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## Agency in the Life Course: Concepts and Processes

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## Agency in the Life Course: Concepts and Processes

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Lisa J. Crockett

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People are proactive, aspiring organisms who have a hand in shaping their own lives.

*Bandura, Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*

The capacity of humans to influence their lives has long been a theme within Western literature, philosophy, and psychology. In recent years, the theme of human agency has crystallized in the psychological literature in the concepts of control, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. As a result, considerable attention has been devoted to the psychological processes through which control is exerted, such as cognitive appraisals, goal setting, and planning, as well as control beliefs and the potentially debilitating effects of loss of control (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Boekaerts, Pintrich, & Zeidner, 2000; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Seligman, 1975). Although this body of work has yielded pivotal insights into the mental processes underlying human agency, it has tended to focus on the person, with scant attention to the environmental exigencies over which the person seeks to exert control. An environment is assumed, but it is the individual's perception of and response to that environment that is considered central, rather than the environment per se. Accordingly, there has been little attempt

to delineate the facets of the environment that may be influential in shaping the expression of self-determination.

In contrast, the sociological literature on agency has focused historically on society as the causal agent in people's lives, with the person being cast more as a pawn (Shanahan & Hood, 2000). According to this perspective, a person's life follows tracks or paths created by an interlocking network of social institutions (Hogan & Astone, 1986) and reinforced by social norms (Neugarten, 1979). Attention is focused on societal forces such as institutionally defined careers or role sequences (as seen in educational and vocational paths), historical conditions, and policies regulating entry into and exit from social roles and statuses (Mayer, 1986).

The psychological and sociological perspectives each provide important information about the respective roles of person and environment in shaping human lives. However, neither fully elucidates the process through which ongoing interactions between person and environment result in a unique life path or biography that is patterned after societal templates but retains the mark of the individual in its details and nuances. In particular, the large individual differences in life paths that can occur within the general sequence of education, work, marriage, and family are not fully addressed. An opportunity to examine these issues has emerged in life-span developmental psychology (Baltes, 1987) and in the life course perspective within sociology (Elder, 1998). Using these twin frameworks, we can begin to chart the ways in which a person navigates an individualized course over time.

To set the stage, this introductory chapter addresses three interrelated questions. First, how might agency in the life course be conceptualized? Second, how do individual characteristics and the social context help shape its expression? Third, how does the expression of agency change over the life span? I begin with an overview of developmental perspectives on agency, describing how individual characteristics and the societal context interact to shape the course of people's lives. Next, I turn to the psychological processes and social influences involved in human agency and then discuss how the expression of agency changes over the life span as a function of maturation, life stage, and changing social circumstances. Finally, I outline the organization of the present volume as it relates to these issues.

## Developmental Perspectives on Agency

In its broadest sense, agency refers to “something that causes something else” (Shanahan & Hood, 2000, p. 123). With such a definition, agency need not reside in a person but could also lie in social forces and institutions. Moreover, agency may be expressed collectively by groups of individuals working together for a common cause (Bandura, 1998). Examples of collective agency might include the response of families to economic hardship during the Great Depression (Elder, 1974), political demonstrations in support of social change, and collective efforts by residents of inner-city neighborhoods to free their communities from drug trafficking. Additionally, the agency of individuals or groups may be extended by the use of tools and technology (Schönplflug, 1998). Thus, human agency may refer to a broad spectrum of individual and group efforts and may even involve larger collectives such as societies or nations. In this volume, however, the primary focus is on the level of the individual and the temporal canvas of the life course. The purpose is to illuminate the processes by which people shape their personal biographies through their ongoing interaction with the social world.

### DEVELOPMENT-IN-CONTEXT

Models of development provide a starting point for examining agency in the life course. These models posit that individuals are in continuous interaction with the environment and that the reciprocal influence of person and environment produces development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1989). For example, an individual’s engagement with environmental challenges and resources may lead to the emergence of new adaptive capacities (Shanahan & Hood, 2000). Moreover, people are viewed as actively selecting environments and shaping the settings they enter in ways that influence their subsequent development (Lerner, 1982). Thus, in a general sense, human agency in the life course involves the selection and shaping of one’s physical contexts and social networks (Bandura, 1982, 1999). These settings, in turn, define socialization pressures, opportunity structures, and adaptational demands that guide further development.

How people engage the environment depends, in part, on their personal characteristics and proclivities. Bronfenbrenner (1989) has

identified several individual characteristics that affect a person's interaction with the social environment in developmentally relevant ways. Referred to as "developmentally instigative" characteristics, these include: "personal stimulus qualities," such as gender, race, and attractiveness that condition how others respond to the individual; "selective responsivity," or individual preferences for and selection of particular activities and stimuli; "structuring proclivities," or tendencies to elaborate and restructure the environment; and "directive beliefs," which refer to the individual's perception of his or her capacity to reach life goals. All of these characteristics influence the interaction between person and context, although the last three come closer to what we might typically term "agentic" because they refer to active attempts to manipulate the environment. Nonetheless, all of these characteristics shape people's experiences in ways that influence their learning, identity formation, personality, and values. In turn, personality and identity influence people's ongoing interactions with the social environment. As Block (1981) has noted: "how experience registers, how environments are selected or modified, and how the stages of life are negotiated depend, importantly and coherently, on what the individual brings to these encounters—the resources, the premises, the intentions, the awareness, the fears and hopes, the forethoughts and afterthoughts that are subsumed by what we call personality" (pp. 40–41). Thus individual characteristics influence the way a person processes experiences and interacts with the environment, with implications for subsequent person-environment interactions and the course of future development.

Much of human behavior is goal-directed, in that a person acts in order to bring about desired outcomes. Through pursuit of goals such as marriage, parenthood, or occupational success, individuals may consciously attempt to influence aspects of their future lives. Such intentional efforts to create or to alter one's biography will be discussed later in this chapter. First, however, it is important to acknowledge that some processes influencing individual development are unintentional and that even purposive acts may have unintended consequences. Examples are found in Caspi's (Caspi, Bem, & Elder, 1989) notions of interactive and cumulative continuity. In *interactive continuity*, individuals foster consistency in their behavior over time by interacting with others in characteristic ways that elicit reciprocal responses. For example, an ill-tempered, explosive person may act

irritably in successive relationships, recreating a pattern of hostile exchanges that supports further angry outbursts. In *cumulative continuity*, a person's behavior channels him or her into settings that reinforce initial behavioral proclivities. For example, ill-tempered males do more poorly in school and complete less education; in turn lower educational attainment leads to lower occupational status, which may produce frustration and evoke further explosive outbursts. In such cases, behavior patterns are maintained by "the progressive accumulation of their own consequences" (Caspi et al., 1989, p. 377). One can also imagine positive cycles of continuity, as when a prosocial individual elicits warmth and devotion from others, supporting the development of satisfying relationships, that, in turn, stimulate further prosocial acts. In such cases, people's actions shape their subsequent trajectories, but the long-term outcomes are not necessarily intended. Rather, a behavior with an immediate purpose—to express irritation or to help someone in need—has unforeseen consequences. Unintended consequences may occur alongside goal-directed behavior and may even spring from the same action. Thus, we shape the contexts that will structure our future behavior in both intended and unintended ways, with both positive and negative consequences.

Within these general developmental models, exerting an impact on one's future life is contingent upon the social and physical environment as well as on the changing capacities, motivations, and resources of a developing person. Human agency is always expressed within a social setting that affords opportunities and resources for action but also obstacles and constraints (Bandura, 1998b). However, how the interaction between person and environment results in a particular biography is not fully articulated in these models, perhaps because they are intended to explain how the person changes and develops over time rather than how a developing person carves a distinct path through a particular social world. In other words, developmental models elucidate key processes involved in self-produced development but do not allow us to envision how people construct their lives in response to specific opportunities and constraints posed by the surrounding social context. To address this complex question, we need a differentiated view of the social environment and how it changes over a person's life. Such a view is articulated within life course theory, which emphasizes the importance of social norms and institutions in shaping developmental paths.

### LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

According to the life course perspective, individuals move through a sequence of age-graded events, settings, and social roles that is structured by social institutions (e.g., Elder, 1998). From this perspective, societal institutions define normative pathways that provide templates for individual lives. For example, the educational system in the United States defines a well articulated sequence from elementary school through secondary school to college and beyond. Similarly, vocational careers follow a path from entry-level positions to more advanced positions involving greater seniority and expertise. The family cycle provides yet another example of a role sequence: from marriage, to childbearing, to early parenthood, to launching children, to "empty nest." Thus, institutions related to education, employment, and family each define paths or trajectories comprised of sequential statuses and the transitions between them (Elder, 1995). Furthermore, the contingencies operating between social institutions often provide an implicit sequence of role transitions, for example, from school completion to job entry, marriage, and parenthood (Hogan & Astone, 1986). Thus, the life course that individuals construct is informed by (though not dictated by) "institutionalized pathways" (Shanahan, 2000) that provide a "road map" of the typical life course. Institutional arrangements vary from society to society, creating cross-cultural differences in institutionalized pathways and life course templates (Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000).

**Age-related opportunities and constraints** In age-graded societies, prescribed social roles and settings are linked to a person's age. For example, in the United States, a 6-year-old is expected to be in elementary school, whereas a 15-year-old is expected to be in high school. Thus, normative roles, behavioral expectations, and institutional settings change predictably with age, and each phase of life reflects a distinct configuration of opportunities and constraints (Shanahan, 2000). Moreover, developmental tasks are linked to life stage, so that the culturally prescribed set of concerns shifts with age and maturation (Havighurst, 1972; Nurmi, 1992; Sanderson & Cantor, 1999). An individual's life is constructed within the parameters of this changing, age-graded matrix of social roles, settings, and expectations.

The age-related configuration of social roles and norms also cre-

ates normative transition points when major role changes occur and the person moves into a new social status or life phase; examples include entry into first grade, entry into the workforce, marriage, parenthood, and retirement. Moreover, within each domain (e.g., education, work, family) individuals move through a sequence of linked states that form a trajectory or career. For example, individuals move from one grade to the next in school or through a series of jobs in the same field (Elder, 1995). Thus lives encompass multiple domain-specific trajectories consisting of linked states and intervening transitions, as well as socially recognized stages of life (e.g., childhood, adolescence) and the developmental transitions between them.

Each status or life stage is associated with opportunities for action but also with constraints, and this constellation of opportunities and constraints tends to channel human behavior. For example, youth under age 16 in the United States have access to free public education but are denied full-time employment and many legal rights (e.g., the right to vote, to marry without parental consent, or to purchase cigarettes and alcohol). Under these circumstances, most adolescents combine schooling with part-time work, postpone marriage, and either forego cigarettes and alcohol or obtain these substances illegally.

Despite the constraints imposed by institutional arrangements and social norms, people have considerable latitude in making decisions about most aspects of their lives. For example, within the same society, individuals differ in the pace and sequencing of important role transitions (Marini, 1985). Some marry at age 19 and others at age 35 or never. Some become parents while others do not. Furthermore, a substantial number experience role transitions out of sequence, for example, by marrying before they finish school or becoming a parent before marrying (Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987). Because society is organized around normative trajectories, individual variations in the timing and sequencing of role transitions have important consequences for people's lives (Hogan, 1981). An individual who marries at age 16 may experience complications related to schooling and subsequent employment that would be unlikely for an individual of 26. Choices in one domain (e.g., to marry early, to drop out of school) may have a ripple effect throughout a person's life, influencing both current circumstances and future prospects. Thus, differences in the timing and sequencing of role transitions create diversity in life paths. The nature of particular decisions also mat-



ters; for example, joining the Peace Corps or the military may open vistas, change self-perceptions, and create opportunities that would otherwise be lost (e.g., Elder, 1986). Human agency is expressed in people's choices related to social roles, the timing of role transitions, and how they coordinate their multiple "careers." Such choices shape the course of their lives, creating unique biographies.

**Social status and diversity** Within heterogeneous societies, the constellation of opportunities and constraints differs not only by age but for members of distinct social groups defined by gender, class, and ethnicity. For example, the opportunities available to poor youth in inner city neighborhoods are limited compared to those of middle class, suburban youth (Burton, Allison, & Obedeillah, 1995; Wilson, 1987). Moreover, studies have shown that developmental phases such as adolescence and the transition to adulthood differ for youth from distinct social and economic statuses (Burton et al., 1995; Bynner, 2000). With regard to gender, studies of individuals born early in the twentieth century revealed that the disadvantage of ill-tempered men was reflected in their lower occupational status, whereas that of ill-tempered women was reflected in their marriage to lower status men (Caspi et al., 1989). Presumably, this pattern reflects the differential opportunities and roles available to males and females in that period.

**Historical conditions and social change** Lives are also shaped by the historical era in which they are lived. The configuration of opportunities and constraints shifts as societies change over time. For example, dramatic changes in political, technological, or economic systems can profoundly alter the institutionalized paths and social norms to which an individual is exposed, as well as social relationships and resources for coping (Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000). Because of social change, different birth cohorts are exposed to different historical conditions, with differing priorities, constraints, and options (Elder, 1995).

In sum, people make choices that shape their biographies. Their choices are influenced by the situation, which reflects cultural, economic, and historical forces, but also by their personal dispositions, ideals, and beliefs about what is likely to bring success. Incorporating this notion yields a more precise definition of agency in the life course: "Individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history

and social circumstances" (Elder, 1998, p. 4). In turn, these choices become "the building blocks of their evolving life course" (Elder, 1995, p. 110).

To examine agency in the life course, it is necessary to view the person as a developing agent embedded in a dynamic social environment within a changing sociohistorical context. Life-span psychology provides a view of people as active, developing agents who make choices that influence their future development, and the life course perspective provides a differentiated view of the social environment as a dynamic landscape of constraints and opportunities that shifts with individual development and societal change. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for examining the expression of agency in individual lives. In the following sections, I review the processes through which individuals make conscious attempts to influence their current and future lives and discuss how these efforts are influenced by individual maturation and social patterns.

## Psychological Processes Involved in Agency

Thus far, we have discussed characteristics of the person and environment that likely contribute to the construction of an individualized life course, but we have yet to focus on intentional efforts to influence one's future. Brandtstädter (1998) has argued that "intentional self-development" is both a basic human attribute and a driving force in development. According to Brandtstädter and Rothermund (this volume), intentional self-development is expressed in activities that are guided and motivated by projections of what one hopes to be in the future. Thus, intentional self-development represents the conscious expression of agency in one's life.

The literature on control provides a useful model of the psychological processes that undergird deliberate attempts at agency. Humans may have a basic motive to exert control and to experience the self as an agent (e.g., deCharms, 1968; White, 1959). Moreover, some scholars suggest that having an impact on the world and experiencing control over outcomes is crucial for psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1995; King, 1998; Seligman, 1975). The psychological benefits may stem from the experience of control per se, as well as from the rewards associated with particular outcomes.

Much of the control literature emphasizes conscious aspects of

control. For example, deCharms (1968) has argued that control means experiencing oneself as "the origin of one's actions." Such approaches link agency to conscious, intentional efforts. However, other psychological processes may also be relevant. For example, Forgas, Johnson, and Ciarrochi (1998) discuss the role of subconscious mood management strategies in personal control. Presumably, personal control entails a conscious and effortful process but also involves automated self-regulatory processes that operate below the conscious level. These two kinds of processes are not mutually exclusive, and the conscious exercise of control likely draws on subliminal self-regulatory routines (Kofta, Weary, & Sedek, 1998).

Despite the likely importance of automated processes, some of the best examples of agency in the life course involve deliberate action taken to achieve consciously articulated goals. Such efforts entail setting goals, planning a course of action, and persisting despite distractions and obstacles. Processes such as goal identification, self-regulation, coping, and self-efficacy are central to these efforts.

## PERSONAL GOALS

Goals and aspirations reflect mental representations of desired future events or states. Such representations occur in many forms, from short term objectives to overarching life plans. Not all goals play a major role in shaping a person's life, but important goals give people a sense of purpose, direction, and meaning (King, 1998). Such goals serve as reference points and guideposts that orient behavior in particular directions, with potential consequences for a person's biography. Some goals represent specific endstates (e.g., to own a house), but others comprise general guides and standards for daily living (e.g., to be kind to others) or represent moving targets (e.g., to improve one's performance at work).

Several kinds of personal goals have relevance for self-directed development and agency. These include "possible selves," which reflect future scenarios that are either hoped for or feared (Markus & Nurius, 1986); "life tasks" (Sanderson & Cantor, 1999), which refer to normative challenges that are salient during a particular period of life; "personal projects," which are personally relevant activities designed to achieve a short-term or long-term goal (Little, 1989); "personal strivings," which represent recurring goals that people strive toward

in everyday behavior (Emmons, 1989); and “life dreams” (King, 1998), which reflect broad, enduring life plans.

Higher-level goals such as life tasks and life dreams may be connected to lower-level mundane goals; for example, the daily goal of exercising may be linked to the higher-level goal of improving one’s health or becoming a world class athlete. A number of scholars have posited a goal hierarchy, with links between lower- and higher-level concerns. For example, in control theory, daily goals are embedded in a motivation hierarchy (Carver & Scheier, 1998), with concrete plans and behaviors at the bottom and abstract, global motives at the top (Emmons & King, 1992). Although the dynamics between higher- and lower-level goals have not been fully articulated, it seems likely that many daily goals are meaningful because they mark progress toward larger goals (Baumeister, 1991). Even seemingly trivial daily pursuits may relate to more distal life plans and thus serve as the building blocks of life dreams (King, 1998).

By definition, goals and standards have a motivational component; they imply desired endstates and hence some inclination to attain that state. Moreover, goal pursuit and attainment may bring psychological rewards that increase the likelihood of continued investment in goals. Research shows that being engaged in structured, meaningful projects is associated with psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1995). Similarly, having a life dream is related to one’s experience of life as happy and meaningful (King, 1998). In King’s (1998) view, achieving proximal goals enhances feelings of personal efficacy, whereas working toward a larger life plan brings deeper satisfactions. In line with this perspective, there is some evidence that achieving proximal goals relates to feelings of success and self-efficacy, whereas having more distal goals relates to heightened intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Personal standards also have a motivational component. In self-discrepancy theory, standards are valued or desired aspects of self, reflecting the way people would like to be or think they should be (Higgins, 1987). These internal standards become important sources of motivation. Meeting one’s standards is associated with psychological rewards such as positive self-evaluation, self-esteem, and a sense of virtue or competence. Falling short, in turn, may be associated with disappointment, guilt, and negative self-evaluations. Additionally, the distance between one’s behavior and one’s standards and the

rate of progress toward closing the gap have consequences for psychological well-being (Carver & Scheier, 1998). A small discrepancy, which indicates that the person is meeting internal standards to a substantial degree, or a diminishing gap, which indicates adequate progress toward meeting one's standards, is likely to yield positive self-evaluations. Yet, as Bandura (1999) has noted, reducing discrepancies between standards and performance is only part of the picture: By aspiring to and setting high standards for themselves, people help create the disparities between standards and performance that they are then motivated to reduce. Furthermore, some individuals respond to reaching their performance goals by raising their standards, thus perpetuating the motivational cycle.

**Goals as reflections of agency** It can be argued that pursuing personal goals is an expression of agency. Goal pursuit implies a belief in one's ability to take effective action to reach a desired outcome. Thus, having goals indicates recognition of oneself as an agent. Furthermore, according to King (1998), the linkage between concrete goals and more abstract life dreams indicates an implicit belief in the potential to control one's destiny. Thus, realizing one's life dreams is a profound experience of agency (King, 1998), and, as Harlow and Cantor (1995) suggest, the strategies people use to achieve life tasks reveal the process of "creating agency in everyday life."

## PLANNING AND SELF-REGULATION

Although goals represent the targets of self-directed development, agency in the life course emerges in the process of striving toward and realizing one's goals. Multiple psychological processes are implicated in goal pursuit: selecting strategies for achieving a goal, implementing those strategies, monitoring one's progress toward the goal, fine-tuning one's behavior, and if necessary, altering one's strategies. These processes fall under the rubric of self-regulation, the capacity to regulate one's emotions, attention, and behavior in order to achieve particular outcomes. Self-regulation has been defined as "self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 14). Myriad self-regulatory skills operate in tandem in carrying out a task. For example, competitive diving requires regulating one's emotions (e.g., to suppress anxiety or to enhance motivation);

it may also involve the use of cognitive strategies such as screening out distracters or monitoring one's progress toward the goal. Often tasks entail adjusting one's behavior to improve performance and sustain progress. The same processes are presumably involved in pursuing broader life goals: A person may focus on short-term goals that are linked to the larger one, while periodically assessing his progress toward the long-term goal. Because pursuing life goals may require sustained effort at tedious or difficult tasks, while foregoing or deferring more pleasant activities, considerable self-regulation may be required (King, 1998).

Zimmerman (2000) views self-regulation as involving a three-phase recursive cycle of forethought, performance, and self-reflection. Forethought includes task analysis (e.g., goal setting and strategy selection) and self-motivational beliefs (intrinsic interest, outcome expectancies, self-efficacy). The performance phase involves self-control processes (e.g., self-instruction) and self-observation (monitoring one's behavior and its effects). Finally, the self-reflection phase incorporates self-judgment (evaluation of one's performance and attributions about the reason for the results) and self-reactions, such as satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's performance. Self-reflection in turn influences forethought about subsequent actions, resulting in an iterative process. Although this analysis applies most readily to concrete tasks and short-term goals, similar skills figure in long-term efforts.

**Development of self-regulation** The kinds of regulatory skills discussed by Zimmerman emerge gradually in development, following a course that is probably linked to brain maturation and integration. It is believed that precursors of the self-guided regulation of emotion, behavior, and attention are interconnected and begin to emerge at the end of the first year of life (Shunkoff & Phillips, 2000). In a classic article, Kopp (1982) describes five phases of self-regulatory development, beginning in infancy. Early in life, infants are able to modulate their arousal as seen in self-soothing (phase 1); this is followed by a capacity to initiate voluntary behavior (e.g., to reach for an object) and to change their actions in response to environmental events (phase 2). However, these behaviors do not involve consciousness or prior intent. In the second year, infants exhibit goal-directed behavior and intentionality and are able to control their behavior in response to

situational or caregiver demands (phase 3); by the third year, they have symbolic representation and can behave in accordance with social rules even in the absence of caregivers (phase 4). True self-regulation, which involves use of strategies, flexible adaptation to changing conditions, and reflection, emerges at ages three or four (phase 5).

This five-level sequence has been extended to include a sixth level that involves strategic self-regulation or "planfulness" (Demetriou, 2000). According to Demetriou (2000, p. 236), "planfulness integrates, under an overarching plan, the main goals and objectives, subgoals, if needed, the strategies and actions needed to attain goals and subgoals, and a time plan that specifies when strategies and actions are to be applied." This capacity does not emerge until about age 9, and some features require formal thought and thus are unlikely before age 13 or 14. Based on this model, planfulness for short- and long-term goals would not emerge in a mature form until midadolescence. At this point, adolescents begin to think about what they want to be in the future and can follow a long-term plan oriented toward that end. In describing the development of executive functions, Shunkoff and Phillips (2000) suggest a similar timetable: At age 6 children can plan simple sequences of behavior, but it is not until adolescence that they are capable of planning complex sequences of behavior. Thus, there is some agreement among developmentalists that although self-regulatory skills emerge in childhood, the more advanced forms of planning and implementation do not appear until adolescence.

**Planful competence** The focus on self-regulation and planfulness in the developmental literature dovetails with an emphasis on planful competence found in the sociological literature. In a life course context, agency has been defined as "the individual's capacity to formulate and pursue life plans" (Shanahan & Hood, 2000, p. 123). Much of this capacity for agency is subsumed in the notion of "planful competence," which Clausen (1991) defines in terms of dependability, intellectual investment, and self-confidence. Elder (1995) has argued that planful competence involves both cognitive and self-regulatory components; for example, the social cognitive ability to evaluate one's efforts and assess other people's responses to them, and the personal discipline to pursue one's goals. This capacity is thought to develop in most people by the end of adolescence, and those who

develop it earlier (i.e., in midadolescence) are assumed to have an advantage because they are better able to identify opportunities that fit their values and talents (Clausen, 1991). Studies of the long-term impact of planful competence in United States cohorts have found that individuals who exhibited this capacity in adolescence showed higher educational and occupational attainment, greater personal consistency over their lives, and greater life satisfaction (Clausen, 1991).

Yet, the impact of planful competence may depend on the broader sociocultural context. Planning and planful competence appear to be more effective in some cultural and historical settings than in others (Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000). For example, in a study of intellectually gifted men, planful competence in adolescence was more predictive of adult educational attainment for those whose historical circumstances afforded viable alternatives than for those with more limited options (Shanahan, Elder, & Miech, 1997). Thus, the effects of planfulness, and by extension agency, are clearest when circumstances permit real choices at key points in the life course.

## COPING

Coping is a second process with implications for human agency. Coping reflects a person's response to environmental stressors, including perceived challenges and threats (Bandura, 1999; Skinner, 1995). Some scholars view coping as a form of self-regulation (Jackson, Mackenzie, & Hobfall, 2000); certainly, successful coping implies some level of self-regulatory capacity.

According to Skinner (1995; Skinner & Edge, this volume), coping responses to environmental stressors depend in part on personal beliefs about one's competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Children develop these beliefs about themselves as they seek to fulfill basic social and psychological needs in social contexts that vary in terms of responsiveness and supportiveness. In turn, children's self beliefs affect their responses to stressors. For example, they influence the child's appraisal of whether a stressor is a challenge to be tackled or a threat to be avoided; they also influence the coping response (e.g., increased engagement and effort to solve the problem vs. confusion and withdrawal). Often, experiences in challenging situations reinforce prior beliefs about one's competence, relatedness, and au-



tonomy (Skinner & Edge, this volume). These beliefs, strengthened by ongoing experience, will influence appraisals of and responses to future stressors. In such cases, everyday experiences of coping can have a cumulative impact, contributing to continuity in behavior (cf., Caspi et al., 1989). Thus, although coping is typically studied in the context of specific episodes in which a person encounters obstacles, setbacks, or frustrations, it seems likely that characteristic coping patterns also have broader developmental implications. Over time we might expect to see distinct trajectories of adaptation for individuals with different coping resources and responses.

Moreover, coping patterns developed in response to everyday stressors may influence a person's response to important normative transitions (e.g., entry into first grade or the transition to high school) and to major life events (e.g., a serious personal injury or the death of a loved one). Responses to such stressors often have consequences for subsequent development. For example, a positive adjustment to first grade may increase the likelihood of a successful educational career and high occupational achievement; the loss of a loved one may precipitate depression or prompt a redirection of interests and activities, leading the person in a new direction. Thus, the coping capacities and resources that develop through daily experience may shape people's responses to more serious adaptive challenges at key life junctures, thereby influencing their subsequent development. With regard to agency, coping may help us predict which people negotiate challenges and life transitions successfully, persisting in pursuing their goals despite obstacles and repeated setbacks.

### SELF-EFFICACY

Perceived self-efficacy (the belief that one is capable of the actions needed to bring about a desired outcome) is a critical prerequisite to engaging in agentic behavior (Bandura, 1997, 1999). Pursuing goals always entails costs, for example, the risk of failure or the loss of time and energy for pursuing other goals. Thus, to pursue a goal with vigor requires a belief that one's efforts will pay off. Why invest time and energy in a particular course of action if you believe your efforts will have no effect? Perceived self-efficacy provides the incentive to act and to persist in a course of action despite setbacks and obstacles (Bandura, 1999).

The relevance of self-efficacy to goal pursuit is supported by considerable empirical research. People with high efficacy beliefs tend to increase their efforts in the face of setbacks rather than withdrawing. These people also show greater cognitive resourcefulness and strategic flexibility and are able to find ways to overcome obstacles (Bandura, 1997). Their persistence and resourcefulness increase the likelihood of eventual success.

Perceived self-efficacy also influences people's choice of goals. Generally, individuals are willing to tackle bigger challenges in domains where they feel they have the capacity to affect outcomes. Thus, high perceived self-efficacy should be associated with setting more ambitious goals. Along these lines, people with high self-efficacy have been found to set challenging goals to which they are strongly committed (Bandura, 1997). Setting ambitious goals and persevering in their pursuit should allow these people to have a greater intentional impact on their future lives and to exhibit greater agency in the life course.

Efficacy beliefs may also affect coping, by influencing a person's appraisal of stressors (Bandura, 1998, 1999). People with high perceived coping efficacy view difficult tasks as challenges rather than as threats to be avoided; they focus on the opportunities worth pursuing rather than the risks and thus maintain their commitment despite setbacks. Moreover, they are more successful in coping with potential threats: They adopt strategies that permit them to transform threatening environments into safe ones, thereby reducing their level of distress and anxiety. In contrast, people with low self-efficacy view stressors as threats. When faced with difficult tasks, they tend to focus on obstacles, personal shortcomings, and the negative consequences of failure. These self-defeating thoughts increase their distress and impair problem solving (Bandura, 1998). In sum, efficacy beliefs influence the kinds of goals and challenges people adopt, their level of goal commitment and persistence, and their capacity to cope with potential threats, all of which appear closely connected to agency.

## **SOCIAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO AGENCY**

Although people exhibit goal pursuit, self-regulation, coping, and self-efficacy, these aspects of agency are also shaped and supported by the social world. The goals we select are conditioned by cul-

tural values and by the norms and models available in our social environment. They also depend on the opportunities and obstacles we perceive in the present and those we believe will predominate in the future. Moreover, our willingness to strive to achieve goals, the circumstances under which we are willing to strive, and our likelihood of success each reflect our current social supports as well as prior experiences that impact our capacity to self-regulate, perceived self-efficacy, and coping-related beliefs.

### CULTURAL NORMS AND PATTERNS

Sociocultural contexts help define many of the goals individuals strive to achieve. Our goals often reflect culturally valued outcomes; similarly, the standards and ideals we seek to attain stem from "culturally based notions of acceptable behavior" (Jackson, Mackenzie, & Hobfall, 2000, p. 277). According to Sanderson and Cantor (1999), social and cultural contexts influence the broad tasks a person works on, as well as the strategies used to achieve them. Normative developmental tasks such as learning to read, deciding on one's vocation, and becoming financially independent emerge in part from cultural values and institutional patterns (Nurmi, 1992; Sanderson & Cantor, 1999). Similarly, broader life goals reflect the viable options presented by the culture and social structure. It is unlikely that people would seek to become architects if the field of architecture were culturally devalued or if the path to becoming an architect were unclear or impossible to follow. Additionally, cultures may define appropriate strategies for goal pursuit, supporting and applauding valued approaches and sanctioning inappropriate or illegal ones. Of course, goals and strategies also reflect individual traits and propensities, along with the person's prior experiences. Thus, "personal goals emerge from a complex interaction of traits, situations, and cultural contexts" (Sanderson & Cantor, 1999, p. 388). A similar case can be made for performance standards, although here ongoing social feedback and particular social experiences may play a larger role than cultural norms.

In addition to defining valued goals and strategies, cultures encourage timely pursuit of age-appropriate tasks by providing opportunities and supports for accomplishing them during particular periods of life (Sanderson & Cantor, 1999). Pursuing goals that are not

socially valued or pursuing normative tasks at the wrong age may bring negative consequences such as social disapproval. Moreover, because society is organized around normative pathways, timely goal pursuit is likely to be less stressful and to result in more positive outcomes. For example, childbearing in adulthood may result in better outcomes than childbearing in adolescence, in part because key social and economic supports are more likely to be available (e.g., a spouse, an adequate income) and because childbearing does not interfere with other prescribed tasks such as completing high school. On-time events and goals are also more predictable than off-time ones, allowing both the individual and the social context to be adequately prepared (Sanderson & Cantor, 1999).

## SOCIALIZATION

Socialization in childhood represents a second set of social processes that influence the expression of agency. Parents play a major role in the acquisition of personal resources and self-regulatory skills that underlie children's planful competence and the development of their coping resources.

Parents are thought to have a profound influence on children's development of self-regulation. For example, parents help regulate their child's emotions early in life by responding to the infant's physiological needs. Later on, the task of emotion regulation is transferred to the child and becomes internalized (Shunkoff & Phillips, 2000). Similarly, behavioral regulation is first accomplished by parents and then by the children themselves, with the help of self-instructions that reflect parental commands. More broadly, parents provide structure or "scaffolding" that enables children to regulate successfully using the rudimentary skills and resources available to them (Shunkoff & Phillips, 2000). These experiences enhance children's regulatory ability and capacity for agency.

Additionally, parents influence their children's coping responses by shaping their coping related beliefs, by influencing their exposure to stressful situations, and by providing support during coping episodes (Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). Moreover, by fostering the accumulation of short-term personal and social resources for coping, parents contribute to their children's long-term coping capacity (Skinner & Edge, this volume). The development of planful competence has

not been studied extensively, but parents could presumably foster this capacity by modeling planning and resourcefulness, by supporting and encouraging the child's efforts to plan, and by influencing the child's capacity for self-regulation. Parents may foster children's self-efficacy by modeling perseverance and by structuring situations to provide mastery experiences (Bandura, 1998).

Jackson, Mackenzie, and Hobfall (2000) argue that even in adulthood self-regulation is socially mediated. For example, adults solicit social support to help them regulate their emotions when they are distressed or dejected—social support facilitates coping. Adults also enlist others to help them work toward their goals and respond to social feedback in setting performance standards. Our plans and goals often involve others, and our choices among alternative courses of action may depend on how each would affect those we are close to. Thus, many of the constraints on our behavior come from the fact that our lives are intertwined with others, and our capacity to self-regulate and to realize our goals depends in part on the other people in our lives.

In summary, the expression of agency in the life course involves the selection and pursuit of personal goals, both short-term and overarching. The selection of goals and strategies is influenced by the sociocultural context, particularly the age-graded pressures, opportunities, and constraints present in a given time and place for members of the person's ethnicity, social class, and gender. Additionally, the likelihood of successful goal attainment depends on personal characteristics such as self-efficacy, self-regulation, and coping capacity that develop in the context of socialization and ongoing experience. Thus agency in the life course is a product of a person's regulation of self and manipulation of the environment, both of which depend on social influences as well as individual proclivities. Personal plans, beliefs, and actions reflect the individual's socialization history, as well as current constraints and opportunities of the social world, including the needs and desires of significant others.

## Changing Targets and Expressions of Agency

Goals, plans, and even life dreams may shift as a person matures, moves into new life stages, or confronts significant life events. With age, people experience changes in their personal capacities, skills,

and resources. Physical abilities (strength, endurance, agility, speed) increase in childhood, peak in adolescence and early adulthood, and decline thereafter (Gove, 1985). Social networks also expand and shrink over time, affecting access to social resources and support. Such changes in physical, mental, and social resources may precipitate changes in goals, self-representations, and self-efficacy thereby influencing the expression of agency. According to Brandtstädter and Rothermund (this volume), people “adjust identity goals, ambitions, and self-evaluative standards to a shifting field of constraints and resources over the life course and through historical time.”

### CHANGING GOALS

Life transitions, which encompass new role demands and new surroundings, can stimulate changes in goals. New life phases bring new socialization agents, activities, and concerns (Higgins & Eccles-Parsons, 1983), and new developmental tasks become salient. Additionally, some goals will be easier to pursue at certain life stages than others, and this may stimulate goal change. Even when goals are maintained, changing constraints and challenges may require the formulation of new strategies for reaching one’s goals (Sanderson & Cantor, 1999).

Similarly, major life events can precipitate changes in short-term goals and even in life dreams (King, 1998). Major life events such as a serious injury, career setbacks, or the death of a spouse require accommodation; in some cases a life dream may become unattainable. According to King (1998), people need to invest in some life dream to instill meaning in their lives; so, if a life dream must be relinquished, it is important to find a new one. In the wake of a major life change, some people may attempt to reinstate agency by reformulating their life dream.

Finally, individual aging can alter the expression of agency. As people age, their individual capacities and resources change, and may decline, reducing the feasibility of attaining particular goals or standards of performance. Brandtstädter and Rothermund (this volume) have suggested that the capacity to redefine goals, to disengage from some and invest more deeply in others, is a key to successful aging. Initially, barriers to valued goals may result in increased efforts to achieve one’s goals or at least to maintain progress toward

them. However, in the face of diminished progress, Brandtstädter and Rothermund argue that it is more adaptive to redefine goals so that they are attainable or, alternatively, to disengage from them. For example, the goal of being a professional athlete may be reframed in terms of being physically fit for one's age. Thus, successful aging should be associated with the flexibility to alter one's goals so as to focus on attainable objectives and standards. The motivational basis for such accommodation is suggested by the literature on pursuing goals and life dreams: Since goal achievement and progress toward one's goals enhance psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1995), identifying goals where progress is possible should carry psychological benefits. For example, focusing on attainable goals should reduce the performance-standards discrepancy, leading to enhanced psychological well-being and a sense of mastery (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Like rewriting the life dream, adjusting one's goals to fit declining capacities may be a way to reinstate a sense of agency.

#### SOURCES OF CONTINUITY

Despite the opportunity for changes in goals that is created by life transitions and individual maturation, several processes support continuity. First, goals are mental projections of self and become intertwined with conceptions of self and identity (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, *this volume*). Thus, there is a personal attachment to life goals, especially life dreams, and a reluctance to relinquish them, as giving them up means losing a basis for one's self-definition. Perhaps for this reason, Sanderson and Cantor (1999) view personal goals as the primary force behind personality coherence over time.

Second, even major life changes and transitions do not require that all prior goals be abandoned. When making a transition to a new life stage, people may integrate some prior goals into their pursuit of new life tasks. People identify with multiple goals at different levels, and some prior goals will be maintained even though new ones are added. In particular, daily goals may be retained, and progress toward these goals can help support a continued sense of self-efficacy despite changes in larger concerns (King, 1998). Also, some new goals may be assimilated into preexisting life dreams. Thus, entering a new life stage does not mean starting over with new goals, but rather the addition of new tasks and concerns. New concerns may stimulate

a reevaluation of former goals; in the process, some goals may be discarded, others reaffirmed, and others redefined.

Of course, there are large individual differences in the pace of development and in the shifting configuration of capacities that accompanies aging. Not all people experience life transitions, role changes, or declines in individual capacities at the same age or in the same domains. Furthermore, people respond to these changes differently, depending on personality and prior experience. Different people will appraise losses in capacity in different ways (as threat or challenge) and respond in characteristic ways (Bandura, 1999; Skinner, 1995). Personality also affects how and when individuals manage new tasks and influences their orientation toward goals in a new life stage. Thus, identical adaptational demands may be met with varying degrees of ingenuity and flexibility. For example, people with strong goals find ways to reinforce them (Sanderson & Cantor, 1999). Such people would be expected to retain their original goals long after others have relinquished them. For these reasons, we might expect large individual differences in how much shifting of goals occurs and at what ages.

In summary, shifts in goals and the strategies for attaining them may be stimulated by age-related changes in physical or mental abilities, by changes in social networks and resources, or by changes in culturally defined life tasks resulting from entry into a new life phase. Additionally, major life events may precipitate changes in both mundane and overarching goals. Yet, at the same time, important goals are linked to one's sense of self and may not be relinquished easily because doing so requires changes in self-definition. Personality characteristics and such processes as self-efficacy, coping responses, and self-regulation affect a person's response to the adaptational demands of aging and should influence the extent to which goals are maintained or relinquished over time.

## Organization of the Present Volume

In this chapter, I have argued that agency in the life course reflects individual actions that influence one's biography and subsequent development. Although such actions undoubtedly reflect subliminal processes and may produce unintended consequences, intentional efforts to shape one's development and future life are core exam-



ples of human agency. These efforts involve goal pursuit and self-regulation, which in turn reflect individual dispositions, cultural values, socialization history, and situationally based opportunities and constraints. Both individual maturation and social change can affect the salience of particular goals and the configuration of opportunities and constraints a person experiences.

Although researchers generally agree that both personal characteristics and contextual variables play a role in shaping individual lives, far less is known about the mechanisms involved. The remaining chapters help to elucidate these processes. They offer distinct though not mutually exclusive perspectives on agency, how its expression changes over the life span, and how it is constrained, channeled, or altered by cultural and social forces. Each chapter focuses on one source of individual agency (e.g., coping, planful competence, goal accommodation) that can have a cumulative influence on a person's biography.

In Chapter 2, Brandtstädter and Rothermund provide a life-span model of agency focused on "intentional self-development." Through interaction with the social and physical environment young children develop a sense of their capacity to "make things happen." As representational and symbolic functions emerge, children also develop a conception of self, along with normative standards for behavior. Additionally, new self-regulatory functions permit self-monitoring and a focus on specific goals. In adolescence, identity goals and life plans begin to coalesce, partly because individuals have the cognitive capacity to employ an extended time perspective and to contrast various "possible selves" with alternative outcomes. Once identity goals and life plans are formed, individuals strive to actualize them. Thus, representations of oneself in the future become a driving force of intentional self-development and agency over the life span.

Brandtstädter and Rothermund further argue that people employ both assimilative and accommodative processes in goal selection and pursuit. In the assimilative mode, the person attempts vigorously to achieve a goal or reach a standard of performance. However, when capacities in some areas decline, as often accompanies aging, individuals may adjust their goals, disengaging from those that are no longer feasible and investing in others that can be achieved. This accommodative mode is hypothesized to be associated with resilience in later life. Data are presented on age-related differences

in accommodation and its implications for psychological well-being in adulthood.

In Chapter 3, Skinner and Edge discuss the development of coping, a potential underpinning of agency. Using an action-control perspective, they define coping as “action regulation under stress” and identify six categories of coping, each characterized by a “prototypical pattern of behavior, emotion, and orientation” (Skinner & Edge). According to their model, a child’s coping response to a particular stressor depends on that child’s beliefs about competence, relatedness, and autonomy, as well as on the resources and opportunities afforded by the situation. Skinner and Edge also discuss the role of parents in fostering self-system beliefs and influencing coping responses during specific stressful episodes. Parents contribute to the development of coping by helping build the child’s individual coping resources, by supplying appropriate supports during situations that demand coping, and by regulating the child’s exposure to objective stressors and resources in daily life. Over time, the effects of repeated coping episodes accumulate, shaping the child’s self-system beliefs and, consequently, their response to subsequent stressors. The co-construction of coping by parents and children is a possible mechanism by which parents foster resilience in the face of adversity and build the child’s capacity for agency.

Finally, in Chapter 4, Shanahan and Elder examine agency within a life course framework. These authors provide a historical overview of the treatment of agency in the sociological literature that culminates in a discussion of agency from a life course perspective. Drawing on Clausen’s notion of “planful competence,” they define agency as “the ability to formulate and pursue life plans.” Using data from the Stanford-Terman sample of gifted children, they provide an empirical test of the influence of historical forces on the expression of human agency and show how the impact of adolescents’ “planful competence” on their future lives was moderated by historical circumstances. They also extend Clausen’s notion of adolescent planful competence, by examining the role of self-direction in early adulthood for men from distinct birth cohorts. Thus, they demonstrate the interplay of personal characteristics and social context in the creation of life paths.

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