archer's social theory] are that a pedagogy that takes account of the lifecourse of individuals must also take account of: their lifeworlds in the natural, practical and social worlds; the way they have 'reconciled' their concerns in each; where their priorities lie; and the way their experiences in each shape their experience of the other. (Wheelahan 2007, 188)

Archer is clear that our 'internal conversations' are fallible and that it takes practice to make accurate evaluations about our being-in-the-world. It is likely that some students would welcome assistance in talking things through with a trusted familiar as they battle to make the shift from primary to corporate agents and social actors as an integral part of learning – firstly to become a student and secondly to become a professional.

Archer's four modes of reflexivity

Subsequent to her development of a framework for the development of agency, Archer (2003, 2007) has further developed her notions of subjectivity and reflexivity. She claims that subjectivity is dynamic and people are radically heterogeneous; we choose how to re-make ourselves in a society not of our own making:

The life of the mind is not a fixed, psychological faculty, but is an emergent and therefore relational property, which is open to mutation. The emergent outcome of such mutations would require longitudinal investigation. (Archer 2003, 164)

Archer's (2007, 276) empirical research found 'no significant correlation between socio-economic origins and mode of reflexivity'. Whilst social context and class position do expose individuals differently, she is adamant that type of reflexivity and the life choices that it leads to cannot be read-off directly from social position and inherited context. This helps to explain why, for example, students from the same class position achieve different academic results. Archer (2003, 134) insists that subjectivity is changeable and that 'the subjective agent is the ultimate and effective cause of social practice'.

Socialisation differentially exposes different collectivities of young people to different experiences, but it cannot enforce endorsement of their natal context or suspend the power of observation and the ability to conclude that there is better to be had elsewhere in society. (Archer 2007, 90)

On the basis of empirical research, Archer (2003, 2007) proposes four modes of reflexivity that develop through the interplay (in the internal conversation) between people's contexts and concerns. Her four modes of reflexivity are: fractured reflexives, communicative reflexives, autonomous reflexives and meta-reflexives. Of course all people do not fall tidily into any one of only four categories, but Archer's research suggests that the majority of people fall into predominantly one category at any one time in their lives. Below we provide brief summaries of Archer's four modes of reflexivity and then discuss how her concept of differentiated modes of reflexivity may contribute to strengthening Masakh'iSizwe's mentorship programme.

Fractured reflexives are unable to undertake purposeful action because their internal conversations are dysfunctional. Fractured reflexives never move beyond the

objective position into which they are born; they are determined by their life chances. We found no examples of this type of reflexivity in students on the programme and suggest that fractured reflexives would be unlikely to succeed academically due to the invasion of non-hierarchical personal concerns and an inability to focus on their work.

Communicative reflexives prioritise self-worth in relation to their social order, i.e. their families and friends. Typically their internal conversations are realised through external conversations; they need 'similar and familiars' with whom to talk things through in order to complete and confirm their internal conversations. Typically they experience contextual continuity because they voluntarily choose not to test the constraints or enablements that society offers them. According to Archer (2003), they adopt an 'evasive stance' towards society, often characterised by self-sacrifice for the sake of family and friends that leads to social immobility and social reproduction. Archer (2003, 209) states that 'communicative reflexivity may well be greater in certain socio-economic groups; but crucially, it is not restricted to any given social class and there is no automatic relation between class and mode of reflexivity'.

Autonomous reflexives have a self-sufficient internal dialogue. They take full responsibility for their own lives, plan ahead, like to be in control and do not need to expose their internal conversations to others because they have self-confidence in their own deliberations. They prioritise success in their careers and find fulfilment in skilful performance (practical competence). Autonomous reflexives are likely to experience contextual discontinuity because their ultimate concerns and projects push them to break with their original contexts. As they pursue their projects, autonomous reflexives are likely to expose themselves to structural constraints (and enablements). They therefore learn to adopt a 'strategic stance' to society, characterised by individualism and self-discipline that often leads to upwards mobility and social productivity.

Key for our purposes, is Archer's observation that becoming an autonomous reflexive is a developmental process and a pattern that eventually becomes a practice. Autonomous reflexives begin by wanting a better life. This leads to dissatisfaction with their inherited contexts leading to moving away from their original close circles (and experiencing contextual discontinuity). Archer observes that as autonomous reflexives' projects take them away from their social backgrounds, they tend to lose their net of close interpersonal relations. They are forced to become more self-reliant, independent and eventually learn how to be strategic in society based on a 'self-contained life of the mind' (2003, 22). This means that they learn to reflect on themselves in society both as subject and as object. They learn to read society better and learn how to exploit the opportunities offered by social structures to achieve their own projects and serve their ultimate concerns; they thus become agents for change.

Meta-reflexives tend to be called to a vocation. They tend to conduct value-orientated internal conversations and aim to achieve both an inner and outer quality of life linked to a cultural ideal. They are critically reflexive about themselves and about society. They develop transcendental concerns, often feel alienated from their social contexts and do not necessarily respond to objective opportunities for advancement. Typically they experience contextual incongruity, adopt a 'subversive stance' towards society, characterised by the desire for self-transcendence that often leads to volatility and social transformation. There was very little evidence in the

data sets that young first generation engineering students were operating with this mode of reflexivity.

We suggest that Archer's proposal and characterisation of four modes of reflexivity can be used to provide a conceptual framework for the support programmes of the Masakh'iSizwe project. Historically, in South Africa, the apartheid system made it very difficult for Black South Africans to break out of their structural constraints. This has created a legacy of contextual continuity for most Black working class South Africans that is only now beginning to change. We can assume therefore that financially disadvantaged (working class) Black South African students who have applied and gained acceptance into historically advantaged higher education institutions are likely to already be novice autonomous reflexives – that is, bursars of the Masakh'iSizwe programme have already formulated projects for themselves that entail contextual discontinuity. Given that in the South African context, the majority of such students are pushing against race, class, gender and cultural constraints, without the requisite cultural, social and educational capital, it is likely that they will benefit from a mentorship programme that provides them with personal support, especially in the early years of undergraduate study. This need and the difficulty that students experience in moving from communicative to autonomous reflexivity are captured in the following quotations:

At the moment I see myself as a very scared girl . . . but I'm determined to grow. I have to overcome self-doubt. (Journal 10)

Sometimes I get frustrated by the fact that there are things I cannot change, like exam stress. (Journal 4)

Our proposition is that to succeed at higher education (and certainly at postgraduate level), a student needs to become an autonomous reflexive. However, this needs to be tested through further empirical work. There was evidence in the data that some students on the bursary programme are nascent autonomous reflexives who are learning to develop a 'strategic stance' towards society:

I guess I'm looking for a certain lifestyle . . . I have to work my way to get there. So I guess it's . . . more personal growth and . . . I guess from where I grew up, you sort of . . . you want more. (Interview 10)

Now I am a very proud and strong young woman. I am no longer in the dark. I have discovered most of what it is that I'm living for. I can say that I am successful as compared to where I was ten years back . . . I do not give up easily, I give everything I do my very best . . . I will most probably be one of those women who own companies. I have learned the importance of self-motivation. (Journal 2)

My main focus is to get my diploma and get a job so I can be able to help my family financially. Now I'm a grown up man who is able to make important decisions. I'm also trying to be an independent person who can face challenges and responsibilities. (Journal 1)

The following students speak as autonomous reflexives who are already independent, achievement-orientated and aware of the need for social mobility:

I want to be a successful architect. I don't believe in mediocrity. I want to live big, do big, not stay in one position and be satisfied, but push myself to greater heights. I want to be hard-working but also be able to juggle my work life and my personal life and be strong in both areas. (Journal 9)

I think because I'm a very independent person and I wouldn't want to be begging all my life. If I want something I have to go out and get it so I'm going to have to work.
(Interview 2)

Archer's (2003) nuanced understanding of reflexivity makes visible the different stances and cognitive styles of the students, which enables their different needs to be addressed. According to Mutch (2007), conversations (internal and external) are important in the exercise of agency. Mutch (2007, 5) states that:

For some . . . the internal conversation needs to be completed in the context of others. Concerns, that is, that have to be verbalised and shared with others in order for resolution to be obtained.

This is particularly relevant for students who are in the process of moving from communicative reflexivity to autonomous reflexivity. Thus a mentorship programme that encourages this shift and enables the exercise and development of student agency is a crucial component in a support programme for disadvantaged students.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the data using Archer's frameworks for agency and reflexivity suggests that most undergraduate first generation students on the programme are in the process of developing their personal and social identities. This may explain why the majority of students responded better to those mentors who could offer them recognition, affirmation and some intimacy, as opposed to those who offered only professional expertise. The evaluation report therefore recommended that all students be given access to personal mentors who, it is hoped, will provide safe, unconstrained spaces where students can negotiate and try out emerging identities. Archer's work supports the recommendation that the support programme should focus on creating enabling conditions for the emergence of aligned personal and social identities, as a pre-condition for successful academic and professional practice. This recommendation was subsequently adopted by the programme. Furthermore, Archer's typification of the four types of reflexivity, which she insists cannot be read-off deterministically from social class, could provide a framework for understanding the range and dynamics of the emergence of new identities and modes of reflexivity, as first generation students move out of their inherited contexts, work out their concerns, negotiate agency and make the transition from local to more global, professional contexts. We have suggested that the movement through university into professional employment demands an ontological transformation from a communicative to an autonomous mode of reflexivity. However, given the lack of rigour in our research methodology and the sample size, further research is required to validate this finding.

The research conducted for this paper suggests that skills development for the new South Africa is not just a matter of imparting certain knowledge and skills to large numbers of people who don't have them:

A pedagogy that focuses only on the knowledge and skill needed for the workplace is unlikely to appreciate the individual in their full complexity, or the complexity of their learning needs. (Wheelahan 2007, 188)

Preparing cohorts of professionals to serve the economic and social needs of a developing country entails negotiating shifts in consciousness, identity and modes of

reflexivity related to severe contextual discontinuity. Our data suggest that many first generation university students come from social contexts where the majority of people are communicative reflexives – historically and structurally almost bound to adopt an evasive stance towards society. The transition from these backgrounds to middle class university and professional contexts demands the development of autonomous reflexives, who seek social mobility through their work. It is also likely that the continued gross inequalities in material and cultural resources in South Africa will continue to create the conditions for the emergence of a minority of meta-reflexives, driven by value commitments rather than by instrumental rationality.

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