The Agentic Self: On the Nature and Origins
of Personal Agency Across the Lifespan

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In this chapter, we examine personality development using the human agency concept as an overarching theme. We first articulate fundamental assumptions about agency, with a quick sketch of its organismic meta-theoretical roots. Secondly, we explore the philosophical and historical underpinnings of agency as a central concept in both past and present psychological theories. We then examine the various layers of agency and discuss their development antecedents and consequences. Finally, building upon the rich historical literature and recent theorizing, we conclude with some comments and suggestions on future directions.

**Fundamental Assumptions of Agency**

Both current and past theories of agency share the meta-theoretical view that organismic aspirations drive human behaviors. This organismic perspective presumes that humans are the “authors” and active contributors to their behavior and development. Most human behavior is seen as volitional and described in terms of self-regulated, goal-directed *actions*, where actions are defined as self-initiated and purposive activities (Boesch, 1991; Brandtstädter, 1998; Chapman, 1984; Ryan, 1993). Because of this inherent propensity toward activity and self-regulation, we speak of the individual in terms of personal agency or as an agentic self.

The concept of personal agency does not reinvent constructs such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-concept, and so on. Rather, it helps to organize such concepts into the multi-layered model of the self that is premised on volitional goal-directed actions (see Figure 1). Key characteristics of actions include:

a) Actions are motivated by both biological and psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Hawley, 1999; Hawley & Little, 2002; Little et al., 2002).
b) Actions are directed toward self-regulated goals that service the biological and psychological needs, both short-term and long-term.

c) Actions are propelled by specific understandings about the links among agents, means, and ends (Chapman, 1984; Little, 1998; Skinner, 1995, 1996), and they are guided by general action-control behaviors that entail self-chosen forms and functions (Lopez & Little, 1995; Little, Lopez, & Wanner, 2001; Skinner & Edge, 2002).

d) Actions give rise to self-determined governance of behavior and development which can be characterized as hope-related individual differences.

e) Actions are triggered, executed, and evaluated in contexts that provide supports and opportunities, as well as hindrances and impediments to goal pursuit.

Being active in one’s development, the individual is integrated in his/her organismic functioning. Various processes are called upon to establish and maintain a balanced sense of self throughout development. In this process, individuals must negotiate the boundaries and opportunities of the surrounding contexts. Accordingly, each person progresses steadily along a predominantly self-guided developmental path. Actions are given form and meaning along the way and they continually define, refine, and update one’s sense of self. Every action represents a choice made by the individual. From an organismic perspective, individuals plot and navigate their own courses through the challenges of the surrounding environments, which vary in their degree of uncertainty. Similar to trade winds and currents, environments sometimes may bolster, hinder, or alter the course of a developmental route (Little et al., 2002).

Through self-evaluative feedback processes, persons continuously interpret and evaluate actions and their consequences. In an organismic model of personality development, humans continually discover and refine who they are and the activities of which they are capable in
varying situational and developmental contexts. People learn under what conditions their actions can or cannot have desired effects. Under optimal circumstances, this continually evolving and actively monitored self-system gives rise to a strong, stable, and effective sense of personal agency and hope. Different individuals with differing experiences and differing predispositions, however, will yield varying profiles of hope because the sense of agency is a multi-faceted and striated system of needs, motives, goals, beliefs, and behaviors (Figure 1; Hawley & Little, 2002; Little et al., 2002; Little & Wanner, 1997).

As a person begins to discover who s/he is and of what s/he is capable, the evolving competence system contributes to an integrated sense of personal agency—an agentic self. The resulting systems of action-control motives, goals, beliefs, and behaviors provide a foundation that is used to negotiate various subsequent developmental tasks and life-course challenges. In facing these challenges, an agentic individual is the primary origin of his or her actions, has high aspirations, perseveres in the face of obstacles, sees more and varied options, learns from failures, has a strong sense of well-being, and so on. A non-agentic individual, on the other hand, is primarily the pawn of unknown extra-personal influences, has low aspirations, is hindered with problem-solving blinders, and often feels both helpless and hopeless (Little, 1998; Little et al., 2002; Ryan et al., 1996; Skinner, 1995; Weisz, 1990). These latter undesirable characteristics can stimulate additional negative feedback, such as teasing and victimization from others (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). In short, agentic persons are on a positive carousel wherein benefits often continually incur, whereas nonagentic persons often spiral into one negative outcome after another.

In addition to the metatheoretical underpinnings of the agency concept as a core feature of personality development, numerous historical precedents point to the importance of agency as an
organizing feature of developmental theories about the self. We selectively sample three of the historical giants—Heider, Lewin, and Piaget. Although the ideas of these three pioneers typically have not been examined with an eye toward the agency concept and its basis in developmental theorizing, we believe that they provide crucial insights for understanding the role of agency in personality development (see Harter, 1999, for additional histories).

Historical Precedents

*Human Agency According to Fritz Heider*

Heider, who is credited with being the father of theory and research on attributions (see also Kelley, 1983), was fascinated with the human propensity to explain why events—especially interpersonal ones—occur (Heider, 1958). Heider also was captivated by the importance of the human agency concept (Heider, 1944, 1983). In his career, he focused upon that part of the action sequence related to the formation of attributions. His underlying interest in agency, however, is intimated in his description of this process as “causal” attributions. Human agency, in Heider’s view, was an imperative cause—*the motivational force underpinning most human actions across the lifespan* (this propensity to ascribe agency to people rather than to the surrounding environment also led to the fundamental attribution-error concept).

According to Heider, agency motivation reflects the individual’s perceptions of having “effective personal force” in the course of unfolding events (also see White, 1959). In this regard, Heider (1958, p. 83) believed that such a force is underpinned by a combination of power or personal ability, the intentions to try, and any relevant environmental factors (with the latter often going unrecognized or under-emphasized by many). At its earliest onset (at least as early as toddlerhood), the effective and ineffective use of personal force begins the synergistic dance between governing one’s actions and adapting to their outcomes. Clearly, Heider’s theorizing
revolved around the central role that human agency plays in psychology in particular, and human development more generally.

*The Role of Agency in Kurt Lewin’s Theorization*

Although Kurt Lewin did not emphasize cognitive processes per se, he did focus on the relationship of thoughts to actions. Furthermore, Lewin believed that behavior was best understood by exploring the underlying paths to people’s goals (Weiner, 1972). Although Lewin did not use the term "agency" in describing how people use these paths to goals, he did use the concept of "tension"—or the inherent arousal that attends teleological thought (Lewin, 1926, 1938, 1951)—as an analog for agency.

Historically, Lewin’s attention to agency-like processes began with his attempts to refine Ach’s measurement of “strength of will” (Lewin, 1917). In the early 1900’s, psychology was in the throes of Gestalt emphases on perception and mental associations. Noteworthy within this Gestalt camp was Ach (1910), who argued that mental couplings created by association provide the “force of will” (sometimes also called the associative principle of cause). Although Lewin borrowed many Gestalt ideas (see Lewin, 1935), he broke away from Ach’s emphasis by suggesting that mere association alone did not provide a sufficient impetus for action; in this debate, Lewin highlighted motivation (a.k.a., the Lewin-Ach Controversy; see Weiner, 1972).

In responding to Ach’s views about association, Lewin distinguished between two types of associations or habits. First, there was tension, which was seen as the need that necessitates satisfaction. This tension or need was conceptualized as the source of energy that leads to action. Second, there was an execution habit (e.g., pulling a lever up or down) that is not a source of action in itself. These execution habits were posited to rely on the tension need in order to lead to action. In Lewin’s (1951, pp. 5-6) words:
Dynamically, an “association” is something like a link in a chain, i.e., a pattern of restraining forces without intrinsic tendency to create a change. On the other hand, the tendency to bring about action is basic to a need. This property of a need or quasi-need can be represented by coordinating it to a “system in tension.” By taking this construct seriously and using certain operational definitions, particularly by correlating the “release of tension” …, a great number of testable conclusions [are] made possible.

Within Lewin’s subsequent field theory and level of aspiration work, he highlighted the role of goals as the objects that produce motivational tensions in humans. Lewin (1938, 1951) posited that goals, by their very nature, set up tensions or intentions that involve a state of disequilibrium. When a goal is realized, according to Lewin, then the level of tension within the system is reduced and a psychological equilibrium is reinstated. For Lewin, such goal attainment did not necessarily translate to “consumption” of the desired goal object. Rather, memory or thinking about a goal could lessen the goal tension. Lewin used the famous experiments on the recall and resumption of unfinished tasks—what has come to be called the Zeigarnik effect (see Zeigarnik, 1927; see also Ovsiankina, 1928)—in order to test and support his assumptions about the important role of tension reduction in goal pursuit activities. In other words, Lewin viewed such tensions as the fuel for the expression of agency across the lifespan.

**Self-regulated Actions and Piaget’s Theorizing**

Although Piaget focused on cognitive developmental acquisitions, the basic tenets of his ideas are readily applicable to both intra- and inter-personal understandings (Carpendale, 1987; Chapman, 1984). At a time when behaviorism dominated much of the North American scholarly zeitgeist (e.g., Watson, 1913), Piaget was building his constructivist view of human beings as active agents. Being an active agent in one’s own development implies that an individual
functions as an integrated organism. In this regard, the same assimilative and accommodative processes that are invoked to maintain equilibrium in cognition also are invoked to sustain balance in both social cognition and one’s sense of self (Carpendale, 1987). Likewise, these inherent processes that provide cognitive templates for understanding the physical and material world give rise to stable schemata about the self and the social world.

From a Piagetian view, subjective perceptions of causality and temporal dynamics, which are established through mental simulations and active experimentation, create the conduits to overt actions (see also Boesch, 1991, on symbolic action theory). Using self-generated schema, individual actors produce explanations and predictions of behavior. This process makes action control and meaningful adaptation to change feasible both cognitively and behaviorally (see also Laukkanen, 1990).

The Agentic Self: Examining the Layers

Numerous contemporary theories have incorporated the concept of agency and action plans either implicitly (e.g., Bandura, 1997) or explicitly (e.g., Chapman, 1984). As exemplified in Figure 1, however, the ways in which agency has been incorporated into contemporary theories is multi-layered. In the following, we examine some of the ways in which the agency concept appears at the different layers that comprise the fully functioning individual.

**Biological and Psychological needs**

A starting point for understanding the development of the agentic self is the assumption that all organisms require resources for physical growth and development (Darwin, 1864; Hawley, 1999; Little et al., 2002; Ricklefs, 1979). Resources are the appetite for biological needs (see Figure 1). There exists, however, an evolutionarily inevitable duality in the pursuit of resources. To meet basic needs that are difficult or impossible to obtain individually, a person can
participate in a social group where the presence of others facilitates acquisition of resources. This social group, however, can become a source of competition for the very resources that it facilitates. This duality creates competition for resources within the social group. Thus, as group members, individuals experience wins and losses. These interpersonal patterns of wins and losses lead to what ethologists describe as a dominance hierarchy. Hawley (e.g., 1999) defines such hierarchies as the emergent ordering of individuals based on their relative competitive abilities. By definition, therefore, highly agentic individuals achieve the lion's share of wins, whereas social subordinates experience a disproportionate quantity of losses (Hawley, 1999, this volume; Little et al., 2002).

As Little et al. (2002) have argued, the history of both early and life-long win-loss experiences influence the development of personal agency, and these early experiences can be viewed as the seeds of agency. Agentic competitors learn that their goals can be met, that their efforts pay off, that they can control their environment, and that their future efforts are likely to be successful. Persistence is both an antecedent and consequence of winning efforts in the pursuit of fulfilling needs (Hawley & Little, 2002). Agency and persistence both are causes and effects of present and future attempts at attaining resource control. On the other hand, children who experience losses early on are at risk. Persistent losses lead to a self view that one cannot achieve desired goals, that personal efforts will not pay off, that the environment cannot be controlled in the presence of others, and that future efforts are likely to be futile. These agentic and non-agentic profiles characterize the extremes of a dominance hierarchy (Hawley & Little, 2002; Little et al., 2002).

One important feature in the development of an agentic self is that different behavioral strategies can be used in these evolutionarily predicated skirmishes. Hawley (1999, 2002, this
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volume) has outlined two classes of strategy that individuals may use. First, there are coercive strategies such as aggression, manipulation, deception, and so on. Second, there are prosocial strategies such as helping, appeasement, alliance formation, and so on. Individuals develop consistent patterns in the use strategies to pursue their goals. These consistently used strategies and the ratio of wins to losses represent building blocks to the developing self-system. As we will continue to emphasize, however, consistency of use and the success ratio depend upon specific social and physical contexts.

In addition to the biological needs that drive behavior and precipitate the development of agency, at least three fundamental psychological needs are at play: Competence, Relatedness, and Autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Competence is the basic need to successfully engage, manipulate, and negotiate the environment (see White, 1959). Relatedness reflects the necessity for close emotional bonds and feelings of connectedness to others in the social world (see Sroufe, 1990). Autonomy reflects the degree to which one's actions are predicated on the self or, when non-autonomous, by causes external to the self (Deci & Ryan; Wehmeyer, 2001).

Little et al. (2002) have argued that goal pursuit in the service of these needs is yet another driving force in the development of personal agency. Here, the need for autonomy is perhaps the most critical. For actions to be optimally agentic (i.e., to possess a strong sense of personal empowerment), they must be autonomous. In this regard, autonomy is the quality of owning one's actions and making action choices that are integrated with the self and that serve one’s needs. As Deci (1986) has reasoned, "without choice, there would be no agency, and no self-regulation" (p. 222). Therefore, autonomy is crucial for the self-determination that underpins the agentic self. Self-determined actions can be directed toward various goals, but the paramount goals are those that service the needs of resource control, autonomy, relatedness, and
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Self-determination, Self-Regulation, and Goal Pursuit

Self-determination is a function of self-regulated agentic action. Wehmeyer (1996; 1998; 1999; 2001) defines self-determined behavior as “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference” (1996, p. 24). Self-determined individuals act (i.e., self-regulate) in such a way that their actions and behaviors are ‘self’ caused (autonomous determinism; cf. intrinsic motivation, Ryan & Deci, 2002) as opposed to ‘other caused’ (heteronymous determination; cf. extrinsic motivation, Ryan & Deci, 2002). From this perspective, self-determined people are agents “with the authority” to initiate actions.

Although actions are purposeful (i.e., performed to achieve an end), behaviors are governed by many interacting influences. In this sense, people are “contributors to, rather than the sole determiners of, what happens to them” and therefore “agency refers to acts done intentionally” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Agentic behavior can be in response to circumstances that are not planned, but such circumstances nevertheless can be acted upon purposefully. The ‘end’ toward which an action is directed varies in terms of specific outcomes, but it ultimately supports self- (versus other-) determination (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Skinner, 2002). Thus, all actions function as the means whereby people achieve valued goals, exert control, and, ultimately, maintain (or enhance) their sense of personal agency.

A number of factors are involved in the self-regulation of goal pursuit. These factors include (a) the capability to perform actions, which can subdivided into causal capacity and agentic capacity, and (b) the challenges to one’s self-determination that serve as a catalyst to action, which can be seen as either opportunities or threats (see Figure 2).
Capability refers to having the requisite ability to execute chosen actions to accomplish a particular task. Agentic individuals possess various capacities that enable them to respond to challenges. Two types of capabilities are important to the agentic self: *causal capability* and *agentic capability*. These capabilities differentiate between two aspects of actions: (a) initiating goal pursuit (causal capability) and (b) directing actions toward a preferred end (agentic capability).

Causal capability includes the knowledge, behavioral skills, self perceptions, and beliefs about one’s environment (see causality beliefs; pathways thinking, below) that are necessary to express agentic behavior. Examples of causal capacities include goal setting, pre-action problem solving, and decision-making skills. Having the capacity to engage in goal pursuit provides the needed impetus to prioritize and choose among various goal options.

Agentic capability involves possessing the requisite skill, knowledge, beliefs that one is capable (see agency beliefs; agency, below). In addition, it involves the belief that if one acts, one can reasonably expect positive outcomes (see control-expectancy beliefs, below). Agentic capacity largely involves self-regulatory and self-management skills that enable persons to compare their current states with goal states and to self-monitor, self-evaluate, and self-regulate progress.

*Contextual Influences on Self-regulation*

An organismic approach to understanding the developing person explicitly focuses on the interface between the self and surrounding environmental context (Lerner, 1995, 1996; Little et al., 2002; Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). Contexts reflect multiple influences, spanning the molar and micro levels that both constrain and promote behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Gottlieb, 1997). Taken as a whole, these contexts create what can be called a psychological
“carrying capacity” within which the individual operates (i.e., the maximal level of functioning given one’s personal resources and the limits and/or supports of the surrounding contexts).

Contexts provide challenges that are the catalysts for actions. A challenge is any circumstance that engages a person’s abilities or resources to resolve a problem or threat as well as to achieve a goal. Human actions reflect responses to socio-contextual challenges. Challenging circumstances elicit volitional actions aimed at maintaining or enhancing a person’s sense of personal agency.

Two classes of challenges exist: opportunities or threats. First, opportunity refers to situations that engage actions to achieve a planned and desired outcome. Opportunity implies that the situation allows the person to make something happen based upon his or her causal capability. An opportunity is bound to the person’s causal capability. If the person has no capability, the situation is not an opportunity. If a person has the capability to act, the situation or circumstance can be construed as an opportunity. If the person is unable to act because of limitations, however, this may be termed a ‘missed opportunity.’ Opportunities can be “found” (unanticipated, happened upon through no effort of one’s own) or “created” (the person acts to create a favorable circumstance). Second, there are the challenge conditions involving situations that threaten, hinder, or impede goal-directed actions. Such conditions provoke the person to engage their agentic capabilities to maintain a preferred outcome or create change that is consistent with one’s preferences and goals.

Affect and Self-regulation

Another operant in self-regulation is affect. Causal affect refers to the emotions, feelings, and other affective components that influence human behavior. For example, emotions (a response involving physiological changes as a preparation for action) often are evoked in response to
challenges, be they opportunities (joy, excitement) or threats (anger, anxiety) that heighten or limit the organism’s capacity to respond. Similarly, feelings are cognitively mediated emotions with long-lasting impacts on both causal and agentic capability, thereby influencing the ways that the person will respond to future challenges.

Features of an Action-Control Sequence

Agentic individuals respond to challenges by using the capabilities that allow them to direct their actions to achieve either a desired change or maintain a preferred status. Both causal and agentic capability work together in complex ways to achieve or maintain a desired goal (i.e., a schema for self-determined action; see Figure 2).

In response to challenges, the agentic self begins with a goal generation process, consisting of self-analysis and exploration concerning one’s strengths, limitations, preferences, values, and wants with regard to the challenge circumstance. This process identifies needed actions, which are prioritized based on salience to the challenge. Once actions have been prioritized, the person frames the most urgent or important action in terms of a goal state. With a goal state in mind, the agentic person engages in a goal-discrepancy analysis wherein the current status and the goal status are reconciled. The agentic individual frames the outcomes from this discrepancy analysis in terms of a goal-discrepancy problem to be solved. This process is followed by a capacity-challenge discrepancy analysis. The person evaluates his or her capacity to solve the problem and examines the degree to which the challenge will support goal attainment. In this process, the agentic self maximizes adjustment in capacity (e.g., acquires new or refines existing action skills) or adjusts the challenge presented to create a “just-right match” between capacity and challenge so as to optimize his or her probability of solving the goal-discrepancy problem (Mithaug, 1996; Wehmeyer & Mithaug, in press).
Once a person has optimized capacity and challenge, he or she creates a *discrepancy-reduction plan* that is regulated by the person’s action-control beliefs. Such beliefs influence the setting of expectations (what can I expect to achieve?), making choices about strategies to reduce the discrepancy, and finalizing and implementing a discrepancy-reduction plan. One component of such a plan is the self-monitoring that enables the individual to collect information about progress toward the goal state. During the action sequence, the person will engage in goal-discrepancy re-analyses, as needed, using information gathered through self-monitoring, to self-evaluate progress toward reducing the discrepancy between current status and goal status. If the person determines that the discrepancy reduction plan has solved the goal discrepancy problem, the desired change or maintenance is achieved. If progress is satisfactory, the person will continue implementing the discrepancy reduction plan. If progress is not satisfactory, the person either reconsiders the discrepancy reduction plan and modifies that component, or returns to the goal-generation process to re-examine the overall goal, its priority, and, possibly, cycling through the process with a revised or new goal.

*Action-Control Beliefs During Goal Pursuit*

During the life course, individuals develop key understandings about what it takes to achieve a given goal (causal capacity) and about whether one possesses what it takes (agentic capacity). People develop these action-control beliefs about themselves and the environmental contingencies in pursuing volitional activity. At this level, personal agency is examined as the possible beliefs one may have about the relations among the primary constituents of intentional action (Chapman, 1984; Little, 1998; Skinner, 1995; Stetsenko, Little, Gordeeva, Grasshof, & Oetingen, 2000).

The three constituents of an action sequence are the actor, the goal, and the various means by
which the goal (or end) can be obtained. Agentic action reflects an agent's general awareness of goals and the means to the goals, taking personal responsibility in pursuing a chosen goal, and the ability to select and utilize potential means (Chapman & Skinner, 1985). Given the three constituents of volitional activity, a number of belief types about the relations among these constituents are possible.

Figure 3 displays six of these belief types (see also Skinner, 1996). Control expectancy beliefs reflects general expectations about the link between the self and the goal (e.g., “when I want to do ____, I can.”). Cultural Efficacy, on the other hand, reflects the belief link between the person’s focal cultural group and the goal. Agency beliefs reflect the links between the self and the various means that are relevant for attaining a chosen ends (“I’m able to put forth enough effort to do this”, “I possess the necessary skills to do this”). The counterpart linkage, when others are viewed as the agent of behavior, can be termed Cultural Agency beliefs. Similarly, the link between the various means and ends can have two levels of meaning. When the self is the agent, the resulting system of beliefs would reflect Strategy Beliefs (i.e., what means work for me). Means-ends (or Causality beliefs, on the other hand, reflect general views of the utility or usefulness of a given means such effort, luck, or ability for attaining a particular goal (Chapman et al., 1990; Little et al., 1995b; Oettingen et al., 1994; Skinner et al., 1988).

Ample research has supported these distinctions (see Little, 1998; Skinner, 1996, for overviews). A defining feature of the action-control view that separates it from other similar models of control perceptions is the explicit means-ends analysis of actions. For example, because ability is considered separately from other means such as effort and access to powerful others, Stetsenko et al. (2000) were able to identify a means-specific gender bias in the action-control beliefs of school-aged children. Girls, whose actual school performance was on par with
boys, reported lower beliefs in their own ability to get good grades than did boys. All other beliefs about their personal agency, such as effort, luck, and access to teachers, were on an equal footing, as would be expected from equally performing groups of children. Only the girls’ beliefs in their access to ability revealed the bias. By focusing on the unique means that are utilized to achieve a goal, Stetsenko et al. identified a specific source of bias in girls’ personal agency profile that my hinder them developmentally. Similarly, Baker, Brownell, & Little (2002) were able to integrate the action-control view of perceived control in the Theory of Planned Behavior and found significant differences in the predictive utility of different means. In sum, in order to adequately assess agency across the lifespan, it is advantageous to focus on differentiating among the available means and evaluate each as a unique dimension and source of an action-control profile of the agentic self.

*Hope and the agentic self*

At the highest level of integration for the agentic self is hope (see Figure 1). Snyder (1994) derived an organismic-agentic concept of hope based on intensive interviews in which people talked about having a sense of agency to pursue their goals, along with the abilities to produce routes to those goals. At this level, personal agency can be thought of in term of both agency and pathways goal-related thinking, which comprise the definitional components of hope. As such, Snyder, Irving, and Anderson (1991, p. 287) defined hope as a, “positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)."

Goals provide the cognitive anchor of hope (Snyder, 1994), and they can vary in terms of their time frames, with some being short-term and others long-term. Goals must be of sufficient value that people will continue to think about them consciously. Generally, hope should operate
within perceived intermediate degrees of goal attainment difficulty (called “stretch” goals; Snyder, 2002; see capacity-challenge discrepancy analysis, above, and Figure 2).

The higher a person’s hope, the more confident s/he will be about finding effective routes. High- as compared to low-hope people also are more likely to ascribe positive and affirming internal pathways messages to themselves (e.g., “I'll find a way to get this done!”; Snyder, LaPointe, Crowson Jr., & Early, 1998). Such thought typically necessitates imagining a credible route and plausible alternate routes for anticipated goal blockages. High- vs. low-hope persons actually are very good at producing alternative routes when faced with blockages (Snyder, Sympson, et al., 1996).

Agency thought taps the perceived capacity to initiate (causal capacity) and sustain (agentic capacity and action-control beliefs) movement toward desired goals. High-hope people embrace agency self-talk phrases such as “I can do this” and “I am not going to be stopped” (Snyder et al., 1998). Agency thinking is important in all goal-directed thought, but it takes on special significance when people encounter impediments. During these blockages, agency thought helps people channel the requisite motivation to the best alternate pathways (Snyder, 1994). Positive emotions result when people perceive themselves as being successful in goal pursuits. Negative emotions, on the other hand, result when the person perceives him- or herself as being unsuccessful in a specified goal pursuit (Diener, 1984; Snyder, Sympson et al., 1996).

The elaborated model of Hope theory is shown in Figure 4. The model depicts the proposed events that occur as the goal-directed thought sequence proceeds temporally. The etiologies of the pathways and agency thoughts can be seen in the far left of Figure 4 above the “Learning History” phase (for more in-depth descriptions of these developmental antecedents, see Snyder, 1994, pages 75-114). Beyond the “hope self beliefs,” people also approach goal-related activities
with varying “emotional sets” with high-hope persons being filled with positive approach-like emotions and low-hope persons being filled with negative avoidance-like emotions (see also, Elliot & Covington, 2002).

The model implies that high- as compared to low-hope people should generate more goals. The advantage of having several goals appears when a primary goal is unreachable, and the person thereby has another readily available goal. The model also implies that people consider the outcome values of various goals before selecting a specific one (i.e., the “Pre-Event” phase; Figure 4). If a goal is based on a person’s own standards, this should have greater value than goals that reflect the desires of other people (see also Deci & Ryan, 2002). Research related to this issue indeed shows that high- more than low-hope people will select stretch goals based on their outcomes in previous similar tasks (Snyder et al., 1991).

If a goal is of sufficiently high value to the person, then s/he will pay attention, and move to the next analysis in the “Event Sequence” phase. Throughout the iterative pathways and agency thinking of this “Event Sequence” phase, however, the person should engage in an outcome value check-back so as to ascertain whether the potential outcome appears to be important enough to warrant the maintenance of goal-directed activities.

In the initial “getting started” portion of the “Event Sequence” phase, as long as things appear to be going well, then feedback should involve positive emotions that reinforce the goal pursuit. Individual differences in dispositional hope, however, should influence the content of such emotional feedback. Because persons who are high in trait hope generally enjoy goal pursuit activities, their self-talk should be of an engaged, positive, challenge-like nature. Such self-talk should sustain attention and motivation to the goal. Low-hope persons, however, often are apprehensive about goal pursuits in general, and chances are high that their attentions will be
diverted from task-relevant cues. This low-hope person also may begin to worry about “how things are going,” and experience a rush of seemingly uncontrolled negative emotions. These negative feelings then produce yet more self-critical ruminations, and it becomes more likely that the pathways-agency cognitions will become “off-task” in foci (Snyder et al., 1991; Snyder, Sympson, et al., 1996).

Although cognitions drive emotions, those emotions in turn should inform the thoughts of the person—even during a given goal pursuit sequence. Accordingly, there is a functional role for emotions in that they, “establish our position vis-à-vis our environment, pulling us toward certain people, objects, actions, and ideas, and pushing us away from others” (Levenson, 1994, p. 123).

As shown in the middle of the “Event Sequence” phase of Figure 4, goal pursuit sometimes may be impeded by life-course challenges and everyday stressors. A stressor represents any impeding circumstance that is sufficiently large so as to place hopeful thought at risk. Should the person perceive that a desired goal is not going to be attained, then disruptive negative emotions should cycle back so as to impact the person’s trait and situational hopeful thinking (see also Wrosh et al., this volume). Some individuals, such as those who are dispositionally high in hope, should experience stressors as challenges rather than threats. Accordingly, an effective strategy when encountering a stressor, or goal blockage, is to develop an alternate pathway, and rechannel personal agency to that new pathway.

In circumstances where there is no stressor, or when the stressor has been surpassed, pathways and agency thoughts continue to iterate (see the bi-directional arrows) and aggregate through the remaining portion of the goal pursuit sequence; in turn, the resulting thoughts should impact the person’s later endeavors in pursuit of that same goal. The individual should have perceptions about the success (or lack thereof) and the associated approach-based (or avoidance-
based) emotions will cycle back at all points in the goal pursuit sequence (see also Elliot & Covington, 2002).

Once a specific goal pursuit sequence has been completed, the person’s attainment (or nonattainment) thoughts and the associated positive (or negative) emotions should cycle back so as to affect the later outcome value attached to that activity, and perceived pathways and agency capabilities in that particular situation and other situations in general (i.e., the narrow-lined, right-to-left arrows in Figure 4 illustrate this latter feedback process). The emotional feedback thereby shapes subsequent goal-directed thinking. Some people should be effective in using such feedback (i.e., high hopers) to do better when facing similar future goal pursuit circumstances, whereas others (i.e., low hopers) should be ineffective.

As can be seen in the lower center of Figure 4, a surprise event may occur. When such an unexpected event is personally relevant to an individual, s/he experiences a rapid rise in arousal. In other words, there is an increase in agency that has yet to be “attached” to any goal. Rapidly, the agentic energy is transferred to a goal and related pathway that fit the circumstances (Snyder, 2002). For example, consider a father who watches his six-year-old daughter fall off the tree branch she was climbing. Filled with agency-like arousal at the sight of his screaming offspring, the father immediately becomes motivated (agency) to take his daughter to the physician (note pathways and goal here). Although the surprise event occurs outside of the hope model, how people cope with the vicissitudes of events is explicable in terms of that model.

Summary and Future Directions

Understanding the complexities of organismic activity clearly requires an understanding of how aspects of individuals such as their motives, beliefs, and behaviors coordinate together in the pursuit of life-course goals. As we see it, the linkages among the layered aspects of the
agentic self are best examined when the operational nature of each layer stems from a common metatheoretical perspective: in this case, the organismic perspective. A number of commonalities emanate from the overarching organismic metatheoretical perspective that unites the different layers of agentic action. For example, because actions are coordinated in specific domains of goal-directed activity, the motives, goals, beliefs, and behaviors of agentic activity will have considerable domain specificity. In addition, because a specific action is chosen from among a number of possible actions, agentic activity can be examined in terms of its means specificity. Last, because of the domain-specific and means-specific nature of actions in service of self-chosen goals, agentic actions can be classified and categorized in terms of a means-ends, form-function analytic framework.

Issues of personal agency and agentic action are increasingly important in numerous applied settings. A primary emphasis in these settings involves teaching people the skills they will need to exert greater control over their lives, including problem-solving, goal-setting, and decision-making skills. Such instruction is particularly critical for disadvantaged individuals, such as person’s with disabilities, person’s from economically impoverished areas, and person’s of traditionally underrepresented populations.

In terms of future directions, we suggest at least three avenues that would benefit from further theorizing and empirical scrutiny.

A first direction for future research is to focus on integrating the layers of personal agency into a coherent structuring of the agentic self. The various layers that we present in Figure 1 are rarely examined in a synergistic fashion. Understanding the direct and indirect linkages between needs, motives, goals, beliefs, behaviors, and hope is the challenge that will reveal the likely mechanisms of development and self formation. Identifying the various linkages would begin to
answer the question of how we progress from needs to hope and give rise to an agentic self.

A second direction of future research is to develop more precise theoretical models of contextual opportunities and hindrances as well as bring the required methodological tools to bear on the analysis of contextual impacts on self development. Clearly the linkages from needs to hope and their reciprocal feedback will be significantly influenced and altered by the supports and impediments of the biological, social, and cultural contexts. In our view, current theoretical models that outline the levels of contextual influence (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1995) have slid to the periphery of mainstream inquiry, even though few would consider contextual impacts to be unimportant. In regard to these latter lacunae, the most likely explanation that we can find is that the methodological and statistical analyses required to model the contextual influences on development are rather daunting in their complexity. The dauntingness stems from the lack of adequate methodological pedagogy that specifically addresses how to incorporate contextual factors into one’s study design, and to appropriately model the complex patterns and paths of influence.

A third direction of future inquiry would be to adopt a person-centered viewpoint with a particular eye to identifying the profiles that characterize different types of individuals. As Magnusen, Bergman, and others have argued (Bergman, 2003), the nomothetic assumption that a model of interrelations among key constructs is the appropriate model for all individuals is less tenable as the complexity of our models increases. The constellations of needs, motives, beliefs, and behaviors that characterize agentic individuals would reveal profiles that are to a degree individuated by the self-direct governance of the individual. Numerous profiles can yield adaptive, effective, and agentic activity. One important implication of this perspective is the need to examine the nature of these profiles over time in order to determine their stability as well as
the antecedents and consequents of a given profile. Such an examination requires a network approach to examine the linkages among the profile dimensions in terms of proximal and distal influences, direct and indirect pathways, as well as uni-directional and bi-directional causal influences (Kelley, 1983).

In closing, we believe that human action not only is at the epicenter of psychological theory and research across the lifespan, but it also is an imperative force that drives the quality of human lives. Positive growth and development hinges upon both personal and collective efforts of our agentic selves. As such, the agentic self deserves to be a priority in the agendas of scientists and practitioners alike.
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Figure 1. The various layers of human agency and the construction of the self.
Figure 2. Overview of action schema
Figure 3. Relations among the three constituents of human action, both when the self is the agent and when others are the agent. [Note. Means can vary from personal attributes such as effort and ability to external aids such as friends and teachers. From Little, 2000].
Figure 4. The development of hope as a feature of the agentic self

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