

# Invoking and Inviting Agency

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*This memo explores one of nine distinctive characteristics of ethical engagement through the arts. It is part of the research informing the report entitled: Invite | Affirm | Evoke | Unleash: How artistic and cultural processes transform complex challenges.” This research was proposed by the [Community](#)*

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# Conceptual Analysis and Important Debates

Concepts of agency resonate strongly with workers at the intersection of arts, culture and conflict transformation. Indeed, agency appears to be at the very crux of what it means to enact change: for without agency, no measure of transformative personal, social or political change may seem possible.

Defining what agency is and how it is cultivated is complex, however, depending on one's ontological perspective and values, as well as beliefs about society, culture and the individual.

## *Agency and Individual Will/Capacity/Choice*

One prevalent understanding of agency is drawn from western Enlightenment thinking on morality and reason, and circulates around three aspects of the individual: their *will* to act, *capacity* to act, and *choice* to act (Reed & Weinman, 2019). This rendering of agency brings individual autonomy and self-determination to the fore and is evident in cultures and societies that are premised on value systems of equality for all, but function on systems of economy and governance deeply rooted in individualism. The idea that *everyone* has agency is based on an assumption that people have equal opportunity to exercise will, develop capacity and are free to choose to act. This veils a deep and oft-times unconscious bias in assuming all individuals have agency and autonomy. Yet within individualist societies, such as those influenced most by western capitalism and patriarchy, there are structural limits and restricted capacities of many members of those cultures to access or cultivate the personal or material resources to enact agency. The complex impact of agency being defined by 'individuals' freedom', in contexts where a person's class, race, gender or ability restricts their capacity to act, can thereby determine people's will and freedom to choose to act.

Colonialist and imperialist knowledge systems impact these understandings of agency. In societies geared toward economic progress above all else, the idea of agency can be laden with assumptions about who has *voice and value* in that society, and who therefore has the capacity to make change. In such societies, those who 'have agency' are those who can afford – *or are afforded* – the privilege *to be able to make a choice* to act.

## *The Structure and Agency Dynamic*

The Structuration Approach (Giddens, 1984; Stones, 2005) brings attention to a more dynamic and contingent relationship between individual and society, enabling a definition of agency that integrates nuanced understandings of power and empowerment. In this approach, the individual is not at the mercy of a static configuration of societal structure; rather, agency is viewed as a multifaceted engagement with power structures that can in turn change as a result. Page and Petray draw on this approach to describe the concept of agency in the context of their research on Indigenous perceptions of agency. In citing Giddens, they claim:

Agency is the capability of individual or collective actors to do something in the social realm, contributing to a process of 'making and remaking [...] larger social and cultural formations'. Agents reflexively perceive their own capability of undertaking social action with an understanding of how power operates. .... Power [being] the capacity to make action occur.

By describing the importance of both knowing *how power operates* *and* *empowering* oneself and others to take action, this definition foregrounds the importance of reflection and a disposition for learning to enable action resulting in social change to take place. Hvinden & Halvorsen, (2018) describe this as active agency, referring “partly to the dynamic complex of persons’ self-reflection, evaluation of their own experience and observation of the world around them” (p. 871). These grounded practices of agency include “internal dialogues, critical awareness of possibilities for change in the world around them, planning, decision-making, choice, discussion and interaction with others” (p. 871).

Faced with restraints, agents can “undertake action through the very structures which constrain them, reproducing or changing those structures in creative ways if they have the resources” (Page and Petray 2016, p. 89). While *access* to resources is key here, the structuration approach to agency focuses on a dynamic interplay, rather than static dualism, between individual and society (Giddens, 1984). Agency and structures are linked – in that social practices produce structure and structures are produced by social practices – and the reflexive individual becomes actively agential in the process.

Furthermore, agency can be conceptualised in an even more dynamic definition of interactive never-ending cycles of change: a cycle of structure – interaction – structural elaboration (Archer, 1995). Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018) comment, though, that such cycles can be virtuous or vicious; either producing improved situations through cycles of change, or reproducing and exacerbating social disadvantage.

Armatya Sen makes a direct link between the agency and freedom in his well-known strengths-based capabilities framework (1993) which has been influential in the international development field. A conceptual alignment between agency and freedom is found in Sen’s thinking: that a person’s capability to *do, be and/or achieve* that which they value, constitutes their freedom (Sen, 1993). The definition allows for diverse ways of knowing and experiencing to be valued. It allows for an understanding of individual agency that need not be housed in individualism.

## *Relational Agency and Interdependence*

Taking us further from the philosophical centralism of the western Enlightenment period and modernist structuration theory are contemporary conceptualisations of agency that value relationality, interdependence, and allow for the vitality of non-human and more-than-human agency. Following Helen Nicholson, who writes on Applied Theatre, this is a recognition that

pathways to social agency are created not only through overthrowing structures of power but also biopolitically, in performative flows and rhythms of human and non-human interaction, and the spatial, temporal and material habits of everyday life (Nicholson, 2016, p. 250)

This is a definition of agency not as something to be achieved or possessed, but something to be experienced and practiced. Agency is enacted in encounters and experiences in the present: “not discretely distributed between the human and the non-human; rather it mutually comes about in the immediate material constitution of any experiential encounter” (Dewsbury, 2011, p. 74).

In this idea of agency, change “is not just willed by humans but comes about equally through the materialities of the world in which we are just a part, and which, through habit, we encompass in the everyday, every changing, assemblage of thought, intensity and matter (Dewsbury, 2011, p. 152). This accords with Barad's view of agency not as a noun but as a practice (2003). In this posthumanist approach, the concept of agency and action toward change can be “affective, situated and embodied” as much as it is cognitive (Nicholson, 2016, p. 252).

Rosi Braidotti describes how an ethical approach to understanding of social change and power is not lost in the assemblages of experience and meaning-making and argues for an affirmative ethics in such work which is “embodied, embedded, relational and affective” (p. 466):

Yes, we have to be accountable for the present, to be worthy of the present, but that is neither a passive acceptance of the status quo, nor a flattening out of our differential locations. It is rather a multiplication, a complexification of the work of critical thinking, so that on the basis of the cartographies – which are the accounts of what we are ceasing to be and of what we are going through in that process, we then can trace what we are in the process of becoming. (Braidotti, 2019, p. 466).

In such an affirmative conceptualisation of change and agency, not flattened out but vibrant with experience, it is not just humans who practice and who are accorded agency; but also Country, memory, waterways and all non-human life.

## *Arts and agency*

When it comes the arts, agency can be spoken of in terms of the agency of artists, communities, audiences, as well as the agency of time, space, memory and matter.

This view of the arts and agency, enables an acknowledgment of complexity, and as Braidotti states, a ‘complexification of the work of critical thinking’; while at the same time, tracing ‘what we are in the process of becoming’.

Engaging in the arts can cultivate the conditions for both practicing and unleashing agency, although some arts practices in this context are not necessarily liberatory. Arts practice, when appreciated for its embodied, embedded, relational and affective capacities, enables creators, participants and audience to encounter complexity in ways that go beyond linear, ideologically static or results-focussed engagement. Holding the paradoxical and the uncertain in everyday life within an aesthetic and/or cultural frame, can engender transformational experience. It can do so by making the familiar unfamiliar, mobilising meaning-making informed by generations past, and animating people to new learnings about themselves, others and the natural systems of which they are a part.

## Author Biography

Mary Ann Hunter works as an educator, facilitator and researcher in creative change in educational and peacebuilding contexts. She has worked in policy, media, creative industry and community-based roles internationally, and prior to living in Hobart, she was coordinator of meenah mienne, a mentoring and alternative learning program lead by Tasmanian Aboriginal elders for young people in the justice system. Mary Ann has held lecturing positions at the National Institute of Education,

Singapore, and the University of Queensland where she was Research Associate with the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. As a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Tasmania and national evaluator for various arts programs, Mary Ann is the recipient of numerous teaching and research awards and co-author of *Education, the Arts and Sustainability: Emerging Practice for a Changing World* (Springer, 2018) and *Education and the Arts* (3rd ed, OUP, 2018). Mary Ann has been deeply involved in peace and the arts initiatives with early involvement in the Acting Together initiative and as a co-coordinator of e-learning exchanges for IMPACT with Armine Avetisyan and Carmen Olaechea. In 2019, Mary Ann formed Peacethink, a facilitating, training and consulting initiative to bring processes of peacethinking to everyday life in communities and workplaces. Her caring and cared-for teenagers, animals, and families of belonging across the world bring a stable heart to her work. Mary Ann is a member of IMPACT Leadership Circle.

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