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Analysing the rows: Investigating different approaches to agency among the 'Class of 2020' graduates

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Abstract: We examine graduates' careers sustainability during the Covid-19 pandemic from an agency-structure perspective using a mixed methods research approach. We use the *Graduating in a Pandemic* survey of graduates from undergraduate-level qualifications in Glasgow and Preston in 2020. We draw on and develop Archer's concept of reflexivity to build a typology of graduates' career-related agency, using cluster analytic techniques (latent class analysis). We then use this typology to analyse similarities and differences in graduates' sustainability-related early career outcomes (employment status, salary, job satisfaction and perceived employability) using regression analysis, and to explore graduates' experiences of how Covid-19 has affected their plans using qualitative thematic analysis. Our research sheds light on how individuals' agency operates in a structural context, furthering a more holistic understanding of transitions to work during exogenous career shocks, enriching Archer's reflexivity construct, and making practical contributions useful to careers practitioners, employers, students and graduates.

Paper: We examine graduates' careers sustainability focusing on health, happiness and productivity (de Vos et al., 2020) at a time of the COVID-19 pandemic, using an agency-structure perspective and a mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) research approach. The pandemic is an example of a global exogenous shock which is likely to have severe and ongoing effects on young people's careers and likely to reduce wellbeing, both in career-specific and general terms (Akkermans et al., 2020). The impact of this shock is likely to be experienced differently by different people, for example, due to long-standing sources of inequality such as race, class, and gender. However, careers and transitional experiences are not purely structurally determined (Aldinucci et al., in press), and there is room for agential manoeuvre and the creation of new identities (LaPointe, 2010). We therefore draw on Archer's (2000; 2012) concept of reflexivity as a framework for exploring how graduates' career-related agency relates to career sustainability and wellbeing during the pandemic. Archer's framework explicitly includes the role of social structures in enabling and constraining reflexivity and human agency while recognising the scope for individual action, and differentiates between reflexivity that can help graduates decide what they want to do and (failed) reflexivity that impedes graduates' decision making and action.

Our main research question is whether graduates display different career-related agency profiles and whether (and how) these profiles are related to early career sustainability and experiences of the

COVID-19 pandemic. We developed a multi-measure survey, *Graduating in a Pandemic*, that investigated structural determinants; individuals' resources (e.g. proactivity, social support, etc.); individuals' perceived careers competencies, the extent of engagement in careers construction behaviours; and careers and wellbeing outcomes. We also included open-ended questions that asked respondents to reflect on how they had been affected by COVID-19 in more detail. Early results (Scholarios et al., in press) found that although there were some structural and demographic associations with more negative outcomes (employability, employment status job satisfaction and salary), it was graduates' perceptions of their careers competencies that had the largest effects. This suggests that agency and acquired capabilities had the largest explanatory effect when assessing differences in outcomes. Therefore, the pandemic is not simply exacerbating known inequalities, it also appears that people differentially and, seemingly *agentially*, responded to the pandemic challenges.

In this paper, we build on the above early results using a mixed-methods approach. We aim to adopt a person-centred approach, following Klehe et al. (2020), who report that most careers research involves analysis of variables (the 'columns' of data) at the expense of person-centred techniques (the 'rows' of data). We do this by exploring variation in individuals' agency that may lead to different career outcomes. We first use a quantitative clustering technique (latent class analysis) to group graduates into different kind of career-related agency profiles, and then explore differences in outcomes by agency profile type. The variables used in the latent class analysis include: careers competencies (including measures on reflexivity), Student Career Construction Inventory (SCCI, Savickas et al., 2018), and personal resources, such as: (1) proactive personality (proactivity and hope have been found to influence careers outcomes (Hirschi et al., 2015)), (2) mentoring and loneliness (reversed) (social support is seen as key in enabling reflection and/aiding careers processes (Wordsworth and Nilikant, 2021; Hirschi et al., 2015) and with conservation of resources potentially disrupted by careers shocks (Wordsworth and Nilikant, 2021)), (3) financial wellbeing (can reduce negative effects of hiatuses, aiding reflection), and (4) degree class (careers competencies and adaptability are seen to increase academic performance (Akkermans et al., 2018)). We then use regression analysis to assess differences in graduates' career outcomes associated with sustainable careers (employment status, salary, job satisfaction, perceived employability, life satisfaction) by these agency profile clusters, controlling for structural factors (including higher education institution type, socioeconomic background, gender, ethnicity, etc.). We further analyse the qualitative data from open-ended survey questions (e.g. "Please tell us about your career plans and how you think the COVID-19 pandemic will impact these.") by agency profile type to explore whether different themes arise among graduates displaying different agency types.

Through this innovative mixed-methods analysis, our research sheds light and nuance on how individuals' agency operates in a structural context. Our findings will contribute to a more holistic understanding of sustainable transitions to work during exogenous career shocks, enrich Archer's construct of reflexivity, and will help make practical contributions to support careers practitioners, employers, students and graduates alike in their navigation of transitions from higher education to employment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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