

Reading

Introducing Agency (Adapted Version)

Introducing Agency

Adolescence is a time of growth and opportunity—a time when young adults **transition** (*change*) from **childhood dependence** to adult independence. From around age 10 until their early 20s, young people are building the skills to make their own decisions, developing new interests, and setting goals for their future. This is an important time for them to learn about the **concept** (*idea*) of agency (*definition in the next paragraph*) and how it can affect their decision-making process.

When we say that an individual or group has **agency, we mean that they have the power and ability to make decisions and take action** (*do something*) **on their own behalf** (*for themselves*). They feel like they can **make a difference** (*have a positive effect*) in their lives and in the lives of other people. Paul Napper and Anthony Rao, psychologists and the authors of the book *The Power of Agency*, explain agency as “the ability to move forward even if we have problems, find emotional and physical balance, think more clearly, and **advocate for ourselves** so we can **take a course of action** (*make a decision*) that makes sense. With agency, we can feel more **in command** (*in control*) of our lives.”¹

DEFINITIONS

childhood dependence: As children, we depend on our parents to do many things for us (feed us, buy us clothes, provide shelter etc.)

agency: The power and ability people have to make decisions and do something for themselves

advocate for ourselves: Do what we need to do to get what we need

MAKE A CONNECTION

What are some examples of ways that you might have agency in the future that you don't have now?

Some examples of ways that I might have agency in the future that I don't have now include:

¹ Anthony Rao and Paul Napper, “Seven Ways to Feel More in Control of Your Life,” *Greater Good Magazine*, April 15, 2019.

Understanding Individual and Collective Agency

People can have *individual* agency, and groups can have *collective* agency.

→ **Individual agency** is when a person takes action alone for themselves or for someone else.

→ **Collective agency** is when a group of people work toward a goal together.

Sociologist Nicki Lisa Cole helps to explain the **impact** (*power*) that individual and collective agency can have on individuals, social structures (*for example, family, religion, social class, and community*), and **societal norms** (*for example, rules about eye contact, personal space, dress codes, and deadlines*):

Agency is the power people have to think for themselves and act in ways that **shape** (*affect*) their experiences and life **trajectories** (*paths*)

Individual and collective agency **may serve to reaffirm social order by reproducing norms and existing social relationships**, or it may **serve to challenge and remake social order** by going against the way the world is now to create new **norms** (*rules*) and relationships. Individually, this might look like **rejecting** (*not following*) the **gendered norms of dress**. Collectively, the ongoing civil rights battle to **expand** (*make bigger*) the definition of marriage to [lesbian and gay] couples **shows agency expressed through political and legal channels.**¹

DEFINITIONS

societal norms: the way people are expected to behave around other people

may serve to reaffirm ...: can be used to keep society and its rules the same as they are now

serve to challenge...: try to change society's rules and how it is organized

gendered norms of dress: the type of clothing that society expects people to wear based on gender

shows agency expressed...: action by groups of people trying to change the law through politics or the legal system

APPLY YOUR LEARNING

Why do you think wearing the clothes you want to wear is considered an act of individual agency?

Wearing the clothes you want is considered an act of individual agency because . . .

¹ Nicki Lisa Cole, "How Sociologists Define Human Agency," *ThoughtCo*, January 22, 2019.

APPLY YOUR LEARNING

Why do you think a civil rights battle to expand the definition of marriage is considered an example of collective agency?

A civil rights battle to expand the definition of marriage is considered an example of collective agency because

Examples of Individual Agency

DEFINITIONS

Let's look at more examples!

- A young girl with **individual agency** asks her parent to buy her a blue shirt with a picture of a robot on it instead of a pink shirt with a picture of a princess. This young girl shows agency when she decides not to dress the way that girls are expected to dress in her society.
- A student with **individual agency** asks for a meeting with a **school administrator** (*principal or assistant principal*) to **advocate for themselves** after their teacher doesn't give them the extra time they can have for a test because of their learning difference.

advocate for themselves: do what they need to do to get what they need

APPLY YOUR LEARNING

What is another example of individual agency? How is it an example of individual agency?

Another example of individual agency is _____.

This is an example of individual agency because _____.

Examples of Collective Agency

DEFINITIONS

→ In 2015, the **Supreme Court** (*the highest court in America*) decided that states cannot keep lesbian and gay couples from marrying. They said that all 50 states must **recognize** (*legally respect*) these marriages. For many years, the **collective agency** of individuals, **activists** (*people who fight for rights*), politicians, and the US legal system helped to **expand** (*make bigger*) the definition of marriage to include lesbian and gay couples.

→ In 2012, a group of employees from different **fast-food franchises** in Kansas City, Missouri, showed their **collective agency** when they **organized fast-food workers** from all across the city to fight for benefits like **paid-time off** (*paid vacation days*), sick days, and a \$15 **minimum wage** (*the lowest amount of money a worker can earn*).¹

fast food franchises: Places like Burger King, McDonald's, Domino's, Subway, etc.

organized fast-food workers: Get all of the workers to agree to fight for the same rights

MAKE AN INFERENCE

What actions do you think the fast-food workers took that demonstrate (show) the power of collective agency?

Some actions the fast-food workers may have taken that demonstrate the power of collective agency include:

¹ Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us* (New York: One World, 2021), 130–32.

Understanding the Factors that Influence Agency

DEFINITIONS

There are many **factors** (*things*) that can **influence** (*impact*) someone's agency at any given moment. For example, an individual's agency might be **impacted by aspects of their identity**, such as their age, race, **gender** (*for example, cisgender, non-binary, or transgender*), religion, language, and social class. Another example of a factor that has influenced people's agency is the Covid-19 pandemic. Many people have said the pandemic makes them feel out of control, **overwhelmed**, and stressed. For young people, there are other important factors that can influence agency, such as their **self-esteem** (*feelings about yourself*), hope and belief in their abilities, feeling like they **matter** (*are important*), a **sense of connectedness** to others (at home, in school, online, and in their community), and feeling like they have power over their bodies.¹

impacted by aspects of their identity: Affected by who they are

overwhelmed: When you feel like there is too much for you to deal with

sense of connectedness: A feeling that they have important relationships with other people

APPLY YOUR LEARNING

Review the factors listed above that affect an individual's agency. Choose one that you think is important and explain how you think it might affect a person's agency.

One of the factors listed above that affects agency is _____ . I think that this factor might affect a person's sense of agency by _____

_____ .

¹ A. Vidyarthi et al., "Agency and resilience – foundational elements of adolescent well-being," *Adolescents* 2030, March 19, 2021, 2.

Conclusion

We can also develop **our own sense of agency**. In their book *The Power of Agency*, Napper and Rao give people ideas for how they can feel more in control of their lives. Some of these ideas include **limiting distractions**, such as phones, when we need to focus; getting enough sleep, healthy food, and exercise; spending time with people who encourage and support us to work toward our goals; **being open to** (*willing to*) learning new things; and taking time to reflect on big decisions, ask questions, and make a plan.¹

Despite how it may feel at times, especially when we are growing up, we all have some control over parts of our lives and decisions. When we understand the **factors** (*things*) that **play a role in increasing or limiting our agency**, we can start to develop the skills and tools necessary to make decisions, take action, and have control over things in our lives that are important to us.

DEFINITIONS

limiting distractions: Trying not to do things – like look at your cell phone – that will interrupt your focus

play a role in increasing or limiting our agency: Help us have more control of our lives or make us have less control of our lives

MAKE AN INFERENCE

How might an object like your phone both help and **hinder** (*block or limit*) your sense of agency?

A phone might **help** my sense of agency by _____.

A phone might **hinder** my sense of agency by _____.

APPLY YOUR LEARNING

What is one step you can take to increase your agency? How do you think you would feel if you took this step?

One step can take to increase my agency is to _____.

I think taking this step would make me feel _____ because _____.

_____.

¹ Anthony Rao and Paul Napper, "Seven Ways to Feel More in Control of Your Life," *Greater Good Magazine*, April 15, 2019.