Agency

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In anthropology, agency is broadly defined as the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act. Classically, the concept has been used to analyse how people try to influence, or change, their lifeworlds and how they act within, or even resist, powerful structures. The concept entered anthropological debates in the 1980s and was initially closely connected to practice theory, an approach which sought to understand how individuals actively create society while at the same time are being shaped by it. Consequently, many of the early debates on agency revolved around questions of self-determination, creativity, and resistance. Anthropologists studied, for instance, how people, especially those in seemingly powerless positions, managed to pursue their own projects and to subvert—if subtly—colonial, patriarchal, capitalist, or other forms of domination. However, anthropologists have always been wary of reducing agency to liberal—or ‘western’—notions of personal choice, freedom, and autonomy. Instead, a plethora of ethnographic case studies demonstrate how meanings of agency, including who can exercise it and how it is valued, vary across social, cultural, or historical contexts. In more recent times, anthropologists have also drawn attention to networked, relational, and more-than-human forms of agency such as the agency of spirits, ‘nature’, art, or things. This entry provides an overview of the extensive anthropological debates on agency, noting that most anthropologists working on questions of agency today would agree that the relationship between our intentions, our actions, and their effects on the world is much more complex than the term agency—as popularly understood—suggests.

Introduction

At least since the 1990s, agency has been a prominent and much-discussed concept in anthropology (e.g. Ahearn 2001; Duranti 1990; Ortner 1984, 1997, 2001). Emerging out of practice theory, agency was frequently imagined as a positive capacity to act within, and even to resist, potentially oppressive structures. When people had agency, they could explain and instigate personal, social, and environmental change. When non-human actors had agency, they affected and transformed the environment, societies, or other bodies. In more recent times, anthropologists have become less enthusiastic about the concept for various reasons. Human agency is increasingly regarded as overly destructive and potentially problematic rather than something to be celebrated (see Latour 2014). At the same time there is an increasing realisation that human agency is rather limited, and there is a widespread sense of powerlessness in the face of climate change, pandemics, and war. Responding to these shifts in scholarly debates and the world we live in, anthropologists have begun exploring new—distributed, more-than-human, and relational—forms of agency, or even radical alternatives to hegemonic understandings of agency. These include 'patiency' (Mazzarella 2021, see also Schnepel 2009), 'non-mastery' (Taussig 2020), 'waiting' (Hage 2009), or different forms of passivity such as silence (Hofmeyr 2009). Such alternative concepts question the imperative to act or ‘do something’ in order to change the world or ourselves. Instead, they attend to

 ISSN 2398-516X

other forms of becoming. In Lutheran theology, for instance, the passive receiving of God's grace is seen as the foundation for any human agency. More broadly, receiving (e.g. a gift or a declaration of love) may not be wholly passive. It can be conceptualised as a form of passivity by which the giver's action turns the other into a receiver with all the obligations that come with this role (Robbins 2020).

This entry provides an introductory overview of the extensive anthropological debates on agency. Drawing on both classic and more recent ethnographic texts, it discusses the complex relationship between agency, intention, and effect in fields as varied as politics, technology, language, and the body. The main aim is to show how the concept has been used and contested in anthropology and how different understandings of agency are tied to different theoretical positions. More generally, it illustrates the varied ways in which anthropologists have tried to conceptualise the dynamics between agent and world, between creativity and stasis, between responsibility and fate, and between power and resistance.

At the heart of debates on agency is the question of social change. Why and how do societies change despite their fairly stable and powerful structures, which are based on class, gender, belief, etc. and which are constantly reinforced through socialisation, daily routines, and rituals? Is there such a thing as free will, or are the choices we make always determined by the social and cultural contexts we live in? Long before agency became a fashionable concept in anthropology, philosophers and sociologists debated this so-called 'structure-agency' problem. Some social theorists, like Max Weber, posited that unlike animals who act out of instinct, humans are capable of conscious, rational decision-making. Others, like Émile Durkheim, cautioned that choices made by individuals are always shaped by social and cultural structures—or, in Durkheim's terms—by a collective consciousness or *conscience collective* (Rapport and Overing 2007, 3-5). Later theorists agreed that both the reproduction and the transformation of societies happens through a dynamic interplay between determining structures and individual intentional actions. However, they disagreed as to whether structures or actions were more important (e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1966, Parsons 1951, Bourdieu 1977). One of the most influential theories, based on the idea that agency and structure are part of an inseparable duality, was developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens. His 'structuration theory' is based on the premise that

> society is the outcome of the consciously applied skills of human agents.[…] While not made by any single person, society is created and recreated afresh, if not ex nihilo, by the participants in every social encounter. The production of society is a skilled performance, sustained and "made to happen" by human beings' (Giddens 1993, 25).

In anthropology, agency and related research foci emerged comparatively late and only started to gain more traction in the 1980s. In its beginnings, agency was closely associated with 'practice theory'—an approach that 'seeks to explain the relationships that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call "the system" on the other' (Ortner 1984, 184; see also Bourdieu

1977, Sahlins, 1981). Practice theory itself emerged out of a dissatisfaction with previous anthropological theories which were either insufficiently interested in questions of history and societal transformation or did not pay much attention to the actions and intentions of individuals.

To put it crudely, up to the 1980s most anthropologists had studied culture(s) or societies as relatively stable, homogenous, and somewhat 'objective' entities (for a more nuanced discussion, see Ortner 1984). Their focus was clearly on the collective and not on the individuals of which it was made up. Some influential theories such as structural functionalism, supported by anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, explained social institutions largely as a result of their usefulness for society at large. French structuralism, made famous by Claude Lévi-Strauss, focused on a universal grammar underlying all cultures, while symbolic anthropology, famously developed by Clifford Geertz, understood culture as a set of shared public symbols and meanings. These different, dominant approaches to the study of society were largely ahistorical and were not explicitly concerned with questions of social change. Other approaches were, but assumed 'that human action and historical process are almost entirely structurally or systemically determined', and not in any central way driven by 'real people doing real things' (Ortner 1984, 144). This charge was levelled against evolutionism and later cultural ecology which saw societies as 'quasi-organisms' that evolved through technological and environmental adaptation. It was also made against Victor Turner's ritual theory, which sought to explain how social integration and solidarity were achieved and maintained despite inherent conflict. Marxism, which viewed society as made up of opposing social forces or 'modes of production', was also held to be overly deterministic.

The turn to concepts such as agency, then, signalled a move away from a focus on abstract forces and processes to concrete, often individual, actors and their particular motivations, intentions, and experiences of social life. Questions about agency, including who may or may not 'have' agency in a given setting, are therefore closely entangled with questions about personhood and self. They foreground human creativity, aspiration, and desire, as well as power and ethics. Discussions, definitions, and theories of agency, as the following sections show, vary according to whether an agent is conceptualised as a rational and independent human individual, a subject (i.e. someone who is to some extent determined by social forces or discourses and studied as a member of a particular subject position, for instance, as a woman or as a peasant), or a non-human actant. According to Sheryl Ortner (2001), one can also differentiate between approaches that analyse 'the agency of intentions', i.e. how individuals or collectives design, carry out, and give meaning to their life projects, and those that focus on 'agency as power', i.e. how individuals or collectives perform or resist domination and oppression.

In everyday parlance, fuelled by widespread neoliberal doctrines of self-responsibilisation, the notion of agency often evokes the image of a human actor whose intentional actions should produce the intended effects (Gershon 2011). This 'voluntarist' notion of agency, i.e. the idea that we are the masters of our own fate and responsible for the outcomes of our actions, has far-reaching implications. It affects, for instance,

how contemporary healthcare, welfare, or justice systems are set up in many countries around the world and how people imagine politics more generally. Anthropologists, however, have always emphasised that what people understand by agency, or how they believe they can act in and upon the world, greatly varies across cultural and historical contexts. As the next section shows, they have also cautioned against simply equating agency with human self-determination (e.g. Keane 2003, 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992).

Cultural constructions of agency

Anthropologists have tended to emphasise that the meanings of agency differ substantially between different social, cultural, or historical contexts. Such differences in meaning can have an immediate effect on how and by whom agency can be exercised and how it is valued. For example, if people believe that God, or spirits, or dead ancestors, are powerful agents, this will affect not only how people *explain* their world, but fundamentally shape many aspects of social life itself. One influential way of defining agency is therefore that it is 'the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001, 112).

Anthropological studies have often focused on encounters between people with different conceptions of agency, often in highly unequal positions of power, such as in colonial, missionary, or interethnic contexts (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, Ortner 2001, Keane 2007, or High 2010). In an ethnography of mountaineering in Nepal, Ortner (1997), for example, details how international mountain climbers, known as *sahbs*, can impose their terms and conditions on the Sherpas they employ as climbing assistants. That is because the international mountain climbers hold a privileged social position and greater economic power. However, Ortner convincingly shows that the Sherpa are not only dominated by the mountaineers, but draw on local constructions of agency to give meaning to their actions and to recurring tragic events, like a death during an expedition. They consider the relations between powerful remote gods, ordinary humans, and harmful demons to make sense of their situation. Ortner claims that over time, Sherpas' assertions regarding why deaths occur and how they might be prevented, have led to small, but important, changes in mountaineering practices. In her words,

> Sherpa religion constructs cultural notions of power and agency and […] their construction of power and agency allows them to manage lamas, gods, sahbs, and deep personal grief in ways that are (for many) effective' (Ortner 1997, 158).

Although the meanings people attach to agency in different contexts shape the way people can and do act, beliefs about agency are not always in line with how people try to exert influence on the world. Furthermore, even though there are hegemonic understandings of agency, most people rely on a plurality of models to explain human action and behaviour. For instance, while one can certainly find a strong discourse emphasising self-reliance, self-responsibility, and personal autonomy in the US, this discourse is usually deployed strategically. It is foregrounded when politicians argue for cutting down on welfare costs

or when the National Rifle Association lobbies against tighter gun controls, but deemphasised in other situations. In the aftermath of the 1999 Columbine school shooting, for example, US Americans who publicly commented on the shooting almost never assigned unfettered responsibility to the two shooters. Instead they blamed the parents, the school, gun culture, media, or mental health for what happened (Strauss 2007). This shows that while voluntarist understandings of agency are widespread and are often uncontested in the United States, there are some contexts, including situations of great social anxiety, in which people draw on alternative cultural models of agency to explain actions and events (Strauss 2007, 822).

As the examples in this section show, agency is to a certain extent culturally constructed—it is shaped by religious beliefs, political and media discourses, but also by what it means to be a person in a given social context. Conceptions of agency will almost certainly vary depending on whether a person is imagined as an individually crafted self or a highly influential and malleable entity, maybe even an interdependent 'dividual' who 'contain(s) a generalized sociality within' (Strathern 1988, 13). However, even in very specific cultural, linguistic, or historical contexts, meanings of agency and related ideas such as creativity, freedom, and intention are usually plural and dynamic, and they change over time. The latter point, and the related question of *how* social/cultural reproduction and transformation occur, is a central concern in debates on agency and language.

Agency and language

Contemporary understandings of agency have been influenced by linguistics, notably by speech act theory. The latter proposes that language does not only describe the world, but that it can in fact change it (see Austin 1962 and Searle 1979). When a priest says, 'I now pronounce you husband and wife', he does not simply describe what he is doing. Instead, he performs an action with very tangible effects. As John Austin, one of speech act theory's most influential proponents, put it, 'When I say, before the registrar or altar, &c., "I do," I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it' (Austin 1962, 6). Following these lines of thinking, most linguistic anthropologists see language as a form of social action, as something that is continually made and remade by its speakers, and as something that, to a certain extent, constructs and creates social reality (Ahearn 2001, 110–1). The interconnections between language and agency have been debated in relationship to different issues. This section focusses mainly on three: the role of intention, the role of linguistic forms like grammar, and the role of discourse. All three issues are related to the larger question regarding how language is reproduced, how it is transformed and, by implication, how it allows for and how it constrains agency.

How to conceptualise the relationship between agency, intention, and effect is a key concern in any debate on agency. The voluntarist notion of agency, as discussed above, assumes a straightforward relationship between the three: if people want to change aspects of their lives, such as their body, their economic

situation, or their health, they can do it. They can intend to do it, engage in the necessary activities, and will likely achieve the desired effects. Other theoretical approaches, however, like actor-network theory (Latour 2005, see below), almost take intention completely out of the equation: they argue that agency is always networked and relational and therefore that things can have agency without having intention. Linguistic anthropologists have engaged with the longstanding debate on intention (Anscombe 2000) perhaps more thoroughly than other sub-disciplines. They have critiqued the proposition of philosopher John Searle (1983) that one can speak of human action only if its effects (i.e. 'what occurs', as Searle put it) matches the intention and that therefore unintended happenings, like falling down a flight of stairs, do not strictly speaking count as action (Duranti 2015). Intention, like agency, is socially/culturally embedded: what we want or choose to do, such as the clothes we wear or the food we eat, for example, is strongly influenced by social conventions. More than that, however, linguistic anthropologists have also debated the extent to which different societies assign importance to the intention behind a statement or whether they focus more on the actual consequences of action. In Samoan political and legislative fora, known as *fono*, for instance, the participants place emphasis on what a specific type of person in a given social role *should* do, or *has promised*, rather than speculating about an individual's intentions or motivations behind their actions or statements. People in specific political or status-based positions, for example, are expected to provide food or gifts irrespective of their current circumstances or desires. And unlike in some cultural contexts, in which reflections about one's own or others' thoughts and feelings are common, *fono* members usually avoid trying to find individual-specific psychological explanations in cases where people fail to live up to their duties or promises (Duranti 2015, 67).

How people can do things with words depends not only on cultural contexts, but also on what and how different languages allow one to speak. Language is one of the most fundamental structures people operate in, frequently constraining and enabling us unconsciously. Often, we only notice how constraining language can be when we want to describe something for which there are no words, when we translate from a different language, or when the rules of speaking change, like when new pathways for more gender-sensitive language are introduced to societies. In these contexts, we do not speak or write automatically, but we carefully reflect before we incorporate the new rules. Different languages allow for different ways of assigning and marking agents and subjects, with far-reaching implications for how agency is understood and how it can be described and encoded. In English, for instance, one can avoid assigning agency by using the passive form. For instance, rather than saying 'Peter verbally attacked Wendy', someone who might not want to cast blame on Peter could simply say 'Wendy was attacked in the discussion'. Different languages have different ways of encoding agency through their grammatical structure—for instance through rules regarding how a subject or object in a sentence are marked and related to each other. In the English sentence 'the boy broke the window', there is no visible difference between the subject/agent ('the boy') and the object ('the window'). In Samoan, by contrast, the agent (i.e. the boy) would be marked by a specific proposition ('e') whereas the object (i.e. window) would be unmarked (for a more extensive

 ISSN 2398-516X

discussion, see Duranti 2004). Linguistic anthropologists have also paid attention to how class, gender, race, or ethnicity shape how language is uttered and received (Ahearn 2001, 120–4).

Language and how it constructs, or even creates, social 'reality' is also a big concern in post-structuralist theories. The latter tend to assume that there is no objective truth and that what we consider 'reality' is created through discourses which are shaped by power dynamics and in which meanings are thus inherently unstable (Foucault 1977, 1978). Discourse-oriented approaches frequently lack an explicit theory of agency or concrete agents. Rather, they focus on subjects, and subject-positions that individuals are born into, and which mark their roles and identities in society. Discourses are powerful, but they are not 'owned' by anyone and thus also cannot be changed at will. After all, one individual can rarely have a profound influence on how their language is spoken. While individual intentions are recognised, post-structuralist theories, especially those inspired by French social theorist Michel Foucault, focus on the often unintended effects of social practices and the ways individuals cannot escape the subjugating effects of power (Ahearn 2001, 116–7, Ortner 1997, 137–8). For example, our position as political subjects or citizens is created via the descriptive and bureaucratic practices of nation-states. They register us at birth and decide whether we should receive passports and social security numbers. Foucault was attuned to such processes of 'subjectivation', showing how they exert power over us in subtle ways. Some post-structuralists, perhaps most prominently Judith Butler (1990, 2010), have tried to extend Foucault's thinking on subjectivation to include a more refined theory of how social change occurs. Butler starts from the assumption that individuals are born into particular—sexed, gendered, or racialised—subject positions; in other words, the body is always already represented. However, the categories used to represent the body, sex for instance, are not naturally given, but discursively constructed and enacted through language. By giving a child a male name based on their genital markers, people 'make' the child's body male, according to Butler. Because bodily markers like sex or skin colour that are chosen to distinguish bodies are to some extent arbitrary, they need to be upheld through constant repetition—or performance. For example, men and women are trained to sit, walk, eat, speak, and think in ways that re-affirm their gender. This makes bodily subjectivation vulnerable and tenuous, because the stability of norms depends on their constant enactment. There is always the possibility that these enactments can fail, leaving room for norms to change or 'become undone' (Butler 2004).

In sum, one can learn a lot about agency by looking at language. Language is one of the most fundamental structures that humans are faced with in almost every social situation. While we have control over the words we decide to speak, we are bound by existing vocabulary, grammatical structures, and often embodied conventions of speaking, which—while dynamic and ever-evolving—do not change at any one speaker's individual will.

Agency as resistance: The feminist dilemma

The turn to agency in anthropology and other disciplines was in part related to social movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The anti-war, anti-colonial, women's rights, gay rights, and environmental movements showed that society could change drastically and rapidly. This was also made clear by the late twentieth century social upheavals in Europe which culminated in the end of the Soviet Union. As a result of observing or participating in popular protests which were aimed at, and sometimes succeeded in, radically transforming society, academics became interested in developing a more nuanced understanding of transformative social action (Ahearn 2001, 110).

In some of the earlier subaltern and feminist anthropological work, agency tended to be implicitly or explicitly equated with resistance. This 'romance of resistance' (Abu-Lughod 1990) however, created several problems, which became most apparent in feminist anthropology. On the one hand, feminist ethnographies rested on the assumption that women across the world were being dominated by patriarchal structures and forms of power. On the other hand, feminist anthropologists felt compelled not to portray women as (mere) victims, but as agents who pushed back against male domination—even if this resistance was subtle or ineffective (for an 'anthropological classic' on subtle, everyday forms of resistance see Scott 1985). Bringing these two goals together proved particularly challenging in situations where women pursued projects which did not challenge, or even supported, patriarchal values and orders (Ahearn 2001, 115-6).

In her work on an Islamic women's piety movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2005, 2006) grapples with this problem at various levels. As a Pakistan-born scholar, post-colonial thinker, and feminist intellectual, she tries to complexify and challenge key assumptions within feminist theory about freedom, agency, authority, and the human subject. The women she studied, while entering into religious spaces and engaging with theological texts which had hitherto been almost exclusively the purview of men, were deeply committed to Islamic principles that enabled, or even prescribed, their subordination as women. In Mahmood's words, 'the very idioms that women use to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres are also those that secure their subordination' (2006, 182). The women's piety movement actively tried to push for moral reforms, advocating, for instance, that women should be veiled and that they should 'cultivate shyness' as ways of enacting the norm of female modesty. As such, their propositions were not in line with conventional liberal feminist understandings of emancipation and resistance. Yet the Egyptian women studied by Mahmood were acting as moral and political agents and were committed to particular forms of self-realisation. They stood at odds with

> a particular notion of human agency in feminist scholarship (that) sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose sense of self, projects and aspirations have been shaped by non-liberal traditions' (Mahmood 2006, 179).

Understanding agency in Egypt's piety movement meant taking particular historical and cultural contexts

into account in which such agency emerges and can be enacted (cf. Lovell 2003). Therefore, 'agentive capacity' must be analytically separated from the notion of 'autonomous will'. Agency may take the form of resisting or challenging norms, but it is also entailed in acts that sustain and reinforce them (Mahmood 2006, 186).

More recent debates have equally moved beyond simplistic conflations of agency with resistance. In fact, the notion of resistance itself has been challenged and complexified. Alternative concepts—such as refusal (Simpson 2014, see also McGranahan 2016, Weiss 2016) or fugitivity (Campt 2014)—come with their very own theories and understandings of agency and what it means in particular contexts and constellations of power. The North American First Nation Kahnawà:ke Mohawk people, for instance, refuse the very terms and paradigms on which the US and Canadian states recognise their existence as people. Rather than actively resisting or trying to change the persisting settler colonial regime, they outright refuse citizenship, voting rights, tax paying, or any other logics ('games') dictated by a colonial state. Recognising the insurmountable power asymmetries, and 'in the face of the expectation that they consent to their own elimination as a people […] to having their land taken, their lives controlled, and their stories told for them' (Simpson 2016, 327f.), the Mohawk build and assert their very own histories, territory, and political order outside of state-governmental control. Their agency thereby far surpasses mere resistance to the state.

Distributed agency: Beyond intention, mastery and humans

As noted above, in many contemporary societies, under capitalism, and certainly also in world politics, agency is almost inevitably tied to the idea of an autonomous self. Most persons are held to be capable of making choices and entitled to rights and self-identification. This is particularly evident in current debates on gender, where individuals call for the right to negotiate whether they want to be identified as man, woman, trans, or otherwise, rather than passively accepting social ascriptions based on sex markers (Garrison 2018; Commissioner for Human Rights 2009). People also increasingly want to choose to change their body in the hope of finding 'a more suitable and fitting gendered space and belonging' (Sanders et al. 2023, 1064). Ideas of an autonomous self also underly other aspects of identity politics such as the so-called 'war on fat' (Greenhalgh 2015). Both sides—those people who 'fat-shame' others and blame them for making unhealthy life-choices *and* those 'body positive supporters' who argue for everyone's right to choose their own body and, importantly, how it should be perceived—use strongly voluntarist arguments (Rose Spratt 2023).[iii] Thereby, both sides largely ignore the socio-economic and political aspects that shape people's bodies (e.g. the food industry, advertising, or poverty and inequality) as well as the bodily and biosocial factors which contribute to, or result from, obesity (e.g. metabolic processes, food addiction, illness). Voluntarists care little about factors that go beyond an individual's personal choice. However, research on people who undergo bariatric surgery, for example, complicates the distinction between active and passive subjects and instead shows the complex, networked forms of agency that are involved in

 ISSN 2398-516X

signifying and treating obesity. While surgery may partially relieve patients of the difficult task of losing weight by simply changing their eating or exercising behaviour, the changed body calls for, and enables, new forms of self-care which are necessary for maintaining weight loss (Vogel 2018).

Especially in many so-called Western countries, the ideas that everyone is the master of their own fate and identity, and that humans control nature and their own bodies, are widespread and can be traced back to the philosophy of René Descartes. Cartesian thinking, and Enlightenment thought more generally, replaced the idea that God was in charge of life on Earth with beliefs in science, rationality, and human mastery (Latour 2014, Mazzarella 2021, Taussig 2020). However, this is not a straightforward genealogy: Marxist or psychoanalytic perspectives, for instance, offer radically different perspectives on self-control and the ability to make 'conscious' or rational choices. Furthermore, current discourses on identity and self-management are closely linked to much more recent neoliberal theories, policies, and ideologies (Gershon 2011). While it appears that people today have extended their control over fundamental matters of life—and even death (Kaufman 2006, Solomon 2022, 147–73) —anthropologists have found more complex ways to conceptualise agency in such contexts. They think of it as relational, distributed, or more-than-human. Ideas of relational and non-human agency have long existed in many parts of the world and have informed past and present systems of knowledge, including African philosophy and psychology (Okeja 2015, Adjei 2019), animism (Chen 2012), and Indigenous epistemologies (TallBear 2011). Now these notions are being 'rediscovered' in many current ethnographies (see below).

Early anthropological theories of relational, 'distributed', or networked agency draw heavily on the science of control and communication known as cybernetics, which claims that individual, society, and ecosystem are all part of one supreme system—what anthropologist Gregory Bateson (2000) referred to as 'Mind'. This systemic and distributed Mind is very different from the notion of an individual mind, self, or consciousness, in that it has the capacity to produce information and respond to it in a self-corrective way. The idea of distributed agency was developed in contrast to occidental epistemology and its inherent fallacies of purposive thinking, rationalism, and control, deemed to be a threat to the networked nature of Mind and to the cybernetic system itself. Bateson's (2000) ideas have recently experienced a great revival and have been taken up by anthropologists and others, particularly in debates on whether we live in a time of man-made planetary change known as the Anthropocene (e.g. Hylland Eriksen 2023). The climate, for instance, can be considered a form of thought or 'thinking system' which profoundly shapes ecosystems and social orders (Knox 2020).

Another influential early anthropological theory on relational or 'mediated' agency and networked 'intentionalities' focused on the agency of art and proposed that art objects have the capacity to exert power over viewers or users (Gell 1992, 1998). Art objects, according to Alfred Gell's theory, are about 'doing' more than they are about meaning, communication, or aesthetics. Embedded in networks of social relations, they have the power to influence and effect change in the world. Art, for instance, can enchant

the viewer, affect them emotionally, and thereby implicate them in larger networks of social relations. The agency of art works especially through abduction, i.e. a type of non-deductive inference. Based on their encounter with a particular material object, viewers or users make assumptions about the intention of its producers. Thereby, the object creates and mediates social relations and forms of agency (Gell 1992, 1998 drawing on linguist Charles Peirce).

The most prominent 'theory' on networked agency to date, however, is actor-network theory (ANT) which in anthropology is mostly associated with the writings of Bruno Latour (1999a, 1999b, 2005). ANT pays attention to the agency of both human and non-human actors and complicates the distinction between active and passive subjects. Its central premise is that everything exists relationally, and that non-human beings, objects, and ideas are just as important in creating particular social situations as humans. Latour gives the example of a man and a gun who both become changed through their encounter. He writes,

> You are different with the gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you (1999b, 179–80).

Latour thus tries to complexify the idea that it is either 'guns' or 'people' who kill, when in fact actions like killing someone always involve a plurality of agents. Agency, in this sense, is thus not necessarily intentional; it is a source of action and effect whereby the material and the discursive are closely intertwined and the 'responsibility for action must be shared among the various actants' (Latour 1999b, 180). This has implications for our understandings of human autonomy. As Latour puts it,

> To be a subject is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy. It is because we are now confronted with those subjects – or rather quasi-subjects – that we have to shift away from dreams of mastery as well as from the threat of being fully naturalized (2014, 5).

Notions of relational, networked, or distributed agency have been taken up in many different fields of anthropological study (for a good overview see Enfield and Kockelman 2017). Some draw explicitly on Bateson, Gell, or Latour, while others build on more recent concepts such as 'entanglement' (Barad 2007), 'vibrant matter' (Bennett 2010) or 'non-mastery' (Taussig 2020) which emphasise that humans are inseparably entangled with, rather than being in control of, powerful non-human life and material worlds. Especially in the fields of new materialism, environmental and multispecies anthropology, recent ethnographies explore almost endless forms of non-human agency. These include the agency of waves (Helmreich 2023), algorithms (Siles 2023), robots (Aronsson and Flynn 2021), oil plants (Chao 2022), dogs (Haraway 2007), or spirits (Blanes and Santo 2013) which in various ways haunt, inform, affect, engage, or transform local and global lifeworlds (for a critique of these 'posthumanist' theories of agency, see Hornborg 2019).

A good ‘everyday’ example to which one can apply ideas of networked agency and non-mastery is sleep (see e.g. Vorhölter 2023). Sleep poses curious challenges for human agency, as it cannot be easily controlled. Everybody does it all the time, and yet no one can really produce it at will. Once it has ‘chosen to arrive’, sleep is unstoppable. But often, people desperately wait for it—and it doesn’t come. Attaining sleep is a strange mix of acting and non-acting, a form of active surrender—but one that cannot always be willingly achieved. Sleep has a paradoxical relationship to intention: the more one actively tries to sleep, the less possible it becomes. Contemporary sleep science reveals the complex interplay of various bodily, cerebral, and social processes that constitute sleep (see e.g. Stickgold and Walker 2009). While some of these can be consciously controlled (like the decision to lie down or close one’s eyes), others cannot. They simply happen, like changes in brain waves, body temperature, or muscle tone. Intermediary agents, like alcohol or sleeping pills, can assist in the process, but they too depend on other, less controllable, agents such as hormones and neurotransmitters to achieve sleep. In sleep, then, agency seems to be truly distributed. It is the achievement of a complex metabolism with no ‘subject’ in control.

While sleep is a very personal example, the desire people have to control it and the powerlessness they experience when control fails, is emblematic of larger political processes. In particular, the challenges raised by the Anthropocene call for radically new ways of thinking about agency—which recognise the active role of nonhumans, including the Earth, and which complexify the agency-intention-effect triad—as Latour (2014) powerfully argued.

Conclusion: Beyond agency

As this entry shows, agency has been extensively discussed in anthropology over the last four decades. Interest in the concept peaked in the 1990s and early 2000s when it was taken up in theories and fields as varied as post-structuralism, actor-network theory, and linguistic anthropology. Despite anthropologists’ attempts to promote a nuanced understanding of agency and what it implies in different social, historical, and theoretical contexts, agency is still most commonly associated with liberal notions of personal choice, freedom, and autonomy. Due to this narrow, but dominant, understanding of the term, many anthropologists have criticised the usefulness of the concept and have proposed alternative terms or concepts which draw attention to specific forms of social action. This is not just a theoretical move, but also a critique of the contemporary moment where ‘agency is imagined as the human capacity without which ethical life, understood as the capacity to do this or to do that, would be impossible’ (Mazzarella 2021, 7). According to this ‘ethics of agency’, the ideal citizen strives for action and self-determination. By contrast, various forms of subtle action and inaction which allow oneself to be acted upon by others, such as waiting, pausing, staying silent, giving in, or yielding, are often perceived as shameful, cowardly, or even as failure.

While William Mazzarella and others have proposed concepts like ‘patiency’ or passivity to imagine possible other, i.e. non-agentic, ways of being in the world, it is highly unlikely that these will replace

agency and related questions and debates in anthropology anytime soon. More and more debates in anthropology are moving away from individual and power/resistance-centred notions of agency towards relational and distributed understandings of the term. Rather than being centrally concerned with questions of self, structure, intention, or control, such conceptualisations are much more tied up with concepts like the 'biosocial', the 'post-human', and the 'affective'. Whether in the field of politics, body-mind, or ecology, most anthropologists working on questions of agency today would agree that the relationship between our intentions and actions, and their effects on the world, is much more complex than the term agency—as popularly understood—suggests. One major impact of the ongoing theoretical debates, then, has been to change our empirical gaze and encourage us to read agency differently as we analyse social phenomena across an ever-growing range of ethnographic contexts.

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 ISSN 2398-516X