

# AGENCY

Authored by  
**Mohammed loot**

October 7, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

Mohammed loot (2025). *AGENCY*. Encyclopedia of psychology. Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=12506>

## Agency in Psychology and Social Sciences

### The Core Definition of Agency

The concept of agency is a cornerstone of the social sciences, referring fundamentally to an individual's inherent capacity to act independently and to make **autonomous decisions** regarding their life course and environment. It encapsulates the ability to choose, to exert power, and to influence one's own functioning and the events that affect one's life. This is not merely the ability to move or perform a physical action, but rather the internal, cognitive, and volitional capacity to form intentions, plan for the future, and execute those plans effectively. Agency therefore distinguishes conscious, goal-directed human action from purely reactive or instinctual behavior, placing the individual at the center of their own experience and development.

The fundamental mechanism underlying agency is the perception of control--the belief that one possesses the power to intervene in events to produce desired outcomes. This perception is deeply intertwined with concepts such as intentionality and self-awareness. When an individual exercises agency, they are engaging in what is often termed **proactive behavior**, actively shaping circumstances rather than passively responding to them. This capacity is crucial for understanding how individuals navigate complex social structures, achieve personal goals, and resist external pressures or constraints. The study of agency spans across psychology, sociology, political science, and economics, demonstrating its universal relevance to understanding human behavior.

### Philosophical Roots and Early Conceptions

The intellectual lineage of agency can be traced back to the earliest philosophical inquiries into human nature and morality. Early Greek thinkers, notably Aristotle, laid the groundwork by arguing that human beings possess **free will** and are responsible for their actions, particularly those based on deliberate choice. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explored the nature of voluntary action, differentiating it from actions compelled by external forces or ignorance, thereby establishing the foundation for understanding moral accountability--a direct consequence of possessing agency.

This notion was significantly advanced during the Enlightenment by philosophers such as Immanuel Kant. Kant argued forcefully for the concept of autonomy, positing that human beings are rational agents who are capable of self-legislation--making moral laws for themselves independent of external dictates or inclinations. For Kant, true moral action is rooted in this autonomy, the capacity to act according to duty, which is only possible if the agent is fundamentally free to choose. This philosophical tradition established agency not merely as a description of behavior, but as a normative requirement for personhood and moral status, emphasizing the internal freedom necessary for self-determination.

## The Sociological and Psychological Turn

While philosophers focused on internal freedom, the sociological perspective introduced necessary constraints to the purely autonomous view. Key sociologists, like Max Weber, recognized that the individual's capacity to act independently is often severely limited or mediated by powerful **social structures**, institutions, and cultural norms. Weber's analysis focused on how rationalized systems and bureaucratic organizations shape and sometimes restrict individual choices, introducing a tension between the individual's will (agency) and the environmental constraints (structure). This structure-agency debate remains central to modern social theory, exploring how human action both reproduces and transforms social environments.

In the field of psychology, the concept of agency gained empirical traction through the work of Albert Bandura, particularly with his development of self-efficacy theory in the late 1970s. Bandura defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their own ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task. This cognitive belief is a powerful mediator of agency; individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to set challenging goals, persist in the face of obstacles, and actively seek out opportunities to exercise control. Bandura's perspective moved the discussion from abstract philosophical freedom to measurable, context-specific beliefs that directly influence behavior and outcome attainment, cementing agency as a measurable psychological construct.

## The Fundamental Mechanism: Autonomy and Intentionality

Psychological agency, particularly in Bandura's social cognitive theory, is characterized by four core properties that collectively enable self-regulation and goal attainment. These include **intentionality**, which involves the formation of action plans and purposes; foresight, the capacity to anticipate potential outcomes and consequences of one's actions; self-reactiveness, the ability to monitor, evaluate, and adjust one's actions based on progress toward goals; and self-reflectiveness, the capability to examine one's own functioning, motivations, and the meaning of one's pursuits. These properties illustrate that agency is an ongoing, dynamic process, not a static trait.

The exercise of agency requires a dynamic interplay between cognitive processes and environmental feedback. For instance, when an individual encounters a novel challenge, their sense of agency dictates their approach: a strong sense of agency leads to active problem-solving and strategic adaptation, while a weak sense may result in feelings of helplessness and avoidance. This internal mechanism is highly influential in determining motivation and resilience. Furthermore, collective agency, where groups of people pool their knowledge and resources to achieve common goals, demonstrates that this capacity is not solely individual but can be a shared social phenomenon, particularly relevant in fields like community psychology and organizational behavior.

## Practical Application: Agency in Educational Settings

A crucial real-world scenario where agency is highly impactful is within the educational system, specifically concerning student motivation and achievement. Student agency refers to the capacity of students to take charge of their learning, setting goals, monitoring their progress, and advocating for their academic needs. When students feel they have agency, they view themselves as active participants in their education, rather than passive recipients of instruction, leading to deeper engagement and better learning outcomes.

The application of agency principles in the classroom follows a discernible sequence. First, teachers must create opportunities for **choice and voice**, allowing students to select project topics, choose methods of assessment, or contribute to classroom rules. Second, these opportunities must be coupled with support systems that build self-efficacy, ensuring students feel competent enough to handle the choices presented. Third, students must be taught how to exercise reflective judgment--how to evaluate the success of their choices and adjust their strategies accordingly. A tangible example is a high school student choosing their capstone project focus, which then requires them to manage their time, seek out mentorship, and independently synthesize complex information, steps that actively build and reinforce their academic agency.

## Significance, Impact, and Public Policy Implications

The theoretical significance of agency lies in its ability to bridge the gap between deterministic models of behavior (which attribute all actions to environmental stimuli or biological predispositions) and purely voluntaristic models (which ignore constraints). Agency provides a balanced framework, recognizing that while external factors are powerful, the individual retains a capacity for self-direction and intentional change. This perspective has revolutionized therapeutic approaches, shifting focus from merely treating symptoms to empowering clients to recognize and utilize their own latent power to effect change, thereby enhancing their quality of life.

The practical impact extends significantly into the realm of public policy and economics. In economic theory, particularly in areas like behavioral economics, agency is critical to understanding how individuals make decisions about resource allocation, savings, and risk, often departing from purely rational models. Concepts like **Prospect Theory**, though focusing on biases, implicitly address agency by examining how individuals choose under conditions of uncertainty. In public policy, recognizing citizen agency is vital for effective governance; policies that foster individual autonomy, such as participatory budgeting or consumer choice in health care, tend to be more effective and sustainable than purely top-down directives, as they leverage the self-regulatory capacities of the population.

## Connections to Related Psychological Constructs

Agency is intimately connected to several other core psychological constructs. Perhaps the most closely related is **Locus of Control**, a concept developed by Julian Rotter. Individuals with an internal locus of control believe that outcomes result from their own efforts and decisions (high agency), while those with an external locus of control attribute outcomes to fate, luck, or powerful others (low perceived agency). Although distinct--agency is the capacity to act, locus of control is the belief about where control resides--they are functionally dependent.

Furthermore, agency overlaps significantly with concepts in motivation theory, specifically intrinsic motivation, where actions are driven by internal satisfaction rather than external rewards. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that human motivation thrives when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy (the core of agency), competence (similar to self-efficacy), and relatedness. Agency therefore serves as the foundational pillar of healthy psychological functioning, acting as the driving force behind personal growth, goal pursuit, and resilience in the face of adversity.

## Summary and Broader Disciplinary Context

In conclusion, agency is a dynamic and essential concept that defines the human experience across the social sciences. It is the complex, multifaceted capacity for self-regulation, intentionality, and proactive engagement with the world. Its foundations lie in philosophical debates about free will, its articulation was advanced through sociological critiques regarding structural constraints, and its empirical measurement was solidified within psychology, particularly through the lens of social cognitive theory and self-efficacy.

Agency is primarily situated within the subfields of **Social Psychology**, Developmental Psychology (examining how this capacity emerges across the lifespan), and Personality Psychology. However, its influence permeates Action Theory and Organizational Behavior, where it informs strategies for leadership and employee empowerment. Understanding agency allows researchers and practitioners to move beyond simple stimulus-response models to appreciate the complexity of human action, recognizing the individual not merely as a product of their environment, but as an active, self-regulating architect of their own reality.

The ongoing study of agency continues to inform how societies can create environments--whether in education, healthcare, or governance--that maximize individual potential by fostering genuine autonomy and the perceived power to make meaningful decisions.