



The Gordon Commission  
on the Future of Assessment in Education

# **Toward the Measurement of Human Agency and the Disposition to Express It**

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“The main thing is the YOU beneath the clothes and skin – the ability to do, the will to conquer, the determination to understand this great, wonderful, curious world”

(W.E.B. Dubois, 1914)

The quote above is from a letter that W.E.B. DuBois, the noted African American scholar and activist, wrote to his 14 year old daughter away at boarding school in England. She was having a hard time adjusting, and he reminds her how lucky she is to be there even though some might make fun of her “dear brown and sweet crinkly hair...” In an understated fashion he also exhorts her to rise above the obstacles, the “curious little annoyances,” by digging deep within herself to that core where human agency resides.

We routinely use terms like *overachiever* and *underachiever*, or more colloquially and judgmentally we describe some people as lazy or unmotivated and others as *can-do* or *can-make-it-happen*. The saying that if you need something done ask a busy person, likewise comes to mind. In all these cases we seem to be referring to the fact that intelligence, talent, or high capability alone is not enough to lead to accomplishment or success, whether related to academic realms of accomplishment or otherwise. Even a combination of raw talent and an enabling environment does not always translate into accomplishment. Or as Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen has noted, a person “could have a great deal of freedom, without achieving much.” (1987, pg.1). On the other hand, there are those who achieve greatness in the face of tremendous obstacles and/or are able to drive their more limited talent towards great accomplishment. What makes for the difference between these types of persons has not been well defined or well measured, but the construct that seems closest to capturing it is that of “human agency” and of course, the disposition to use it. Or, as our more quantitatively oriented colleagues have described human agency, it is the “unexplained variance,” once all other personality and environmental factors are accounted for (Hitlin & Elder, 2007, p. 33).

While it is difficult to find much writing or even reference to human agency outside of philosophy prior to the 1980’s, there has been a growing interest in the construct both in the psychological/sociological literature, especially in the work of Albert Bandura (1997, 2000, 2001, 2006) and Glen Elder (Elder, 1994, 1998, Hitlin & Elder, 2007a, b). Human agency also figures prominently in the economic/political development literature where it fits into a “capabilities” framework, most clearly elaborated in the work of Sen (1985, 1987, 1999a, b) and Sabine Alkire (2002, 2005, 2008). In addition, a very similar notion, that of individual

empowerment, has received growing attention especially in the realms of women's rights, healthcare and workplace/organizational literature (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993, Nussbaum, 2000).

This paper will attempt to bring together these bodies of knowledge in developing a multidimensional view of human agency, with a focus on those factors that allow for and facilitate the development and display of human agency. We do so with an eye toward the development of ways to assess, facilitate, and foster human agency in ways that are most relevant to academic achievement and the advancement of intellectual capacities. We come at the construct of agency in an integrative fashion that fully acknowledges that while the disposition to act in an agentic manner may be, at least in part, a characteristic of the individual, there are contexts more or less likely to encourage human agency and/or to provide necessary preconditions for its expression. While an examination of collective or group agency and proxy agency are beyond the scope of this paper, we will at least note how they could be explored further, especially with regards to education.

### **Perspectives on Defining Human Agency**

#### **A Social Cognitive Perspective on Human Agency**

Bandura's (1997, 2001, 2002) concern for human agency springs from his earlier work on self-efficacy. His definition of agency stresses the ways in which people exercise control over their lives by acting upon their environments in a goal directed manner. For Bandura, human agency is purposive, constructive, and planful. It involves anticipating the effects of our actions, estimating our capabilities, regulating affect, and initiating effort. We not only act upon a stage, we construct the stage we act upon, and the motivations and outcomes of our actions.

This constructivist perspective intentionally gives short shrift to the duality between human agency and structure, which has vexed other social scientists. While stopping short of viewing persons as fully autonomous and imbued with free will, a concept he views as quaint, Bandura notes the many ways in which persons can and have transformed the "natural" order of things, including disentangling sex from reproduction, genetically modifying foodstuffs, and even creating artificial forms of intelligence and machine learning. This serves to blur the distinction between environment, behavior, and outcomes (Bandura, 2006), a radical shift from scientific psychology's earlier behaviorist origins.

Drawing upon a more sociological view of the world, Elder (Elder, 1994, 1998, Hitlin & Elder, 2007a, b) takes a life course approach that similarly cuts through the traditional individual-structure impasse. He views social structures as placing situational constraints on individual choices, in part through our own subjective awareness of environmental parameters. In this sense, “People bring a life history of personal experiences and dispositions to each transition” and they also, “interpret the new circumstances in terms of this history while also working out lines of adaptation that can fundamentally alter their life course.” (Elder, 1998, p. 957). Thus, social structure matters, in part, because we shape it. And, like the person who goes to a boot camp style resort planning to lose weight and get into better shape, we shape with the full knowledge and intention that it *will* shape us.

#### A Human Capabilities Perspective on Human Agency

At about the same time that Bandura, Elder, and colleagues were creating an interest in the study of human agency from a psychological perspective, Amartya Sen, an economist, was developing a human capabilities approach to indexing economic and political development, especially in countries we often describe as third world. Drawing from his earlier writings on social choice, Sen (1985, 1987, 1999a, b) views agency as an individual’s ability to act upon the world to achieve their goals, a definition reminiscent of Bandura and Elder. However, Sen also places considerable emphasis on people’s ability to freely make choices and on “positive freedom.” This emphasis is something that goes relatively unaddressed in the writings of social scientists from the more developed Western world. It also stands in marked contrast to the more typical economic focus on negative freedom, or a *laissez faire* approach.

In Sen’s writings about the Bengal famine of 1943 he notes that there was nothing actively interfering with peoples’ ability to buy or consume food. But, they were also not free, given their circumstances, to actually do so. As such, Sen would argue that it is an empty right. Genuine choice can only come when one has access to both a reasonable quantity and quality of options in life (Sen 1985). We seldom think about this in the United States, where many, if not most, experience freedom almost in excess. Yet, it is important to note that while, in theory, U.S. citizens all have a right to at least a high school education, without support for educational achievement or true freedom to engage in the pursuit of educational goals, this may not be as meaningful as many take for granted.

In his work, Sen speaks to both the human agency of individuals and the degree to which nations, as a context, allow for personal empowerment. He argues that in examining the progress of nations, we need to look beyond an assessment of economic indicators and also include an examination of human capabilities that give meaning to those indicators. In his book, *Development as Freedom* (1999), Sen further states that all persons possess a set of key capabilities. It is the realization of these capabilities that gives him or her claim to agency and an escape from the “unfreedom” that characterizes abject poverty. Moreover, he argues that when policies are developed to provide people with help, aid recipients must be given the opportunity to shape their own destiny. Too often they are instead, viewed as passive recipients of programs developed by others to improve their lives. From his perspective, human agency is the ability to act and bring about change in line with one’s *own* values, goals, and objectives.

Sen’s capabilities approach has been most useful in examining the status of individuals, especially women, in developing or newly developed countries. The notion implied within these studies is that barriers to full societal participation must be taken into account in the examination of human agency and well-being. This is what makes this framework of particular interest to those of us working with populations that have been historically marginalized, oppressed, or disadvantaged, whether then reside within developed countries in the West, or the developing third world.

### **Operationalizing Human Agency and the Disposition to Express It**

Whether coincidental or not, the revival of academic interest in human agency happened during a time of large-scale emancipatory movements across the globe, both at the level of nation-states (e.g. the dissolution of Soviet Union), and at the level of specific groups or sub-groups of the population (e.g. women, gays and lesbians). The psychological/sociological perspective on agency has focused more on individuals and subgroups, the capabilities perspective more at the level of nations. Yet, a great deal of definitional overlap can be found.

Our definition is situated at the heart of this shared space. We define human agency as the capacity and disposition to recognize and act in one’s own best interest and that of chosen others. Or alternatively “a person’s ability to act on behalf of what he or she values *and has reason to value*” (Alkire, 2008). It is the ability to choose between alternatives and, to intentionally make things happen. We consider this a fundamental but developed human

characteristic to which other abilities are attached and through which human capacities are expressed.

Despite general agreement amongst diverse social science theorists about what human agency means, several conceptual and measurement questions remain contested and are worthy of further consideration.

- 1- Is human agency a generalized capacity or domain specific?
- 2- What characteristics of the environment or context are necessary or serve as pre-conditions for the expression of human agency?
- 3- Can human agency be assessed outside of achieved functioning? and
- 4- Is human agency necessarily related to positive well-being or toward goals that will positively increase a person's capacity?

#### Is Human Agency general or domain-specific?

Human agency is, no doubt, a multidimensional construct. Any attempt at measurement will need to take this into account. In addition, it is quite possible that some characteristics of human agency (e.g. the ability to exert control or freely make decisions) may be necessary components of agency regardless of the context, while others (e.g. access to information or services) may be specific to expressions in particular domains.

If pressed, we could probably arrange individuals according to how typical it is for them to work toward their own defined goals, or to feel empowered to change their circumstances. This would constitute a more generalized aspect of human agency. It is also quite possible, indeed likely, that those who have a tendency to take control of their life in some aspects, are also more apt to exert control over others as well. We can all think of individuals that we describe as the Mr. or Mrs. “Dewars” of the world (see Sarason, Carrol, Maton, Cohen & Lorentz, 1977). When a problem arises, they tackle it head-on. When a decision needs to be made, they make it -- whether it's about what restaurant to take out of town guests to, where to take the family for vacation, or who to hire or fire for a position. In all likelihood, there is a trait-like aspect to human agency, similar to the “g” factor that is found across multiple forms of intelligence.

An example of a measure that taps into this general view is the “Ladder of Power”, which was used in the *Moving Out of Poverty Study* (Narayan & Petesch, 2007) to assess global agency.

In this measure people are asked to assess where they stand on a 10-step ladder, where the lowest rung represents an individual who is totally powerless and without rights. Of special interest is the dual assessment of both, where they are now, and where they were 10 years ago, allowing one to assess agentic trajectory. The General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) is another example of this global approach. This scale is based on 10 items (e.g. I can usually handle whatever comes my way, I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events) that individuals respond to on a 4 point scale (definitely not to exactly true) which are summed together to yield a composite score on general self-efficacy. This measure has been used in samples in more than 20 nations, and correlates positively with optimism and work satisfaction, and negatively with anxiety, stress, and depression (*Luszczynska, Gutierrez-Dona, & Schwarzer, 2005*). These types of general measures probably function best at identifying individuals who are likely to perform more effectively than others in ambiguous situations, where it is not clear what exact skills are called for. In a world where the rapidity of technological advances threatens the usefulness of established tried and true ways of doing things at an unprecedented pace, possessing a generalized sense of agency and efficacy is no doubt an extremely powerful resource.

Nonetheless, there are also likely context- or skill-specific aspects of agency. A person who can exert agency to overcome an intellectual challenge, such as solving a difficult math problem, may not be able to exert it to overcome a more physical challenge, such as climbing a mountain. Or, in some developing countries women might feel very empowered in the domestic sphere of life, but less so in the political sphere or in the labor market (Alkire, 2008). This is similar to the differentiation that Bandura makes between more generalized self-worth and more specific self-efficacy beliefs.

Various measures have been used to assess agency or empowerment in domain specific areas. Within the general area of health behaviors, specific measures of self-efficacy have been developed to look at physical exercise, adherence to medication, condom use, and smoking behaviors to name a few (see Schwarzer & *Luszczynska, 2011* <http://cancercontrol.cancer.gov/brp/constructs/self-efficacy/se5.html> ). As another example, the “Demographic and Health Survey” (Orco-Macro, 2006, and discussed in Alkire, 2008) examines who controls decision-making (women themselves, their husbands, or joint decision-making) in areas such as “health care for yourself,” “purchases for daily household needs,” “the money you

earn,” etc. In this measure there is no summing across these various areas, each is seen as a stand-alone measure of human agency. This more fine-grained measurement approach probably makes the most sense when we are trying to understand or predict behavior or achievement in a more circumscribed domain or area.

In sum, good arguments can be constructed to assess either, or both, a generalized and/or domain-specific view of human agency. Fortunately, from both a conceptual and measurement perspective, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are likely to be positively correlated. Bandura has written a guide for constructing self-efficacy scales (Bandura, 2006) which deals with specific issues about how to avoid response biases and preferable intervals for responding. The appendix to this guide contains good examples of scales that have been developed to assess a range of domains including instructional self-efficacy (for teachers), social self-efficacy, self-regulatory self-efficacy, and self-efficacy for academic achievement.

#### Pre-conditions or Facilitative Conditions for the Development and Display of Human Agency

Work on human agency in the developing world posits that the capacity to exercise personal volition in decision making is an essential aspect of, or pre-condition for, human agency and its expression. For example, theory and research on women’s agency and empowerment in the third world often focuses on their ability to freely make choices or decisions about contraception and child-bearing, employment and work conditions, choice of one’s spouse, or about how household monies will be spent. The ability to make one’s own decisions is at the heart of what power and autonomy is all about. One cannot exercise agency if one is not allowed choice.

Another capability that is commonly viewed as central to agency, especially as it relates to women in the developing world, is access or control over resources. The micro-credit/finance movement is specifically targeted at giving people the resources necessary for them to gain more control over their lives and their world. The goal is often to put these resources directly in the hands of women, so they will not have to use men as the access point. Not surprisingly then, decision-making autonomy and control over resources are those capabilities most often assessed or measured when examining agency or empowerment in the developing world. Women’s control over income, freedom of movement, control over sexual relations, and support for

political engagement are amongst the most important areas in which to assess household and community empowerment of women in an international context (Malhorta, 2003).

In the U.S. and most of the Western world, however, these capacities are pretty much taken for granted. We generally assume that adults of both sexes have this sort of control in and over their lives. And, while this may not always be the case for children, we assume that these freedoms will come at the appropriate developmental period. Indeed, one common measure of adolescent autonomy created in the U.S. examines what decisions (e.g. choice of friends, when bedtime is, whether there is a curfew) are made by adolescents, by their parents, or jointly (Dornbusch, S.M., Ritter, P.L., Mont-Reynaud, R., & Chen, Z, 1990). An assumption underlying this measure is that all adults make such decisions, on their own, without needing permission from a parent, spouse, or any other authority figure. In the U.S., and most other Western countries, assessing progress along this autonomy dimension is a marker of adolescent movement toward adult status.

Thus, in contrast to work conducted in the developing world, research in the West is more apt to focus on agency-related capabilities to achieve goals that are at the higher level on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954). For example, research on perceived self-efficacy, a construct that is central to human agency, is more likely to focus on its' relationship to choice of college major, academic achievement, participation in the political process that goes beyond voting, control over one's own behaviors that are health-related, or the development of meaningful life goals.

In a more general vein, Bandura has identified four core properties that undergird human agency in any realm: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2006). Some attempts have been made to develop specific measures of these capabilities, such as the *Self Reflection and Insight Scale* (Grant, 2002). But, more often these capacities are examined as part of larger attempt to look at problem-solving in a specific domain.

In sum, we believe that it is generally the case that for research conducted in the West, Bandura's definition of the capacities or capabilities that serve as pre-conditions for human agency probably makes the most sense to focus on for measurement and assessment. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that there exist communities or sub-groups within this country where the more basic levels of empowerment are simply not available. There are still women, in this country, who are part of the sex trade or who are in abusive relationships and who

cannot fully exercise sexual choice without coercion. There are also those living in conditions of poverty, with so little access to resources that they cannot engage in meaningful choice in areas such as educational participation or job or career choice. For a Bill Gates Jr. or a Mark Zuckerberg dropping out of college was clearly a choice made as a byproduct of human agency. But, the same can't be said for those who must leave because of fear of debt, or because they have to support a family.

Context should be a determining factor in what agency-related abilities are most important to focus on, and this context varies markedly in different parts of the world. It may also vary markedly by sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, within countries or regions. There is a great deal of individual variation within any of these categories. Ironically, it is often the harshest conditions and most exceptional situations that offer the most powerful and poignant examples of the power of agency. Frankel's (1954) *Man Search for Meaning* or Mandela's (1994) *Long Walk to Freedom*, respectively written in a concentration camp and prison, are an eloquent reminder of how our humanity shines in situations where neither choice or agency seem possible. These examples, and many others, notwithstanding, it is important not to build a theory, or a set of measures, based, on truly exceptional situations.

#### Is Human Agency a Capability or Achievement?

It has been noted that in Sen's capability approach, capability is to functioning as possible is to actual (Williams, B. 1987, p. 96). Bandura (2006) also speaks of "agentic capabilities" or resources which allow people to be more successful in reaching their goals. In this view, the belief that one is capable of acting meaningfully upon the world, or perceived self-efficacy, is an important characteristic that is a part of, or can lead to, human agency. Without a sense of perceived efficacy it is unlikely that one will be motivated to act. Indeed, the bulk of human agency related measures, including most of those we have discussed thus far, assess some level of capability or efficacy belief.

Nonetheless, in our definition of human agency, we specifically add "and the disposition to express it" as we are not confident that human agency, outside of its expression, is sufficient to the type of measurement that we envision being most useful. Perhaps even more important to note is our belief that the disposition to act upon the world is, in fact, an inherent part of human agency. In that sense, it is not a capacity or capability that one can have, without *any* active

manifestation of it. The propensity to be intentional, to act, and to be goal-driven, is precisely what we mean when we say someone possesses human agency. As the diagram below illustrates, human agency is what allows us to turn agentic capabilities and/or the psychological resources we describe as perceived self-efficacy, into achievements.

### **CAPABILITIES/PERCEIVED EFFICACY → AGENCY → ACHIEVEMENT**

We root our definition, and any subsequent operationalization of human agency in meaningful, intentional behavior, or action. Human agency is not just the *potential* for action. However, it is important to note that this does not mean that agency is the same as the outcome or achievement. While we require that human agency entail some action or behavior, it may not be an action or behavior which, in fact, fully achieves the desired goal. For example, one's desired goal might be to climb to the top of Mt. Rainier. To simply think about it, or even to plan for the climb, but never leave the house, would not qualify as a display of human agency in our definition. There would have been no real "propensity to express it." However, to attempt the climb, get part of the way up, but not complete the climb due to inclement weather, or simply physical exhaustion and inability to go the distance, would still qualify as some expression of human agency.

It is our contention that any attempt to operationalize human agency should define it as a capability-in-action. We believe that human agency *and the propensity to display it* must be looked at together. However, we also acknowledge that when it comes to measurement, one is most likely to be able to clearly measure (1) agentic capabilities or self-perceptions of abilities or (2) achievements or outcomes of one's actions. It may well be possible that human agency is best inferred through a portfolio of measures at the intersection of these two, rather than as something that can be measured by itself in a head on fashion.

For example, as the first author was working on this paper, she was also reading applications for the Bezos Scholar Program@The Aspen Institute. The applicants are high school juniors, twelve of whom will be chosen to attend the Aspen Festival of Ideas along with a teacher. What we look for in applicants is a combination of demonstrated and potential for leadership in their school and community. This isn't something that can be assessed with a standardized questionnaire, but when four or five "experts" each read student essays on an array

of topics, teacher recommendations, and high school transcripts, there is a surprisingly high degree of concurrence about which students most possess these capabilities, which are, in large part, rooted in the effective use of human agency.

### Is Human Agency and its Expression Necessarily Positive?

There is room for debate as to whether human agency is necessarily related to positive or pro-social goals. It can certainly be argued that human agency is sometimes, if not often, used to ascend to positions of leadership, fame, or power, not always used in the service of the good of the many. When asked to identify their most admired people in the U.S., presidents and the spouses of presidents generally top the list, often followed by famous celebrities. While in some cases the admiration, fame, or power seems clearly tied to good deeds, in other cases that seems unlikely. Yet, it is hard to deny that a great deal of drive and agency seems to have been expended by many in order to reach the ranks of fame and power.

Sen's definition of agency very specifically notes that the individual gets to set the goals to be attained. Agency is "what a person can do in line with *his or her* conception of the good" (Sen, 1985, p. 206). This definition certainly leaves room for human agency to be channeled toward activities that would not be viewed as uniformly positive. One can readily think about people whose goals include the exploitation of others, if not as an end in itself, certainly as a means to an end. Nonetheless, Sen (1992) has also emphasized in his work that true human agency can only be achieved when people can choose *responsible* options for its display, implying if not overtly stating, that when such options exist, they would likely be chosen (Sen, 1992).

Bandura has also engaged in the debate about the ethical aspects of human agency in his writings about moral agency (2006). Here he notes that "moral agents commit themselves to social obligations and righteous causes..." (p. 171). However, he also notes that morality is socially situated and that societies or subgroups within societies may vary in what they consider to be morally responsible actions.

There is certainly considerable evidence to suggest that, as humans, we are hard-wired with some sense of fairness and at least some sense of altruism. A sociobiological perspective would argue that these characteristics are vital to survival of the species even if, in specific instances, to act otherwise may confer individual advantage. It is also the case that some of the

most amoral behavior that we witness, such as taking other human life, happens mostly under extreme circumstances, such as war, or by individuals in settings characterized by extreme disorganization and poverty.

In a more prosaic example, in discussing women's empowerment, Kabeer (1999) notes that agency is not only the freedom to engage in decision-making, but in other forms including "bargaining and negotiating, *deception and manipulation, subversion* and resistance" (p. 438) specifically noting that agency both resides in *power to* and the *power over* including the capacity to overcome the agency of others through violence and coercion. As part of a normative life cycle, for example, a third world woman may go from being a daughter-in-law in a household, a position of little power, to that of a mother-in-law exerting power over her son's wife. Is that movement toward empowerment? Has this woman gained agency? One could say yes, and it is not an incorrect answer, but some (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002 ) would argue that this only looks like power because of the large (and inequitable) gender constraints of that society that continues to subordinate her as a woman. Women's larger lack of agency does not allow for truly empowered choices or agentic functioning.

An argument could be made that in conditions conducive to full individual freedom, human agency would be exercised in a manner that is generally pro-social and non-exploitative. However, at this point, constricting a definition of human agency to goals that are in service of the greater good remains a decision rooted in values rather than empirical evidence. Nonetheless, it is the preference of these authors to do so, at least when it comes to the areas of study we are most interested in.

### **Relating Human Agency to Cognitive Development and Educational Outcomes**

The search to better define and assess human agency, especially at this point in time, is important, in part, because it takes us beyond the boundaries that we typically explore in the social or behavioral sciences. At a time when reductionist models of humanity are the norm, where our humanity is defined as the sum of the contingencies that surround us, the market forces that control us, or by a set of discretely defined characteristic and abilities, the search for human agency feels expansive. It reminds us, to riff on Hamlet, that there are more things in heaven and earth that can be neatly captured in our taxonomies.

But, to bring us back to our key goal, we are interested in building a link between agency and intellectual competence and/or school performance. There has been a substantial body of work linking perceived self-efficacy, one aspect of human agency, to school achievement and related factors. The work in this area is extensive, and reviews of this work can be found elsewhere (see Pajares, 1996; Pajares & Schunk, 2001). To just note a few examples, either general or domain-specific perceived self-efficacy has been found to predict performance on mathematical problem solving tests in elementary school children (Collins, 1982; Schunk, 1984) and college students (Pajares & Miller, 1994), even across a diverse array of actual ability levels (Collins, 1982). Perceived academic self-efficacy has also been related to language and/or writing ability (Schunk, 1989, Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). High school students, mainly of ethnic minority status (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992) with higher levels of perceived self-efficacy have also been found to better plan and organize their academic activities

The relationship between self-efficacy and performance appears to be largely mediated by effort, persistence, and motivational processes linked to forethought (Bandura, 1991; Schunk and colleagues 1985, 1988). Those with a strong sense of perceived self-efficacy are most likely to persist in the face of initial failure. They are more likely to attribute failure to lack of effort, while those with lower levels of self-efficacy view failure as stemming from a lack of ability, and so are less likely to persist.

Research with adolescents, using a life course approach (Hitlen & Elder 2007) has likewise found that human agency, defined by the combination of general perceived self-efficacy and optimism, an aspect of forethought, is related to fewer school behavioral or academic problems (e.g. problems with teachers or other students, problems completing or turning in homework). It is also related to a greater sense of school engagement and to school cohesion, or belongingness (e.g. closeness to others at school, happiness with school, school safety).

In sum, the evidence for a link between factors that are considered to be pre-conditions for, or components of, human agency and school achievement or performance is quite strong. Most of these studies have focused specifically on perceived self-efficacy, mostly in relation to the performance outcome tested (e.g. perceived self-efficacy in math related to better math performance). There is even some evidence that perceived self-efficacy, a component of human agency, influences the choice of what to study. For example, women are more apt to choose a major in college that is more male-identified (such as math or science) when their self-efficacy in

that subject matter is high (Bandura, 2006). Moreover, the mediators for this link are exactly those variables that we posit to be of greatest importance for agency -- persistence, effort, motivation, and forethought. These studies make it clear that human agency, and the disposition to display it, is an important factor in educational outcomes, assuming, of course, that for most, this is a desired and attainable outcome.

However, it is important to note that almost all these studies have been conducted in the U.S., or other Western countries, where school attendance is taken for granted, at least into high school. Research using a capabilities perspective in developing countries, or conducted concurrently with studies of poverty, does not take this for granted. Indeed, work coming from these approaches seeks much more simply to establish the right to become educated, most typically in a formal school setting, as a basic human capability or freedom. Simply being able to attend school, especially for girls, could be viewed as an exercise in human agency (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002).

In the West there has been a tendency, to at least in part, view human agency, and the disposition to express it, as a characteristic of an individual (or setting). This characteristic, in turn, is viewed as leading to other desired outcomes, such as school achievement. In contrast, those doing work in the developing world are much more apt to also note the intrinsic value of human agency and the role of education in producing, or facilitating, the development of agency itself. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned here for how to view our own educational systems and their desired outcomes.

### **Development of Human Agency as a Goal of Education**

These days, in the post-recession West, there was been an almost obsessive focus on the vocational/career outcomes of education for the individual (see Bruni, April 28, 2012 for an example of this rhetoric) and on the importance of education, especially in the sciences, to enhance the global competitiveness of nations. While education is certainly important for both of these, we believe, as did the ancient Greeks, that it is first and foremost an activity that is required for the formation of citizens and for the affirmative development of an active and informed citizenry that make a true democracy possible. This goal of education puts the development and fostering of human agency at the center of the educational effort, not only

because it leads to better academic outcomes, but because it is, in itself, a desirable outcome of the educational enterprise.

This broader view of the purpose of education was echoed in a recent report on the goals of education in the country of Turkey, which sits at the nexus of the developed and developing world, of east and west. This report notes at its very outset that looking at education as only a means to economic growth or personal earning represents an “impoverished metric of human well-being” (Akkoyunlu-Wigley & Wigley, 2008, p. 1). Instead, it is stated that the development of what we refer to as intellectual competence “will bolster the ability of individuals to engage in public debate and reach an informed judgment about public policy and the performance of elected officials.” (p. 3). Intellectual competence, including the power of human imagination and inquiry has “intrinsic value” (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 335-337). Education can, in itself, be viewed as a basic capability that promotes both freedom and agency, which may, in turn, lead to further education and a widening net of freedom. Indeed, from this viewpoint, the provision of at least a basic level of education can be seen as a simple matter of justice. Or as Terzi (2004) has said “education is intrinsically good, is valuable in itself, in that being educated, other things equal, enhances the possibility to appreciate and engage in a wide range of activities which are fulfilling for their own sake” (pp. 11). He specifically calls out as fulfilling activities the appreciation of poetry and music and nature, not just a higher paying job. We would add to this list the fulfillment, indeed the true feeling of happiness that can come from helping others, from fighting for justice, or attempting to right a wrong.

As Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist and Holocaust survivor, summarized so beautifully in the preface to his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1954) “...happiness ...ensues... as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself.” Or as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) notes in a decade long study of the psychology of happiness, one's best and happiest moments occur when a person's mind is stretched to its limits in an effort to accomplish something challenging and worthwhile. Thus, perhaps one of the most important outcomes of schooling or education, whether it is a direct goal or not, is to make sure that youth, whether privileged or disadvantaged, understand this link between the exertion of effort, aiming for goals beyond oneself, and true happiness or fulfillment. In a world where pleasure and leisure is so often portrayed as the result of intentionally doing nothing, of relaxing by a pool, or in front of the TV, it is imperative that youth make the connection between input

and output, between effort and attainment. When this link is made, human agency is strengthened.

While beyond the scope of this paper, we believe that it is possible to structure school and other learning setting in ways that will strengthen the development and expression of human agency. This may be especially important in today's increasingly networked world, where the power of one voice, or one video, can be transformative and literally *go viral*, touching more people, in more far-flung corners of the world, with more rapidity than could have been imagined even a few short years ago. This is exactly the goal of the Center for Human Activity Theory in Kansai University, led by Katsuhiko Yamazumi whose mission statement includes "promoting the development of innovative, collaborative learning and education systems, both in theory and in practice, aimed at the creation of a new culture of human activity in our increasingly complex and diverse modern society" (<http://www.chat.kansai-u.ac.jp/english/about/index.html>, accessed 4/28/12). Yamazumi (2007) notes that "a new educational research agenda should include forms of human agency in educational practices that can transform traditional educational work." (p. 20). The loosely defined international research group engaged in this process is using design experimentation as a method for creating pedagogical research and settings that can "generate critical and creative agency among learners. Such agency will help peoples shape their own lives and futures that are gradually being transformed" (Yamazumi, 2007, p. 20, Nicolopoulou & Cole, 2010). This work is certainly worth a close following among those of us interested in a more emancipatory role for pedagogy, especially for youth growing up in environments that are not conducive to personal empowerment.

### **Future Directions for Theory and Measurement**

The renewed focus on human agency as a construct worthy of attention by social scientists is a welcome development in the social science literature. This interest has sprung up in various areas, representing different social science fields and traditions, both in this country and abroad, and in the developed and developing world. Not surprisingly then, various attempts to define and measure agency have sprung up independently with very little attempts to create an active dialogue across disciplinary or national borders. This paper represents an effort to jumpstart such

a conversation especially amongst those who have interests in child development and/or in educational reform. This broader conversation is important for two reasons:

- 1- While psychological/sociological perspectives represent ways of looking at, and assessing, human agency in a manner that is more conducive to its study in the United States and other developed, Western countries, it seems to make assumptions about human freedom and lack of constraints that might not best represent the material conditions of those living at the margins of our society. Indeed, the focus on the preconditions for, or capabilities needed in order to, act with human agency, that comes out of the economic development perspective may be especially informative as we think about factors affecting human agency amongst poor youth and/or youth of color in U.S. educational settings. This is especially the case in a context where the divisions between the have and have-nots are growing rather than narrowing. And,
- 2- Each of the perspectives we review has its own rich tradition of assessment, and looking across both allows us a broader array of tools to choose from.

An emphasis on assessment and measurement is becoming a key part of educational reform movements. As calls for accountability become the new mantra in all public sectors, and especially in public schools, it is important that we develop assessment tools that can tap into the full range of capabilities, skills, and achievements that we believe are important in optimizing human success. In this day and age, if we can't measure it on a test, we're not apt to focus on it in the classroom or in other learning settings. Thus, it is critical that we continue to put effort and energy into the development of tools to assess human agency and its components.

Measures are available to assess some discrete aspects of human agency, or associated capabilities and capacities, such as the extensive research on measuring self-efficacy. We have pointed to various examples of such measures in this paper. Nonetheless, at this point, we believe a more holistic assessment of human agency is perhaps best done using portfolio techniques, similar to those that are typically presented when students compete for national prizes. Such assessment typically includes a personal statement, letters from others, measures of academic achievement of potential, and an in-person interview. Unfortunately, this is a very costly assessment and it is not clear that it is scalable to large numbers, appropriate for elementary school aged children, or that the level of subjectivity involved would be

acceptable for use on a wide-scale basis. Clearly, much more work needs to be done in this area.

The assessment of collective human agency was viewed as beyond the scope of this paper, yet this is an area worthy of continued serious focus. In this new interconnected world, where it is becoming easier and easier to communicate across the globe instantaneously, the mastery of digital and social media, and the ability and propensity to engage it in the service of one's goals is becoming a more and more important tool to harness in the service of individual or group goals. Just recently, within a matter of days, the first author received e-mails from over 400 people in support of a small (less than 10 students enrolled per year) program in her university that had been threatened with closure. About another half dozen university administrators, along with a dozen or so members of the state legislature also received these e-mails. Final decisions on program closure will be made based on the quality of the arguments made, not the quantity of complaints received, but there is no question that the sheer volume of the response got everyone's attention (see [change.org](http://change.org) to see how easily such campaigns can be mounted).

Another area of measurement and assessment that was not examined in this paper, but is worthy of more serious research, is the assessment of teacher or principal behaviors and their effect on empowering or disempowering students. One of our biggest fears with regard to the testing movement in education is that if we are not alert, it can come to crowd out spaces for the self-reflection, forethought, and creativity so necessary for fostering human agency in teachers and their pupils. In this sense, perhaps the most important outcome of being more self-conscious about the role of human agency, and viewing it not only as an important driver of educational achievement, but an important outcome of the educational process, is the way it transforms the way we look at education, schools, and learning.

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