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Agency: Meaning and Characteristics

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Dialogue

Ann Dale

Welcome to the members of the Advisory Research Committee exploring the relationship between agency, social capital and sustainable development. This is a three-year research project funded by SSHRC, for which we are very grateful, this research would not be happening without it. And welcome to our audience. We will be brainstorming about the meaning of agency, its characteristics, who manifests it and can policies help or hinder it?

Before we start, could I ask you to introduce yourselves, and why you are interested?

Chris Ling

Hi, I am Chris Ling and Post-doctoral scholar working with Ann on the Agency project. I

am wondering if the notion of Agency is commonly understood even amongst this team and what we think it actually is.

Ken Lyotier

Good Afternoon, my Name is Ken Lyotier and I have been invited to be part of a research team to explore the nature of agency with Dr. Dale, Dr. Ling and others.

Ann Dale

And I am privileged to be working with my dear colleagues, Ken Lyotier and Chris Ling.

Jennie Sparkes

Sorry I am late, I had to get a new password, could not seem to get my old one to work. But I am here now! Let me read what has been posted...

Nola-Kate Seymoar

I am Nola-Kate Seymoar, President and CEO of the International Centre for Sustainable Cities. My interest in agency as a concept relates to the work that we do on empowerment. I don't like the term agency - it sounds like jargon because it is not a term one hears everyday. On the other hand I find it is a useful concept. I think of agency as being the power to affect decisions about oneself and one's community. But it goes beyond that to include the psychological sense of potency - of feeling empowered.

Chris Ling

Hi Nola-Kate - I agree with you, mainly because most people immediately associate Agency with Government Agency. I wonder what an alternative could be however.

Ann Dale

Let's get started, I do think there is a difference between agency and empowerment. Agency is the a priori condition to empowerment, it is whether or not a person has the will or intent?

Chris Ling

Is empowerment the giving an individual the opportunity to exercise their agency?

Ann Dale

That's what I think, it is the enabling conditions?

Chris Ling

So if someone has no (or little) agency then however they are empowered they won't act. Similarly someone with enormous Agency will probably manage to empower themselves regardless of context?

Jennie Sparkes

Sounds like empowerment may be an outcome while agency is a catalyst?

Nola-Kate Seymoar

I like that idea Jennie - empowerment as an outcome and agency as a catalyst.

Chris Ling

Which leads me to wonder if Agency can be taught or if it is innate - which I guess gets us into nature versus nurture, which is probably not very helpful.

Nola-Kate Seymoar

I don't think anyone can empower another - there must be enough sense of agency to be able to act. There may be opportunities and structures that enable people to be empowered. What about the consciousness raising aspect of empowerment, which proceeds empowerment? Is that really the way in which agency (intent) is fostered – i.e. through consciousness raising?

Maybe I have taken us on a wrong track here. Should we go back to the definition that was proposed in the earlier paper we were responding to at the last meeting? I don't have it with me but it was a good comprehensive definition.

Ann Dale

Agency is a team or structure of people performing specific tasks for a specific purpose (Barber, 2001). It can also refer to intentional actions and processes that result in a new 'state of affairs' that would not otherwise emerged (Bhaskar, 1994). In a paper by Newman and myself, we argue that agency is the force behind social action, and actors must be aware that they possess agency. We must believe that change is possible, which creates a process of empowerment and agency (Horvath, 1998, Bandura, 2000).

But, there can be no agency without power (Dietz & Burns, 1992), access to critical information, diverse intellectual capital and in the long run, wisdom (Dale, 2004).

Ken Lyotier

First, when thinking of agency, I expect we are thinking of "social agency" so in that context, we are talking about the capacity to act in a social environment in ways that affect intentional social change. A question arises as to whether there is something intrinsic about the nature of "agency" or is it something that can be nurtured into existence?

Jennie Sparkes

Maybe Agency is taught or maybe it is inherent in ones personality - or a little of both. I tend to lean towards thinking that agency relates to psychological characteristics of a person that are part environmental and part genetic and related to their ability to be self confident, have a deep sense of social/eco justice, thinking beyond self towards inclusiveness.

Ann Dale

I think it is both, however, to be even more confusing, I don't think you can create agency, it is innate, however, external events can take away one's agency, and I wonder about its latency? Ken raises an interesting point as well, does agency always have an action component?

Chris Ling

I think action is implied in agency - if someone has agency but does nothing then a) they might as well not have any - or b) then they are facing barriers which overwhelm the agency that is innate within them.

Is a definition perhaps: the capacity to create intentional change?

Jennie Sparkes

I like this quote from Nola-Kate and think we should hold onto it as part of our definition "the capacity to act in a social environment in ways that affect intentional social change".

Nola-Kate Seymoar

I like the quote too - but it was from Ken not me.

Ann Dale

Are we getting closer to a definition--agency is the will or intent or capacity to act in a social environment in ways that affect intentional social change? Any one willing to throw out some definitions?

Ken Lyotier

I also wonder if the potential for agency is like a kind of latent energy, some kind of dormant potential in the human condition that only becomes clearly evident when social conditions develop in a manner that call them into being. It may be that such social conditions always exist but that the "agent" happens along with just the right kind of background and experience to seize an opportunity within the environment and act on it in a directive way...then voila, AGENCY!

Ann Dale

Ken, VOILA, you nearly have it, agency is

Jennie Sparkes

I agree with Ann that 'agents of change' need the right setting/political/social environments for their 'agency' to naturally emerge.

Nola-Kate Seymoar

And also the opportunity could be manifest - and then the agent comes into play.

Jennie Sparkes

I would like to capture Ken's concept of 'latent' potential in the definition. Maybe agency is the latent will or intent or capacity of individuals to act in a supporting social environment in ways that affect intentional social change

Chris Ling

I suppose that there is relationship between social stress and agency - no stress means no need for agency to become manifest - too much stress means that the agent becomes overwhelmed with other priorities (such as survival).

Are there different types of Agency - do different people act towards the low end (ie relatively minor problems) but become paralyzed at higher levels, whereas others 'couldn't be bothered with trivialities as they see them, but become real agents in very difficult circumstances?

Ken Lyotier

Curiously, of those people who I might consider to exhibit agency, more often than not, they seems to develop more capacity with more action and seem to attract others to participate with them in action that affects change. It may be that lots of people have varying degrees of personal agency and demonstrate it in their personal relationships with others. There are some people however, who seem to be able to share their agency with others in ways that create more agency.

Ann Dale

And this is precisely why we need to understand this area better, what gives one individual the capacity to transcend a terrible tragedy, while another collapses, similarly, a single-resource economy town collapses while another rises from the ashes.

And as well, we all know the axiom that success breeds success, and yet, is that the kind of society we want, one of big winners and big losers. How do we help people who have had their agency diminished, what diminishes it, and how can we avoid this?

Chris Ling

Is that because agency feeds off confidence - Jennie mentioned earlier that self-confidence is an important component of agency - a visible success would increase confidence and therefore engender more agency would it not. This would explain Ken's observation perhaps?

Jennie Sparkes

I don't think that people need to know that they have agency to be agency. I don't even know if they must believe that change is possible, but I think they need to believe that they can influence the direction of change. Change in life is the only constant, it is influencing the direction of change that matters

I am wondering if everyone has agency - like Ken suggests. Maybe some people are gifted with an abundance of it and it overflows into their broader relationships and into structured intent....while some people need to use their agency to just get out of bed and get themselves organized to make a living.

Chris Ling

I am sure that is correct - and I think different things will affect how it manifests, and what triggers it.

Ann Dale

So, it is a dynamic quality, in some contexts it may be manifest, whereas in others, given the conditions, it may be dormant. But then, in other people, it may be latent all the time, and why?

Ann Dale

Agency is the latent human ability to act/influence social conditions that are adversely affecting them individually or collectively their community?

Nola-Kate Seymoar

I am a little worried about limiting this to social conditions - what about influencing the natural world or other conditions?

Ken Lyotier

True, it shouldn't matter whether the action relates to the social environment only. People can take actions that affect change in the physical environment, their own interior psychological or physical environment. What about a painter who has agency in relation to a blank canvas?

Ann Dale

I would rather the natural world influences us:)

Ken Lyotier

Is it more than self-confidence? Is there this other quality of agency empowering others to act with agency - a kind of "monkey see, monkey do" quality about it that messages others that it is possible to act and that action can effect change?

Jennie Sparkes

Agency is the latent human ability that acts with social conditions to influence social relationships that are adversely affecting them individually, their community or their broader environment?

Ann Dale

Jennie, very, very close, what do others think before we move on to our next question.

Who do you think has agency in your network, or what leader do you think of as having agency?

Ken Lyotier

I think Ann raises an really important question about why some seem to be able to act regardless of pre-existent negative life experiences and others become paralyzed by

them.

But agency may not just be something that manifests to generate positive change. And some change that seems positive to begin with may not seem so positive over time.

Chris Ling

Do we think that it needs to be intended to be positive however ? It may turn out not to be, and that may impact someone's future agency, but are we not interested more in intent?

Nola-Kate Seymoar

Hey I like the direction this is taking but unfortunately I have just received a call and must go into the office. I hope that I can come back in on the dialogue before it ends, but if not - thanks everyone - and many apologies - this is the sort of emergency that isn't supposed to happen on a Friday afternoon.

Jennie Sparkes

Who do you think has agency in your network?

This is an interesting question because I see 'productive' agency and 'unproductive' agency all around me. I could say that all these people have agency, and based on my personal values of what is really important to me in this world, I can be biased and think that those people who are not achieving results that complement my values don't have agency. But they do. It is agency that does not contribute to my life causes though.

Or what leader do you think of as having agency?

I think all leaders have agency...that charisma that creates followers.

Chris Ling

I agree entirely with Jennie here - however I think the people I perceive as having more Agency tend to be the people who I would also describe as driven, passionate and/or dynamic.

Ann Dale

Jennie, I don't think all leaders have agency, and I think Chris' point is germane here, that perhaps it has to be regarded as positive rather than negative. But then, who decides? For example, I can think of many political leaders who lead by dividing and conquering, by diminishing rather than empowering, by taking away agency through how they exercise power. I really feel that agency is an a priori condition, and perhaps a limiting factor is self-confidence, which then determines if it is exercised positively or negatively?

And as Ken has suggested, agency may be more internal than external?

Chris Ling

I would disagree - I think you have to have agency to become a leader - I think you are putting value judgments on what people do with agency here - like other aspects of social capital it doesn't all have to lead to good things to still be agency. For those leaders that are dividing and conquering is that not how they are manifesting their own agency to advance their (and their cronies) power and wealth? A goal of progressive society would be to increase everyone's opportunity to manifest agency - but a goal of a repressive regime to exercise personal agency to the detriment of their enemies. They themselves may think this is for the greater good perhaps?

Ann Dale

People I see with agency are Hannah Taylor, Ryan Hreljac, Simon Jackson and Ken Lyotier, my research colleague. I won't embarrass Ken further, Hannah Taylor, an eight-year girl in Winnipeg, became concerned about all the homeless people she saw on the street, and then proceeded to raise \$50,000 for Winnipeg's homeless by collecting change in jars decorated like ladybugs. Simon Jackson, started his campaign to save the Kermode bears--the spirit bear--at the age of eleven, and has created the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition, with 5 million people involved. Ryan was six years old when he raised his first \$75.00 to drill a well. Since that first well was dug in Uganda in 1999, RyansWell.ca, has raised over \$100,00 to provide clean water to people in Africa.

Why did they act, while so many others don't? I hope to have the privilege of interviewing them as part of this research project. And Pierre Elliott Trudeau is also someone who exhibited great agency, so it manifests very differently and at very different times in a person's life, I think part of it is the courage to dare to be different, to act before waiting to see if anyone else will act,

Jennie Sparkes

I think these people you mention Ann are great example because they were able to rally a great number of people to support their cause. This in turn gave them greater confidence to believe not only in themselves but to become an ambassador for a cause (to speak for the many who supported them). But as Ken suggests some people have great personal challenges to overcome and perhaps they use their agency to take the greatest of journeys, to face what is inside ourselves. One is personal victory while the other is public. But perhaps both are equal in greatness?

Ken Lyotier

I think that courage is an aspect of agency but I think that there is a deeper motivating aspect to it, an empowering aspect that has to do with one's sense of belonging. the line often reported from heroes who engage in courageous action is that "anyone else would have done the same thing under similar conditions". This suggests to me that while the hero may have acted courageously in the eyes of others, he or she seems to be responding to something more than just daring to act,..something that calls us to respond to the other from an identification with, a sense of being apart of something larger than oneself.

Does Barak Obama have agency?

Jennie Sparkes

Ann, I thought about agency versus power when I wrote my quote. There are people in positions of power because they have secured a legitimate place in an hierarchy. In some cases these people have power, but I do not believe they have agency. People 'follow' them because they must as part of the hierarchy. The 'power' that emerges from agency is a freely given 'power of support' to an individual from the masses as opposed to power that commands and demands the masses...which is not agency.

Ken Lyotier

Those agents who seem most effective to me often go about their work with great humility. Others are right up there front and centre. Do hockey stars have agency in relation to creating a base of loyal fans? I would be inclined to narrow the definition of social agency to the kind of capacity that results in the empowerment of others to discover and act on their own agency. the kind of "change we need"...especially if we are talking about behavior that will come to grips with social, economic and environmental imperatives we face, is a kind of "sea-change" that will require far more

than leadership.

I want to mention that last paper that you sent, Ann, the one that talks to the need tell stories that conjure up the "heroic" in us.

Ann Dale

Thanks, Ken, good linkage, the paper is called The People Paradox, and it is attached in my conversation now. It talks about why people deny climate change and the failure of environmental education, that we deny people's fear of death and mortality, that we haven't understood the need to nurture people's self-esteem and that we need to appeal to the hero in all of us, that humans are meaning-seeking creatures.

File attachment [WilkinsonPeopleParadox.pdf](#) (178.19 KB)

Jennie Sparkes

For those that exhibit Agency what are their personal characteristics?

For this I would defer back to the paper that Ann and I just authored and the qualities that the research participants identified as their leaders having. I like Ken's addition of humility and think that this is an important quality that did not come out directly in our research, but it was there.

Ann Dale

For me, the most important one, is self-efficacy, or in other words, to persevere, and attached is the paper by Bandura in which I stumbled across the term and its meaning. I love some of the examples in the paper about self-efficacy, how some famous writers were turned down many many times, and persevered. The Beatles were rejected by the first record company they went to, as the company thought no-one would appreciate their sound. Maybe that is the difference why if everyone has 'it', some act and others don't.

And Ken, we need to explore further the 'agency' it takes to face the blank canvass, or what I refer to as the 'tyranny of the great white page'. Perhaps that is a difference between those that do and those that don't, I have been talking a lot lately about how to flow through creative blocks, and everyone has them, some stay there, others use sex,

drugs and rock n' roll, and others transcend them?

Last edited by Ann Dale on Fri Oct 30, 2009 4:43 pm; edited 2 times in total

File attachment [bandura1.pdf](#) (2.63 MB)

Ken Lyotier

Part of the reason that people don't like the word agency is not unlike the reason that people don't like to be called leaders, first off it is kind of embarrassing to be singled out like that, somewhat flattering, but to anyone who is engaged in agency and being honest about it, the first thing that they likely recognize is that real social change has very little to do with them and much to do with the social group in which they are engaged. The difficulty with those who engage in repressive agency may be that they believe that the change they intend is as a result of their behavior, when in fact it is as a result of a whole pile of others "only following orders".

Ken Lyotier

Good Lord, I can see now why some of you have Dr. in front of your names.

Ann Dale

I take this as a compliment, hopefully we aren't being too pointy-headed, but are you just not exhibiting high agency and as well, you haven't been a slouch yourself:)

I guess agency may be at odds with one of its characteristics, humility? Ken and Jennie have raised the critical point about working with others, Jennie, I think we discovered in your case study, that people who were identified as having high agency also had an innate desire to communicate and indeed were excellent communicators? And, all saw themselves as working through others, and interestingly, knew when to let go their issue for the sake of the collectivity? Maybe that is the problem with some of our current leaders:

And I keep thinking of Obama, I think he has agency, but why him, and not others? I keep thinking, did Hitler have high agency? My god, I need a glass of wine.

Jennie Sparkes

Ann, we did discover these things (people who were identified as having high agency also had an innate desire to communicate and indeed were excellent communicators and all saw themselves as working through others, and interestingly, knew when to let go their issue for the sake of the collectivity). I think these are a dimension of humility.

Jennie Sparkes

Having just come back from the US, there are many Americans who surprisingly viewed Obama to be like the "Hitlers" of the world. It is all perspectives, values and fear that shape the perspective.

Chris Ling

Ha - I almost posted a post a while back suggesting the Hitler had incredibly high agency, but then didn't. Because I think he obviously did, and I didn't think the post would be helpful. However I think in reality this project is not looking for examples of all agency - but for agency that contributes to the creation of social and ecological capital (as opposed to destroys it, or is only creating economic capital).

Ann Dale

My thoughts as well, but intellectual openness must always win the day. Such a tension, between wanting to bridge and interjecting. Good go, Chris, I think you have just sharpened the definition somewhat, after all that is where our heart lies.

Ann Dale

This shows me that we have more work to do, in our defining and explaining, getting tired now, almost 6:00 p.m. my time, so much to mull over, to think about, to explore, but life ain't dull.

Ken Lyotier

I have learned something just recently about efficacy in relation to the hoarding issue. People's capacity to change conditions has, in part to do with their ability to handle stress and to ride the wave of a stress level that is bearable for them. People can persevere under arduous circumstances if the stress level is kept at a level that is bearable. If the stress becomes unbearable, people tend to try to escape from it. It is a question of finding that place where one is just on the edge of bearability. Anyway, people can be trained or train themselves into escaping from stress as a reward. As a result, "addiction."

I take it that Jenny and Chris are busy reading the article. I will save it for later given that we only have a few minutes left on here.

Ken Lyotier

I wish I could go get a glass of wine. NO I DON'T!

Ann Dale

There is always rock and roll.

Ann Dale

This has been one of the most pleasant conversations I have moderated during my seven years of experience with this medium. Why, probably because of the respect for one another I sense, who says emotions can't be on-line, the compassion, the integrity of each of you, which makes it a pleasure to work with all of you, I am truly honoured by your involvement.

Une mille fois merci, any last comments, dear colleagues and my best wishes for a good weekend, Ann

Ken Lyotier

This was great fun. Talk to you all soon. I started off creating another topic accidentally there Chris. It was why I was late. I kept looking for others to join. I hope you can delete

it. Sorry for not knowing what I was doing. Have a great weekend everybody. I have my trick or treat costume all ready.

Chris Ling

No problem Ken - it's a common error, no harm done. It shall be ignored ;-)

Best wishes everybody, have a good weekend.

Chris

Jennie Sparkes

I hope all enjoy the weekend...and happy Halloween!