Chapter 2
Bounded Agency in Professional Lives

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2.1 Introduction

The expression of bounded agency in a life course perspective is a temporal process. This means that biographically produced positions are present in decisions and action-taking in the contingencies of the present moment. This temporally embedded agency can be individual or collective. Past experiences as well as possible futures can be reflectively reformulated and reimagined. Bounded agency also expresses itself in the social landscape through the dynamics of multiple, interlocking socio-biographical journeys in a social terrain. The relational and temporal approach makes a conceptual advance in connecting changing social conditions and professional lives. Agency in adult life operates through engagements in and through the social world; it is exercised through the environments and institutional practices of everyday life in changing social landscapes. Bounded agency is a feature of actors' engagements in the complex social ecologies of work, learning and social responsibility. The spaces in which human agency is exercised are regulated by professional bodies, through the setting of professional standards and by public policy, through the regulation of the employment relationship and through wider systems for the management of employment and government interventions directly targeted at the workplace.

The development that takes place through the exercise of human agency is not that of the self-propelled autonomous individual but, rather, relational and profoundly social in nature. What binds us also contains affordances that enable us to think, feel and act. Conceptions of agency as bounded, discourses on professional knowledge, capabilities and the sense people have of self-authorship and capacities

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for self-direction in their professional lives can be connected in a new dialogic endeavour between communities of thought. Furthermore, the scope for agentic action in professional life reflects the bounds on agency and the affordances for learning that are embedded in work environments and institutional practices. Two occupational cases considered in the second half of this chapter show how the agentic processes inherent in the post-qualification learning of nurses in regulated hospital environments differ profoundly from the learning processes that characterise the freelancers' development of their craft as they simultaneously and continuously have to reinvent themselves in pursuit of contract-based work. The sources of variation that come from the contexts of work, as well as the input of practitioners themselves as they put different forms of knowledge to work, are interpreted according to an interdisciplinary conceptualisation of human agency as bounded in an interplay of processes of structuration, internal-external control and the potential for social reproduction or transformation.

2.2 Towards an Interdisciplinary Understanding of Human Agency

A comprehensive understanding of human agency and the multiple influences on the acting individual begins with recognition that the life course is profoundly affected by macroeconomic conditions, institutional structures, social background, gender and ethnicity, as well as acquired attributes and individual resources such as ability, motivation and aspirations. Individual development takes time and reflects cumulative experiences. The social contexts of human development range from interactions with significant others to macrosocial circumstances. Turning points in the professional life course, such as from full-time education to full-time employment or from work to retirement, are not only shaped by institutional and labour market structures but also involve developmental tasks that challenge the individual actors as well as testing institutional processes. While individual decision-making is bounded by social institutions and the wider macrosocial conditions, it is not determined by them.

The idea of agency as the ability to give direction to one's life is pervasive in the economic and social sciences and in humanities, yet frameworks for understanding human agency are dispersed. In the field of economics, notions of agency centre on the rational choice of actors, but the notion of rational choice does not necessarily take into account the role of social and cultural resources and individual values (Sen 1985; Goldthorpe 1998). Cultural variations and the role of social structures in human development are the primary focus of sociology, whereas the multiple facets of individual functioning are the main concern of psychology. The disciplines meet where they aim to examine agency in terms of the interactions between individual and context. While this interconnection is widely recognised, lines of inquiry have developed independently in recent decades. Within sociology, research has tended

to focus on the study of the life course as externally shaped by institutions, structural opportunities and historical change, in which life course dynamics and expressions of individual agency are contingent on a given sociohistorical context. Psychology, conversely, has concentrated on the study of individual adaptation and development across the life span, conceptualised as lifelong adaptive processes governed by principles of self-regulation and psychological functioning (Evans et al. 2013). While the malleability of individual development and functioning through social influences is acknowledged within psychology, the emphasis is on the more proximal social contexts, such as the family, social networks and peers, rather than on more distal sociohistorical or institutional influences.

The notion of agency as a bounded lifelong process that is both biographically produced and socially embedded brings the discussion of agency into an interdisciplinary space. Increasing the field of view of sociologists to take into account individual motivation and preferences will result in a better understanding of modes of individual agency. For psychologists, increasing the field of view means taking into account the role of institutions and social structures in ways that contribute to a better understanding of individual adaptation in times of social change and provide the means to assess how social and institutional change is affecting individual functioning. Both can also learn from social anthropology in acknowledging how social processes are embedded in cultural and subcultural differences. Expanding disciplinary perspectives in this way can enhance our understanding of human agency in changing social contexts and enable us to reconsider ways in which economic, social and cultural factors influence and impede individuals' attempts to control their lives and their capabilities to respond to opportunities and to manage the consequences of their choices.

2.3 Rethinking the Role of Personal Agency and Its Limits

Bounded agency has its roots in a dialogue between ideas and evidence (Evans 2002, 2007) arising from a series of comparative studies of learning in early adult life (between the ages of 18 and 25) in selected cities in England and the western and eastern states of Germany. These studies support the thesis that environments which are highly "visibly" structured are associated in people's minds with the idea of reduced scope for individual, proactive effort. In highly structured environments, opportunities are open only for those following clearly defined routes. Consequently, it is those same structural opportunities or barriers that are held responsible by individuals for any failure. Furthermore, an environment such as the English labour market in which the workings of structures are strong but increasingly difficult to read can foster a belief that "opportunities are open to all" such that people blame themselves for their failures in education and the labour market. In the highly structured Western German system, external factors can more easily be held responsible for failure, giving people greater scope to develop a positive sense of self in early adult life (Evans et al. 2000, p. 134).

Structural, institutional and cultural processes produce both social regularities and heterogeneity in life course patterns. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), the face of society is changing dramatically, with a clear distinction between individuals at the very top and the very bottom of society and those in between who have to bear the brunt of ambivalences and uncertainty, striving to move into the top category or to remain in control of their life but in constant danger of falling down (2002, pp. 49–51). While the permanently underprivileged and excluded might be growing, there is also much movement of individuals in and out of poverty. The search for new concepts and research methods to differentiate between those at the top and bottom of the social ladder and the fluidity of new "hybrids" located in between has been connected with the development of the "individualisation" hypothesis that the person learns to "conceive of him or herself as the centre of action, as the planning office with respect of his/her own biography" (Beck 1992, p. 135) in the attempt to minimise risk and maximise personal opportunities. An interdisciplinary debate on human responses to the sources of uncertainty in people's lives can connect the distal and proximal perspectives on human agency in an exploration of concepts and models of biographical negotiation, as processes of decision-making and action-taking reflect the exercise of contextualised preferences and the ability of individuals to achieve the functionings that they have reason to value (Sen 1985; Evans et al. 2013). Life chances are produced through the complex interplay of agency and material resources (Côté 2013). In personal and professional life, adults are motivated to learn and develop their capabilities in particular directions because these are central to their workplace goals or life priorities at that particular time. The intersection of the proximal and distal has been claimed as terrain both for an emerging sociology of the individual (Lahire 2003) and for a socially evolved version of developmental psychology (Sokol et al. 2015).

Exploration of three intersecting dimensions (see Fig. 2.1) opens up the individualisation hypothesis to debate in an expanded interdisciplinary space.

Structures Shape Action – Individualisation: The first dimension extends from social determinism at one end of the continuum, in which human agency does little to disrupt the structural forces that determine outcomes, to individualisation at the other end, as encapsulated in the idea that people are agents who are compelled to take individual responsibility for the construction of their own biographies. While Sen (1985), Bourdieu (1990), Ziehe (1996), Bandura (2006) and Côté (2013) attend to the structural influences on action, they do so with different degrees of emphasis on the internal processes of the acting individual.

Emphasis on Internal Control – Emphasis on External Control: Human agency involves self-awareness and personal meaning-making integrated with self-control abilities (Sokol et al. 2015). This second dimension explores the limits to personal control in different aspects of human functioning. Some aspects of environment and personal circumstances are extremely difficult to change. Others can be strongly influenced by the exercise of initiative and learning. Social psychologists and sociologists who consider the internal processes of the acting individual as mutually constituted or reciprocal connect agency with concepts such as self-efficacy (Bandura 2006) and "makeability" (Ziehe 1996). Furlong and also

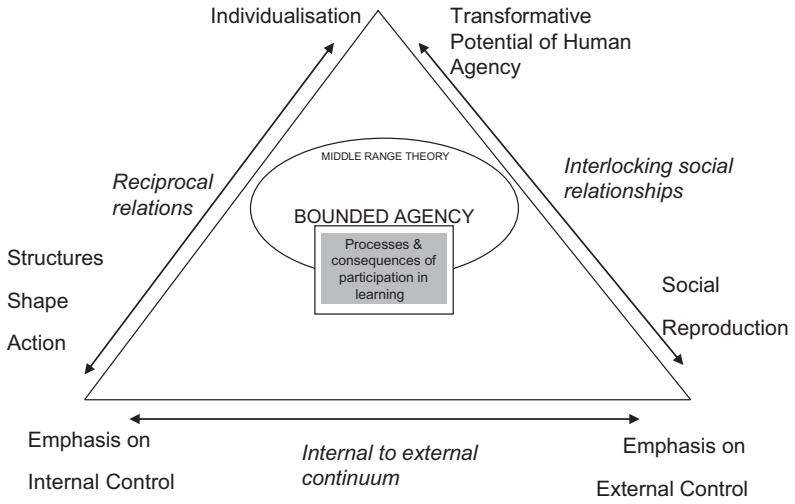

Fig. 2.1 Dimensions of bounded agency

G. Jones (2009), by contrast, place greater emphasis on the controlling functions of social structures.

The third dimension of *Social Reproduction – Transformative Potential of Human Agency* focuses on the potential for social change, exploring the limits to individual and collective scope to break the mould of standard biographies by their actions. Goldthorpe (1998) has emphasised the overriding importance of analysing the conditions of agency and action, acknowledging the interplay of internal and external factors and subjectivities. Furlong and Cartmel's (1997) position identifies structural determinants acting through chains of "human interdependence", with transformative potential limited by the "epistemological fallacy" argument that uncertainty of outcome only appears to have increased. Bourdieu's (1990) articulation of social reproduction, in contrast, emphasises subjectivities of the acting individual and explores agency in relation to habitus and field.

Sen (1985) stands apart from these positions by focusing attention on variations in contextualised capabilities within social groups, connecting functional capabilities with actual life chances and opportunities. Furthermore, capacities of individuals and groups to influence their environments can be linked to the social cognitive view of reciprocally changing conditions (Bandura 2006) as human agents participate in practices that contribute to the conditions that can promote, sustain or limit their own agency. As Biesta and Tedder (2007) explain, people do not act *in* environments; they act *through* environments and within complex social ecologies (Elder 1994). In their professional lives, workers engage in activities with differing degrees of intentionality to learn. Practitioners draw continuously on their prior knowledge, both codified and tacit, and are generally disposed to learn new capabilities that coincide with their workplace goals (Billett 2006). These goals take many forms and may range from moving to a new position in or beyond the organisation, to

improving the functioning of their team or securing employment rights for themselves and colleagues through a professional association.

2.4 Articulating Visions of Individual-Biographical Dispositions with Structural Conditions

Taking into account the dimensions in Fig. 2.1, it is possible to develop hypotheses about the structuring effects of contexts while attending to biographical dispositions to action. As Elder (1994) has observed, all social transitions entail risk of losing personal control, with effects dependent on biography and on the persons' material (economic) and social situation. The empirically grounded concept of *bounded agency* views the actions that people take in the contingencies of the present moment as bound up with subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate and the interlocking social relationships which influence them. Agency is socially situated, constituted but not determined by environments and by internalized frames of reference as well as external actions. For example, an understanding of how human agency is exercised in professional lives requires insights into the realities of work: how people think and feel their ways into work identities; how they respond, individually and collectively, to the structures and forms of work organisation imposed on them; how they use their skills, knowledge and emotions; and how they cope with pressures and stress.

2.4.1 Socially Positioned Lives

The focus thus shifts from "structured individualisation" towards people as actors, without losing the perspective of structuration. As actors move in social landscapes, spaces open up for action which are not wholly reducible to the effects of social reproduction or underlying structural features. Bounded agency keeps the boundedness of socially positioned lives in view as well as the internalised processes of self-awareness and personal meaning-making, recognising that individuals differ in the ways in which they interpret their situation and act upon it to achieve the functionings that they have reason to value. Bounded agency is not determined by relational networks or social structures but recognises that the embeddedness of human agents in these relations and structures both constrains and extends dispositions to act, leading to new expressions of agency. As Ratner (2000) argues, agency is not intrinsically creative and can only be enhanced by enhancing the social relations which constitute it. Herein lie the explanations of the empirical heterogeneity found in life course patterns as well as the social regularities in outcomes that persist. Both can be accounted for by the social factors that influence variations in human responses rather than irreducible differences between social groups (Lahire 2003).

For the concept of bounded agency to be further elaborated in ways that inform research, practice and policy, we also need deeper insights into the agency involved in taking action, how these agentic beliefs are developed, what drives them and how they related to dispositions of people to act in particular ways.

2.4.2 Self-Directed Learning

A central tenet of the developmental psychologist approaching this matter is that agency is essentially self-directed – a stance that most sociologists refute. Perspectives on adult learning enter the interdisciplinary space from opposing positions on the extent to which self- directed activity in adult life can be the site for emergence of the capabilities to give direction to one's life. Brookfield (1995), for example, has long warned against views of adults as self-contained, volitional beings engaged in individual projects. Sokol et al., meanwhile, assert their "goal to rise above this debate and make self-directed activity the site of the emergence of agency" (2015, p. 287).

The lens of bounded agency allows self-directed learning to be viewed in ways which bring into focus the social, cultural and relational dynamics of the acting person. The agency inherent in self-directedness is shown to be emergent and biographically produced as individuals confront, negotiate and reconstitute their position in the world. Agency is not just about acting, but it is about making a difference to oneself and others (Giddens 1984) and strikes a balance between the power of individuals and collective commitments, in Sen's (1985) capability approach. Where bounded agency is understood to be both produced by and exercised in a process of biographical negotiation – where both the self-direction and the bounds are understood to be socially and temporally embedded and amenable to change through action which has both individual and collective consequences – the debate about self-directedness in learning can be fundamentally reframed.

Carré's call for learning in adult life to be "thought out upside down" (2013, p. 12), from the learner-agent's perspective, can be achieved in a way that articulates visions of individual-biographical dispositions with structural conditions. Bounded agency can be characterised by a sense of reflexive self-authorship that translates into an expansion of human capabilities through learning or at least the potential for future learning. For example, narrative accounts of women aged 50 looking back on their life course show how specific relationships and workplace or life experiences can be construed as "activating events" that have triggered personal and professional development, often entailing growth of confidence and willingness on the part of adults to develop themselves in new ways (Evans and Biasin 2017). The reverse can also be true – individuals can become trapped by events and locked into their own stories. However, the impact of these shifting orientations on life trajectories, and the degree to which such changes are sustained over time, is constituted through personal, cultural and institutional influences. In some cases, activating relationships have stimulated women towards broadening of horizons for action. In others,

recurrent patterns of crisis and the search for stability characterise the ups and downs and turning points of the life course, in culturally specific ways. In examining expressions of agency in women's life history narratives and self-representations, self-direction, in a "life course" definition, can be identified in the extent of women's capabilities to analyse their lives and make sense of personal and professional situations in ways that allow for potential development, enrichment or growth. These forms of sense-making often reveal the therapeutic power of narratives (Silva 2013; Franceschelli et al. 2015; Ketokivi and Meskur 2015) in evaluating the scope for personal agency in challenging life situations.

The expression of bounded agency in a life course perspective has, so far, been characterised as a temporal process. Biographically produced positions are present in decisions and action-taking in the contingencies of the present moment. This temporally embedded agency can be individual or collective. Past experiences as well as possible futures can be reflectively reformulated and reimagined. Multiple flows of influence come into play in ways that are always relational, sometimes reciprocal and may be mutually reinforcing or limiting. While these change over time, agentic action in adult life is, at any particular time, embedded in engagements in the social world, the environments and institutional practices of everyday life in changing social landscapes.

2.5 Focusing on Professional Life

In the context of professional learning, action can be considered from the perspective of how adults exercise agency in forging what they perceive, at any given time, to be their professional career paths or trajectories. Agency can also be considered from the perspective of the processes that underpin the directing of action in the practices of their day-to-day work. In Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal conception of agency, routines, habits and beliefs are brought from the past into the contingencies of the present moment, and agentic action reflects not only these habits, routines and beliefs but also the conceptions of the acting individual of what are the possible outcomes, both proximal and distal. Yet it is not just routines, habits and beliefs which are brought into the contingencies of the present moment but a variety of forms of knowledge, ranging from personal and tacit knowledge to the specialist scientific and professional forms of knowledge that fundamentally differentiate professional work. Knowledge is therefore "put to work" in all forms of agentic action and is integral to an understanding of the social processes that both characterise particular professions and also distinguish between them.

2.5.1 *Agentic Action Embedded in Environments and Institutional Practices of Professional Life*

The scope for agentic action in professional life reflects the bounds on agency and the affordances for learning that are embedded in work environments and institutional practices. Manifestations of *bounded agency* can be analysed according to the interplay of the three conceptual dimensions associated with structuration, internal-external control and reproduction-transformation. The first dimension keeps in view the ways in which work structures interact with perceptions of individualised scope for action and "choice"; the second, the internal-external continuum reminds us of the limits of internal and external sources of control on individual and group action; the third highlights the possibilities for transformative potential of human agency that arise from interlocking social relationships amidst the self-evident socially reproductive processes of workplaces and institutions. For example, focusing on the micro level shows the significance of forms of work organisation and how learning often arises from people working together and cooperating in daily work tasks. At least six types of workplace-based learning arise naturally as people work collaboratively on tasks: people can seek out and observe those who are "knowledgeable" about the task or activity; they can involve themselves in peer support, in focused workplace discussions, in practicing without supervision, and in searching out new information, ideas and solutions. They may also benefit from mentoring and coaching (Taylor et al. 2009). Learning that results from combinations of activities such as observation and focused workplace discussion depends on worker motivation and dispositions to learning, workplace relationships and the affordances of the wider environment (see also Harwood and Froehlich 2017, this volume; Messmann and Mulder 2017, this volume; Palesy and Billett 2017, this volume). Professionals engage with varying degrees of intentionality to develop their practice. This development takes both adaptive and productive forms as professionals strive to adapt their practice to changing situations and to produce new responses and ways of working to meet the challenges of unpredictable circumstances or problems for which there are no readily identifiable solutions.

The affordances for this learning and development are shaped by professional norms, traditions and regulatory frameworks that govern the employment and professional relationship. The norms and traditions are socially reproductive by definition; the latter are structures that are powerful in shaping action. Learning affordances are also profoundly affected by work organisation. Rich learning engagements can occur, with transformative potential, when "doors are opened" to opportunities to expand and share knowledge and skills in supportive workgroups. Conversely, unintended negative influences on learning may occur, for example, where the interdependencies of the workplace are undermined by feelings of lack of trust (Billett 2006).

International case comparison (Taylor et al. 2009) has shown the importance of interplay between these forms of "in situ" workplace-based learning and participation in forms of instruction or learning events that are distanced from the particular site of work. Triggers for further learning may arise from a company ethos of quality

performance or safety or from participatory management and collaborative working to solve specific problems. Where attitudes of curiosity, inquiry and imagination are encouraged and supported through access to wider educational content, inner realisation of the personal and work benefits of learning often follows. Agentic involvement in day-to-day workplace-based learning tends to be less motivated by monetary rewards or upward mobility but is often spurred on by a need for challenge or variety in the everyday work routine (Taylor et al. 2009). Conversely, participating in the more formal workplace programs, courses and workshops can ignite the desire to do things differently, acting as catalysts for worker involvement in varying practices and in innovation.

Transformative potential is developed, where the wider context is supportive. Developing creative interplay between different modes of learning in professional development requires us to keep the dynamics of knowledge and pedagogy in view, as well as the multiplicity of purposes that derive from the contexts of employment and the agency of the acting individual. In professional life, learning and development take place as practitioners focus on the practice while attending to the knowledge frameworks that underpin the directing of work and the exercise of judgement that is involved (Evans 2015). The highest levels of professional learning and development are manifested in *knowledgeable practice*, that is, practice that is characterised by the exercise of attuned and responsive judgement when individuals or teams are confronted with complex tasks and unpredictable situations at work.

2.5.2 Putting Knowledge to Work as Bounded Agency in Action

These relationships have been investigated through two new research studies, which set out to explore the part played "knowledge recontextualisations" as agentic processes in professional development in contrasting occupational sectors. Knowledge recontextualisation, in this formulation, implies agentic involvement as knowledge of different kinds is "put to work" in different environments. Evans et al. (2009, 2010) have argued that for knowledge generated and practiced in one context to be put to work in new contexts, it has to be recontextualised agentically in ways that simultaneously engage with and change those practices, traditions and experiences. This approach to recontextualisation has drawn on (1) developments of Bernstein's idea that concepts change as they move from their disciplinary origins and become a part of a curriculum (Bernstein 2000; Barnett 2006) and (2) van Oers' (1998) idea that concepts are integral to practice and change as practice varies from one workplace to another. These notions have been substantially expanded to embrace the ways in which adults themselves change as they recontextualise concepts and practices in different settings and think and feel their ways into new professional identities. This is a continuous agentic process, bounded by workplace relations and the organisation of work as well as by the knowledge and experience of the

professional. Two subsequent research studies have built on this approach, by focusing attention on how practitioners put knowledge to work, combining and using different forms of knowledge (propositional, personal, procedural, tacit, experiential) as they move between sites of learning and practice in contrasting occupational fields. The agentic processes involved in strivings to become knowledgeable practitioners have come to the fore in these new analyses, which are outlined in the next two sections.

2.6 Bounded Agency in the Context of Regulated Public Sector Professional Practice

The recent research study **"**Academic Awards and Recontextualising Knowledge" (AaRK) reported by Magnusson et al. (2014) has focused on the ways in which newly qualified nurses experience their early years as qualified practitioners in hospitals. This study reveals some hidden aspects of agentic professional development and supportive environments in regulated public sector practice.

As a new registrant in one of the four fields of nursing practice, the newly qualified nurse (NQN) has to show evidence that she/he has met standards for registration set by the Nursing and Midwifery Council. To assist with the recognised reality shock experienced by NQNs, a period of "preceptorship", a form of supervised practice, is seen as necessary to provide a safe period of learning to support the transition to confident practitioner (Muir 2013). Newly qualified nurses often feel they can be left to "sink or swim" as they make the transition to fully operational qualified nurse, as Allan et al. (2014) have shown. A central challenge involves being able to delegate and supervise bedside care. Most of the learning in the preceptorship period is ward-based as NQNs learn from day-to-day practice in health care teams. Some timetabled instruction in the nursing preceptorship covers codified aspects of procedural and work process knowledge. But unlike disciplinary or subject knowledge, where there are clear criteria for combining knowledge to lead to the goal of greater abstraction and depth in understanding, there are few rules about how to structure and sequence content towards the goal of knowledgeable practice, as the latter often depends on the "invisible" learning that takes place. The invisible learning is often triggered by particular workplace activities or events and the particular context in which they occur.

Knowledge recontextualisation takes place when the practitioner recognises a new situation as requiring a response and uses knowledge – theoretical, procedural and tacit - in acts of interpretation in an attempt to bring the activity and its setting under conscious control. The AaRK study data have shown (Allan et al. 2014, 2016) how NQNs strive to manage uncertainty and bring order to unexpected and new situations in ways which use, stretch and challenge their knowledge in all of its forms. The NQNs learn not only to enact established workplace practices and procedures, in *adaptive* forms of knowledge recontextualisation, but also to modify

their responses in the search for solutions to unexpected occurrences or in the light of experiences of mistakes they, or others around them, have made. They learn through this process to develop their judgement of what constitutes safe practice and enact it through effective delegation or appropriate situations for learning from co-workers. Learning through difficult experiences and through mistakes is most readily associated with *productive* forms of knowledge recontextualisation, while counterexamples have shown how defensive practices can sometimes be traced to difficult experiences that have not been fully worked through with supportive debriefing. The deepening of adaptive to productive learning has been shown to be crucial for activities such as delegation, where there are few pre-existing guidelines and where the development of attuned judgement is crucial to effective practice.

In their frequent accounts of "muddling through", newly qualified nurses are adapting existing knowledge of many different types to respond in the contingencies of the present moment to multiple pressures and demands. Their responses are themselves contextualised in the routines and protocols of record-keeping, patient confidentiality and safety checks. They are also modified according to workplace relations and the organisational hierarchies that influence how NQNs communicate with health care assistants, doctors and their mentor. Knowing when, how and with whom to communicate in an emergency or unpredictable situation can be critical to the outcome. The NQN is thus building knowledge of how to work with the protocols and manage the workplace relations that are embedded in clinical practice. The findings show how NQNs come to embody knowledge cognitively and practically through these agentic processes. They show how enhanced knowledge-aware mentorship that recognises the power of invisible ward-based learning can support professional development towards the goal of knowledgeable practice.

Interviews and observations repeatedly highlighted having to negotiate the busyness of the ward situation. These negotiations entail expressions of agency and an awareness of the ways in which practitioners' responses in the present moment are bounded by relationships and the particular situation as well as their own habits, routines and beliefs in their own capabilities. An NQN, for example, describes both her abilities to monitor and prioritise in critical settings (expressions of agency, as she puts knowledge to work) and her feeling of being "overwhelmed" by the demands (the situational challenges to agentic action). She describes how she was on a late shift, monitoring somebody who was critically ill every hour. Her account shows what the "contingencies of the present moment" actually mean in practice, as she explains how she decided to "pull out" a team of doctors to assess the patient, giving priority to this over attending to two people who were waiting to be discharged and waiting for their paperwork. A new admission from accident and emergency department arrived at the same time, and she was aware that she also had to do the drug rounds as it was six o'clock. This newly qualified nurse describes her feelings over being overwhelmed but nonetheless copes with the situation as best as she can.

Here, agency is expressed, even when feeling overwhelmed, in her attempts to read the situation and gain control over it. These and similar cases are discussed by Allan et al. (2014), showing how the tolerance from colleagues that is a key

ingredient in these situations gradually decreases as the newly qualified nurse is increasingly given responsibility and is expected to cope. In this case, agency can be seen as bounded in an interplay of lack of confidence and limits that close supervision places on action, reflecting the dimension of internal control mediated by the regulatory hospital environment and the immediate work context. A supervisory process that actively enables productive knowledge recontextualisations can help the newly qualified practitioner to gain mastery of delegation and prioritisation.

Newly qualified practitioners are shown to recontextualise many forms of knowledge in the workplace to emerge as competent staff nurses capable in their own eyes and recognised by the ward team as capable of managing a section of the ward and eventually a shift. This is a professional development process in which agency is exercised and its bounds are negotiated in a liminal space where novice status is recognised and tolerated by staff. The liminal space is where reformulation of knowledge into new patterns takes place and is linked to action. This process of liminality takes time and can become transformative. Phases of liminality are characterised by uncertainty and contradiction as newly qualified practitioners have to assume authority and accept accountability while feeling that they are still learning and are not recognised as fully competent. This places them at times in difficult situations with the staff for whom they are responsible, notable health care assistants. Newly qualified practitioners learn to manage their authority as part of the agentic process of thinking and feeling their way into a professional identity (Evans et al. 2010). Allan (2007) and Bruce et al. (2014) suggest that the liminal space is where identity is played out safely, and newly qualified practitioners are expected to move out of this space as they become increasingly competent and confident. The AaRK Project has reviewed the support functions within the National Health Service (NHS) that have been introduced to recognise and support this liminal journey, in the preceptorship course and most notably in the tolerance expected from clinical colleagues.

As fully qualified practitioners move beyond the liminal stage, knowledge undergoes further recontextualisations as practice varies from workplace to workplace and from situation to situation, and practitioners exercise and attune their professional judgement. Questions arise as to why some early career professionals seem better able to negotiate the liminal space and others to find difficulty in doing so. Practitioner capabilities, changing relationships in reconstituted NHS teams and the wider challenges of rapidly changing and busier NHS services are interconnected in a wider social ecology in which the agency of the acting individual has many manifestations and possible outcomes.

2.7 Bounded Agency in Freelance or Contingent Work Contexts

The public sector scenario of highly regulated practice can be contrasted with the insecurities of freelance work in the cultural and creative industries. A second research study using the lens of knowledge recontextualisation set out to investigate how best to support the professional learning of freelancers in the film and TV industry (Bound et al. 2014, 2015). The contrasts with the regulated public sector context are striking. This research has also highlighted how the relationships between professional learning and the agency of the acting individual are mediated by the particular occupational affordances of the sector. Freelance work in the film and television industry is characterised by a combination of freedom and autonomy with a lack of stability and security. Diverse work opportunities can offer a plethora of learning opportunities but can also bring heavy workloads. The evidence indicates that learning on and through the job is most highly valued by practitioners, while having high levels of reflexivity helps a freelancer refine their skills and knowledge and use them across multiple locations. The development of knowledgeable practice entails constantly monitoring and responding to changing practices and technology, shifting work patterns and needs within the industry, which freelancers can only address by engaging in work and interacting with other industry players. Learning how to navigate this landscape effectively requires freelance film and television workers to develop multilayered or hybrid professional identifications with their craft and freelance status. Not only is craft important, in terms of understanding the technical and aesthetic, but developing the "entrepreneurial self" is crucial for understanding how to maximise their opportunities to get work. Workers develop aesthetic and "entrepreneurial" dispositions as well as knowledge and skills through doing the work. Having to be "malleable" and having the ability to "swallow your pain" are examples of expressions used by freelancers to capture the pressures to having to fit the requirements of the contractor and task at hand, to sustain work and survive in the profession.

The learning of freelancers as they move from one project can expand as they put multiple forms of knowledge to work, in ways that are not easily abstracted to be taught in educational institutions. The learning process entails investment in "who you are" and requires, according to Du Gay (1996), a strong sense of self-efficacy and metacognitive strategies that are applied in the constant production of self at work. This is a highly agentic process in which organisational bounds are negotiated towards outcomes that have an element of co-production. As well as contributing to the individual's own development, these negotiations often collectively reproduce and reconstitute industry norms.

The nature of freelance work leads to particular kinds of identifications with the profession, where these workers are constantly reproducing themselves as an economic resource. Identification with their craft is foremost. In the film and TV industry, the freelancer identifies with the craft or camera work or sound, for example. Second, the practitioners identify with the entrepreneurship of freelance

work. In order to cope with the uncertainties of the work environment, freelancers report a range of dispositions, working ethics and tacit competencies, in addition to sector-specific technical knowledge and expertise that play a part in mitigating risk and making working life viable. The Singapore-based research team (Bound et al. 2015) has developed the concept of integrated practice to capture these multiple identifications with the craft, with entrepreneurialism and capacities to learn. These are dimensions of integrated practice, not separate sets of skills and dispositions. Craft, entrepreneurialism and capacities to learn are combined as a cohesive, coordinated set of actions and activities. "It is not the technical skills alone that makes a crafts person, or even the mastery and identification, but their combination with entrepreneurialism that generates the learning to learn and provides its material" p.12. These insights have salience internationally and implications for design and delivery of continuous professional development and higher education programmes.

Integrated practice places the agency of the freelancer at the heart while keeping in view the multiple ways in which the expression of agency is bounded as workers negotiate their working landscape. The agentic freelancer has to negotiate the affordances of the profession as well as those of the particular workplaces to which they are attached. These affordances vary in the ways they can limit, set free or otherwise influence the expressions of agency of the freelance worker engaged in integrated practice. Four categories of occupational affordances are identified by Bound et al. (2015) as significant: work, linkages, occupational community platforms and voice. Work affordances that support the development of integrated practice make available opportunities for specialisation and quality assignments that can stretch and challenge capabilities. The category of "linkages" focuses on ease of entry and movement across subsectors of the industry (e.g. stage companies, touring shows, hotels and convention centres). Linkages across job roles are also important potential facilitators as are professional networks. Networks can operate in ways that are excluded, competitively, in which case linkages become potential barriers that the agentic freelancer has additionally to navigate in pursuit of integrated practice. Occupational community platforms, the third category, can provide access to experts, networks and quality assignments through associations and non-profit organisations. The final category of "voice" refers to organisational representation, the extent to which the interests of freelancers are represented organisationally through professional associations, unions or other bodies representative of freelance worker interests.

As freelance work and other forms of self-employment are increasing, so too does the significance of political channels for the advocacy of better support for these forms of work through the welfare and pension systems and social policies. The Royal Society of Arts project investigating self-employment in the UK has proposed a "minimising risks" approach which emphasises spreading risks through collective action, whereby individual responsibility on the individual to minimising their own risks through continuous personal and professional development has to be matched by a new tax and welfare settlement, including the extension of tax relief on training (RSA 2014). These systemic and occupational affordances are increasingly critical

as the extent of freelance or self-employed work increases in developed economies. What freelancers make of these affordances is also critical – a co-production occurs as they exercise abilities to read situations, make judgements and take effective action. The scope of this co-production process extends from the micro level in practices to meso-level frameworks that frame and set limits on action.

This research has shown that freelancers in the creative industries speak well of continuing professional development opportunities only in so far as they support entrepreneurialism as well as the craft aspects. Given the demands of freelance work, the findings indicate that programmes of higher professional development are more likely to be taken up if perceived to have value in terms of these aspects of integrated practice. For the platform of provided opportunities to become a springboard for agentic development for the working freelancer, development opportunities have to be decentred and distributed, supported by quality mentoring, with a focus on knowledgeable practice. Developing a strong sense of the nature of the craft with agentic dispositions and metacognitive strategies is central, but many issues for the freelance worker are bigger than and beyond the control of the individual. These include employment practices in agency work that can undermine quality and skills development in the industry. The freelancers' needs to develop business management skills, including contract management skills, have been established, but this should not draw attention away from requirements for improvement in established industry practices. Professional associations can take the lead in representing the collective interests of freelancers in these matters, which are fundamental to a continuous supply of work and therefore of income.

2.8 Discussion

The cases above have illustrated the scope for learning through agentic action in contrasting fields of professional practice. Nursing exemplifies a regulated professional context, and film and TV represent the contingent contexts of freelance work. In both examples, professional learning and development is directed by a sense of what one is striving to "become" and the drive for feelings of competence and control in the present moment (see Table 2.1).

Exploring the processes that underpin the directing of work in these two fields has opened up new perspectives on the bounds of agency in professional practice. Agency is expressed in the processes of negotiation of the activities and relationships of professional practice, throughout working life. Agency is bounded in the negotiation of the organisationally and structurally embedded limits and possibilities of the particular employment relationship. The reflexive processes of structuration involved in negotiating the requirements and expectations of a regulated profession in a hospital trust differ profoundly from the constant reinventions of the self that characterise the freelancers' pursuit of contract-based work. Further sources of variation come from the input of practitioners themselves as they put knowledge to work, as well as from wider professional affordances and societal forces. And

Table 2.1 Sources of variation in bounded agency at work in contrasting occupational fields

	Nursing (hospital)	Film and TV
Context	Regulated professional and institutional	Contingent context of freelance work
Expressions of agency	Negotiating requirements and expectations of profession and hospital trust	Continuous reinvention of self as economic resource
Identifications	Becoming "a good nurse"	A craftsperson first; entrepreneur second
Process of "becoming" a good practitioner emphasises	• Learning by trial and error, from difficult experiences, from patients and peers; by "muddling through" • Supportive environments and relationships for the above	• Learning by mimicry and synthesis • Metacognitive strategies – learning to learn • Supportive networks and relationships for the above
Knowledge "put to work" examples	• Recognising situations as requiring a response and bringing situations under control, under pressure • Exercising good judgement • Knowing how and when to be able to delegate, effectively and safely, and when to call in specialist help	• Co-production • Knowing how to navigate "the working landscape" of multiple contractors • Coordination of craft, entrepreneurial and metacognitive capabilities in "Integrated Practice" (Bound et al. 2015)
Affordances depend on	Supervision; mentorship; work intensity	Networks, who you know; quality of assignments; management of downtime; access to resources

both settings have affordances that produce both socially reproductive and potentially transformative learning.

Studying agency empirically from the perspective of bounded agency developed in this chapter entails an ethnographic approach, combined with integrated analyses that keep the social processes that bind human agency, together with their interdependencies, in view. Contexts are not "backdrops" for agency but constitutive of agency. The organisation, work team or individual can be taken as the point of departure. Furthermore, each individual's personal history can be considered a platform for their coming to know and make sense of what is encountered in workplaces and in their wider professional lives. This sense-making process both shapes and reflects the person's intentionality and agency in the ways in which they engage with work roles, as shown by Billett (2006). Analyses of how individuals engage with the affordances of work – what work offers them and can do for them – show that the distribution of affordances is far from benign and is associated with the occupational hierarchies that operate with different degrees of visibility in organisations.

It was noted, in the examples of professions, that affordances are interconnected in a wider social ecology in which the agency of the acting individual has uncertain outcomes. Four categories of *actors*, *relationships*, *environments and structures*, *and*

processes lie at the heart of social ecological analyses (Weaver-Hightower 2008). Because ecologies are self-sustaining through interdependencies that operate without centralized controls, individuals and groups have spaces in which to exercise agency in ways that can influence the whole dynamic. More recently, in the context of life course research, Biesta and Tedder (2007) argue that people do not act *in* structures and environments – they act through them. This resonates with conceptualisations of agency as bounded rather than structured. People's beliefs in their ability to change their situation by their own efforts, individually or collectively, are significant for their professional learning and development. These beliefs develop over time and according to experiences in working environments and beyond. They do not necessarily conform to societal norms and expectations, as the agentic action of people who sustain gender atypical choices in vocational education and training shows (Evans 2006). The ability to translate these agentic beliefs into action is achieved rather than possessed (Biesta and Tedder 2007), and capabilities are limited by bounds that can be loosened (Evans 2002, 2007). These perspectives recognise, for example, that professional workers can use the workplace as a learning space for ends that extend far beyond the organisation. It is also important to avoid assumptions about the straightforward dissemination of, for example, particular workforce development policies but instead explore their contestation, selective appropriation and interpretation by members of workforce to whom they are meant to apply (De Certeau 1984; Waite et al. 2014). In professional learning and development, practitioners are generally disposed to learn new capabilities that coincide with their own workplace and wider life goals, as Palesy and Billett (2017, this volume) note. Yet agency is bounded in occupational fields that are highly differentiated as domains for agentic expression, not least because of fundamental differences in the knowledge frameworks that underpin the directing of work and the ways in which judgement is exercised in evaluating the scope and limits of agentic action.

The development that takes place through the exercise of human agency is not that of the self-propelled autonomous individual but, rather, relational, historically embedded and biographically produced. It is as representative of the distal effects of socioeconomic and occupational structures as it is reflective of individual capabilities and the proximal influences of workplace, family and community. What binds us also contains affordances that enable us to think, feel and act. In forging connections between conceptions of agency as bounded, and the sense people have of self-authorship and capacities for self-direction in professional life, this chapter has aimed to open up an interdisciplinary space for new dialogic endeavours between communities of thought and practice in the field of adult learning.

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