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## **Unpacking the divergence of mobility trajectories in doctoral education: the contested role of individual agency and reflexivity**

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### **Research Domains**

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

### **Abstract**

Within the broader background of globalisation and higher education internalisation, the pursuit of a PhD degree nowadays often entails an enormously high degree of geographical and geopolitical mobility. Considering this phenomenon, this study sets out to shed light on the continuous, variable, and evolving processes of cross-border PhD students navigating their doctoral trajectories in a Hong Kong setting.

Using a longitudinal narrative inquiry design, the study focusses attention on the agency and reflexivity enacted by four participants in their dynamic interactions with the fluid temporal-social contexts in which their doctoral studies proceed.

Narrative analysis of the four cases reveals variations in the forms of agency and reflexivity participants exercise in multiple and shifting doctoral contexts of action. Meanwhile, the study calls attention to the finding that the efficacy of participants' agential and reflexive powers seems contingent on the various kinds of capital unevenly built along their life-course mobile experiences.

**Full paper**

## Introduction

In the heyday of globalisation and higher education internationalisation, it is common for the PhD population relocating to a new geopolitical, cultural, or organisational context to undertake the doctorate (Elliot et al., 2016; McAlpine et al., 2022; Schäfer, 2020; Xu et al., 2021). Regarding this phenomenon, a rich body of literature has documented the vast array of challenges linked to the educationally mobile experience, such as candidates' feelings of academic and cultural otherness, barriers to intercultural engagement with supervisors, and severance of old ties with faraway family and friends (Cornwall et al., 2019; Elliot et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2021). However, extant research has largely failed to capture the continuous, variable and evolving nature of individuals' mobility trajectories over the course of their pursuing the PhD degree. Even less known is about how the mobile PhD agents interact with the specific host doctoral education contexts while constructing their distinctive paths.

To address this knowledge vacuum, this study draws upon Margaret Archer's (1995, 2003, 2007, 2012) sociological notions of structure, agency, and reflexivity to examine how cross-border PhD students navigate their doctoral studies within a Hong Kong setting. Anchored in the critical realist tradition, Archer (1995) argues that human beings (agency) and the objective social conditions (structure) represent the two strata of social reality. The two are essentially different entities possessing their own emergent properties and powers and capable of exercising causal influences, which make one irreducible but necessarily related to the other. She goes on to note that the interaction between structure and agency does not occur straightforwardly but is mediated by human reflexivity – defined as 'the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) context and vice versa' (2007, p. 25). Furthermore, Archer (2003, 2007, 2012) puts forward four reflexive modalities including communicative, autonomous, meta-, and fractured. Each mode represents a constellation of individuals' main concerns, career orientations, and reactions towards structural powers, and is practised by different people in different ways and under different situations.

Building itself on these theoretical assumptions, this study focusses on answering two research questions:

- How did participants' reflexivity mediate their exercise of agency within the structural conditions of their doctoral education?
- If any, what were the differences in the way participants constructed their mobile trajectories?

## **Methodology**

The study employs a longitudinal narrative inquiry design to address the research questions (Chase, 2013). Informed by the purposive maximum variation sampling method (Duff, 2008); I chose to follow the pathways of four participants who differed in prior educational histories, origins of location, stage of study, disciplinary field, and doctoral study institution. Life story interviews with the four participants were conducted over a period of 18 months, aiming to shed light on the dynamisms of their interactions with the changing temporal-social contexts throughout their learning journeys.

Using Archer's four reflexive modes as the analytical guide, case-by-case narrative analysis was conducted to the four cumulatively collected stories. Analytical focus has been placed on identifying the modes of reflexivity participants displayed in situations where the role of agency or the influence of structural constraints and offerings appeared to be significant. This brought to light the individual subjects' use of agency within their ongoing experiences and situated social practices, relations, and contexts.

## **Findings and implications**

Findings reveal that participants were prone to practise shifting and integrated modes of reflexivity in navigating the multiple aspects of their doctoral lives. This accounted for their differentially enacted agency within the multi-layered contexts of action (e.g., competitive peer relations, alien institutional culture, academic communities convened in the virtual space, the neoliberal academic labour market) in which participants pursued their personal, intellectual, or professional goals.

Moreover, analysis highlights that when participants lacked sufficient academic, social, emotional, and psychological resources, they were unable to actively respond to the opportunities and constraints presented by doctoral study. This led to their construction of distinctly mobile trajectories.

The study has provided a nuanced understanding of why and how agency can play an effective role for some participants whereas inadequate for others in enabling a successful sojourning experience. It underscores the pressing need for expanding systemic affordances for students with fewer varieties of capital to mobilise in formulating and fulfilling a satisfying doctoral career project.

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