

Capturing the elusive? A reflection on the study of agency

The concept of agency is now commonly used in both social and cognitive sciences. It could even be argued that women's agency, in particular, has reached the status of buzz word in some disciplines. But are we always talking about the same thing? A new literature review conducted for the project 'Participatory research on education and agency in Mali' (PREAM) suggests that we are often not. In spite of its frequent use, agency is rarely addressed with the depth it deserves and is being framed and interpreted in various ways depending on the backgrounds of the authors. For instance, agency is associated to bargaining power in economics, consciousness, voice and action in gender studies, and autonomy and personhood in psychology. This means that unless researchers and policy makers take the time to clearly specify what they mean by agency, they run the risk of discussing different things.

Gender scholars and activists alike have long said that it is time to move beyond discourses of empowerment and implement policies and interventions that really enhances agency, but how can we do so unless we share a common meaning? How can we design programs if the significance of their object keeps on escaping us? How do you study the meaning of the elusive without defining it for the people whose understanding you seek to capture?

The challenge is even more acute when attempting to translate the concept into other languages. For example, in the francophone literature, there is no agreement around the terminology of power yet, and no officially accepted translation of agency. Rather than joining the debate, some authors simply use the term in English, talk about agents or describe what they mean in a few words. The terms 'agencéité' and 'agentivité', while they have not yet entered official dictionaries, are now commonly used by academics but while some fields appear to have marked preferences for one term over another (for instance 'agencéité' in economics) the choice of wording still appears to be a matter of authors' personal preferences.

During the review process, we came across more than 30 different definitions of agency in the English literature alone. That said, Naila Kabeer (1999)'s definition – the ability to define one's goals and act upon them – appears to be the most influential across fields and has been expanded upon by different authors. Overall, there seem to be a general agreement that agency is about purpose, potential, and action. It can manifest itself differently in different domains of life and is affected by norms and structural constraints. One of the key lessons from the

literature is that efforts to enhance agency have to go hand in hand with addressing inequitable social norms and sociocultural barriers.

The literature reviewed suggest that when studying agency with children and youth, researchers should keep in mind their asymmetrical position with adults, but still regard them as being able to make decisions and influence their environment in their own unique peer cultures. However, little is known of how children and youth themselves perceive agency and the components of agency that matter most to them. We therefore call for more participatory studies involving youth from around the world – young women in particular – because agency does not have to be an elusive concept, it can be a transformative one, if we only take the time and give it the space it deserves.