Conceptualizing Youth Agency

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Introduction

Agency of young women and men has become a considerable focus of educational and youth research, policy and practice globally. Policymakers and educators alike use the trope of agency as a necessary part of being and becoming an independent adult and a contributing member of society. For example, McLeod (2012) argues that global institutions and goals and national policies increasingly frame agency, participation, and citizenship as imperatives that respond to and foster economic, social, and political changes. In addition, some donor and non-governmental organizations draw on discourses of agency to signify efforts toward youth participation in development projects, and, more broadly, in the future of their societies.

The urgency attributed to youth agency is in part a reflection of a growing youth population worldwide, known as the "youth bulge" (Ortiz & Cummins, 2012), and in part a refraction of changing global political, economic, social, and cultural relations in which youth are finding it increasingly difficult to politically and economically participate and contribute to their communities and countries. Much public discourse situates youth in a binary category: they are "at risk" and vulnerable, and, when their agency is not positively channeled, they cause social and political

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tensions, and possibly unrest. In contrast, some scholarship and development organizations label the large youth population the "youth dividend"—the promise for the future and the "makers" of society (Honwana & De Boeck, 2005). Regardless of whether youth are "at risk" or a "dividend" to society, agency is regarded as a necessary component to shape, and even improve, their lives in relation to a myriad of social, cultural, and political problems in societies. However, agency as it is used to describe or even change youth's lives is fraught with conceptual and practical ambiguities in diverse settings.

A common definition of agency in social science and policy discourses is the ability of young people to make decisions and take action toward their own life and well-being (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; McLeod, 2012). This definition assumes that youth need to be guided in developing and channeling their agency through external interventions, such as education and youth programs, to ensure that they can be productive members of a society, and so they do not become "failures" in society. From this perspective, education and youth initiatives may attend to structures that constrain agency, but they place considerable hope in the power of the educated individual to overcome obstacles she may face. Increasingly, this perspective of youth agency is tied to a neoliberal notion of self-making amidst a decline in government programs and changing social-cultural systems that support youth's futures (Honwana, 2012; Kelly, 2006). However, a large body of scholarship on youth, education, and agency also problematizes how both formal and non-formal educational efforts foster or constrain agency.

Sociological and anthropological studies of education debate how youth agency can be constrained by structures of class, gender, and racial inequalities in society, and they acknowledge that social change is not easily achieved even though education may foster aspirations and individual agency (see, for example, Bucholtz, 2002; Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Hart, 2012). These debates tend to position the macro-environment, such as the economy or "culture," as dominating individual agency. In contrast, scholars who focus on the micro-level, including beliefs, attitudes, and practices in daily life, argue that contradictions in the different sites or fields in which young people live, such as in schools and work, may result in uneven changes in young people's agency (Klocker, 2007; Murphy-Graham, 2010). This theorization of structures and individual beliefs and actions tends to set up agency as a binary, or, alternatively, takes it as a holism (see Maslak, 2008). As a holism, structures and agency are regarded as integrated parts and the relationships among them are not well clarified. Different from binary and holistic perspectives is a dialectic relationship in which the individual is always socially embedded in different structures and norms. A dialectic conceptualization ontologically positions youth agency in relation to others; young people do not necessarily learn and act alone, but rather with and through others (see Archer, 2000; McNay, 1999).

This introductory chapter to the volume sets out the differing conceptualizations of youth agency and the contextually specific ways that education and programs for youth foster and constrain agency. The adjective of *youth* adds particular import to the concept of agency; we take youth to be a social and physiological construct that reflects both age and critical or vital junctures in their life trajectory (Johnson-Hanks, 2005). The UN refers to youth as a specific age cohort, between 15 and 24, though

some other international organizations and governments, such as the African Youth Charter, extend this age cohort to 35 years. Common social junctures that mark "youthhood" from a Western perspective have traditionally been denoted by passing through puberty, participating in education, residing with family, not being married or having their own family, and seeking to transition to work or livelihoods.[1] Bourdieu (1993), in his essay, "'Youth' is just a Word," captures the import of this category as signifying particular physiological commonalities and sets of power relations; he also challenges us to consider the differences between categories of youth. On the one hand, he notes, youth as a "classification by age (but also by sex and, of course, class …) always means imposing limits and producing an order" which is related to both social power and biological differences with adults (p. 94). On the other hand, this classification obscures differences in relation to social power among a group of youth. Since Bourdieu's writing, youth or youthhood as a social-cultural construction has been shifting, and both biological and social junctures are expanding, contracting, and becoming more diversified among a continuously growing youth population.

As the majority of the world's youth live in the global South, situating how youthhood is defined within a specific country and culture is imperative. For example, examining youth's experiences between different life junctures and social positions, such as having a child and still pursuing secondary school, warrants greater attention to the plurality of issues and challenges faced by youth. At the same time, adults in society often ascribe certain roles and responsibilities to youth that may lie within the traditional markers. Burgess (2005), in his introduction to an issue on youth in Africa draws on Brubaker and Cooper (2000) to describe this duality as "[the term youth] possesses both 'soft' and 'hard' meanings. The difference is between categories that are fluid and improvised, and those that are bounded and possess a fundamental sameness" (p. 9). There are multiple meanings to this category of youth and many differences within it. For the purpose of this book, youth as a concept has sociological importance in relation to agency in that it considers power relations within an ageist structure as well as power relations among categories of youth. Each of the chapters situates how youth or youthhood is being constructed within these different relations.

The rationale for this edited volume on youth and agency in global contexts is twofold. First, it offers a current and in-depth qualitative perspective on youth agency in different social, cultural, economic, and political environments, and in doing so, these in-depth qualitative cases contribute theoretically to the debates about agency as socially embedded and culturally and economically mediated. These qualitative case studies also offer an analysis of youth agency as constructed and reshaped over time and in specific spatial sites. The chapters in this book employ in-depth mixed methods and qualitative approaches, including ethnography and narrative analysis. The contributors to this book spent extensive time with the young people with whom they conducted the research in diverse country contexts.

[1] It is worth noting the distinction between adolescence and youth, where adolescence refers to the physical and psychological changes and youth is predominantly a social category. Additionally, much of the research on young girls tends to use the term adolescence, which is not necessarily applied to research with young boys.

Not only do these case studies illustrate how agency is contextually contingent (as has been argued by Bajaj, 2009; Murphy-Graham, 2012; Shirazi, 2011; and others), but they show the contradictory possibilities of youth agency with and through structures and norms. These accounts therefore are hopeful and, at times, uncertain, because as most of the scholars of these chapters proffer, agency is not always transformative or complete.

Second, this volume offers concrete examples and implications for the role of education—formal and non-formal—in fostering agency among youth. Many of the chapters suggest that particular educational practices play an important role in changing unequal social conditions and producing alternative social imaginations. While formal education particularly has taken a more individualistic turn toward the skills and competencies a young person needs to succeed in society, it also plays an important social role in preparing youth as members of their communities and countries. Additionally, non-formal education holds a prominent role in youth agency as it is often a site for critical pedagogy that potentially challenges the status quo of formal education and static political and cultural practices in communities.

The questions that are taken up in the different chapters in this volume include: How do formal and non-formal educational opportunities contribute to the construction and enactment of youth agency in specific contexts? How is agency linked with specific cultural histories, social relationships, and economic structures within country contexts and marginalized communities? In what ways do enactments of youth agency, either individually or collectively, and empowerment bring change to local and regional communities? Finally, are educational approaches to intentionally foster agency problematic and do they account for historically and culturally embedded practices in youth's daily lives? By examining these questions, we do not assume there are universal or holistic conceptualizations of agency among youth. While there may be some shared economic or social factors that affect youth, such as high unemployment in a global economy, we aim to tease out the multifarious social, cultural, and economic conditions that take on specific meanings in youth's lives at particular places and times. In doing so, these chapters contribute to conceptual and empirical examples of how agency is socially embedded. The thread woven throughout the chapters is that education is dialectically related to agency in that it is supportive and constraining depending on specific economic, social, and cultural factors affecting the education system and youth. Advancing the scholarship on youth, education, and agency, these chapters offer ways to consider agency as more socially than individually constructed, embedded in relationships with peers, family, and communities. It is through relations with others or with structures surrounding these youth that agency is imagined, shaped, enabled, or suppressed.

Theories of Agency and Education

In this section, we discuss the ongoing debates in the literature that situate agency in relation to structures, including cultural norms and systems. Social theories offer a rich, though varied, set of conceptualizations of agency, structure, and education

(e.g., Archer, 2000, 2007; Bourdieu, 1990). Scholars in feminist studies, anthropology, and critical policy studies also contribute to these debates (McLeod, 2005; McNay, 2000; see also Levinson et al., 2011, for a brief summary of critical social theorists' contributions to education, agency, identities, and youth specifically). We begin with a brief discussion of Bourdieu's perspective on structure and agency, particularly in relation to education, along with those who have extended his ideas toward productive notions of agency, including Levinson et al. (2011), McNay (2000), and McLeod (2005). We then discuss Archer's (2000) scholarship as another perspective that helps us to think about the relationship between agency, culture, and social change. Finally, a capability approach offers a normative perspective of agency toward achieving individual well-being and addressing societal inequalities. This discussion is followed by a brief commentary on the concept of empowerment, in which we suggest agency serves as a dimension. After setting out these theoretical debates that position agency ontologically and epistemologically, we review studies of youth and education that draw on, critique, and extend these different perspectives.

Bourdieusian Perspectives on Agency, Structure, and Education

Bourdieu's classic work on agency and structures is often drawn on to consider how education reproduces social inequalities, or to alternatively consider if it can foster individual and social change (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, 1990). While the body of scholarship drawing on Bourdieu utilizes concepts of social fields, habitus, capital, and practices, agency is not often defined and has become conflated with habitus (see McNay, 2000 for a discussion of agency from Bourdieu's perspective; and Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, and Gale (2015) for conceptualizations of agency drawing on Bourdieu). For purposes of this book, then, it is useful to briefly review Bourdieu's key concepts, their meanings and the assumptions about the individual, society, and the role of education, and then to consider how other scholars have extended his work to consider agency in and through education for youth. Two key points are important for our purposes to illustrate the tension around conceptualizations of agency. First, much of Bourdieu's early work (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and those who drew on him, positioned educational structures and norms as having power to influence youth's dispositions, thoughts, and actions in ways that reproduce middle-class norms. In this sense, his theorization of structure and agency, or relatedly fields and habitus, has been critiqued for being overly deterministic and primarily used to explain class differences. For instance, Farrugia (2013) notes that Bourdieu theorized subjectivity as individual practices that are produced to fit material structures—a view that is more reproductive than productive. However, Bourdieu (1990) acknowledges that there may be a lack of "fit" or dissonance between the habitus, or practices of an individual, and the conditions that structure it, producing a crisis (Farrugia, 2013). In these moments of crisis, reflexivity occurs and alternative or innovative practices may arise. A related second point is that Bourdieu's habitus is innovative, creative, and malleable (McNay, 2000). Reflexivity

of one's situation and responses to it allows for a myriad of different responses that are innovative and not only reproductive. Such changes to an individual's habitus have the potential to also foster broader social change. This reproductive and productive tension is central to conceptualizations of agency in the chapters in this book.

Fields, in Bourdieu's (1990) use of it, describe the relations, rules, and norms that constitute particular social spaces, and habitus is the durable though concomitantly inventive dispositions, values, and preferences of an individual, shaped from personal and collective histories of those with whom we interact in different social spaces. Furthermore, the habitus is embodied action in day-to-day interactions in different fields. So while there is continuity in dispositions, values, and knowledge, they also change through an individual's practices as she negotiates her present reading of the field (Bourdieu, 1990). Therefore, the habitus is not static or determined solely by social structures. Individual's practices are enacted within and shared among a group and are what Bourdieu refers to as cultural and social capital as they can confer resources or power that can be convertible to other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). McLeod (2005) states that this relationship of habitus with social fields is one of "ontological complicity" in which there is a complex and dynamic relationship between objective structures and the subjective self, even while Bourdieu also aims to understand the underlying and systematic relations of structures. However, some scholars continue to conceptualize structure and habitus in holistic and unitary ways, assuming that all class or gender structures have similar effects on actors; others challenge this unitary ontology and consider structure and habitus as dynamic, contradictory, and mutable, thus allowing for agency within structures of power.

Critiquing and extending Bourdieu's work, Levinson, Foley, and Holland (1996) offer a perspective of education as the cultural production of meaning and identities in contrast to a foreordained social and cultural reproduction. Reconceptualizing the relationship of structure and agency, Levinson et al. (2011) puts forth a definition of agency "as inherent creativity of the human being given expression through subjectivities that both fashion and are fashioned by the structures they encounter" (p. 116). They argue that through practice, as discussed in Bourdieu's (1990) practice theory, there is a relational conception of an individual and society in which a person both internalizes structures of power and is also an implicitly knowledgeable agent. Similar conceptualizations of agency are also taken up among some feminist scholars.

Feminist Framings of Agency and Structure

McLeod and McNay take more nuanced positions extending the theoretical linkage between habitus and fields to account for a multiplicity of change. McLeod (2005) astutely argues that Bourdieu's early work was most often used to analyze the

reproductive nature of education; however, she draws on Ball, Maguire, and Macrae (2000) to argue the following:

> Some contemporary commentators have attempted to reformulate the relationship between habitus and field so that it is imagined as less tightly deterministic and rigidly presumed, emphasizing more the scope for improvization and degrees of inventiveness alongside the structural and shaping qualities of habitus. (p. 17)

McLeod also takes on the question of whether and how habitus, which is usually used to explain and examine class differentiation and hierarchies of difference, could be used to examine other social relations and distinctions. She recounts Bourdieu's (2001) *Masculine Domination* in which he applies the concept of habitus to denaturalize gender division and to "locate gender as a particular kind of habitus" (p. 18); however, she concludes that this analysis does not offer much to feminist scholarship because feminists have long theorized gender differences of labor—the focus of his research here. Despite Bourdieu's rather limited gender analysis, some feminists still find the concept of social fields useful to consider how they are differentiated by gender, as well as race and class, and to understand how the habitus is gendered. Still, some of this scholarship has tended to emphasize the domination of structure more than the inventive and productive nature of habitus. These different uses elides habitus with agency or identity and, as McLeod (2005) argues, distinctions are not always made between the practices of habitus that may be contradictory—at times reproductive and at times innovative.

The inventiveness and mutability of an individual's habitus vis-à-vis gender norms and structures are further taken up by McNay. McNay (1999, 2000) extends Bourdieu's work to complexify the relationship between structure and agency, suggesting that there is more room for instability of gender norms than most research has accounted for. McNay (2000) argues that conceptualizations of fields need to consider how they represent social differentiation. She uses the metaphor of "refraction" to explain how gendered social norms in different fields have differentiated and dispersed effects on one's thoughts, actions and embodiment of these norms. She further elaborates that "as a relational concept … [the field and habitus] provide a framework in which to conceptualize the uneven and non-systematic ways in which subordination and autonomy are realized in women's lives" (p. 70). While McNay refers to the multiple subjectivities and identities in accounts of gender, she also speaks to agency, stating that the habitus is generative, and "like the 'art of inventing' makes it possible to produce an infinite number of practices" in different social spaces (p. 55). McLeod (2005) warns, however, that the possibilities of agency should not be overstated, and that research should consider how change happens in contradictory ways, and slowly over time. Summarizing the debates between McNay and Bourdieu, McLeod (2005) argues there is a need to theorize, and we add, empirically show, "change and continuity, invention and repetition—a complex process that happens in ambivalent and uneven ways" (p. 24).

As these debates illustrate, the concept of agency is fraught with ambivalences. Other feminist scholars, such as Madhok, Phillips, and Wilson (2013), are more critical of the positive, transformative and liberation ideals equated with agency, which they say favors "the hyperindividualist liberal subject" who is autonomous,

free, and independent (p. 7). At the same time, they acknowledge that many feminists call upon the ideals that agency signifies. Both the use of agency as a positive ideal and the critiques thereof suggest the contradictions and ambivalences inherent in this construct. In their edited volume, Madhok, Phillips, and Wilson situate agency in relation to coercion, arguing that agency is always exercised within constraints. Their approach to agency has two implications that are relevant for chapters in this book: first, agency is reframed based on ideals of collectivity and social relations, rather than the individual; and second, agency is embedded in social relations with deep inequalities, and such an account also allows for theorizing the social structures that frame possibilities for being agentic. A recent volume by Maxwell and Aggleton (2013) puts forward a contrasting perspective of how privilege is constitutive of agency and it asks whether agentic practices reproduce social relations or if there are possibilities for social change. These recent works point to the tension between agency as situated within privilege or coercion, thus ontologically positioning agency within dynamic social power relations.

These recent debates and developments in theorizing agency are relevant for the chapters in this book, many of which are situated in positive development discourses about youth and agency even though youth's lives are characterized by seemingly intractable material and social inequalities. Still, being educated affords some possibilities for greater privilege and power than if youth did not have these opportunities. However, education is also marked by social differences and inequalities, particularly in relation to class, race, and gender, among other social categories. We now turn to Archer's theorizations of how a social-cultural and subjective approach of agency can be used to understand differentiation among social categories.

Reflexivity, Agency, and Culture

Margaret Archer's scholarship on structure and agency is extensive and she theorizes a dual ontological approach in which structures are objective and agency is subjective (see, for example, Archer, 2000; her complete work cannot be fully discussed here). We draw on her work that conceptualizes agency in relation to cultural structures and norms. In her 2005 chapter, *Structure, culture and agency*, she argues that culture is often poorly related to structures, and theorizations of cultural properties often assume a homogenous and holistic treatment of culture. Anthropologists and sociologists, she suggests, have tended to conflate cultural systems with socio-cultural explanations. This conflation does not sufficiently differentiate what is cultural in the socio-cultural, and it further assumes coherence and closure in the system rather than possibilities for change and contradictions. Archer argues that functional theorists and Marxist theorists alike assume closure, with functionalist theorists suggest individuals are determined by a cultural system through socialization, whereas Marxists regard cultural properties as formed and transformed only by the dominant group, which universalizes cultural ideas. She acknowledges that this over-deterministic theorization has been shed; however, she asserts that the conflation of culture and agency remains in which culture is regarded as the texture of

thought with little internal possibility for change. This conflation further "prevents the interplay between the parts and the people from making any contribution to reproduction or transformation" (p. 37), and precludes a two-way interaction or explanation of how change occurs in one way and not in another. She puts forward an explanatory framework in which cultural systems interact with the socio-cultural level of individuals, which in turn produces a cultural elaboration, stating that "cultural structures necessarily predate the actions that transform it and that cultural elaboration necessarily postdates those actions" (p. 43). From this perspective, agency is always present in individuals and possibilities for reproduction or transformation relate not only to material structures but also cultural systems, which have differing effects on individuals' thoughts and actions.

Further elaborating the subjectivity of agency, Archer uses the concept of reflexivity as the core of agency, and in her later work (2012) she argues that habitus is "no longer a reliable guide(s)" (p. 1). Her conceptualization of agency assumes that social order and systems are changing and that "new games" and their rules are novel, and "increasingly all have to draw upon their socially dependent but nonetheless personal powers of reflexivity in order to define their course(s) of action in relation to the novelty of their circumstances" (p. 1). Reflexivity for Archer is the internal conversations that mediate the effects of circumstances on actions, and define the courses of action taken in given situations. She is clear, however, that these internal conversations are not individualist; they are concerns formed in and of social life. Her analysis of different types of reflexivity (meta, communicative, autonomous, and fractured) among college students in the United Kingdom in the early part of this millennium is detailed and astute; however she says less about the varying material and cultural structures that affect these young people's live, assuming certain understandings of "late modernity." If, as her theory assumes, agency is always embedded in changing social, cultural, and material structures, then consideration of different cultural and structural environments as they affect reflexivity and agency need to be examined. Specific nuances of changing material and cultural environments vis-a-vis youth' agency are detailed in the chapters in this book.

Agency, Capabilities, and Well-being

Finally, another perspective on agency is offered through Amartya Sen's and Martha Nussbaum's capability approach.[2] Different from social theory that explains the relationship between agency and structures, the capability approach is informed by philosophy, ethics, economics, and development and is a normative approach that situates well-being as central to development. Sen's approach is concerned with comparatively evaluating policies and practices that can expand freedoms, foster well-being, and address inequalities (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2009). Education is suggested as a core capability—one that functions to foster well-being as well as other

[2] In this brief review of a capability approach and its conceptualization of agency, we primarily draw on Amartya Sen's work.

capabilities necessary for pursuing a life that individuals value. However, Walker and Unterhalter (2007) have argued that education is under-theorized in a capability approach as to how it can foster well-being and address inequalities. Other scholars have since taken up a capability approach in various ways to theorize and empirically examine educational practices that enable other capabilities, agency, and well-being (DeJaeghere & Lee, 2011; Hart, 2012; Hart, Biggeri, & Babic, 2014; Murphy-Graham, 2010; Saito, 2003; Walker, 2010; Walker & McLean, 2013). Much of this work draws on critical feminist or critical pedagogical approaches to show the possibilities for transformation and the constraints that arise for individuals as they become educated and use their education to enhance their lives.

Agency has been less theorized and examined within a capability approach, as it is assumed to be present in order for individuals to make informed choices toward their well-being. At the same time, agency is dialectically situated within social, environmental, and personal conditions that affect whether and how one can make choices (Sen, 1999). In Sen's writings on a capability approach, agency entails choices and actions linked to achieving positive well-being or addressing inequalities, even though others have argued that agency can also be used for less positive outcomes (see Walker, 2010 for an example of two women using their agency for different ends). Even if an individual has certain capabilities, such as the ability to read and write, she has to be able to convert these capabilities into well-being outcomes she has reason to value. This requires not only social and economic opportunities, but also agency. Sen further distinguishes between agency freedoms and agency achievements, and Unterhalter (2005) applies this to the context of education. Agency freedoms are having the conditions to exercise agency, including but not limited to access to information, the chance for (critical) discussion and evaluation of goals and values, and the freedom to make up one's mind without violence or shame (Unterhalter, 2005). Agency achievements are success in pursuing goals that she has reason to value, which may be the same as her well-being achievements, or it may be related to other well-being outcomes that are valued.

While there are critiques of the capability approach as being ontologically individual, others have conceptualized agency as socially and collectively embedded (e.g., Deneulin & McGregor, 2010). Deneulin and McGregor (2010) develop this view when they situate agency as "defined through our relationships with other persons … and that what we value is built from meanings which we share with others" (p. 2). They elaborate that agency to achieve well-being is for both self and others: "Rather than an individualized form of wellbeing … we argue that a broader and socially informed telos is required; this encompasses the good of oneself and others, including future generations" (p. 4). Thus, agency is not simply individual choice; it is embedded within social relations that give value to certain goals and outcomes. Further, agency is enacted not only for the individual but with and for others.

Little research, however, has examined the linkage between education and agency from a capability approach. The most recent is Caroline Hart's (2012) book on young people in the United Kingdom and their educational aspirations and agency, and Hart et al.'s (2014) book on agency and participation of young people. Lastly, DeJaeghere (2015) examines how aspirations and agency are dialectically and socially fostered through education in a rural community in Tanzania. Several

chapters in this book offer insights into how agency is socially constructed and embedded in current and future aspirations, providing an alternative to the individually oriented agentic young person that other chapters critique.

Agency and Empowerment

Debates about agency require a word about its related concept, empowerment. Empowerment is equally ambiguous and varied in its uses. In the international development literature, empowerment is a positively regarded buzzword and the uses of it resemble the discourses of agency that situates youth, and particularly girls, as individually making decisions and changing one's own life amidst structural barriers. Similar to agency, feminists have both been drawn to and critique the concept of empowerment. On the one hand, it aims to explicitly bring in a conceptualization of power as changing if one is empowered. On the other hand, empowerment has also become an empty signifier, in which various actors and perspectives can give it meaning. In this way, it is often tied to neoliberal perspectives on individual power (see Sharma, 2008 for a discussion of discourses on empowerment particularly in relation to women and development). In contrast to the neoliberal uses of empowerment, Kabeer (1999) provides a useful definition of empowerment as a tripartite process, resources, agency and outcomes, in which agency is a dimension of a larger process of empowerment. Kabeer's theory of empowerment parallels a capability approach, noting that resources are important but insufficient to achieve desired or valued outcomes, and agency is a critical part of this process. Murphy-Graham's (2008, 2012) scholarship on education for empowering women also draws on a capability approach and other feminist scholars of empowerment and defines it as recognition, capability building, and action. In her work, recognition is fundamentally about recognizing one's own inherent worth and the equality of all human beings, and actions are for both personal and social betterment. This conceptualization primarily positions empowerment as subjectivities, and it does not necessarily account for objective material structures as Archer's account does. In this way, empowerment strongly parallels the constructions of agency above: as influenced by social, cultural, and historical structures/resources; as reflexive in one's thought and action; and as individual and social change. However, as conceptualizations of empowerment engage specifically with power structures, the scope is broadened to examine the dialectical relationship between individuals and their material and social worlds.

In the literature on youth and education, agency may be more frequently used than empowerment, possibly because agency does not necessarily assume marginalization of all youth, and it is related to a psychosocial process in which youth learn to become agentic over time and space. For this book, we use agency because the chapters capture how youth engage in a process of reflection and action within specific social contexts and power relations, but depending on these social, cultural, and economic contexts, the authors do not necessarily claim that these youth are empowered. In sum, agency is both a useful and a problematic

concept. We recognize the limitations of this concept, including its over-usage and linkage with psychological and economic theorizations of self-efficacy, individual choice and the making of the self (see Hemmings & Kabesh, 2013 for this critique). However, all of the approaches discussed above call for situating agency as socially constructed and embedded, with more or less emphasis on the construction versus embedded. We see value in conceptualizations offered by McLeod, McNay and other critical and feminist scholars, in which agency includes inventiveness and improvisation vis-à-vis coercive and oppressive norms and structures. Such a conceptualization invokes inequalities in privilege and power, and it regards these inequalities as fluid and changing, even if in uneven ways and slowly over time. In addition, a capability approach orients agency toward specific ends, drawing attention to ethical considerations of the use of agency toward "a good life" and addressing inequalities (Walker, 2010). Finally, the role of reflexivity in relation to social-cultural structures situates cultural norms as socially constructed and also dynamic. By incorporating reflexivity into our conceptualizations of agency, we focus on how agency takes shape individually and socially. In rapidly changing societies affected by global economic, political and cultural change, we see value in continuing to examine and problematize agency among youth as they make sense of their lives in their social worlds.

Situating Agency Within Youth and Educational Studies

Youth inhabit a space and time where they are aware of and engaged with the world around them, and at the same time, they are on the fringes of change across their different life spheres (Benson & Saito, 2001). Agency as a concept allows us to understand how youth envision, negotiate and navigate their lived realities amidst social, cultural, political, and economic continuity and change, as well as during the transitions of their life from childhood to adulthood. Maira and Soep (2005) identify the term "youthscape" to describe the geographic and temporal spaces in which youth are positioned, as well as the social and political context in which they live and experience their lives (p. xv). Scholars of youth studies document how youth subcultures emerge in marginal spaces, such as urban sites (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010) as well as over time through elongated transitions into adulthood, or what Honwana (2012) terms "waithood" in the context of many countries in Africa. These transitions of being part of and at the margins of specific life phases as well as spaces or spheres in which youth engage suggest that agency is temporally and culturally situated. In this section, we first discuss how scholarship on youth and educational studies conceptualize agency. Similar to the theoretical literature above, these scholars recognize the tension between agency as positive action and as imaginaries or possibilities of their current and future realities. This literature also suggests that agency needs to be linked with larger ethical stances or values of well-being so that it can have positive outcomes. Still other scholars take poststructural and ethnographic perspectives and argue for understanding agency as it is

constructed through contradictory cultural formations, such that it responds to social forces. Following this discussion of literature specific to youth, we turn to studies that examines agency, activism and citizenship; agency and social identities; and agency and peer and family relations, all bodies of literature that have informed many of the chapters in this book.

The dynamics of youth identities as both engaged with and at the margins of change allow them to view the world from a different "vantage point" that Honwana (2012) characterizes as being "outside dominant ideologies" (p. 162). Such a vantage point allows for conceptualizing agency within these socio-cultural and temporal dynamics. In her studies in Mozambique, South Africa, Tunisia, and Senegal, Honwana suggests that youth are citizens engaged in new forms of social and civic action, which she contrasts with the assumed participation in partisan political activities (p. 135). She elaborates that these new modalities are collective protests and movements, with the possibility for broader social change. She discusses how youth's "collective action" may cause a generational change, which in turn spurs a "collective consciousness" for social and political issues (Honwana, 2012, p. 159). This action-oriented perspective of youth agency is countered by Dillabough and Kennelly (2010) in their description of youth's "urban imaginaries." They describe how youth cultures are "made and remade" through their "temporal and special understanding of how diverse young people struggle to hold together the imagined identities they constructed for themselves" (p. 204). Whereas Honwana describes a positive trajectory in which youth cultivate "collective conscious" that leads to "collective action," Dillabough and Kennelly suggest that youth at the margins are able to navigate through the broader society by constructing identities rooted in their "imaginations without hope, or without fantasy and its fictional effects" (p. 205). These collective actions and imagined identities serve as a medium of youth agency in their perceived and actual realities.

Acting upon and imagining futures or alternative realities are all forms of being agentic to create and respond to specific cultural, social, and economic dynamics in which youth are situated. Sociological, anthropological, and cultural studies of youth take different approaches to conceptualize action in relation to societal structures, such as racism, religious or gender discrimination, and class and economic structures of power. For example, Hart et al. (2014) edited volume takes up youth agency from a capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999), drawing on Sen's concept of "agency freedoms" or the "freedom to bring about achievements one values and attempt to produce" (Sen, 1992, p. 57). This concept of agency freedoms assumes that youth know—or have access to information to learn and understand—what they value. Furthermore, agency from this perspective assumes that youth have supports and conditions that allow them to pursue what they value. However, Hart et al. (2014) note that agency freedoms, while often used to achieve positive outcomes (for self and other), may be used to negatively affect self and/or others. Therefore, agency needs to be linked to larger moral and ethical stances, and as Sen (1992) has argued, for the improvement of well-being and addressing inequalities. Such an approach suggests judging whether and how educational policies and practices enhance agency and well-being. A second point raised in this book is that

while an individual may be agentic and act for both individual and social benefits, the "sum of social benefits may be greater than the individual parts" (Hart et al., 2014, p. 20). This points to the need to examine the complex, subtle, and wider community benefits when youth act agentically.

While the capabilities approach of youth agency presented by Hart et al. (2014) focuses on the broader community influence on and impact of youth agency, Bucholtz's anthropological (2002) perspective seeks to link youth to their cultural context and how they negotiate and interact within that environment. She writes that researchers seeking to understand youth agency need to be attentive to "… how identities emerge in new cultural formations that creatively combine elements of global capitalism, transnationalism and local culture" (p. 525). Yet, in examining their agency, youth are seen as "responding to, not shaping, cultural forces" (pp. 532–533). This perspective of agency does not necessarily involve acting and influencing others, but rather agency is a response to and reconfiguring of oneself in relation to external influences.

While agency is always related to social, cultural, and economic context, how researchers understand the ways youth construct their agency through actions, imaginaries, and responses requires attention to how youth see themselves (and not how others see them) shaping their lives. Korteweg's (2008) feminist approach sees agency as "responding to" social forces of domination and subordination within societies. Korteweg's work, which is focused on agentic religious subjects, examines agency in relation to cultural practices. She critiques Western assumptions that certain cultural and religious practices are necessarily oppressive, challenging the assumption that Muslim women who participate in religious practices are not agentic. Korteweg suggests that if framings of agency are embedded in socio-cultural contexts, including religious practices, there is the possibility for more nuanced representations of agency particularly among women. She defines "embedded agency, which captures practices that do not have this explicit aim [of resistance to domination], yet still reflect active engagement in shaping one's life" (p. 437). She further states such a conceptualization allows us to see that "the capacity to act is not contingent on 'free will' and 'free choice' approaches to subjectivity" (p. 437). This perspective suggests that agency can be conceptualized and understood in terms of how youth shape and reshape their identities vis-à-vis cultural influences, and not only as actions taken in resistance to domination or in imagining alternative futures that are in sharp contrast to hegemonic ideals of youth. Agency, then, is not simply action to change or navigate youth's lives, it is also the subtle ways youth understand and respond to cultural forces in which they are situated and construct their identities.

Agency, Citizen Activism, and Society

One of the aims of formal and non-formal education is to foster youth to act within the larger society as citizens. However, education may serve to both facilitate and constrain agency for youth to be and act as citizens. A critical pedagogical approach,

which seeks to involve youth and their perspectives in educational activities and decisions, is regarded as necessary for youth to act upon conditions in their lives (Bajaj, 2009; Bajaj & Pathmarajah, 2011; Olitsky, 2006). In her work within the Umutende school in Ndola, Zambia, Bajaj (2009) explores what she calls "transformative agency" (p. 2). "Transformative agency" was cultivated with the Umutende school students, in comparison to a group of government school students, through a focus on social justice in the curriculum and by teachers and administrators' positioning the youth as "future leaders" (p. 6). The use of a social justice discourse changed how youth thought about and saw themselves within their broader educational and community structures. Bajaj noted numerous ways in which the youth in the Umutende school expressed feelings of agency; however, she also shows that agency could be situational, stating that graduates did not always express an ability to act agentically within their broader communities (p. 13).

Shirazi's (2011) use of critical youth studies and the adoption of a postcolonial framework in his work in Jordanian schools with youth from both Jordan and Palestine allowed him to uncover ways that youth were able to enact their agency in spite of an educational environment that did not actively promote it. Rather than a perspective that views the Jordanian youth as being "marginalized" or "oppressed," the framework he employed allowed him to see and name the "agency in everyday venues and practices of schooling" (Shirazi, 2011, p. 292). For example, in an interaction between the students and Mr. Barakati, a teacher at one of the secondary schools, Shirazi documents the ways Mr. Barakati physically struck the hands of his students with a rod as a form of punishment. In turn, Shirazi shows how the students used their agency to name the hypocrisy of teaching human and children's rights when the teacher used corporal punishment in the classroom (pp. 285–286). While outwardly these acts of corporal punishment might be viewed as stifling youth agency, their naming and critiquing of the contradiction between these acts and what they were learning in class were acts of agency.

Despite constraining, and even oppressive environments in school and the larger society, youth's participation in shaping their learning experiences can enable them to be "agents of change" (Ardizzone, 2008, p. 279). Kennelly's (2011) work on youth's political engagement speaks to the effects that neoliberal policies have on youth's citizenship experiences in political and economic spheres. She argues that youth are situated within a tension between the state's construction of "good citizens," who are representations of the model students succeeding academically and engaging in the benevolent community work, and the "bad activists," who act beyond the limits of good engagement and challenge the state and economic structures, or the policies upholding them. She shows that despite constraining influences (i.e., the expectations of the citizenship curriculum to prepare youth to pass the exams or complete community service; and limited content of social injustices present in the textbooks), youth are activist in political issues that affect their lives. Kennelly highlights some of the ways youth are activists through their engagement in protests against the G-8 and G-20 meeting and how they do not conform to the expectations for and identities of becoming adults. The studies noted here also show that youth citizen agency, a term that Josić uses in her chapter, is socially constructed in relation to specific ethnic and group relations within the state.

Agency, Social Identities, and Status

Agency to resist, imagine, and act is intricately tied to social identities and statuses that are oppressed in society. These social identities are not usually singular, rather they are intersectional (gender and racial, gender and social class) and they affect youth agency in dynamic and complex ways. Gender relations have been one of the more prominent and salient social identities explored in regard to agency and youth; however, these gender relations are also often linked with ethnicity, class, or other social statuses.

Agency to negotiate gender norms and to form new gender identities can be fostered through education, though it is not necessarily the case that schooling is always agentic. Murphy-Graham's research on the curriculum of the Sistema de Aprendizaje (SAT) secondary school program showed how gender equity can be learned and fostered in the Garifuna communities in which she conducted her research in northern Honduras. Gender equity messages were incorporated within the five content areas of the curriculum and aimed to cultivate women's self-confidence and their knowledge and understanding of their own positionality as young women (Murphy-Graham, 2008, p. 31). The self-directed coursework helped the young women to set their own goals and follow-through with them. Furthermore, the curriculum promoted positive gender relations and agency. For instance, young women saw their own lived experiences through the lessons, and young men gained a better understanding of social constraints affecting women (Murphy-Graham, 2008, 2010). While Murphy-Graham's analysis provides a gender account, it does not explore the cultural embeddedness of agency at the intersection of the Garifuna racial/ethnic group status and gender status.

Agency as the capacity to change society or reshape one's response and identity also produces a new set of challenges in which existing agentic capacities are not sufficient. Greany's (2008) work on gender and education in Niger brings to light how young women who pursue schooling are set apart because they are agentic vis-à-vis norms that did not support their schooling. She problematizes that girls and young women are positioned to choose between what she terms "two distinct worlds" in their pursuit of education (p. 561). Going from a "traditional life to a more urban, modern one" changes the lived reality of girls' and young women in the type of community they feel comfortable engaging and acting in (p. 561). This study shows how gender identities and agency may take on distinct nuances in rural and urban communities, and furthermore how tradition and modernity are positioned in opposition.

Refugees are another group often seeking to reimagine their futures in new spaces, and their social status also intersects with gender, ethnic, and religious inequalities and oppression they face across different spaces in which they live and move. Gateley's (2015) study shows how refugee youth enact agency in their pursuit of higher education in the United Kingdom. Even though many refugee youth came from situations where their access to education was highly irregular or constrained due to religious beliefs or gender norms, the participants in the United

Kingdom's Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) program saw higher education as a "central aspiration" (Gateley, 2015, p. 29). Agency for the refugee youth meant having the "opportunity to choose" and the "space (time) to make the choice" (p. 38). Based in Sen's capabilities approach, Gateley found that many youth were agentic in pursuing higher education opportunities despite professionals in the program discouraging them to do so and encouraging them to pursue work. While Gateley identified this population as "vulnerable" due to their marginalization in both the larger societal context and educational settings, the study showed that vulnerability does not preclude the ability to act agentically "when given both the opportunity and the space to choose" (Gateley, 2015, p. 35). This study illustrates assumptions that are often held about who can be agentic and what individuals and groups value with regard to their lives.

Agency in/Through Family and Peer Relations

Familial and peer influences are ever present when researching youth agency. Benson and Saito (2001) name the need to explore "spheres of influence" as sites in which youth engage across communities and "socializing systems." Aaltonen (2013) identifies education, peer relations, and family life as three sites where agency can be examined as they often require "action and choice." (p. 376). The presence or absence of support for youth within their family homes often sets the stage for how they can be agentic in other spheres of their lives (McCleary, 2013). In addition, peers are influential across the spectrum of choices youth make and the types of experiences in which they engage. The influence of family and peers is taken up in Tomanovic's (2012) longitudinal study of a group of Serbian youth. She tracked these young people over a decade from childhood into youthhood in order to examine the family influences and structural opportunities available to them. She uses the term "active use of opportunities" as a descriptor for how youth used agency in a setting with considerable political, economic, and social change (p. 610). For Tomanovic, youth's ability to use family resources and peer networks to actively engage opportunities available to them was demonstrative of agency. In this sense, agency is not individually held, but rather actions taken and imaginations made with others comprised a socially embedded agency.

Agency is also examined in romantic or sexual relationships among youth (Averett, Benson, & Vaillancourt, 2008; Thorpe, 2005). Having the agency to communicate about engaging in physical intimacy, responding to a request for sex or a sexual act, and making sure contraception is used are areas in which researchers discuss how youth are, or are not, being agentic. Bell (2012) found in her study on sexual agency in Uganda that young women and men extended their agency in negotiating with whom they would have sex and the material goods that would be a part of this transaction. Bell (2012) cites sexual agency as "… an individual's actions and decisions about one's body and emotions to shape and change one's sexual practice, including whether, when, where, and with whom to initiate a sexual

relationship" (p. 284). In this case, youth's sexual agency had outcomes at the personal level, although the youth used their peers as barometers to consider if and how decisions around sex had positive or negative outcomes for themselves.

In sum, studies on youth illustrate different frameworks for understanding agency as constructing identities, resisting, and acting amidst cultural, social, economic, and political forces. These studies also show youth agency as being constructed individually and collectively at the macro, meso, and micro levels, including in relation to the state and economy, social groups and communities, and families and peers. The chapters in this book draw on some of these bodies of literature to explore how youth agency is taken up from different disciplinary lenses and in diverse contexts. The book is divided into three sections encompassing agency and political, social, and economic contexts, policies and discourses.

The Chapters

The first section of the book focuses on agency and youth activism as citizens at the intersection of various social positions of youth—race, ethnicity, and age. Dierker's chapter considers African American youth belonging and agency through an exploration of points of resistance and what she identifies as youth's counter-narratives of their history. She unpacks how counter-narratives about African Americans contribute to youth's agency within a broader context of racism and violence. Pulling from Chávez and Griffin's (2009) work on youth belonging and resistance, Bajaj's (2009) writing on transformational agency, and Ginwright and Cammarota's (2002) work on critical race consciousness, Dierker describes how these youth developed coalitional agency by understanding their culture and its history, and through a sense of belonging with others who participated in a youth program. In addition, she shows how this youth program supported these youth to use their coalitional agency to enable community social change.

Josić takes up how youth's practices of citizenship are shaped by community contexts and through their relations with schools and neighborhood communities. Based in research from two United States high school social studies and civic programs, Josić examines the ways institutionalized structures and practices (i.e., the social institution of education, schooling practices) condition youth's belonging to their communities, and how they are becoming and acting as a citizen. Calling on the work of Staeheli (2010) on citizenship and communities, and Lawy and Biesta's (2006) work on "citizenship-as-practice" (p. 45), Josić explores the role of school and community opportunities, resources, and practices in shaping youth's formation of their citizen agency.

The Senegalese Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) is the site of Stafford's research in which he explores how student activism is, what he terms, an "entry point" for understanding collective student agency. Stafford situates higher education in Senegal within postcolonial theory, as well as discourses of "developmentalism and global capitalism" (Gupta, 1998, p. 10). He uses "transformative agency"

(Bajaj, 2009) as a basis for examining how social expectations related to "the educated person" and the "rule of failure" are used to cultivate student activism and participation to improve their educational and university experience vis-à-vis constraining structural conditions of higher education institutions and the state.

The second section of the book examines gender, class, and religion and constructions of youth agency in various sites of patriarchal oppression. Payal Shah's 5-year ethnography of a Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) residential school in Western Gujarat looks at how structures and resources within the school and community contribute to a "thickening" and "thinning" of girls' agency (Klocker, 2007). Using two case examples from her study, Shah details how Rekha's and Lata's agency has been fostered and shaped by their secondary education experiences, families, and the non-egalitarian gender system present in their communities in Western Gujarat.

McCleary's chapter explores how Honduran young women and men used their agency to "resist," "transgress," and "undo" gender norms that constricted their actions and behaviors at home and in their local communities (Montoya, Frazier, & Hurtig, 2002; Stromquist & Fischman, 2009). Her chapter also addresses how a non-formal youth program promotes reflection on and change toward greater gender equity through a local community youth sport event.

Staying within the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, Shawanda Stockfelt takes up the legacy of colonialism in Jamaica, and the effect it has on Jamaican boys' participation and interest in higher education, in her chapter examining young men and masculinities in education. Using Bourdieu's work on agency, habitus, field, and cultural capital, Stockfelt looks at the intersection of government policy, young men's academic achievement, and their life experiences of education to understand the low enrollment of young men in higher education.

Sallam's chapter focuses on how the historical and contemporary urban–rural divide in Upper Egypt is exacerbated through educational programming for women's empowerment. Using a poststructural framework, Sallam critiques the role of development efforts, and particularly "second-chance" education programs, in shaping young women's agency. Bringing together Said's (1978) cultural critique on the representation of the Eastern world, particularly Arabs and Muslims, with a cultural analysis of the empowerment of women in Jordan (Adely, 2012), Sallam's research points to the historical, sociopolitical, and cultural influences of rural–urban dynamics shaping Egyptian communities and how patriarchal oppression and agency are framed differently in these communities.

Laura Wangsness Willemsen and Anna Ndesamburo Kwayu draw on two qualitative studies to examine Tanzanian secondary school students' agency and the ways peers and family are mediators in how they learn about and engage in sexual relationships. Utilizing Kabeer's (1999) concepts of agency, resources, and achievements to conceptualize empowerment, Wangsness Willemsen and Ndesamburo Kwayu show how youth's sexual agency is constructed and learned through their relationships.

Khurshid and Guerrero's chapter is a discourse analysis of the problematic ways that Western media writes about and portrays the tragedy and triumphs of Malala

Yousafzai, her family, Islamic religion, education, and Muslim culture. Problematizing the dual position of Muslim women as victims and agents, and the ways education contributes to that binary, Khurshid and Guerrero examine the discourse used by *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* to portray Malala's story as a binary between a victim of Islamic patriarchy and an agent of change for girls' education. They note how her agency is often fallaciously attributed to the West's support of her education. These authors give voice to Malala's story as counter-narrative to that of the Western media's discourse of girls' and women's positionality within Islam and the Muslim culture of the Swat Valley.

The third section of the book explores how economic and social policies intersect with and impact youth's economic agency. Thangaraj's research problematizes common understandings of children's economic agency through an ethnographic exploration of the dynamics that influence how young people in India's Kanchipuram region engage in education and labor. Providing a rich account of the dominant global discourses and conventions on child labor alongside the voices of young people and their experiences, Thangaraj offers a critique of the inflexible nature of the policy banning child labor and calls for alternative approaches to schooling and labor that are responsive to the economic agency of these youth.

Pellowski Wiger's chapter on entrepreneurship education in Tanzania examines how youth develop social capital, which serves to both foster their agency and be converted into other forms of economic capital. Drawing on critical conceptualizations of social capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011) Pellowski Wiger illustrates how youth utilize their schooling to develop peer and adult relationships that in turn assist them in pursuing enterprises and their livelihoods. Using longitudinal data of youth attending two secondary boarding schools in Tanzania that are implementing entrepreneurship training, this analysis highlights how social relations with both family and non-family peers and adults affect youth's agency and ability to further their livelihoods in constraining economic and social environments.

Nikoi's work with Kenyan youth provides insights into how a non-formal training program fosters agency and empowerment to improve their economic and social lives. Building on Murphy-Graham's (2012) framework of empowerment, Nikoi also engages with the concepts of economic empowerment and Payne's (2012) everyday agency to explain the empowerment of the young people completing the vocational programs. Nikoi's research reveals how vocational training programs, and particularly work-readiness and life skills, allow youth to make livelihood decisions in contexts of limited economic opportunities.

In sum, this book's examination of youth agency aims to problematize the intersections of the social, cultural, and economic relations that affect youth agency and their identities. Our review of the literature and the conceptualizations of agency we put forward suggest that researchers and practitioners need to understand how youth construct for themselves their actions, resistance, and imaginaries in relation to both their present situations and desired futures that are historically, socially, and culturally embedded. Bucholtz (2002) reminds us that "the lived experience of young people … [is] neither rehearsals for the adult 'real thing' nor even necessarily oriented to

adults at all" (p. 532). In this sense, agency is constructed specifically among youth and their ways of seeing, resisting, and acting on the forces in their lives at different times and in different spaces.

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