
Agency Across the Life Course

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Life course studies have moved beyond the abstract “agency vs. structure” debates that were commonplace in sociology over the past decades, moving the focus away from the “timeless realm of the abstract” (Nisbet 1969) and into the empirical domain. Accordingly, “agency,” is less a matter of philosophical exploration and more so a construct needing scientific specification and exploration across societal forms and human development. Although agency is not a problematic construct in many social science fields, it is contested in sociology, a discipline that largely focuses on the nature of social forces that shape, direct, constrain, and enable individual lives. In sociology – unlike much of psychology, economics, and political science – individual volition is often of secondary concern and even the subject of doubt (Fuchs 2001; Loyal and Barnes 2001; Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

Developing a sense of agency appears to be part of human development across cultures (Scholz et al. 2002; You et al. 2011) and the capacity for people to influence their own lives is a fundamental tenet of life course research (Elder 1998). For life course scholars, debating agency’s existential nature is less important than exploring its facets and mechanisms, how cultural and structural factors shape it, and in what circum-

stances having a sense of agency explains behavior and life course outcomes. Within the study of the life course, agency is fundamental to understanding structurally bounded human beings who age within structural and cohort influences. Its existence is not problematic within life course studies, rather the focus is on its constitution and relative influence on social outcomes.

While many aspects of agency-and-structure have seen advancements, there are some notable directions for future inquiry that we will discuss, below. Scholars have largely measured agency as a subjective sense of control, and this conception has proven fruitful across a number of domains. Yet, we argue, there are additional aspects of agency that need to be conceptualized and measured, and its links to structure have largely been established within Western cohorts and societies, but with little attention to other times and places. The bulk of research on agency equates it with concepts like efficacy and personal control. We suggest, however, that other aspects, as captured in constructs like optimism, expectations, and self-identification boundaries, are less theorized and empirically linked with agency. We suggest that many of the pieces of an influential life course understanding of agency exist across disciplines and subdisciplines, though not enough work has explored its constituent parts across cultures. Life course studies hold many of the pieces for an eventual synthesis, given its fundamentally interdisciplinary approach (Elder et al. 2003).

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This Handbook comes at a propitious time for the field, and our contribution attempts a global view of agency in order to identify past successes and future opportunities for linking individuals with a proper longitudinal understanding of their development and societal change. We suggest that exploring agency with a cross-cultural lens helps to identify those theoretical claims about the topic that are most useful for motivating future research. We build on the tenet (Elder 1998) that individuals make choices in life, though such choices are quite bounded (Shanahan and Hood 1998). While some of these debates range into the abstract (Hitlin and Elder 2007b), this chapter promotes an empirically anchored discussion, drawing on important social psychological treatments of this core, multifaceted construct and offering some direction for the next stage of exploration.

1 Agency: Influential Definitions

Any discussion of agency should begin with a key distinction between its objective and subjective dimensions (Hitlin and Long 2009). Sociological treatments focus less directly on ‘objective’ agency, which would consist of actual skills and resources (Clausen 1991; Sewell 1992) that an individual possesses. Some people have more economic, social, or psychological resources for encountering life’s vicissitudes and thus possess more options to deal with potential setbacks. A greater amount of empirical work expressly on agency highlights its ‘subjective’ aspects, people’s internal sense that they can influence their lives. In theory, one’s subjective sense of agency is linked to the objective skills and resources they possess, but in practice this is not a perfect correlation. Men, for example, appear to develop attribution patterns that motivate persistence in the face of failure more than women (Correll 2001), meaning that failures are perceived as surmountable obstacles, rather than evidence of personal failings. This subjective sense of agency has a number of overlapping conceptualizations we will discuss, in constructs such as personal control, mastery, and self-efficacy.

Hitlin and Long (2009) suggest that this distinction between subjective and objective agency is important; children are socialized to learn a sense of control over their surroundings, but likely their subjective sense outweighs (for a time) their actual capacities to influence the world. That subjective sense likely reflects broader structural forces and social locations beyond the child’s control: they cannot affect their parents’ occupation, their location, or the legal systems in which the family is embedded. Recent psychological work suggests that aspects of this subjective sense, as well as some attendant skills like delaying gratification, can be taught (Duckworth et al. 2011); it is easier for educators to influence subjective agency, rather than larger social or cultural resources. The study of the life course is, in part, the study of how these subjective and objective factors interact to shape that child’s future opportunities and outcomes.

An early statement on the nature of agency was issued by Sewell (1992) in his attempt to restore a notion of agency as contrasted with influential theories of social structure. Responding to Giddens’ (1984) notion that structure and agency presuppose each other and that structure both constrains and enables the individual actor, Sewell highlights that being an agent “means to be capable of exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed.... Agency arises from the actor’s knowledge of schemas, which means the ability to apply them to new contexts” (p. 20). This enterprise was part of a general trend to counter sociological notions that reduced human actors to unrecognizable simplifications (Kohn 1989), and even those aspects of sociology aimed at linking the individual to social structure – the Social Structure and Personality tradition (McLeod and Lively 2003) – which were seen as overly deterministic (Elder and Johnson 2002). There is a theoretical debate over whether agency and structure should be considered as discrete, de-coupled concepts (Archer 2006; Emirbayer and Mische 1998), or largely as two intertwined sides of the same social process (Cockerham 2005; Hays 1994).

Perhaps the preeminent theoretical statement of the nature of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) holds that agency is “a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)” (p. 963). This model is especially important for life course theory, given the importance of temporality as a basic component of agency. Hitlin and Elder (2007a, b) build on this by anchoring agency within social psychological understandings of the self, suggesting that different temporal foci lead to four analytical types of agency (“existential”, “identity”, “pragmatic” and “life course”), the last being the most anchored within empirical studies of agentic beliefs across the life course, discussed below. They suggest that only the last three types of agency are sociologically meaningful. The first, ‘existential’ agency, involves the most basic sense of free will and is thus sociologically banal. ‘Identity’ agency captures the large literature on situational action (e.g., Burke and Stets 2009) that focuses on how people interpret and enact important identities and roles. Even this set of behaviors, which sociologists often consider as a fixed, structural pattern, involves agentic, self-directed action. Relatedly, ‘pragmatic’ agency deals with those aspects of the person that necessarily act when the previous form of routine situations break down (e.g., Gross 2009). ‘Life course’ agency draws on the large empirical literature we discuss in this chapter, the notion that subjective beliefs at one point in time influence later trajectories and life course outcomes.

This conceptualization of temporality is gaining currency in current theorizing, notably with Mische’s (2009) idea of the importance of futures for determining social action, and Frye’s (2012) discussion of how optimistic views of the future can help determine positive social outcomes within challenging circumstances. This body of work is especially relevant to life course theorizing, contrasting with classic models of the self that focus only on its existence within situations. Instead, this work draws on a less commonly

used theoretical tradition that conceptualizes the self as transcending situations and thus includes a temporal element (Flaherty and Fine 2001; Mead 1932). Recently, Hitlin and Johnson (2015) demonstrated that empirical models incorporating a future-oriented aspect of agentic beliefs provide additional purchase in predicting life course outcomes beyond earlier, atemporal, measures. Thus, our understanding of agency would benefit from empirical exploration that incorporates actors who utilize beliefs and feelings about the future while acting in the present, especially for actions with potential life course influences.

Ultimately, we suggest that agency has served as a popular and useful theoretical construct due in part to its slippery nature (see discussions of other complicated terms like ‘identity’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) or ‘dignity’ (Misztal 2013), which allows it to serve as a placeholder for scholars interested in carving out room for individual volition within a range of social forces (see the discussion by Marshall 2000). We focus largely on agency as a variable, not an existential capacity to act (e.g., Hitlin and Elder 2007b). As a variable, agency captures an individual’s ability to shape their behavior in novel, routine, or life course relevant situations. The subjective sense of agency changes, though to what extent remains an empirical question, in light of individual development, structural location, cultural beliefs, and individual outcomes. Some work, discussed below, has attempted to instantiate some of these influential notions of agency – from Sewell (1992) and Giddens (1984) – through testing claims with relevant social psychological measures and samples. We encourage more of this within the field.

2 Agency as an Empirical Construct: Synonyms and Future Opportunities

A range of constructs have appeared in the literature in the last half century that purports to deal with individual volition, broadly understood. In addition to the constructs most influential to the study of the life course, discussed in this section,

aspects of agency appear in ideas like self-direction (Kohn and Schooler 1982), personal autonomy (Seeman and Seeman 1983), and internal locus of control (Rotter 1966; see Haidt and Rodin 1999 for a psychologically focused overview of some of these constructs). Our discussion will focus more depth on those constructs most tied to life course issues, primarily mastery (Pearlin et al. 1981), self-efficacy (Bandura 1982, 1997; Gecas 1989), personal control (Mirowsky and Ross 1998), and planful competence (Clausen 1991, 1993). In general, differences in these measures involve methodological tweaks, that we discuss in turn, but many reviews (Gecas 2003; Haidt and Rodin 1999) treat them as largely equivalent.

Work on agency often has a cognitive focus, in part due to its measurement through survey items that involve conscious reporting of one's subjective beliefs. It is likely that not all aspects of subjective agency occur consciously. Influential notions of how non-conscious processes guide interaction, whether linked to structure (Bourdieu 1977, 1984) or to cultural repertoires (Vaisey 2009), are undoubtedly at play. This is an arena for future inquiry, the extent that measures of agency capture non-conscious outlooks, expectations, and feelings.

Mastery. Mastery is one of the older sociological attempts to render subjective agency as a measurable construct. It refers to the extent that an individual believes she can control her life chances, rather than having them predetermined (Pearlin and Schooler 1978). Most often employed within the stress literature, mastery is an important buffer between external stressors and individual health (Pearlin et al. 1981).

Mastery generally increases across the life course, until older age (Pearlin and Schooler 1978). With age, people achieve more physical and social mastery over their lives, net of social class. Mastery is influenced by both social structural realities, and the social psychological perception of those realities (Christie-Mizell and Erickson 2007). In later life, the decline of physical skills, cognitive functioning, as well as the loss of social status and significant others, is

associated with declines in mastery (Pearlin et al. 2007; Schieman and Turner 1998). For some people, mastery beliefs in older age are linked to the perception that one has managed their life effectively, suggesting that the internal standards for establishing a sense of agency may shift across the life course (Pearlin et al. 2007).

Self-Efficacy. Self-efficacy is one of the most commonly utilized constructs referring to agency. Developed by Albert Bandura (1986, 1992, 1997), self-efficacy beliefs focus on the notion a person possesses that she has an ability to take actions that generate expected outcomes. It measures domain-specific cognitive beliefs about one's ability to organize and execute courses of action required to produce certain achievements (Bandura 1982). Bandura argues that self-efficacy is best measured in specific domains (e.g., singing self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy), though there are later general self-efficacy scales that profess to measure this as a global orientation (Chen et al. 2001; Sherer et al. 1982). Evidence suggests that developing a greater sense of economic self-efficacy, a core self-domain within the stratification system, predicts educational attainment (Grabowski et al. 2001) as well as socioeconomic achievement into adulthood (Lee and Mortimer 2009). Yet it is less often a focus of life course study (though see Gecas 2003 for a review).

Personal Control. Personal control is perhaps the most commonly used construct within life course studies. The sense of control involves the belief that a person can control her life outcomes (Mirowsky and Ross 1998; Ross and Mirowsky 2013). Individuals with a sense of control feel responsible for their successes and failures and do not attribute those outcomes to external factors. The sense of control indicates a generalized belief by an individual about her power over life outcomes, and is more global than the largely domain-specific construct of self-efficacy. Personal control is beneficial to the individual, helping her address difficult life situations (Conger et al. 2009; Wheaton 1980; Berrenberg 1987).

Personal control is a generalized, learned trait, measured through an 8 item-scale, comprising

positive and negative subscales asking about feeling control over good and bad outcomes. The scale includes items such as “I am responsible for my own successes,” “I can do just about anything I really set my mind to,” “My misfortunes are the result of mistakes I have made,” and “I am responsible for my failures.” This construct was developed to empirically improve upon the self-efficacy scale as well as the locus of control measure. Those other measures possessed agreement bias, and were more likely to obtain positive responses from older adults and the less educated (Mirowsky and Ross 2007). Personal control is acquired and becomes part of one’s self-concept, but it reflects life circumstances; repeated difficult life events, for example, can wear away at this sense of self (Wolinsky et al. 2003). This sense helps people persevere in the face of hardships (Trommsdorff 1994), especially when linked to positive views of the future.

In practice, the sense of control is the construct most commonly linked with stratification and life course outcomes; mastery, for example, is most commonly found within the aging literature. Its popularity stems from its empirical utility. Having a sense of control allows individuals to build different life paths compared with others with a lack of personal control: individuals with a higher sense of control typically evidence higher levels of achievement, like higher high school and college GPAs (Gifford et al. 2006; Perry et al. 2001; You et al. 2011), and better educational and occupational attainment (Wang et al. 1999). The sense of control is especially linked to education, and this in turn contributes to better health as the educated pursue healthier lifestyles and seek information that improves life chances (Mirowsky and Ross 1998). In addition, a sense of control motivates effort and work engagement, which also translate into better life outcomes (Mirowsky and Ross 2007).

The sense of control has a well-established strong relationship with social class position: higher class people tend to have a stronger sense of control than those in lower classes (Kraus et al. 2009; Mirowsky and Ross 1998; Ross and Van Willigen 1997; Ross and Mirowsky 2002).

Lachman and Weaver (1998) find that those with lower incomes report a lower sense of control. Most commonly, a sense of control is strongly positively linked with education (Mirowsky and Ross 2007; Ross and Mirowsky 2013; Schieman 2001; Schieman and Plickert 2007). The rationale for this lies in the content of education, which helps people develop useful skills and resources, also leading to better job positions that can, in turn, increase the sense of personal control (Ross 2000). Obtaining more education, due to its strong links with income, means that people have more resources with which to face adversity and potentially bad outcomes that would, in turn, harm a sense of self control (Mirowsky and Ross 1998; Ross and Van Willigen 1997). The literature strongly suggests that this belief is one factor in reproducing the class structure over time, as individual agentic decisions reflect greater or lesser beliefs in one’s capacity to make potentially advantageous changes in one’s life trajectories. Future work should focus on disentangling the sense of control from related issues – actual capacities, beliefs about the future – that also comprise agency as it affects individual and structural stratification.

Future Orientations and Planful Competences. Theoretical treatments of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Hitlin and Elder 2007b) have begun to incorporate temporality as fundamental to a notion of agency (Pickering 1993), while Hitlin and Johnson (2015) have begun to test these ideas empirically. Future orientation (Lewin 1948; Yowell 2000), in general, has recently been highlighted as important for understanding social actors (Frye 2012; Mische 2009; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013), in that it motivates and guides action. This orientation can be linked to the notion of ‘life projects’ (Archer 2003; McAdams 2013; Taylor 1989), the ongoing stories that people develop to make sense of their lives that, in many ways, guide interpretation and intentions for future activity. Forethought is a core aspect of human agency, understood through a psychological lens (Bandura 2001), with the notion of looking ahead being an important force in human cognition (Seligman et al. 2013). This forward-looking

orientation contains an emotional element and a set of cognitive appraisals. Having a positive outlook, a sense of optimism for the future, has beneficial effects on one's life course (Frye 2012; Peterson 2000), and can also serve to buffer individuals from setbacks (Oyserman et al. 2004).

In sociology, aspects of looking forward have been captured somewhat in the literature on expectations and aspirations (Morgan 2006), though this literature is rarely linked to life course notions of agency (but see Rudd and Evans 1998). Having higher educational expectations in adolescence is associated with advantaged life course outcomes (Andrew and Hauser 2011; Bozick et al. 2010). These and other expectations involve cognitive appraisals of the conditions that a person grew up within (Hallerod 2011; Reynolds and Johnson 2011), yet shift in line with life course achievements or failures (Mortimer et al. 2002; Reynolds and Baird 2010). Mentally healthy people tend to be positively biased in their expectations (Taylor and Brown 1988), and this optimism has beneficial effects on social life (Andersson 2012b), mental and physical well-being (Carver et al. 2010), and labor market successes (Vuolo et al. 2012). Optimism in the health domain, what Hitlin et al. (forthcoming) term 'health agency', captures a sense of one's capacity to handle and recover from illness, and has longitudinally advantageous life course outcomes across a range of mental and physical health domains.

Beliefs about one's future are theoretically and empirically distinct from beliefs about personal control (Epel et al. 1999; Trommsdorff 1994). Structural conditions, for example, might foster a sense of hopelessness even as an individual feels a personal sense of efficacy (Young 2004). Aspirations are likely to change in response to experiences during life transitions as people assess opportunities and results, with a general trend toward increasing realism (Heinz 2014). Recent work (Hitlin and Johnson 2015) suggests that adolescent life expectations are as strong predictors of a range of later life outcomes as the more commonly employed subjective notion of mastery, demonstrating the utility of an expanded notion of agency.

Classically, the primary life course rendering of agency-as-forward-oriented was found in Clausen's (1991, 1993) planful competence. Clausen drew on a set of classic longitudinal studies (including the Berkeley Growth Study and the Oakland study), developing a measure based on scales and Q-sort techniques to develop three aspects of planful competence: dependability, self-reflexivity, and self-confidence. These external evaluations of abilities and skills, once the gold-standard for psychological measurement, differ from the self-reported beliefs that comprise the bulk of current research; personality psychologists suggest that we do not know ourselves as well as others know us. Planful competence is not fully an objective measure, but it foregoes the subjectivity most common in those studies linking individual functioning with larger social structures.

What is notable is that this measure performs well as a predictor of later life outcomes (Clausen 1991, 1993). An adolescent with more planful competence makes more advantageous life-decisions and sticks to advantageous trajectories. This construct anchors the capacity for making advantageous long-term plans (Shanahan et al. 2003), and was a good predictor of adolescents who had more stable life courses (e.g., marriages, occupational stability). Historical circumstances are important, however; planfulness was an important life outcome predictor for men who came of age during the Great Depression, as compared to men who grew up a few years earlier where this skill had little consequence for outcomes (Shanahan et al. 1997).

Psychological Cognates. Agency is largely problematic only in structurally oriented disciplines. In those that begin at the level of the individual, notably psychology, agentic capacity has largely been taken for granted, though recent discoveries of dual-system psychology (Gilbert 2006; Kahneman 2011; Wilson 2002) have rendered conscious knowledge of our actions more problematic. Work on agency has not directly engaged dual-system psychology, the idea that we have a conscious and automatic pair of related brain systems. This view, currently ascendant within psychology, holds that we have more

capacity to control the conscious system, while we are also motivated by an implicit set of understandings, beliefs, fears, and emotions that often shape our conscious perception (Haidt 2001). Work in this vein is filtering into sociology (Firat and Hitlin 2012; Hitlin 2008; Massey 2002; Vaisey 2009), and has implications for understandings of agency that have not been fully articulated.

That said, a few psychological constructs overlap with the general sense of agency we have discussed. Grit is a newly developed construct used to predict achievement (Duckworth et al. 2007; Duckworth and Quinn 2009; Reed et al. 2013; Singh and Jha 2008; Von Culin et al. 2014). Qualitative and quantitative studies have examined this trait that is found in high achieving individuals, defined as “passion and perseverance for a long term goal” (Duckworth et al. 2007, p. 1087). Grit contains two components, consistency of interest and perseverance of effort; grit encourages people to maintain a constant focus and work hard to complete a goal, what its progenitors argue is distinct from the self-regulatory aspects of the previously discussed life course constructs (Duckworth and Gross 2014). Individuals high in grit can maintain their determination, interest, and effort despite failures or adversities, something that seems to develop as people age (Duckworth et al. 2007), and is linked to achievement through the amount of deliberate practice that people engage in (Duckworth et al. 2011).

The practice of goal-setting, itself, has an extensive literature and is relevant to the actual capacity to achieve life aspirations. Carver and Scheier (1998) conceptualize this as self-regulation, the capacity to maintain focus on particular goals. They argue that human beings are motivated toward goal representations captured within mental constructs, and are learned from one's culture and social networks. Motivation (Turner 1987) is something captured implicitly with the focus on future orientation, discussed above, but needs a great deal of work before it is a useful life course construct. Finally, work on the Big Five personality typology (Costa and

McRae 1985) suggests that one core component, conscientiousness, might be an individual-level aspect of agency given its focus on goal-direction, focus, persistence and industriousness (Reed et al. 2013).

3 Subjective Agency and the Life Course: What We Know and What We Need to Know

Understanding agency allows life course scholars the capacity to circumscribe conditions under which individual-level factors shape meaningful social outcomes. Traditionally, life course studies explore issues of mental and physical health, occupational and educational attainment, family formation and the intergenerational transmission of advantage or disadvantage. Versions of agency are thought to be core for reproducing and generating inequality (Grabowski et al. 2001; Shanahan and Bauer 2004; Wolinsky et al. 2003). Some aspect of the trajectories that connect early life with these later outcomes is thought to be captured under the umbrella of agency; how much can we credit people with successful outcomes, or hold them accountable for less advantageous outcomes? Some people feel a greater sense of control or efficacy, and this sense may simply reproduce class advantages, or it may represent an individual's motivation for shifting away from disadvantaged social locations. We know a decent amount about how subjective agency (as captured in efficacy, personal control and mastery) is shaped and influences later outcomes within Western contexts; we know much less about other subjective aspects of agency, such as optimism and expectations, or how wider cultural forces moderate the relationship between structure and individual social psychology.

Social class influences normative expectations for what agentic choices ‘mean’ to people making choices. For example, Stephens et al. (2007) find that people from middle class backgrounds make choices that distinguish themselves from others more often than those from working class

backgrounds, who exhibit a preference for highlighting similarity with those around them. Classic social psychological results suggest that parents' occupational position leads to value socialization in line with these patterns, with working class children taught to value conformity and middle class children taught a focus on autonomy (Kasser et al. 2002; Kohn 1969, 1977; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Schooler et al. 2004), even into adolescence (Kasser et al. 2002). Social class influences intertwine with education, the primary mechanism through which class advantages translate into individual senses of control. Obtaining higher socioeconomic status, along with higher education, may offer a smoother life path, reducing a person's exposure to adversities in her life that may hurt her beliefs of personal control (Mirowsky and Ross 2007).

Gender and race, core sociological areas of study, have less global influence on agency than one might suspect. Females have a lower sense of control than males (Ross and Mirowsky 2013; Slagsvold and Sørensen 2008) although often this difference turns out to be statistically insignificant (Mirowsky and Ross 2013). Women's sense of control declines more than men's as they age, showing a gender gap in the sense of control that increases with age (Ross and Mirowsky 2002). Further, this growing gender gap in the sense of control is greater for older cohorts than for younger cohorts (Ross and Mirowsky 2002), suggesting that cohort differences in work experience contribute to this observed gap. If so, we may continue to see change in this pattern in future cohorts. Blacks in the United States report a lower sense of control than their white counterparts in every age group, net of other socioeconomic factors (Bruce and Thornton 2004; Shaw and Krause 2001). Pearlin et al. (2007) suggest that race effects disappear, however, when controlling for education. This suggests that agency, as currently measured, is not a key factor explaining some of sociology's major culprits for transmitting inequality across the life course.

Family is one of the most important developmental loci for developing one's volition, agency, or self-direction (Gecas 1989). Family size, as well as parents' educational level and self-

efficacy, along with parenting behaviors have been proposed as crucial factors affecting children's agency development. Family size has a negative effect on developing self-efficacy. Socioeconomic resources are less available and events are more unpredictable for children from large families compared to children from smaller families (Gecas 1989). Rodin (1976) finds that children from large families tend to report lower levels of feeling of choice and perceived control.

Parents' education also influences children's levels of sense of control. Higher class parents transmit dispositions, competences, and knowledge that help children to obtain advantages (Calarco 2011; Lareau 2003). Parents with a higher education also encourage children to develop abilities and habits (Mirowsky and Ross 1998). Lewis et al. (1999) find that adolescent sense of control is positively associated with parents' levels of education. Well-educated parents have a greater sense of personal control and their children are affected by such beliefs. Parental efficacy about influencing children's academic performance increases academic aspirations and self-efficacy (Bandura et al. 2001). Parents' beliefs that they can successfully carry out child-rearing activities can also affect children's self-efficacy by shaping actual parenting practices (Schneewind 1995). In addition, better-educated parents tend to focus more on children's independence, self-direction, and personal responsibility while less-educated working class parents tend to emphasize conformity and obedience (Lewis et al. 1999; Pearlin and Kohn 1966). In accordance with this tendency, well-educated parents transmit these attitudes regarding agency to their children (Lewis et al. 1999). At least within a Western context, the family, as a prime socialization agent, is a fundamental link in shaping subjective agency that partially serves to reproduce social structural advantage.

Close friends also have a significant influence on one's development of agency (e.g., Adler and Alder 1998). Adolescents tend to be friends with those who are similar to them (Ryan 2000), and students who observe similar friends' achievement have stronger beliefs that they can also achieve (Deci et al. 2006; Schunk and Meece

2006). In contrast, experiences of peer pressure are negatively associated with self-efficacy among adolescents (Kiran-Esen 2012).

School experiences help adolescents establish beliefs about their agency (Schunk and Meece 2006). Formal educational institutions are places where socially desirable and legitimate cultural knowledge about attitudes and behaviors are transmitted (Bourdieu 1984; Calarco 2014; Gordon 1989; Pollack and Thoits 1989). Children not only learn how to critically and logically think and solve problems, but also develop attitudes and skills to face problems with confidence and perseverance through diverse activities in schools (Mirowsky and Ross 1998). The learning sequence of the school environment makes children face progressively challenging sets of problems and, step-by-step, children learn that things that look initially difficult can be construed and learned via practicing. This training and experience of accomplishment help them to build a sense of control over their lives (Ross and Mirowsky 2007). Lewis, Ross, and Mirowsky (1999) report that dropping out of high school has a significant, negative effect on a person's sense of control, controlling for their initial levels, demonstrating the negative importance of this potential life course transition.

Schooling further encourages people to acquire strong beliefs that they can achieve better outcomes by using their capacities and resources (Ross and Mirowsky 2013; Schieman and Plickert 2007). School is not the only force increasing a sense of control, but it is vital. Mirowsky (2013) modified his original notion of agency as 'built up in school, used up in old age' (p. 415) to encompass a growing set of findings that personal control increases across early adulthood and middle-age, regardless of additional schooling. Educational institutions teach valuable skills and abilities beneficial for yielding better achievement in later life, but aging, itself, contributes to people obtaining a sense of control in life until older age. Schooling, however, provides a focused location enabling individuals to obtain useful resources and socioeconomic positions in society.

Work and occupational characteristics, often correlated with education, provide crucial settings that influence one's sense of agency. Building on the well-established positive relationship between education and agency, researchers have also focused on employment as the underlying mechanism that connects education and personal control (Ross and Van Willigen 1997; Schieman and Plickert 2007). Individuals with higher education levels tend to participate in the labor force and obtain higher status occupations (Blau and Duncan 1967; Grusky and DiPrete 1990; Schieman and Plickert 2007; Warren et al. 2002), that, in turn, tend to provide greater job authority, employment security, and flexibility in schedule, creativity and autonomy (Ross 2000; Ross and Mirowsky 1992; Ross and Van Willigen 1997; Schieman and Plickert 2007). Drawing on Marx's notion of workers' alienation, researchers find that individuals with non-routine, autonomous, creative, and problem-solving work develop greater senses of agency over their lives (Ross 2000; Ross and Mirowsky 1992; Schieman and Plickert 2007). Causality is difficult to disentangle, as these higher status occupations also offer better economic rewards, thereby reducing exposure to adversities that can challenge personal control beliefs (Mirowsky and Ross 2007). Class influences on the intergenerational shaping of attitudes, as mentioned previously, lead working class parents to be more likely to teach conformity as opposed to autonomy taught by parents who themselves have greater occupational autonomy, a finding with cross-cultural evidence (Kohn and Schooler 1983; Kohn and Schoenbach 1993; Kohn et al. 1986).

Culture is a crucial factor that influences individuals' senses of agency. The majority of agency studies have focused on the United States specifically, or Western nations generally, extrapolating issues of the nature of the person from an admittedly narrow, privileged sample (Henrich et al. 2010a, b). Building on the classic distinction between collectivistic and individualistic culture, cross-psychological approaches typically suggest understanding Western cultures as individual-focused cultures, with a focus on the self as independent from others (Kondo

1990). East Asian cultures are generally considered collectivistic cultures, in which individuals see themselves as interdependent with other people (Cross and Gore 2012; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Matsumoto et al. 2008; Snibbe and Markus 2005; Triandis 1995). A sense of agency is much more intertwined with what Elder (1994, 1998) refers to as 'linked lives'; to be an agent is to take important others into account as an aspect of the self. Because of the emphasis on collectivistic culture in East Asian nations, the concept of individual agency has received less attention among researchers; delimiting the possibility that agency is fundamentally experienced differently.

A great deal of cross-cultural research in East Asian countries has reaffirmed the link between Western cultures and individualistic orientations versus East Asian cultures and collectivistic orientations. Several studies have found that East Asians have a lower sense of control than Westerners, and therefore linked low sense of control among Asians with collectivistic cultures generally (O'Connor and Shimizu 2002; Smith et al. 1995; You et al. 2011). In a review of cross-cultural studies of the locus of control, Smith et al. (1995) conclude that East Asians, particularly Japanese, tend to report lower sense of control compared to others. You et al. (2011) report Asian-American students show lower senses of control compared to American students from non-Asian groups.

Although these cross-cultural studies have illuminated the important role of culture in shaping agency, they have not yet provided a useful correction to the western bias that suffuses much sociological discussion of the topic. Cross-cultural research often accepts this individualistic-collectivistic dichotomy at face value, suggesting that it is a universal categorization of societies, and thus becomes a source for explaining cultural differences in perceived agency. This simple cultural dichotomy, however, has come up against criticism in recent years. Cross-cultural research tends to largely presuppose an internally consistent societal

culture, obscuring important variation by class, race, religion, and other factors that might plausibly contribute to people within a particular society developing different subjective orientations. Relying on the East/West simple dualism may obscure within-culture variation, and thus lead researchers to focus too much on between-society differences and less on within-society patterns (see Kwon 2013). Complicating this dichotomy, Vandello and Cohen (1999) show the United States, perhaps the paradigmatic example of an individualistic nation and thus lauding agency's importance, has extensive intra-national variations in individualistic orientations. Yamawaki (2012) also finds that individuals who reside in larger Japanese cities such as Tokyo report a lower collectivistic orientation when compared to residents in rural Japanese regions. Researchers find that younger Koreans diverge from collectivistic orientations of the older generation, reporting more individualistic orientations (Cha 1994; Hyun 2001). These studies suggest that overlooking variation within cultures to conform to one index within individualism or collectivism may obscure within-cultural variation critical to understanding the role of agency, and how changing global forces contribute to changing cohort beliefs in the importance of subjective control over one's life. We do not know enough about how much subjective agency's contribution to later life outcomes is moderated by the cultural systems of belief surrounding those individual subjective appraisals, nor how subjective agency, itself, differs across nations and cultural forms. Nor do we have a great deal of confidence that our measures capture agency well for those who conceptualize the self differently. Future research would benefit life course studies by exploring longitudinal data on the sense of control in different countries, and specifying measurement to include issues like expectations and aspirations as core agency components. The study of such cultural differences might draw on improved methodology that can better distinguish age, period, and cohort effects (Zheng et al. 2011).

While cultures differ on the relative importance they extend toward the construct of agency, it appears that even ‘collectivist’ cultures still produce people who claim a sense of agency (Li 2006). Counter to prevalent notions about a low sense of agency among East Asian population, Li (2006) finds Chinese adolescents have particularly high senses of agency in the domain of learning. Using Pearlin’s 7-item Mastery Scale, Jang et al. (2009) explore a sense of mastery in Korean American elders and find financial insecurity hurts their feelings of mastery. While East Asian populations have received less attention by researchers, even these ‘so-called’ collectivistic cultures in which individuals’ independence and autonomy are assumed to be less socially valued, findings are in line with studies on non-Asian populations. Culture, age and historical cohort intersect to shape subjective senses of agency, yet research on these linkages is in its infancy.

In addition, structure interacts with culture even in Western nations to shape agency; analyzing a Norwegian adult sample, Slagsvold and Sørensen (2013) suggest that age-related losses in mastery are influenced by cultural and structural differences across countries. Whereas previous studies in the United States found that the sense of control declines around age 60 (Mirowsky and Ross 2007), Slagsvold and Sørensen show that the decline in the sense of control begins around age 75 in Norway. They argue that differences can be attributed to different welfare systems between the two countries, implying that more generous welfare provisions in Norway reduce elders’ uncertainty and provide greater predictability about their future lives. This in turn protects a sense of mastery. A provocative thesis worth pursuing would be that ‘culture’ is becoming less influential in shaping subjective agency as national economic systems develop, such that structural influences might become the dominant forces shaping perceptions of agency.

Aging, itself, offers complication in understanding general principles about the development and loss of agency. We know less about how agentic beliefs are shaped in adolescence (Conger et al. 2009), and whether it is age, itself, or other

factors that contribute to the generally accepted inverted U-curve, with agentic beliefs increasing through adulthood and declining in older age. Influential longitudinal work suggests that much of the cross-sectional association between age and the sense of personal control is, in fact, due to cohort differences in education levels (Ross and Mirowsky 2013; Schieman 2001; Wolinsky and Stump 1996). That is, lower levels of personal control in older age are in part due to lower levels of education in earlier cohorts (Wolinsky and Stump 1996; see Ross and Mirowsky 2013 for further discussion). Slagsvold and Sørensen (2013) also distinguish between aging and cohort effects using data from two waves (collected in 2002–2003 and 2007–2008) of The Norwegian study of Life course, Aging, and Generation (NorLAG), and conclude that the observed distribution of the sense of control by age “should be attributed to cohort effects and not to aging effects (p. 302).” Beyond education, however, there are several important factors that show aging influencing the sense of control: impact of physical impairment, retirement, loss of partner, etc (Mirowsky and Ross 1998, 2007; Rodin 1986; Schieman 2001). Future work should attempt to further disentangle these issues, and adjudicate how much of the general inverted U-shaped curve of increasing agency through adulthood until a noticeable drop in older age is shaped by cultural and structural factors, and how much simply occurs through the biological aging process.

4 Conclusion: General Conclusions and Some Continuing Holes in Knowledge

Agency is considered a core sociological construct and one of the main principles of life course studies (Elder 1994). Its existence is likely more problematic within sociology than within most other academic disciplines, or the wider popular consciousness, as American society is largely defined by the ideology that hard work will pay off, and that everybody has a fair chance to achieve the American Dream. Specifying agency

has fueled decades of theoretical discussions and arguments, with various positions assigning more or less agency on the part of individuals acting within a web of social structures and forces. Understanding the relationship between an individual and the structured life course pathways that are presented to her within a given society makes getting an empirical handle on agency important, if not fully successful, within the field of life course studies.

We focus here primarily on the subjective sense of agency that people develop, and how that influences their life courses. In general, having more of a sense of agency appears to be beneficial for mental and physical health (Gecas 1989; Mirowsky and Ross 1989; Wheaton 1980). Having a sense of control over one's life is a positive force on well-being, though, as we suggest in this chapter, having that subjective sense does not necessarily mean that a person actually has more agentic capacity. In this sense, agency can be a positive illusion (Taylor and Brown 1988, 1994), contributing to optimistic outlooks that, in turn, are positive for life outcomes (Andersson 2012a, b; Hitlin and Elder 2007a; Peterson 2000). Subjective agency, measured with a range of constructs reviewed here, appears to buffer the influence of various life course stressors.

Measuring objective agency, the actual skills and capacities that contribute to advantaged social achievement, points to a potentially important area for future inquiry. Value judgments about particular traits and skills that might improve outcomes can quickly bump up against issues that were once captured within the 'culture of poverty' debate, with a concern about blaming the victim. The concern is that pointing out distinct skills that lead to advantageous outcomes, such as Clausen's underutilized treatment of planful competence, holds those who achieve lower stratification outcomes as responsible for their own disadvantage. Sometimes discussions of the ways lower SES leads to different skills/orientations has been interpreted as holding people in these circumstances causally culpable for their stratification position. We advocate cautious engagement with those psychological profiles,

and socially shaped skill-sets, that are linked with higher achievement, better mental and physical health, and optimal functioning (Vaillant 2012). Sociologists are often more comfortable discussing social problems than making prescriptions for what the alternative might be, including positive aspects of human functioning that psychology has embraced much more fully (Dahlsgaard et al. 2005; Haidt 2006) in the recent past. As a field, we might focus more directly on optimal levels of agency, both subjective and objective, that might serve to inform policy makers to a greater extent.

Beyond this general thesis, that having more of a sense of agency is associated with positive outcomes – we do not know if, like self-esteem (Baumeister et al. 1996), there can be a 'dark side' to having too much agency. There are a great deal of questions remaining specifying agency's contours, development, and specific contribution across social domains. Contentiousness, perhaps related to aspects of subjective agency, are largely positive for life course outcomes (Shanahan et al. 2014), but also can have a 'dark side' when people high in this orientation encounter failure. This is an underexplored aspect; Alexander (1993) suggests we too often focus on agency's 'heroic' aspects.

A primary issue to be resolved involves the nature of the subjective construct, itself. For the purposes of this review (see also Gecas 2003), we collapse different traditions into the general sense that people have that they can exert influence on their lives. This treats the construct as a global, cross-situational sense that is in many ways at odds with Bandura's (1997) domain-specific notion of self-efficacy. Some scholars suggest that it makes sense to talk about 'agency', or their preferred indicator of this concept, as something that transcends the various roles and identities they play. The psychological cognate, self-efficacy, is most accurately assigned to specific tasks, roles, and outcomes. Just because somebody has an exceedingly high sense of self-efficacy as a singer or a programmer does not necessarily mean they will have confidence in other domains.

In addition, agency is sometimes discussed as a motivational force, other times as a dependent indicator of status, other times as a buffer from social stresses; across studies, then, agency operates like another multi-faceted construct, self-esteem (Cast and Burke 2002). As a result, agency has been used variously as a cause, an effect, a mediator and a moderator. While there may never be exact agreement over its properties, we do suggest researchers be clear about how they are using their indicators, a problem made even more complicated by the fact that many of the scholars cited here might be surprised to know their work has been subsumed under the umbrella of 'agency'. We follow Ross and Mirowsky's (2013) suggestions that more work using representative samples is needed to disentangle a number of issues relating to aging, gender, and the sense of control, as well as issues of racial difference. They also call for more exploration on the relationship of personal control, their measure of subjective agency, and anxiety and anger.

Its subjective nature, as we outline here, suggests a variety of questions about how agency is formed and maintained across situations, relationships, and the life course. Sociological treatments of cognition (Howard and Renfrow 2003) and emotion (Stets 2003; Turner and Stets 2006) are likely implicated, as well as the psychology of cognitive processing, biases, and illusions. To the extent that one's beliefs about themselves and their futures are important, the nature of these beliefs, their cultural content, and their influence over situated action is an open question. Hitlin and Elder (2007b) suggest, for example, that the form of agency present in maintaining an established social identity differs from the sort of agency referred to at key potential turning points in the life course. While life course researchers have accomplished a good deal explicating various facets of this construct that influence individual life outcomes, there is a good deal of bridge-building to be accomplished with psychological theories that might spell out more completely how and when these senses develop and influence action. A large enough body of work has been developed such that stronger claims about the interaction of situation, life course

stage, general structure, and facets of individual functioning can start to be developed. For example, Shanahan et al. (2014) offer the Life Course of Personality Model, offering theoretical specificity about when and how personality traits interact with structural advantages at different periods of the life course, intersecting with linked lives and situational contexts to influence particular outcomes. Future work can move beyond their focus on health to a range of stratification outcomes to demonstrate the conditions under which agency is particularly influential in helping individuals shape their life courses.

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