

Psychological Agency

Theory, Practice, and Culture

edited by Roger Frie

A Bradford Book
The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

© 2008 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

MIT Press books may be purchased at special quantity discounts for business or sales promotional use. For information, please e-mail special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu or write to Special Sales Department, The MIT Press, 55 Hayward Street, Cambridge, MA 02142.

This book was set in Stone Sans and Stone Serif by SPi Publisher Services, Puducherry, India and was printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Psychological agency : theory, practice, and culture / [edited by] Roger Frie.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-06267-1 (hardcover : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-262-56231-7

(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Self. 2. Agent (Philosophy) I. Frie, Roger, 1965–

BF697.P755 2008

155.2—dc22

2008017556

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

This book is premised on the belief that agency is a central psychological phenomenon that must be accounted for in any explanatory framework of human action. Broadly speaking, psychological agency refers to the human capacity for reflective action, and is based on the potential to imagine and create new ways of being and acting in the world. This generative potential is only possible within the collective meanings and social and material relations that shape our lives.

It is essential, in my view, that agency be seen as a *situated* psychological phenomenon. Psychological agency is not a fixed entity that conforms to traditional definitions of free will. It is an active process of meaning construction that is dependent on the self-interpretation of individuals and is grounded in biology, society, and culture. As such, agency can never be divorced from the contexts in which it exists, yet neither can it be wholly reduced to these contexts. Agency is based on the embodied, affective potential for reflective understanding and, as such, is central to the process of psychotherapy and psychological change and development.

Agency is a lived phenomenon that is evidenced in everyday experience and in those therapy clients who seek help for problems in living. The question of agency also relates to how we choose to live our lives and the responsibility we have for the decisions we make. As such, agency is both a psychological concept with direct clinical implications and a central philosophical issue pertaining to the ethics of choice. Because it is such a multidimensional concept, I believe that agency can only truly be appreciated and understood from a multidisciplinary perspective. In developing this book, I therefore invited a diverse group of scholars, researchers, and clinicians to provide discussions of agency that expand our appreciation of the complexity of the agential process. The contributors are all trained in either psychology or psychiatry, and many have academic philosophical backgrounds that they bring to bear in their explication of agency.

I have divided the book into three separate sections: theoretical contexts, clinical and developmental contexts, and social and cultural contexts. Each chapter, to a greater or lesser extent, touches on all three of these areas. I also asked contributors, where ever possible, to combine theoretical discussion with clinical case illustrations. Taken together, the chapters demonstrate that agency cannot be fully appreciated from any single disciplinary outlook, but, especially when considering its clinical implications, must be considered from multiple perspectives. As a group, the contributors approach and define agency as a central topic in clinical and theoretical psychology, yet their discussions also draw on the fields of philosophy and neuroscience and to a lesser extent, on sociology and anthropology. An underlying theme throughout the book is the utility of a contemporary psychodynamic perspective for understanding the affective dynamics at work in the emergence, development, and experience of agency.

This book developed over a number of years and with the help, both direct and indirect, of many people. I would like to thank first and foremost my students and clients. It is through the process of mutual reflection on the nature of psychological agency, whether in a pedagogical or clinical setting, that I have learned to appreciate both its importance and its complexity. Working in the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University and the Department of Psychology at Long Island University, as well as at various doctoral and postdoctoral institutes, has enabled me to understand and appreciate the interconnections between theory, practice, and research, and to draw on each of these in formulating my approach to agency. In addition, my earlier academic training in continental philosophy in Cambridge and Berlin has been enormously helpful to my elaboration of agency as a “metatheoretical” subject. The majority of my published work to date has been geared towards developing the interconnections between the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. I continue to believe strongly that clinical training in the mental health professions can benefit from the study and recognition of the philosophy of human development and experience. Unfortunately, pervasive disciplinary boundaries, reinforced by economic and social forces, often present challenges for substantive cross-disciplinary exchange. I hope that this book can help to foster such dialogue.

I wish to express my gratitude to Tom Stone, Senior Editor at The MIT Press, for taking on and supporting this project and to Sandra Minkkinen for her advice through the editing stage. I also owe thanks to the contributors to this book for their shared enthusiasm and belief in the value of the study of

psychological agency. My work on agency has benefited greatly from discussions with many friends and colleagues over the past several years; I wish to acknowledge in particular John Fiscalini, Elliot Jurist, Jack Martin, Donna Orange, and Jeff Sugarman. However, I am without doubt most indebted to my family for their support: to Emily for her enthusiasm and boundless energy, and to Elena and Andreas for their wonderfully imaginative and endlessly creative acts of agency. It is to them that I dedicate this book.