

## Investigating Agency

### Preamble

'Agency' is the *capacity* to have an effect – it is the *potential* to influence. Agency isn't something that can be seen or measured directly. Instead we know it through its *effect*, i.e. through feedback from how the world reacts to us. As a result we form a perception of our (and others') agency in particular contexts. For example, how much agency do you think you have, say, in relation to the health of your body?

Albert Bandura (according to many, the world's most influential living psychologist) says there is nothing "more central or pervasive" to human agency "than beliefs of personal efficacy". In other words, our beliefs about our agency influence our capacity for agency!

The next Developing Group online workshop will delve into the idea of agency:

- What is it?
- Who or what has, or doesn't have it?
- Where does it reside in a system?
- What influences it?

We will focus on *individual* agency but there are two other types: *group or collective* agency, and *proxy* agency where we act on behalf of another. Parents with a young child are a good example of all three types operating at the same time.

Facilitators need to be careful of assuming proxy agency, especially if their client is expressing little agency.

We are wary about abstract concepts like 'agency' because they can generate lots of explanation that is of little practical value. So in the July 4 & 5th workshop we will be concentrating on:

- How a person's agency manifests in their language
- How we can work with a client's sense of their own (or others') agency
- And what role does having a little, or a lot of agency play?

Below we attempt to bring some clarity to a number of terms related to the topic and provide a little background to the nature of agency.

We have also provided a short activity to get you thinking about how you recognise indicators of agents and agency.

## Definitions

There is a great deal of overlap and undefined use of terms in relation to agency. We will use the following words to mean:

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <b>Agency</b>         | Capacity* to (act and) have an effect.  |
| <b>Self-efficacy</b>  | An assessment [belief/appreciation] of one's own <i>agency</i> to produce (achieve) a desired outcome. Closely related to our 'sense of control'.   |
| <b>Other-efficacy</b> | Capacity* to recognise agents and attribute <i>agency</i> to people or objects  |
| <b>Will</b>           | Capacity* to deliberately choose (at the moment of decision) among various desires present – especially those involving the inhibition of one's own impulses.   |
| <b>Volition</b>       | Capacity* to decide on and commit to a particular course of action. It is purposive striving especially when there are obstacles and frustrations in pursuit of goals or adherence to principles. (Also called 'willpower', it is the exercise of <i>will</i> over time). |

Some things to note about these definitions:

\* Most of these are defined in terms of a 'capacity'. Also referred to as a 'faculty/ability/power'. In these cases, capacity is a non-tangible, abstract concept. We can see and measure the capacity of a physical container but we cannot see or directly measure someone's degree of agency, will or volition. It has to be done indirectly.

All of the above concepts are closely related to the implicit sense that 'I' am bringing about the actions of my body or thinking thoughts, that there is an agent 'I' with agency, will, volition, etc.

'Free will' is defined as the capacity to make choices in which the outcome is not (pre)determined exclusively by past events or other forces (e.g. genetics, fate, destiny, a divine being).

Several scientists have sought to show that free will and our sense of agency, will and volition is an epiphenomenon and not 'real'. Whether there is any basis to these ideas or not is of marginal importance to the work of a clean-constructivist since people *experience* themselves as being an agent with the capacity to chose, act and have an influence – and that's what we work with. (Even free-will doubters behave *as if* they have some degree of agency!)

What is well-proven is that the degree of agency we may 'actually' have can be widely different from our perception of our agency. At times all of us are fooled by an 'illusion of agency' and at times this can be beneficial or detrimental to our own well-being and for social cohesion.

It is important to realise that high or low agency is neither intrinsically good nor bad – it always depends on the context and the perspective taken. And as Gregory Bateson pointed out, too much or too little of anything becomes destructive.

## Perceived agency

Gregory Bateson, and following him, Paul Watzlawick also maintained: *we cannot not communicate*. Since all communication has some effect, the maxim can be extended to: *we cannot not influence*. In other words, we always have *some* agency – just by existing.<sup>1</sup>

We can assume we have a certain capacity to have an effect in any context, however, knowing how much agency we, or someone else, 'actually' has is, for the most part, an elusive dream.

Therefore, most of the time we will be considering **perceived agency**, which we define as:

A person's sense of their own, others' or an external agency in a context.

We can perceive agency in ourselves, in other people and in other things (e.g. superstitions, animism, divine and supernatural forces, etc.).

Perceived agency is important since it influences 'actual' agency. Albert Bandura, the originator of the term 'self-efficacy' wrote:

Among the mechanisms through which human agency is exercised, none is more central or pervasive than beliefs of personal efficacy. This belief system is the foundation of human agency. Unless people believe that they can produce desired effects by their actions they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties. Whatever other factors serve as motivators, they are rooted in the core belief that one has the power to produce changes by one's actions.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes the opposite is also true. Feedback influences our sense of agency. But often it doesn't. Experimental evidence shows that most of us are surprisingly poor at predicting how we will react in an unfamiliar situation. We are not much better in familiar situations. For example, most of us underestimate how much we are influenced by the groups we are in ('social influence') and in so doing we overestimate our agency within a group setting.

The key question for us as clean facilitators is what effect does a person's perceived agency have on their ability to improve their lives and the lives of others around them?

We been asked whether the grammatical 'active' or 'passive' voice indicates agency, e.g. "The window was broken (by me)" is in the passive voice, while "I broke the window" is in the active voice. From a Symbolic Modelling viewpoint, a person using the active or passive voice may indicate the degree of agency, but more important is whether the *agent* is apparent or not.

And, as a rule, client's desired Outcome statements become shorter and more 'active' as the session progresses.

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<sup>1</sup> "It is difficult to imagine how any behavior in the presence of another person can avoid being a communication of one's own view of the nature of one's relationship with that person and how it can fail to influence that person." Paul Watzlawick, John H. Weakland, Richard Fisch (2011). *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Bandura, A. (1999). [Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective](#). *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 2, 21-41. p. 28.

### **Pre-workshop activity**

In the following two statements, identify:

(a) the indicators of the perceived agency

and (b) the source of that agency.

1. "I want that when I put myself out into the world, if I am upset or if I say something someone won't like, or if I offer my opinion, or if I stand my ground, I want gentleness back, the sense they receive, accept and welcome me."
2. "I admit I am powerless over alcohol and that my life had become unmanageable."

During the workshop, there will be an opportunity to discuss your thoughts on the above with other participants.