Agency in Cultural Historical Activity Theory

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Abstract
This article is a response to the review of four studies of "agency" by Hopwood in MCA 29(2). I advocate for use of a unit of analysis for the formation of a concrete concept of a phenomenon, as demonstrated by Vygotsky in his foundational studies. It will be shown that each of four CHAT writers fail to form a concrete concept of "agency" and fail to indicate the limitations of their theory. I point to the classic work of Vygotsky and two further concepts which together offer concrete concepts of the entire field covered by the category of "agency." I also briefly review the conceptions of writers in other theoretical traditions on the problem of "agency," so that the contribution of CHAT can be assessed.

Introduction

The importance which CHAT writers attach to the problem of "agency" flows from our shared commitment to emancipatory science, and in particular, the situation of marginalized groups. This focus was highlighted in *MCA 29*(2), by Nick Hopwood (2022) who compared the concepts of "agency" proposed by Annalisa Sannino (2022), Anna Stetsenko (2019) and Anne Edwards (2017; 2020). In responding to Hopwood's initiative I will add the work of Gutiérrez et al. (2019) to the range of ideas considered. Each of these writers has proposed a distinct approach to "agency." My aim here is to demonstrate how all of the writers reviewed failed to form a concrete concept of "agency" because they failed to follow Vygotsky's lead and identify a unit of analysis.

I shall take Hopwood's examination a step further by calling into question whether "agency" is capable of being rendered into a true, concrete concept at all, or is it an unscientific concept, like "fish" or "race"? A concept can be called "concrete," if it is anchored in a unit or germ cell which may be identified as an instance of the phenomenon by natural consciousness, and is concretized by the synthesis of other concepts drawn from the context. My analysis will focus on whether concrete concepts of "agency" have been formulated.

I use the word "concrete" in the meaning given by Hegel. CHAT researchers will be familiar with this usage of the term as used by Marx (1858) and popularised by Ilyenkov (1960) in the phrase "rising from the abstract to the concrete." Vygotsky never used the term in this sense.

I will further review analyses by Amartya Sen, Pierre Bourdieu, Nancy Fraser and Myles Horton, so that the contribution of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to this problem can be assessed in a wider theoretical context.

Background

Vygotsky on Concrete Concepts

Vygotsky demonstrated in his work on the intellect, on the development of the personality, on the acquisition of cultural norms of behavior and on disability, that scientific study of phenomena must begin with identification of a unit or germ cell which, both in reality and in theory, can be developed into a concrete scientific concept of the phenomenon.

To formulate a *concrete* concept of "agency" one must begin by determining a germ cell or unit of analysis for "agency," otherwise a concept of the phenomenon can only be an *abstract general* concept. Such an abstract general concept can function only as a general heading indicating something common to a range of phenomena, but not so as to facilitate a phenomenon being grasped as a whole, concretely and scientifically. (See Blunden 2016a).

Vygotsky made this point when he criticized the use of "artefact mediated action" as a unit of analysis, obliterating the distinction between tool and sign:

> The basis for this identification [of tool and sign] is ignoring the essence of both forms of activity and the differences in their historical role and nature. Tools as devices of work, devices for mastering the processes of nature, and language as a device for social contact and communication, dissolve in the general concept of artifacts or artificial devices.
> (1931, p. 61)

Contrariwise, Edwards (2020) declares: "For Vygotsky, concepts were tools." In fact, spoken words, tools, and signs are the three distinct units Vygotsky identified for three units of human activity which arise at specific points in human development, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. The idea of "artefact mediation" points, he says, to "general properties of mind" (alluding to Hegel), and the "analogy" and "connection" between different processes. However, "artefact mediation" cannot function as a germ cell of human activity; it expresses only a general category, a common feature of human activity. It can only be the basis for a concrete concept of one or another definite mode of human activity when one or another quite distinct means is determined as the germ cell in each case. Human activity, as a phenomenon distinct from non-human activity, can only be grasped concretely and therefore scientifically as one or another distinct type of activity which differs according to the kind of object and means of activity, and arises at distinctly different junctures in human development under specific conditions. Vygotsky made this point emphatically in the concluding words of *Thinking and Speech* (1934, p. 284-5)

> The connection between thought and word is not a primal connection that is given once and forever. It arises in development and itself develops. "In the beginning was the word." Goethe answered this Biblical phrase through Faust: "In the beginning was the deed." Through this statement, Goethe wished to counteract the word's over-valuation. … we can agree with Goethe that the word as such should not be overvalued and can concur in his transformation of the Biblical line to, "In the beginning was the *deed.*" Nonetheless, if we consider the history of development, we can still read this line with a different emphasis: "In the *beginning* was the deed." … the word is a higher stage in man's development than the highest manifestation of [tool-mediated] action.

The situation is the same with respect to "agency." A scientific study of "agency," to which Vygotsky is certainly the most important contributor, has shown that in different domains in which the human will is manifested, quite distinct units of analysis are required. Consequently, any concept which is used indifferently across the entire domain of "agency" can only be a "general category, a common feature of human activity," an abstract general concept, not a concrete concept.

None of the writers mentioned above have determined the domain over which the theory they have developed is valid. On the other hand, each of the writers mentioned *have* identified features in the development of human volition which arise in one or another domain of human development.

"Agency" is a relatively modern term, initially popularized by post-World War Two sociology, in contrast to "structure," and in connection with the identity of the agent or subject of history. "Will," on the other hand, is an ancient term which was clarified as an interdisciplinary concept by Hegel (1821) and along with its Latin cognate, "volition," was used by Vygotsky in his foundational work in psychology. Thanks to Hegel and Vygotsky, we can form concrete concepts which entails the use of quite different units of analysis in different domains, united

under the category of the will. Agency is not something other than the will; it is an unscientific term with unstable meaning variably denoting different phases of the will.

Interest in "agency" was at its height in the 1980s and '90s, and Dorothy Holland et al (1998) was the first of a number of CHAT writers to take up the topic in the context of individuals making a life in a given cultural environment, such as in positioning theory.

Vygotsky on development of the will in childhood

In his study of child development, Vygotsky identified a series of social situations of development each of which is characterized by the formation of a specific form of activity, and during the critical phase of development between one situation and the next, the child transforms their relation to the world, throws off the former identity and demands to be treated differently. That is, the critical periods are each marked by a development of the *will*. Each critical period had a different character, though all were more or less 'difficult' periods and entailed specific 'transgressive' forms of activity which proved to be transient and died away once the relevant development of the will had been accomplished.

It is significant that the will, also referred to as "volition," is qualitatively different at each stage as the child frees themself from the parents successively physically, biologically, psychologically, socially and economically. The development is *both* an internal psychological maturation, *and* a transformation of the relation between the child and those who are meeting the child's needs. Vygotsky refers to this process as "emancipation," for example: "In early childhood, the child is separated biologically, but psychologically he is still not separated from the people around him. ... during the crisis at age three, we are dealing with a new stage of emancipation" (1934a, p. 286).

Vygotsky is dealing here with "agency," but uses the terms "will," "volition" and "emancipation," never "agency." At the same time he makes it clear that these concepts are at the level of activity, not psychological faculties abstracted from activity as a whole. At every stage we are dealing *both* with the development of the child's needs *and* the development of the means of their satisfaction. During child development, the unit of analysis for the child's personality, according to Vygotsky, is the social situation of development.

"Agency" entails both the development of human needs becoming successively less egocentric, *and* the ability of the subject to free themselves from domination *by* these same needs, *and* the ability to realize these needs. "Agency" differs in essence as the will develops from the will of a new born to that of the adult citizen of a democratic socialist republic. It is an abstract general concept.

Vygotsky on self-control

Sannino (2022) took Vygotsky's (1931a) study of the development of self-control through the appropriation of cultural artifacts (words, tools and signs) as a model for her approach to "agency," specifically the waiting room experiment: a subject is left in a waiting room without any explanation, and is observed to use their watch to determine the moment when they get up and leave.

In this chapter, Vygotsky is focused on understanding the *psychological* basis for voluntary action by a human being who is, after all, subject to the laws of biology. He concludes that voluntary action can only be understood through the combined action of two distinct processes: (1) the formation of a *decision process* using an otherwise neutral stimulus, and (2) *closure* when the selected decision process has produced a new stimulus and the person reacts in the way they have determined. "Behavior," he says, "is determined by situations and reaction is elicited by stimuli; for this reason the key to controlling behavior lies in controlling stimuli" (p. 201). A little later he expands this formulation a little: "intention is a typical process of controlling one's own behavior by creating appropriate situations and connections, but

executing it is a process that is completely independent of the will and takes place automatically" (p. 211).

Vygotsky has added the *situation*. A person manifests self-control insofar as they have determined the *situation and* the neutral decision procedure. The waiting room experiment tells only half the story, for in this experiment the subjects have had no control over the situation they find themselves in and do not understand its significance. "Human freedom consists specifically of man's ability to think, that is, that man is cognizant of the developing situation" (Vygotsky, p. 209).

In coming to this conclusion, Vygotsky was in agreement with philosophers going back to Hegel's early collaborator, J. G. Fichte (1797) that human freedom (a.k.a., free will or agency) has its origins *outside* the person, in Fichte's terms, thanks to "recognition" by others.

Thinking is a psychic process which resolves a problem by resort to already established auxiliary connections in the brain (*op, cit*, p. 207). Vygotsky placed his research subjects in a situation and he so complicated the situation that the subjects were unable to resolve it using their existing psychological resources. He then offered the subjects, directly or indirectly, a die as a new neutral means of resolving the decision. The die was not the first means to which the subjects turned, but a last resort. There was no suggestion by Vygotsky that use of the die was a germ cell or unit, far less a *typical* means of decision making; indeed it is more likely that a child subject would turn to the adult researcher and *ask* how they should decide. Indeed, the appropriation of a cultural artifact generally means asking a more experienced other or using a reference book, procedure or other cultural product *intended* for the resolution of problems. The relevant unit here is the cultural tool- or sign-mediated action, not the use of a die as such.

So, the appropriation of the use of a die by the subject *does suggest* a germ cell for the *formation of a new auxiliary stimulus*; the subjects appropriated a means which was suggested to them directly or indirectly by others evidently more in control of the situation, included it in their activity and incorporated this means into their ongoing intellectual resources, as a "neutral decision process." Throwing dice, looking at a clock, writing a note, finishing one's coffee, hearing an alarm – all these are not only artifacts, but artifacts which have been culturally marked as means of deciding to act.

The characteristic of specifically human activity and human freedom in particular is that it is mediated by deliberation, i.e., *thinking*. Vygotsky showed that thinking develops by the appropriation of cultural means. This is a universal truth but *Thinking and Speech* (1934) is the work where Vygotsky elaborated the most essential process in the development of the mind, appropriation of *spoken words*. The means entailed in the development of the intellect and the personality as a whole are diverse. The appropriation of cultural means is a general feature of the development of the personality, but it would be a mistake to lump all such distinct processes of human development together under "artifact mediation" as if they were one and the same process.

Further, Vygotsky states that human freedom consists in both controlling our situation and fixing the connections by means which we make decisions. Vygotsky does not further elaborate on the significance of controlling our situation. In general, all his psychological work was done by placing subjects in a situation and then guiding and observing their actions. If we expand our vision beyond the lab. to include formation of the situation, then it is apparent that while controlling one's situation is challenging, CHAT researchers cannot ignore it. Creating, controlling and avoiding situations is the most important element of self-control. and the most important determinant of human freedom altogether. Mothers do not teach their children how to dodge cars; they teach their children where and when it is safe to cross the road.

Here is a general rule: in order to attain freedom it is always necessary to sacrifice a portion of one's own liberty.

The Activity Theorists gave recognition to this idea with the notion of the development of the personality (*lichnost*) through the development of a structure of *commitments* (*otnosheniya*). In

the course of the development of a mature personality, according to Leontyev (1978), a person's commitments become less and less egocentric and more and more tied up with the general good. Only the immature personality imagines that freedom can be attained *immediately*, rather than by sacrificing personal liberty in the service of collective projects. This insight was prefigured by Vygotsky in his use of the concept of *perezhivanie* in personal development.

Although the human organism is born with certain biological needs, from the very beginning these needs are overlaid by needs *constructed* through cultural development. So the individual is subject not only to basic needs (food, security, etc.) but acquired needs which include the auxiliary means acquired through cultural development and are the basis for the development of the will. But the capacity of a person to self-determine these acquired needs develops only in the course of maturation in a culture. In general, we are all, to one extent or another, prisoners of our own needs and desires and it is only as the young person begins to move outside the circle of the family and interact with their peers, that they begin to gain voluntary control over their desires as such (as opposed to their *response* to desire which is developed in childhood). Voluntary control over our own needs and commitments is the accomplishment of a lifetime. The shopper in the thrall of advertisers is not a free agent just because they have money to buy; nor is the student a free agent so long as they must do as their professor directs.

The processes by means of which an infant gets what it wants and the toddler manages to avoid being manipulated by their mother and the teenager builds their own place in society are not the same processes by means by which civil rights come to be legislated or an invading army is repulsed. These are qualitatively different stages of development of the will, of freedom or 'recognition'. True freedom is necessarily mediated through successful collaboration with others, initially our family, but ultimately even our political *opponents*. Human freedom is the product not only of being raised by a good family, but of enjoying the benefits of many centuries of social development, most of which, if we are lucky, still lie ahead of us.

Approaches to "Agency"

Three of the four CHAT writers considered refer to the process they are discussing as *transformative* agency, and Sannino is explicit in contrasting the metaphor of "forward anchoring" with "backward anchoring." By the latter is meant the use of established norms of collaboration, whereas *transformative* agency refers to actions which resolve what Vasilyuk (1984) called "impossible situations," or change the object of activity, over and above pursuit of given ends according to established norms. Edwards on the other hand, uses the word "transform" frequently in her work, but it seems that the object of her research is closer to "improvement" of collaboration than "transformation" of the object.

All four writers explicitly make collaborative activity the object of their study. Much of collective activity proceeds without recourse to explicit or formal decision making, simply according to what is seen to be the right thing to do in a given situation. However, all the writers considered here are concerned to go beyond acting according to established norms, so "transformative agency," or the *development* of volition, necessarily entails collective decision making. whether or not decision making is formal,.

Like the four writers to be examined here, Holland did not define agency, but she did cite post-colonial theorist Ronald Inden (1990) to define "agency":

> human agency is "the realized capacity of people to act upon their world and not only know about or give personal or intersubjective significance to it. That capacity is the power of people to act purposively and reflectively, in more or less complex interrelationships with one another, to reiterate and remake the world in which they live, in circumstances where they may consider different courses of action possible and desirable, though not necessarily from the same point of view."

Transformative Agency by Dual Stimulation

Sannino (2022) set off from Vygotsky's (1931a) study of self-control through the appropriation of cultural artifacts (words, tools and signs) to determine a starting point for development of a concept of "agency." She took the waiting room experiment as a model and repeated the experiment using a *group* of her students. In the absence of their professor, the students had no means of deciding how long to wait, and after several attempts, took the use of a cultural artefact (writing a note) to determine their joint action. Sannino took this as an exemplar for "transformative agency by dual stimulation," i.e., the use of a neutral decision procedure.

Sannino claimed that "agency" is a three-part activity which she represented using a *metaphor*: throwing out a "kedge," to anchor a vessel against the tide so as to draw it forwards, i.e., a metaphor for selecting an arbitrary stimulus such as throwing a die; repeating until confirming that the kedge resolves the situation (gains a hold), and initiating the indicated action (pulling the vessel forward). Vygotsky had already shown that use of a cultural device was a possible means of resolving a situation for *one* subject, and Sannino showed that a *group* of her students put together in a situation acted by consensus and followed the lead when a successful "kedge" was thrown. However, she never asked under what conditions a collective decision is made by consensus, taking this for granted.

Several problems arise.

(1) Very few decisions are made in this way. Juries do not decide the guilt of the accused by tossing a coin; unions do not decide to strike by following the first suggestion; surgeons do not decide to operate when the nurse has finished his coffee. Vygotsky, for example, determined word meaning as the germ cell of the intellect, but *went on* to trace how the intellect developed ontogenetically through distinct stages from the child's first meaningful word. Thinking, as Vygotsky said, is essential to human self-control, and definite processes of deliberation are essential to (re-)determining the object of activity in collective decision making. And yet when Sannino observed real collective decision making as reported in the same paper, she sees the whole variety of decision processes witnessed as kedges. And yet the waiting room experiment suggests that the decision will be made by consensus on the first suggestion which "lands," *without* deliberation. This germ cell lacks even the essential component of human freedom – thinking and deliberation.

(2) "Kedge" is a metaphor, but a metaphor for what? If we are following Vygotsky, a kedge should represent a *new*, *neutral* decision procedure, not an actual solution, but that it is what a kedge is, a solution determined by trial and error.

Hopwood et al. (2022) report a case when the mother of a child needing to be weaned from tube feeding had a chance meeting with a mother who had successfully weaned her own child from tube feeding. Acting on her suggestion, the mother convinced her doctor to act on the suggestion and the child was successfully weaned. Hopwood et al. took the suggestion by the other mother as a "kedge." The kedge in question was of course no neutral stimulus; it was an educated suggestion which aligned with the science, otherwise it would not have resolved the situation. So this metaphor also lacks another essential component of human freedom: *relevant knowledge*. And science is not a trial-and-error process, but an historically extended process of deliberation. Metaphors are an engaging but notoriously unreliable means of reasoning and communication.

(3) Collective decisions are made by neutral procedures which are ethical in nature (not pragmatic), culturally-historically and situationally determined. As shown by Blunden (2016), collective decisions are made by Counsel, Majority, Consensus or Laissez-faire, and even Consensus always entails deliberation (except in the Quaker version), and consenting to a suggestion is not the only means of resolution; alternatives are amending, indicative voting, postponing, blocking, standing aside, disrupting or withdrawing, in addition to a multiplicity of *techniques* of *deliberation*. These neutral *procedures* are available for any collaborative group to make decisions, and which procedure is used will be decided, whether formally or informally,

in the context of the cultural-historical situation. It is hard to imagine any project which would make decisions by throwing out a metaphorical kedge and I am aware of no evidence suggesting that the above really existing decision paradigms originate historically or logically from throwing out a kedge.

(4) One interpretation of the kedge is that it represents a *framing* of the situation. When someone makes a suggestion, even a stupid one, they have reframed the situation, and the collaborators must make a Yes/No on it, and the process could be repeated until a valid decision is made; this is called "brainstorming." This interpretation still leaves out deliberation and the decision procedure. However, many collective decisions can be understood making as a succession of Yes/No decisions on proposals. Majority and Consensus operate this way, though Counsel and Laissez-faire do not.

(5) In reporting the interventions in the homelessness eradication efforts in Finland, Sannino observes a number of the distinct paradigms of collective decision making I have described (2016). (1) Consensus Decision Making, including the use of (a) brainstorming, (b) a flipchart, (c) a "compass" diagram, (d) decision by action and (e) transgressive acts, (2) Counsel, and in the case of discussion with clients (3) Colonization, (4) Negotiation, (5) Solidarity, (6) Laissez faire, and combinations of all of the above. But all Sannino saw was throwing out kedges. If one is going to use metaphors in lieu of units of analysis, then unless more than one metaphor is used, the point of using a metaphor is lost.

My point is that the six processes observed are paradigms of decision making together with some techniques of deliberation which have developed historically and were available for the subjects to use in the appropriate situations. Sannino was blind to the cultural and situational choice of procedure used to resolve problems in these real-life scenarios. All she saw were "kedges." I will return to these paradigms in the penultimate section of this paper.

Although a predicament is archetypically two equal and opposite motives, it is not always the case in practice. Vasilyuk, for example, dealt with *four* archetypes of "impossible situation," only one of which is a "double bind." In Vygotsky's experiments on self-control he "complicated" the decision such that it exhausted the capacity of the subject to decide, before offering the die as a *neutral* decision procedure. The "dual" in the term "dual stimulation" refers to the problem and the neutral decision procedure, not the "horns" of a dilemma.

Sannino suggests no theoretical, practical or pedagogical route from her kedge metaphor to conceptually reconstruct real, culturally and historically produced paradigms of concrete collective decision making, and when these were witnessed, Sannino saw no qualitative differences, only kedges.

Transformative Activist Stance

Anna Stetsenko (2019) and her associates have introduced the "activist stance" as the focus of her work with marginalized youth in New York. The action referred to is the work of helping a marginalized person *reframe* their situation as neither a result of their own shortcomings nor of an all-powerful oppressor, but as a social situation which it lies within their own power to change. For example, Stetsenko's associate Eduardo Vianna (2009) worked for many months with youth living in a foster home, talking with them, gaining their trust, introducing them to socially critical literature and organizing collaborative projects, to bring the youth to a point where they were able to self-consciously criticize the ideological roots of their own marginalisation, that is, to bring them to the activist stance.

The activist stance is not of course a culturally and historically invariant concept; it is a relatively modern concept. However, the "activist" is the contemporary archetype of the active critical citizen, the ideal of the participant in any movement for social change. Interpreted in this somewhat broader way, becoming an activist means reframing your social situation as a feature of social structures and taking responsibility for changing these structures. As such it could be said to be the starting point from which any successful movement for social change

must grow, and the unit of which all movements for social change are constituted. (It was this work, in fact, which most engaged this author prior to retirement.) In addition, this reframing in which a person's freedom is framed as a person's *own* work, engaged in collaborative activity with others, is a necessary step towards psychological health. Indeed, it's significance is equally societal and psychological, ethical and pragmatic. Movements are made up of activists steeped in the lived experience of the conditions to be changed.

One of the conclusions of Stetsenko and Vianna's work has been that formation of the activist stance inevitably entailed transgression of the social norms from which the subject wishes to break. In Vygotsky's words: "People with great passions, people who accomplish great deeds, people who possess strong feelings, even people with great minds and a strong personality, rarely come out of good little boys and girls" (1926).

My criticism of the activist stance as the basis for a theory of agency is two-fold. First, without justification it takes "agency" to exist at only one point in the continuum of development of the will from the infant child to the democratic socialist republic. However, agency is problematised across the entire spectrum and different "stances" are relevant at each nodal point along this spectrum. By framing the problem of agency in this way, Vygotsky's work in child and personal development is obliterated. The abstract concept of "agency" is rendered as a concrete concept, but with limited scope. However, Stetsenko never attempts to define or clarify the meaning of "agency," beyond the application of the adjective "agentic." Its meaning is, in effect, taken as given.

Second, the activist stance fails to address the problems of agency which lie *beyond* the fostering of individual activists. With the adoption of the activist stance a person has achieved the highest degree of self-emancipation available to a person of their class in their socio-political situation, but by definition that is not enough for the activist. The activist desires the transformation of the social structures of which they are a part, and it is a fact that this cannot be achieved either by the activist alone or even by the project to which they have committed themself alone. Agency is not an attribute of an individual or even a social movement since transformation of a social structure entails the joint action of many different, mutually independent projects. In the last instance, agency resides with the entire social structure.

The formation of one concept of "agency" does not resolve all the problems of emancipation, but nor does that invalidate the claim. However, if the limitations of the given theory of "agency" are left *unspecified* then the remaining problems of human emancipation are left *unexamined*.

By contrast, in formulating the concept of "agency by dual stimulation" Sannino addressed herself to how *collectives* determine their collective actions. However, when Sannino (2020) observed collective decision making in the wild, all she saw was "warping," and failed to notice the variety of different ethical and technical modes of decision making which were at work in the scenarios she observed. The limitations of her concept flowed from the fact that Sannino had never actually critically *examined* how collaborative projects make decisions, but Sannino at least recognised that this *was* a problem of "agency" in collective decision making.

Transformative Agency by Transgressive Acts

Gutiérrez et al. (2019) identified transgressive acts as *indices* of "agency." Transgression presupposes that the actor is participating in some activity, and is thereby bound by the norms of that activity, and therefore has the opportunity to transgress them. And thus, wherever transgressions take place, then agency is being exercised.

In a study of a group of youth participating in a video game, echoing Hegel's (1821) characterization of a "world historic personage," Gutiérrez et al. refer to the youth becoming "historical actors" by deliberately transgressing the rules of the game. The high-flown title for such apparently trivial actions is justified. Any union activist or organizer knows that the successful transformation of the rights and working conditions of employees always begins with

transgressing their employment contracts. Likewise, the Civil Rights Movement in the USA took off when a handful of Black students transgressed the rules of a department store and demanded to be served at a lunch counter. Every great social change begins with a relatively minor transgression. Changing norms begins by transgressing the norms.

It is the object-concept of an activity or institution which determines the norms of participation in the activity, and Gutiérrez et al. point to how these norms can be changed, even by those excluded by the norms of the project and who must transgress those norms to do so.

Gutiérrez et al. identified four pointers to the emergence of "historical agency." (1) The recognition of a *double bind* (a.k.a. some predicament); (2) a transgression (breaking a norm) is enacted; (3) Cycles of experimentation by individual(s) occur over time and a person begins to tinker with everyday interactional expectations; and (4) "The object of activity is expanded. This involves a refiguring of purpose and meaning, and a sense of one's historical role and connection to the larger stream of historical events." As in Sannino's conception, development takes place by repeated efforts to break the frame, within an existing project.

Gutiérrez's idea is somewhat less than reframing; it is more like *un*-framing, in that it breaks the frame in which the object is being framed, thus opening the way to reframing the object; the transgressive act is just as likely to aggravate the trap it is meant to escape as to resolve it. According to Hegel, even future generations will condemn the world-historic person who creates a new state. While there is no criterion internal to a project by which a transgression can be justified, it is generally by reference to *some external norm* that a transgression may be evaluated. There is no examination of this problem in Gutiérrez's work, however. For example, when the lunch counter activists transgressed the norms of Jim Crow, they were able to appeal to norms inscribed in the US Constitution. Further, Gutiérrez's idea is open to the same criticisms which I have made of Stetsenko's idea, specifically that it does not actually go beyond the actions of an individual or group.

Relational Agency

Anne Edwards' (2017; 2020) conception of "relational agency" refers to the *capacity* and *disposition* of a person to collaborate with others who may have a different sense of the object of activity. This capacity is a crucial element of "agency," but Edwards conceives "relational agency" as a personal attribute. Agency is uncritically taken to be the capacity of an individual to do what matters to them. Interventions could therefore be aimed at fostering this capacity for collaboration. "Relational agency" was implicit in Sannino's conception as she took for granted that the group of people which is the subject of the experiment make a collective decision by consensus. A group of strangers stuck in a lift or left waiting in an empty shop would not necessarily respond in the same way as a group of Sannino's students. On the other hand, the disposition of Gutiérrez's subjects to violate the norms of the activity in which they are participating would seem to contradict Edwards' conception. It seems to me that Edwards's conception is not developed as a concrete concept and "relational agency." Her work is more a *description* of high level collaborative activity.

Summary of the position of CHAT writers on "agency"

None of the writers considered above have used Vygotsky's method of beginning from a germ cell or unit of analysis. However, all have focused on a single instance, be that a metaphor, index or person, and developed their ideas within the context of activity. Together, they identified important features of the free development of control over one's situation in a way which is intended to facilitate *intervention*.

CHAT writers have gone further than the typical psychologist or psychotherapist of our times in that they have gone beyond the popular concept of a "sense of agency." They all look to the capacity and disposition of an individual (or group in the case of Sannino) to take responsibility for their own actions in the context of a problematic situation and to some degree in one way or

another look to how an individual (or group) can *actualize* that responsibility as collaborative activity which could have some impact on their circumstances. However, all have fallen short of forming a concrete concept of human emancipation, while failing to indicate the extent of their shortfall.

Only Saninno's conception goes beyond the actions of individuals or groups of friends, but Sannino does not systematically or comprehensively investigate the development of collective action. Her metaphor was not the outcome of analysis of real collective action, but of a hypothesis based on one laboratory experiment, subsequently projected on to observation. Insofar as culture and history is considered at all it figures only as taken-for-granted background to research. None of the writers actually based their claims on cultural or historical research.

Contribution of writers not part of CHAT

To evaluate the contribution of CHAT to the problem of human emancipation I shall very briefly note the contribution of writers from *other* theoretical traditions.

Amartya Sen and critical voice

Amartya Sen is a welfare economist who has conducted an internal critique of utilitarianism across the 50 years since he began studying the causes of famines in his native India and of inequality in general. He asked the question: *what is it that ought to be more equally distributed*? Beginning with "wealth," he traversed through a series of concepts: wealth, functioning, capability, voice and finally *critical voice* (Sen & Drèze, 2002). That is, he reframed the notion of distributive justice to claim that what people needed an equal share of was critical voice.

This observation supports Stetsenko's approach which centered on introducing marginalized subjects to the reading of critical theoretical literature and the practices of critical collaboration. It also better represents the "agency" acquired by the mother of the tube weaning child for whom a second opinion gave the disposition and capacity to challenge their pediatrician. Furthermore, "critical voice" can be readily grasped as a germ cell. As a consequence of his study, Sen proposed the education of women as the central task of national development in post-colonial societies.

See Blunden 2022 for a more comprehensive review.

Pierre Bourdieu and social capital

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) was a French sociologist and structuralist who investigated the class structure of late 20th century France, and proposed that instead of seeing class in terms of ownership of (economic) capital, there were a variety of entities which constituted equivalent forms of capital: cultural capital, academic capital and social capital. People in each of the class fractions dispose of varying amounts of capital of one kind or another and are able to use their capital to secure their needs: agency. As a result there is an ongoing struggle over the rate of exchange between various kinds of capital.

It should be noted that while differences in economic capital, cultural capital, etc., clearly form a backdrop to the problems which are being addressed by CHAT writers, none of them addressed the *variety* of routes available for a citizen of a modern society to achieve the recognition of others. Not only is becoming wealthy (or at least not poor) one route to personal freedom, but also becoming an aficionado in modern art or a skilled engineer, or accruing an address book with 1,000 friends willing and able to lend a hand.

Bourdieu was a structuralist, and his work is imbued with skepticism towards agency, tending to demonstrate how oppressive social structures ruthlessly reproduce themselves despite the best efforts of social movements to upset them. However, his insights into how social hierarchies are enforced provide inspiration for those seeking to overturn them.

See Blunden 2022a for a more comprehensive review.

Social Capital theorists

Jane Jacobs, James Coleman, Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama are among writers who developed concepts of "social capital" along similar lines to Bourdieu. In all cases, they addressed themselves to the situations of *entire communities* and public policy measures which could offer a path to self-emancipation for members of marginalized communities. They advocated for interventions which would increase sociability of all kinds. The conception of "agency" deployed here is one located in an entire community, rather than an individual.

See Blunden 2004 for a critical review.

Nancy Fraser and parity of participation

In the 2000s, there was a debate (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) within Critical Theory over the relation between struggles for recognition and traditional notions of distributive justice. Axel Honneth claimed that distributive justice was being transcended by demands for recognition, recognition being a near-synonym for "agency." People needed self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, according to Honneth, which he conceptualized as forms of self-consciousness gained through interaction with others in relevant contexts.

Fraser countered Honneth's approach by echoing Bourdieu, claiming that there are two axes along which people gain recognition – the political economic system and the cultural system. In each case, individuals are located on each of the hierarchical scales which are irreducible to one another. Self-emancipation therefore requires *parity of participation* both in the economy (broadly instantiated in "equality of opportunity") and in cultural interactions, i.e., freedom from the imposition of cultural hierarchies such as gender and racial discrimination.

Emancipation is achieved therefore by dismantling both forms of subordination, but this is not a task which is the exclusive responsibility of the subject of such subordination themself. It is a task which falls on all of us. In the relevant domain, subjects do not choose their situation – they are born into a society with certain fixed norms of behavior in relation to gender and ethnicity, for example. People can emancipate themselves from a situation, but only to the extent that they enjoy parity of participation with others. Fraser's observations also highlight the error seen in the work of some contemporary CHAT writers, of ignoring oppression originating in *economic* structures.

See Blunden 2004a for a critical review.

Myles Horton and the Highlander

Myles Horton (2003, pp. 246-7) ran an adult education center in rural Tennessee from 1932 until his death in 1990. He provided training courses for poor people who were engaged in a struggle for their own emancipation. The centerpiece of his approach was to train groups of adults in collective decision making, and this began when they arrived at the School and were told that they were in charge running the school. Horton provided expert input to their studies only when it was specifically asked for.

The striking feature of Horton's work was that he trained his students in forms of decision making which were *appropriate to their social and cultural situation*. From 1932 until the War, he trained the workers who were to build the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations, uniting unskilled workers across the US) in the use of Robert's Rules of Order (the norms for decision making in US unions). In the immediate post-war period, he trained groups of poor farmers in setting up cooperatives to free themselves from the domination of agribusiness. In the 1950s, he trained African Americans in Consensus Decision Making which young activists turned to use in Civil Rights activism, and later launched the literacy program which gave millions of poor Southern Blacks access to the vote.

Horton's work was strikingly successful and it did not involve throwing kedges or teaching his students critical theory. Horton understood that self-emancipation required the disposition and ability to participate in *relevant* collective decision making, and find solutions to one's problems collaboratively with one's peers. Horton believed that people are the experts in their own experiences. What they needed was the capacity to find solutions to the problems they faced jointly with others. To do this, they needed training in specific, *culturally relevant* procedures in collective decision making.

See the chapter on Myles Horton in Blunden 2016 for a review.

Summary of approaches to "agency" by other writers

Among the writers reviewed, only Horton anchored their conception of "agency" by means of a germ cell (although he does not use the term) and synthesized concrete concepts relevant to the times. The others pointed to public policy issues which were broad in scope, but lacked the concreteness which CHAT writers bring to this question. The contributions of Sen, Bourdieu, Fraser and Horton, however, make it abundantly clear that the CHAT writers reviewed above have failed to engage with crucial issues relevant to the development agency beyond individual disposition. They have gone to the edge, so to speak, but failed to go beyond the voluntarist domain of individual action.

A CHAT approach which is true to Vygotsky's method

The ability to determine our own actions depends not only on self-control but also on control over the situation in which we may find ourselves, and this essentially entails not only the development of the mature personality but also collective deliberation and decision making,

This author has published several books aimed at developing a CHAT approach to human emancipation. These include a volume entitled *Collaborative Projects. An interdisciplinary study* (2014), *The Origins of Collective Decision Making* (2016), *Hegel for Social Movements* (2019), *Essays in Social Philosophy* (2022) and *Activity Theory. A critical overview* (in press). I shall not attempt to summarize this body of work here. One conclusion however is the determination of two distinct domains in which a germ cell for mediated self-determination can be identified, domains which are a *terrae incognitae* for the CHAT writers considered above.

There is no collective action without collective decision making, be that explicit and formalized or implicit and informal. Of course, in between decisions, people collaborate in practices and projects according to shared norms and rules, already established and grasped through joint understanding of the object of activity.

This is how normal, everyday activity unfolds; problems and their resolution only happen from time to time, but it is by the resolution of such problems that the concrete concept regulating the collective practice is transformed. In the life of an individual, new commitments are made only occasionally, but it is by such commitments that an individual develops their "agency" in the wider world around them.

An activity is a meso-level unit of human life. It is a domain in which an individual participant has a realistic opportunity of changing the concept of the object of activity, *and* the project is an actor on the broadest societal plane which has realistic chance of the changing societal arrangements affecting an individual. Thus, there are two specific concepts of mediated self-determination which express the capacity of a person to shape their own situation and which go beyond rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic to getting one's hands on the helm and steering the Titanic clear of the iceberg.

The first domain is collective decision making *within* a project. The unit of analysis and germ cell for this process is a group of people in the room together making collectively binding decision with respect to a project to which all are already committed. The result of my research in this domain was that history has given us four distinct paradigms of collective decision making, (i) Counsel, found in traditional communities, small businesses and single-parent

families, and in projects on which the fate of one person in particular hinges. In Counsel, one person takes the advice of everyone else and then makes the decision which is binding on all. (ii) Majority, which originated with the medieval guilds and is found in trade unions, parliaments, management committees and voluntary associations of all kinds. Here the rule of one-person-one-vote applies and binding decisions are made by majority voting. (iii) Consensus, which originated in mid-century USA in the Civil Rights and Peace movements and has since migrated to many social movement and activist projects. (iv) Laissez-faire, which originated with the breakdown of consensus in recent decades, when participants favor authenticity and personal liberty over collective action, and no collective decision made. In the cases of Majority and Consensus, decision making is governed by decision procedures in which the smallest unit of analysis is the Yes/No decision. Counsel and Laissez-faire are governed by virtue-ethical and aesthetic considerations rather than procedural or discourse ethics.

The second domain is the relation of support (or not) between independent projects. Decisions bind pro tem two or more parties which are not committed to the same project and retain their mutual independence after making an agreement. There are five paradigms. (i) Colonization or philanthropy, in which another project is simply taken over and absorbed, saving it by extinguishing it. (ii) Negotiation or Exchange, in which two or more parties make mutually binding agreements by means of delegates while respecting each others' independence and right to withdraw, (iii) Solidarity in which one party offers aid to another party but by subordinating themself to the other's direction pro temp. (iv) Collaboration as such in which two or more projects voluntarily dissolve themselves into a single project. (v) Laissez-faire in which projects have nothing to do with one another, the default case.

The unit of analysis in this instance is the relevant act (i) to (iv) which has the capacity to develop into more elaborated forms of interaction. *Within* these paradigms there are numerous, culturally specific *techniques of deliberation* and conflict resolution which have been the subject of studies by psychologists and organizational change managers.

In examining the formation of mediated self-determination in any real social formation, it will be found that *more than one* of the nine germ cells are manifested in any given case, in a variety of complex interactions. These are all considered from both an historical and logical points of view in Blunden 2016, and are the result of historical research into how real collective projects actually make decisions, and subjecting observations to analysis by the methods pioneered by Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky.

Conclusion

The general understanding of "agency" nowadays is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. Rationally understood, the term should indicate the *extent* to which a person's actions are free from determination by coercion, upbringing and the ideology, customs and laws of the community in which a person finds themselves. Closer examination demonstrates that this abstract general notion has quite different meanings in different contexts.

Vygotsky (1931a, p. 218) quoted Engels approvingly:

> "Not in the imaginary independence of laws of nature does freedom lie, but in recognizing these laws and, based on this, knowing the possibilities of systematically making the laws of nature work toward certain goals. This refers both to laws of external nature and to laws that govern the bodily and mental existence of man himself – that there are two classes of laws that can be separated from each other is the most important thing in our concept which is by no means far from reality. Consequently, freedom of will means nothing other than the ability to make a decision with knowledge of the matter." In other words, Engels places in

one order the control of nature and control of self. Freedom of will with respect to one and the other is, for him as for Hegel, understanding necessity.

"Laws that govern the bodily and mental existence of man himself" do not stop at the skin. The social and cultural environment in which human beings exist constitute our "second nature" and freedom means mastering the laws governing human activity en masse as well as our own bodily functions. To master such laws, they need to be studied.

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