



Review

What is agency? Conceptualizing professional agency at work



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ABSTRACT

The concept of agency has become widely used in learning research, especially in studies addressing professional and workplace learning, but also in policy discussion on how to promote individually meaningful careers and life-courses amid rapid changes in working life. The purpose of this article is to provide a critical review of the multidisciplinary concept of agency, and to suggest a fruitful conceptualization of professional agency at work. The following questions are addressed: (i) How have the ontological characteristics and manifestations of agency been understood? (ii) How have the relationships between the social and individual aspects of agency been understood? We examined previous studies and discussions on agency in the fields of education and social sciences, looking selectively also at psychology and gender studies. We identified four major research traditions in which notions of agency were prominent: (i) the social science tradition, (ii) the post-structural tradition, (iii) the socio-cultural approach, and (iv) the identity and life-course approach. Analyses within and across these traditions brought out a range of understandings and manifestations; thus agency might be viewed merely as rational and intentional activity, or else it might be seen from a temporally broad perspective, covering subjects' ontogenetic development, and encompassing discursive, practical, and embodied relations with the world. Analysis of the relationships between individual and social/contextual elements revealed assumptions ranging from analytical inseparability to separateness, and in case of analytical separateness assumptions of strong or weak contextual influence. Based on our review, we suggest a conceptualization of professional agency from a subject-centered socio-cultural perspective. This takes individual agency and social context to be analytically separate, but mutually constitutive, and in complex ways highly interdependent. The suggested conceptualization is summarized in terms of seven propositions.

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1. Introduction: the current need to understand, theorize, and analyze professional agency

The concept of agency has become increasingly popular in education, the social sciences, and psychology, and also in working-life studies and gender research. In addition, agency has become highly topical in policy-level talk, in which it has been associated with the challenges of life-long learning, and with labor markets characterized by increasing uncertainty. Despite its current appeal, the concept of agency has mostly gained resonance in the absence of any explicit definition of its core meaning. This lack of clarity has led to confusion surrounding the whole concept; notions of agency have usually been loosely associated with active striving, taking initiatives, or having an influence on one's own life situation.

The roots of the concept of agency are in the social sciences (Archer, 2003; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Giddens, 1984), but the term has recently also been used in anthropology (Ahearn, 2001; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2003), psychology (Bandura, 2001, 2006; Silbereisen, Best, & Haase, 2007), and gender research (Clegg, 2006; Gordon, 2005; McNay, 2004). Within educational practice, the concept of agency has long been established, although it has not always been explicitly stated in connection with the development of educational and learning practices. Ever since the Enlightenment, the idea that education can and should help people to develop their capacities for agentic and autonomous action has formed an important tradition in Western societies (e.g. Ecclestone, 2007). In more recent times, the importance of human agency has been emphasized in theories of adult learning and adult education. In an influential model of adult learning, Mezirov (1981) discussed human agency in terms of empowerment through emancipatory adult learning, discerning its roots in the critical Frankfurt school of inquiry (Habermas, 1984). In the more sociologically and philosophically oriented field of adult education, Freire (1973) discussed collective agency extensively, looking at it in terms of social empowerment through community-based improvements in human living conditions.

In the theories of learning that have predominated since the 1980s, the learner's active and agentic role in the construction of knowledge has been at the forefront of constructivist theories of learning (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). Individuals practise agency while they construct knowledge, and they use meta-cognitive and reflective processes that operate via self-control and self-management in their learning and problem-solving (Prawat, 1996). In recent socio-cultural theories of learning and development, learning has further been seen not merely as the individual's active construction and generation of knowledge, but also as social participation involving the construction of identities in socio-culturally determined knowledge communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sfard, 1998; Wenger, 1998). Over the last decade, the concept of agency has gained even more currency in the educational and learning sciences (Billett, 2008; Davydov, Slobodchikov, & Tsukerman, 2003; Ecclestone, 2007; Edwards, 2005; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Martin, 2004; Shanahan & Elder, 2002), and especially within discussions on workplace and lifelong learning (Billett, 2006; Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Collin & Billett, 2010; Fenwick, 2006; Hänninen & Eteläpelto, 2008; Hökkä, Eteläpelto, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2012; Paloniemi & Collin, 2012; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). Within these areas the concept of agency has been applied to professional work, in particular work done in creative and human-centered domains, such as teaching and the arts (Hökkä, Eteläpelto, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Paris, 1993; Pehkonen, 2010; Sloan, 2006; Vongalis-Macrow, 2007; Hämäläinen & Vähäsantanen, 2011; Vuorikoski, 2011). Within discussions of adult learning and life-long learning, individual agency has received increasing emphasis, with learning being seen as taking place not merely in educational institutions, but also through work, and through living as an active citizen (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Billett, 2006; Evans, 2007; Paloniemi & Collin, 2009; Tynjälä, 2008).

Agency in general, and professional agency in particular, has mostly had very positive connotations for creativity (Glăveanu, 2010; Littleton & Miell, 2004; Sawyer, 2007) and further for motivation, well-being, and even happiness (Welzel & Inglehart, 2010). Agency is also seen as connected to subjects' autonomy and self-fulfillment, acting as a force for change and for resistance to structural power (Casey, 2006; Fenwick & Somerville, 2006), and manifesting intentional action (Giddens, 1984, 1991). In its most active and positive forms, manifestations of professional agency can be seen as subjects' creative initiatives and suggestions for developing existing work practices (Littleton, Taylor, & Eteläpelto, 2012; Paloniemi & Collin, 2012; Vähäsantanen, Saarinen, & Eteläpelto, 2009). However, professional agency can also manifest itself in apparently less progressive and positive ways, such as taking a critical stance, or entering into a struggle against reforms suggested from outside (Fenwick, 2006; Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009), or else as simply leaving the work organization. Furthermore, professional agency can manifest itself as individual-level action or else as practiced within

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