Psychological Agency: Evidence from the Urban Fringe of Bamako

ELISE KLEIN[*]

Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Summary. — A deficit in the theorisation of psychological elements of agency and empowerment in development literature exists. To address, I present the results of an empirical study using exploratory mixed methods examining central factors contributing to initiatives people undertake to improve personal and collective well-being in a neighborhood on the urban fringe of Bamako. Informants articulated that the psychological concepts of *dusu* (internal motivation) and *ka da I yèrè la* (self-belief) were most important to their purposeful agency. The psychological constructs had an intrinsic and instrumental value to respondents from differing socio-economic characteristics which contributed to social change in the neighborhood.
© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Key words — psychological agency, agency, empowerment, Mali, social development

1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, intentional and purposeful agency is important in the international development context as a way in which agents negotiate their lives (Alkire, 2008; Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006; Batiwala, 2007; Chambers, 1997; Dreze & Sen, 1995; Kabeer, 1999; Long, 2001; Mahmood, 2005; Narayan, Pritchett, & Kapoor, 2009; Nussbaum, 2001; Ray, 2006; Sen, 1999). For example, Amartya Sen in his work on the Capability Approach has defined the term "agency" as purposive, and argued for agency to be at the heart of all processes of development and social change (Sen, 1999). Within the Capability Approach, Sen explains the usefulness of expanding human freedoms not just through opportunities or the "substantive freedoms" that the members of a society enjoy, but also through empowerment and agency, which Sen calls "process freedoms" (Sen, 1999). Specifically, process freedoms "enhance the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, these matters are central to the process of development" (Sen, 1999, p. 18). Sen considers empowerment, agency, and systemic process freedoms such as democratic practices, civil and political liberties to be central to creating social change. Here, the process of achieving such freedoms has intrinsic importance, independently of the outcome, and "the people have to be seen... as being actively involved—given the opportunity—in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs" (Sen, 1999, p. 53).

This current research also identifies purposeful agency as central to people's lives. In a neighborhood on the urban fringe of Bamako, the capital city of Mali, agency and specifically initiatives people undertook to improve their livelihoods were central to people's daily lives and improving personal and collective well-being. People were purposeful in their actions because they were following their aspirations: to get a job, to have a house, to reap a good harvest, to have their children educated, to overcome poverty. This is not specific to this neighborhood; in all societies there is a tendency for human beings "to live on the basis of some understanding of what is a better, more desirable or worthier way of being in the world" (Christopher, 1999, p. 141). For many of the people in this particular neighborhood, the aim was working toward what is called *hèrè*[1] in Bambara, defined as "well-being" and the "good life." Agency directed toward the "good life" can be thought of as purposeful—that is, with a target—toward the aspiration of *hèrè*.

Through my inductive study, I explore mechanisms that were central to purposeful agency. After spending time in the field engaging with this question of purposeful agency, two important concepts emerged as being central to intentional action: *dusu* (internal motivation) and *ka da I yèrè la* (self-belief). While seeming perhaps a little extraordinary at first as the due to the heavy structural focus in development literature on Mali, I expected responses around resources and structures (such as education, better government, money, and health care), yet these psychological concepts emerged time and time again when I asked about what was necessary for people to overcome hardship in their lives.

This paper will explore in detail the concepts of *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* as central to people's purposeful agency. The first section of this paper will survey the literature on purposeful agency and empowerment, locating a deficiency in the literature regarding psychological agency (defined as the psychological level of purposeful agency). Secondly I will describe the mixed methods employed and provide a description of the study site. Thirdly I will present the results of the research including a discussion of the *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* concepts, processes of production of such concepts and examination of their relationship with the socio-economic characteristics of gender, education level, deprivation level, and age of respondents. Finally I will discuss the relevance and challenges of such psychological concepts in social development. While the paper focuses predominantly on the empirical data that emerged regarding the importance of psychological agency, I do not deny the importance of structural factors in people's lives and agency. So while focusing on psychological agency as an understudied area of development, and although *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* are important to agents and their actions

toward improvement of personal and community well-being, *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* should never be understood as a silver bullet and the only aspects of social development considered. Furthermore, the impedance of poverty or oppression experienced can never be attributed to that individual or group, a point I will return to later.

2. BEYOND PROXIES: LOCATING PSYCHOLOGICAL AGENCY

There is a deficit in the theorisation of the psychological level of agency within the literature on empowerment even though empowerment has featured as a buzzword in many approaches of development (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). The exceptions come from Rowlands (1995, 1997), with her concept of the "power within," and Narayan-Parker and Petesch (2005) who articulated "self belief". Both argued for the importance of psychological agency, although neither has defined at length the mechanics of what specifically constitutes agency at a psychological level in people's lives. Other definitions of empowerment vary quite widely. For example, a study by Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) showed 15 different definitions of empowerment and another 15 different definitions were again presented in a study by Ibrahim and Alkire (2007). These definitions broadly fall into three categories: firstly empowerment as a favorable opportunity structure (Alsop *et al.*, 2006; Narayan-Parker & Petesch, 2005), secondly empowerment as choice and decision-making ability (Kabeer, 1999; Kabeer, 2003; Olney & Salomone, 1992), and thirdly empowerment as relations of power (Batiwala, 2007; Wee, Shaheed, Choonara, Jaschok, Sim, & Chiu, 2008). While these elements of the concept of empowerment are important and it is neither my goal nor intention to say they are not, I would like to show how there is room to enhance each of these definitions by also including a provision for psychological agency. The importance of this is twofold: firstly at the conceptual level in terms of how empowerment is defined, as well as at the level of measurement, which informs further research and policy. I will now discuss each of the main areas in which empowerment is defined and raise some possibilities for furthering these definitions to include psychological agency.

(a) *Empowerment and a favorable opportunity structure*

Alsop *et al.* (2006) draws on Sen to frame empowerment as a process comprising both agency and a favorable opportunity structure that constantly interact with each other, having some instrumental value for development. Alsop *et al.* define opportunity structure as "the broader institutional, social, and political context of formal and informal rules and norms within which actors pursue their interests" (Samman & Santos 2009, p. 3). Alsop *et al.* (2006), in a World Bank Policy Publication, show how the degree of empowerment is directly related to the agency and opportunity structure, which are in turn shaped by each other. There is an inherent risk that opportunity structure will be defined as the socio-economic characteristics of the agent—at both the conceptual level and in measurement, leaving limited room for psychological "power from within." For example, in the Malian Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) 2013–14, empowerment is defined (only in respect to women), as "strengthening women's economic capacity by recognizing their contribution to economic development by introducing them into productive circuits and guaranteeing equal access to economic employment opportunities and production factors" (International

Monetary Fund, 2013, p. 28). While it may be partially the case that manipulating an agent's structural environment, such as by increasing one's education, providing better access to markets (like micro credit) and increasing assets, does increase levels of empowerment for many people, viewing empowerment solely through proxies can be problematic as it assumes that resources automatically translate into purposeful agency, which in the findings of my research as well as in the literature, is certainly not the case (Collins, 2000; Sen, 1992). Nonetheless, Narayan *et al.* (2009) have expanded on Alsop's work in the World Bank *Moving Out of Poverty* study which she directed—a research project that included over 5,000 people from 15 different countries. Narayan *et al.* argue that the poor made explicit the importance of self-belief in moving out of poverty, thus suggesting that opportunity structure is not solely responsible for empowerment, and psychological agency should be considered. While theirs is a powerful contribution, in the *Moving Out of Poverty* study, Narayan *et al.* purposefully focus on the ways in which empowerment is instrumental to overcoming poverty. While they recognize empowerment has wider values, these are not the focus of concern for that study. This leaves room for further theorisation of intrinsic dimensions, which I will take up in this paper.

(b) *Empowerment as choice and decision-making ability*

In the literature empowerment is defined as choice and decision-making ability. As Kabeer (2003) argues, this definition of choice implies that there are other options that the agent can choose, which may or may not be the case, not to mention that agents may be unaware of the existence of other choices. For instance, an illiterate person would have a very different realm of choices available than an educated person. In addition, choice removes the value component of the choice itself (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). For example, a person might not make decisions about minor household purposes because she and her husband have decided that this year she will focus fully on her career, and her husband will look after domestic matters, which she does not value doing anyway. In this fuller context, not having the choice of whether to buy beans or spinach makes her more, rather than less, empowered. While Kabeer (1999) may qualify these points in her detailed discussions of empowerment, when it comes to operationalising the definition in a set of measures, again we come into trouble with the very one-dimensional view of choice, measured through decision-making ability, which can overlook the consideration of intrinsic value and how some choices align with one's deeper values and others do not. This is a point I will return to later in this paper.

(c) *Empowerment as relations of power*

Another set of authors—including those writing in the feminist literature—conceive of empowerment as the (re)distribution of power toward those who historically have had none. Wee *et al.* (2008) argue that any inquiry into empowerment "should entail some analysis of the power dynamics that are implicitly in all social, economic, cultural, and political relations" (18). Discourse theory scholars working on power also show the depth of oppression at a more subjective level, demonstrating how the control of knowledge conditions agents' aspirations and how they see themselves (Foucault, 1980) and how the impact of oppression and hegemony condition and restrict human agency (Lessa, 2006). While the examination of oppression through power is an extremely important