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Intentionality of Action in Cultural Context

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Introduction

Presently, much discussion is going on about whether human beings possess a free will; whether human behaviour is intentional and goal-directed or rather automatic and primarily a product of neuronal processes; whether human beings can be held responsible for their behaviour; and to what degree behaviour is based on rationality and self-reflection. These discussions do more or less explicitly deal with the concept of agency and its psychological basis.

Human agency – a topic of research in philosophy, social sciences and anthropology – is discussed here from a psychological perspective taking culture into account. Presumably the development of psychology as a discipline and many of its theoretical approaches would never have been possible without the fundamental assumption of human agency. However, widely differing views on agency exist, going back to debates about dual processes of mind and body. Proponents of behaviourism studied reactions of participants to certain stimuli in experimental studies, rather than agency. Cognitive theories brought about a shift from the mechanistic paradigm to an organismic and interactionistic view, followed by emotion theories dealing with emotion and motivation as part of human agency. From the point of view of these latter theories, human behaviour cannot be regarded as simple deterministic reaction but as a process of goal-directed action. Intentionality became an important aspect of human agency while agency was regarded as the dominant characteristic of the human being. The question is, how can the person's agency be characterized? One approach is to ask for reasons why the person acts in this and not in another way. Does the person act in the observed way because he/she has decided and planned to do so after having chosen among alternatives in order to pursue certain goals? Or does the person believe that she cannot act differently due to internal or external constraints? Both alternatives are related to agency even though certain constraints (which may have resulted from the person's own previous behaviour, from external conditions, or other factors) may limit the scope and direction of agency. Agency is based

on intentionality (including choice among several alternatives). However, agency does not necessarily mean 'free' choice since internal or external, stable or variable factors can constrain behaviour to a certain extent. The person may be more or less aware of these constraints, and may intentionally take into account these constraints by processes of assimilation or accommodation. The question arising here is whether the person practices agency even if she believes that factors beyond her control guide her behaviour? Thus, agency is a theoretical concept of psychologists and other scientists who aim to describe and explain human behaviour; furthermore, agency beliefs can be seen as part of a person's naïve theory on the self and other persons.

Human agency has been studied in psychology by taking into account intentions, goal setting and planning, future orientation, self-regulation, self-efficacy and coping (e.g., Bandura 2001). In the same line, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) conceive of agency as particular kinds of developmental outcomes: 'those that represent the actualization of potential for (a) differentiated perception and response; (b) directing and controlling one's own behavior; (c) coping successfully under stress; (d) acquiring knowledge and skill; (e) establishing and maintaining mutually rewarding relationships; and (f) modifying and constructing one's own physical, social, and symbolic environment' (1994: 569). A related view suggests a close relation between agency and intentionality. Tomasello et al. (2005) conceive of intentional action as a larger adaptive system in which goals and action are components that serve to regulate the organism's behavioural interactions with the environment. According to Bratman (1999), intentions include a plan of action the person chooses and commits herself to in pursuit of a goal; thus, intentions include the goal (environmental effects or self actions, or both) and the means (action plans). Another psychological approach to agency is the study of the subjective agency beliefs. One of our questions here is whether and why people differ with respect to agency beliefs and whether this affects individual and social behaviour.

The history of psychology indicates that the underlying theoretical framework of the researcher (and the dominant theoretical *'Zeitgeist'*) defines whether intentional or deterministic (internal or external) causes of behaviour are used for the respective psychological conceptualization of agency. Agency beliefs are influenced by personal characteristics and by situational factors. Presumably, both scientific and lay theorizing on agency are influenced by general cultural belief systems.

Most scientific psychological approaches on agency are based on Western theorizing, assuming an individualistic orientation of the person and the basic motivation for autonomy (e.g., Ryan and Deci 2000). Only very recently have culture-informed approaches questioned the Western concept of agency based on individuality, independence and autonomy, and asked whether relatedness and social orientation guide people's behaviour in certain cultural contexts (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991,

2002). Therefore, our question is whether and which kind of cultural differences exist with respect to people's naïve theories on reasons for human behaviour, and whether such cultural differences affect human behaviour and social interaction.

Culture is regarded here as an important factor affecting agency while agency and intentionality influence culture. This process is mediated by social interactions which require the ability and motivation to understand the intentions of others and cultural learning (Tomasello et al. 2005). Cultural learning develops on the basis of joint attention and shared intentionality and involves the development of agency. In line with Bruner (1996), we conceive of culture as a belief system providing meaning to what we perceive. Cultural rules and norms can be understood as ways to solve fundamental problems of social existence such as understanding oneself, one's relationship to other people and to the community, and one's orientation towards people and authorities in power (Shweder 1982). Accordingly, we assume here that culture evolves as a result of individual and shared agency in processes of social interactions; culture provides solutions for problems and structures the way we understand and make sense of the world, the self, and the relation between them. Thereby, culture organizes intentional behaviour and agency.

In the following pages we deal with theoretical approaches to agency from a developmental psychological and a cultural point of view. In the first part, we examine selected psychological theories which stem from assumptions on agency and the subjective belief in agency. In the second part, we discuss to what extent theories on agency depend on cultural belief systems and what the implications of these cultural belief systems are for other agency beliefs.

Basic Elements of Agency and Its Development

Human Need for Understanding and Explanation

First, some preliminary remarks on human beings' need to understand the self and the world are necessary. This need underlies the belief in human agency and the tendency of human beings to engage in causal attributions. According to Heider (1958), subjective causal attributions indicate a belief in agency; their function is to help the person understand the world and the self.

A subjective theory on causes of observed behaviour of others usually refers to internal or external causes (or to their interaction). This holds for self-perception and for person-perception. For example, people tend to believe that the causes of their success are rather based on internal (stable or variable) attributes (ability and/or effort) and causes for other people's success are based on external attributes (and vice versa for failure). These attributions are based on specific assumptions regarding person-environment relationships; causal attributions structure one's experiences

and can affect motivation and related behaviour (e.g., achievement, aggression).

Often, such attributions are not based on validated personal experience but are adopted from certain cultural beliefs. For example, a pregnant mother may interpret the felt foetus signals as the unborn infant's intention to receive care and attention, or she may interpret the same behaviour as caused by biological factors determining reactions of the unborn baby. Preschool children employ magical thinking to interpret physical processes until they have achieved the level of concrete operational thinking. In certain cultures, sickness and physical problems are interpreted as being caused by bad spirits or by bad behaviour of the person. The Shaman is asked to serve as mediator and make the bad spirits leave the sick person. In the Batak culture a practice was used where in the case of a person's transgression the victim or Shaman could give power to a magic artefact to hurt or kill the aggressor without physical contact (see Kornadt 2007). Here, the artefact is believed to possess agency.

Attributions of behaviour and of psychological or physical conditions of a person can take the form of rather complicated theoretical assumptions of agency, based in part on subjective experiences, shared cultural beliefs, and wishful thinking or fears. In this chapter, agency is dealt with as a specific characteristic of human beings. In the following section, the structure, function, and sociocultural conditions of personal agency are discussed.

Development of Agency

From a psychological view, the question is how far the development of agency is influenced by biological and environmental processes and their interactions, and how individual differences in agency develop and affect further development. Development of agency requires an understanding of intentional actions of others. Infants begin to understand intentional action by 14 months of age, including their selective attention to goal-relevant aspects of situations. This can be seen as the basis for cultural learning (Tomasello et al. 2005). The infant observer now understands the means-ends relations of the observed act which is a precondition for imitation – an act of learning about intentionality which contributes to the development of understanding others' agency in the sociocultural context.

The development of agency is a life-long process which can be seen as an ongoing active construction of the person's own development depending on the respective developmental tasks and the individual and contextual conditions. Successful agency in later life can be described as gains in some areas which compensate for losses in others (Baltes 1997). Thus, agency can be viewed as a phenomenon of considerable individual variability and plasticity.

One branch of theorizing has regarded development as being primarily influenced by (inborn) biological factors, while another branch conceived of

development as primarily affected by environmental conditions. This rather simple nature-nurture controversy dominated the field for quite a long time. Since advocating one-sided positions did not improve the theoretical discussions, *interactions* between both environmental and biological conditions are now taken into account (e.g., Rutter and Silberg 2002).

Furthermore, in their bio-ecological paradigm of human development, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) have suggested an extension and redefinition of the behavioural genetics paradigm beyond the assumed interactions between genes and environment, which may be helpful to better understand the development of agency. The authors assume proximal processes through which genetic potentials for effective psychological functioning are activated. They are interested in how far persons differ in their 'innate capacity for realizing individual talents and buffering against dysfunction' and 'under what circumstances such constructive potentials find expression' (1994: 570). This view on interactions between innate and external conditions conceives of the person's agency as particular kinds of successful developmental outcomes while the authors also assume that agency of the person is part of the process of development.

In early development, the infant's behaviour can be seen as a precursor of agency. Though the infant can very early influence his or her own environment and transform aspects of the immediate setting, this capacity is limited not only in scope but also in quality. When infants influence the reactions of parents and caregivers by, for example, expressing certain needs, they are only reacting to their needs instead of acting on intentions. Acting on own intentions develops somewhat later (about after 8 months of age). A basic developmental achievement is the development of shared intentionality based on the rudimentary ability to understand the intentions of the other person – an important precondition for imitation and cultural learning (Tomasello et al. 2005). The later development of a 'theory of mind' plays an important role in the understanding of agency and intentionality and varies cross-culturally (Lillard 1998). As for the development of agency, this is influenced by innate processes during the sensorimotor development and the social and material environment and can be analysed according to the above-mentioned developmental outcomes which represent the actualization of various potentials.

To summarize, agency includes internal mental processes and the intentional expression of behaviour. Furthermore, agency can be directed to the inner self and/or to the environment. It develops in early childhood as a necessary part of human development.

Development of Intentionality and Goal-directed Behaviour

A central characteristic of agency has been seen in intentionality and the related processes of goal-directed and self-directed behaviour. Early indicators of intentionality can be observed in sensorimotor development.

Based on results from their innovative experiments on toddlers, Meltzoff and Brooks (2001) concluded that infants tend to attribute intentionality to living rather than to physical mechanistic objects, thus giving priority to the social environment and to human behaviour as the basis for the development of agency. The early understanding of physical and social agency in infancy gives rise to more mature understanding of the self as a mental agent. This is a product of complex developmental processes.

In their developmental theory of early understanding of the self as agent, Fonagy et al. (2002) differentiate five levels of agency of the self: physical, social, teleological, intentional and representational. With ongoing development, actions are viewed as related to causality. Around 8 to 9 months of age, infants differentiate actions from their outcomes; infants now represent actions as means to achieve certain goal states. During the second year, infants view the self as an intentional agent whose actions are caused by previous intentional states such as desires (Wellman and Phillips 2001) and whose actions can change physical and also mental aspects of the environment. Understanding agency as mental causation gives rise to including the representation of epistemic mind states such as beliefs (development of theory of mind). This understanding of the self as a 'representational agent' is a precondition for the development of the 'autobiographical self'. According to the authors, early in development, agency is represented as part of causal relations that connect actions to their agents and also to the world. Therefore, research on the development of agency and the self also needs to focus on the effects of agency on further development.

Several factors including context and the present developmental situation can influence the direction and onset of agency during development over the life span. From a life span perspective, agency and the related pursuit of goals is influenced by the person's past experience, expectations, hopes and fears regarding the future, belief in self-efficacy, the experience of developmental tasks, constraints and chances. Also, the belief in one's agency and self-efficacy influences goal-directed behaviour such as the choice of goals (and related plans to achieve this goal), the termination of a goal-directed behaviour after successful goal attainment, the choice of an alternative goal in case of anticipated difficulties with goal attainment, or giving up a goal after unsuccessful pursuit. From a developmental perspective, continuities and discontinuities in goal-directed behaviour indicate ways of flexible coping and optimization of development. Selection of goals and optimization of a goal pursuit thus constitute preconditions for successful development over the life span especially in times of stress or (normative or nonnormative) transition. The ability to maintain long-term goals even when facing immediate temptations is one of the major aspects of human agency. Therefore, self-control is an important and necessary ability for all children to learn.

In our own studies on the intentional duration of goal pursuit, we have induced conflicting motivations such as prosocial and achievement

motivation, thereby affecting the intensity and duration of goal pursuit in preschoolers. When children who are distressed recognize the chance to shift their attention to another goal such as achievement, they do so and cope with distress effectively. This indicates a certain 'rationality' in using distracting stimuli and switching goals in order to cope with distress effectively (Trommsdorff and Friedlmeier 1999). In line with other studies which have shown that attachment security fosters the ability to delay gratifications (Sethi et al., 2000), attachment security predicts the ability to regulate emotions in an achievement situation (Trommsdorff and Rothbaum in press). Thus, the question arises whether the quality of goal pursuit (degree of persistence and flexibility) as a part of intentionality and agency is affected by the person's agency beliefs. This question will be discussed below with reference to attachment theory.

Attachment and the Development of Autonomy

Autonomy has been regarded as a main characteristic of agency in mainstream psychology. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan 1995; Ryan and Deci 2000) assumes that striving for autonomy is one of the basic needs of human beings. From a developmental perspective, autonomy is indicated by exploration early in development, and it develops on the basis of secure attachment relationships. Attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) assumes a biologically based, universal need for attachment, and universality of preconditions for and consequences of attachment. The central assumption is that sensitive, responsive caretaking fosters a secure attachment relationship between the caretaker and child, which, in turn, allows for exploration and related social and cognitive development. Children who have a secure attachment relationship with a caregiver, as compared to children who have ambivalent or avoidant attachment relationships, are described as differing in the way they construct person-environment relationships which are represented in their internal working model (evaluating oneself as more or less competent and other persons as more or less trustworthy). Assumptions of attachment theory thus include viewing agency as based on autonomy and relatedness.

The assumption of attachment theory of a close relation between attachment security and autonomy (exploration) has recently been challenged by cross-cultural studies (Rothbaum et al. 2000; Rothbaum and Trommsdorff 2007). So far only a few cross-cultural studies on attachment have been carried out (see Van IJzendoorn and Sagi 1999). Most of these studies report a higher number of children with secure attachment relationships as compared to the other groups. It should be noted that, in several non-Western cultures, exploration and independence/autonomy are not as highly valued as in Western cultures. Furthermore, most attachment theorists have not taken into account cultural conditions of development. The caretaker's sensitivity is thought to be a basic

precondition for the development of secure attachment but culture-specific variations have been ignored. Similarly, differences in the culture-specific value placed on exploration, the assumed consequence of secure attachment, have not been taken into account. Exploration and autonomy are not necessarily desirable aspects of agency in non-Western cultures; other aspects of agency may be more desirable, such as dependency and relatedness. The attachment theory is a fruitful approach to explain the development of agency when cultural factors are taken into account.

Bidirectionality in the Co-construction of Agency

Since goal pursuit and internal control seem to be influenced by the subjective interpretation of the self and the world, one may assume that the cultural context affects the way intentionality and agency develop by providing interpretive perspectives and schemata (such as the inner working model as suggested by attachment theory), which arise by co-constructive processes in the interaction between the child, the caretakers, and other relevant persons. From a unidirectional approach, socialization conditions and/or biological dispositions were focused upon as central factors for development. These approaches have largely ignored the active participation of the child in his or her development, and the role of agency in the process of active development (Lerner 1982).

When the unidirectional paradigm was opened for a bidirectional perspective, the activity of the child became a target of research, e.g., with respect to affecting the parent's behaviour (Bell 1979; Kuczynski 2003). However, bidirectionality in parent-child relations is not symmetrical, since infants have only limited resources to change their environment. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies have shown that bidirectionality is asymmetric in parent-child relations in other cultures (Trommsdorff and Kornadt 2003), and it remains asymmetric during the life span in many other cultures, especially in East Asia (e.g., Trommsdorff 2006; Trommsdorff in press). Therefore the question arises whether this implies a different extent or even a different quality of agency as part of human development in parent-child relations in other cultures?

Agency can be regarded as the ability to *change one's environment*. However, this is only one aspect of agency. Another aspect of agency can be seen in the ability to *change the self*, e.g., by learning processes which are basic for development. The child's active involvement is needed for learning and development. In their theory of internalization, Grusec and Goodnow (1994) have extended the idea of interactive processes between parents and children and the active role played by children. They assert that children have to both understand and accept their parents' message as a prerequisite for internalization. These cognitive, emotional and motivational processes are part of both children's and parents' agency; these processes affect the children's ability to change the self (e.g., by the development of self-regulation), to change their environment (e.g., by

developing cognitive, social and emotional competence), and thereby to co-construct their own development. This ability develops early in development, it differs with respect to different cultural and situational contexts (also depending on changing developmental tasks), and it affects further behaviour. It is an essential prerequisite for human plasticity, which is an important characteristic of development over the life span.

Scientific and Lay Theories on Agency in Cultural Context

Attributes of Personality

A major debate in personality theory deals with the question of whether traits or states should be the primary focus of research. In particular, the debate centres around the question whether assuming that behaviour is determined by personality traits, or by situations, will provide the most valid answers. Traits are usually defined as relatively stable, enduring internal attributes which account for individual differences in thoughts, feelings and behaviour. States are seen as changing characteristics of a person depending on the situation. An extreme situation-specific view on personality will risk to losing sight of consistent patterns of thinking in different persons. Cross-cultural research on personality has partly supported the trait approach on the basis of the 'five factors' theory of personality by McCrae and Costa (1996). However, the results from other cross-cultural studies are inconsistent (for an overview see Triandis and Suh 2002; Trommsdorff and Mayer 2005).

Present research shows that both the trait and state perspectives are too short-sighted. Magnusson (1990) suggests an integrated holistic model for research. Similarly, Mischel (2004) advocates an integrative view on personality taking into account situation-specific conditions while accounting for stability and consistency in personality characteristics. He views persons as coherent organisms who may change their behaviour over time during development and in different situations but still remain the same unique persons. Another integration is suggested by McCrae and Costa (1996), who point out that in their 'five factors' theory of personality a distinction should be made between inherited basic tendencies such as the 'Big Five traits', conceived of as universally valid and stable characteristics of the person, and culture-specific adaptations such as 'self-concept' and 'personal goals'. Church (2000) therefore asks the question: 'Might not individuals in all cultures manifest their traits, at least to some degree, in their selection of situations?' (2000: 683).

Interestingly, the discussion of the question whether genes (stable traits) or environment (situation-specific states) are better suited for describing persons, is not unique to scientific personality psychology. This dichotomy characterizes a typical bias, present also in naïve theorizing about the self and agency. The general question is whether primacy is given to internal or contextual characteristics.

Self-Construal as a Framework for Self-Perception and Social Explanation: the Impact of Culture

Knowledge of a person's self-construal or self-concept helps to understand and predict the person's behaviour. The self-construal results from the co-construction of the self in interaction with relevant other persons during development in the cultural context and thus it is closely related to cultural beliefs and values which are internalized during the person's development.

According to mainstream American psychology, the conceptualization of the self can be described as 'self-contained individual' in contrast to 'ensembled individual' which views (certain) other persons as part of oneself (Sampson 1988). In line with this conceptualization, mainstream American psychology has traditionally placed more value on self-development as compared to development of interpersonal relatedness (Guisinger and Blatt 1994). Self-development focusing on autonomy, independence and individual identity has been described, in psychoanalytic theory, attachment theory, and in Kohlberg's theory of moral development. In contrast, the development of interpersonal relatedness has not gained much interest in Western theorizing.

Only recently, based on cross-cultural and culture-psychological research, has it become clear that the conceptualization of the self as 'self-contained individual' is not shared in other cultures, which are more likely to prefer the conceptualization of 'embedded individual'. Richard Shweder's (1991) criticism of the mainstream Western approaches is based on the observation that in other cultures, more sociocentric conceptions of the person prevail. Empirical studies on open-ended descriptions of persons given by Hindu Indians and by American respondents showed that Hindu Indians used more concrete and context-specific descriptions in comparison to the more abstract and context-free descriptions given by the American respondents (Shweder and Bourne 1984).

It is not surprising that different self-concepts prevail in different cultures. Cultures differ in ecological, social, economic and political systems, norms and rules of living, and their value structures. According to eco-cultural and value-dimension approaches, culture influences all levels of the macro, meso and micro system of a society and thus influences the socialization conditions as well as the development of the individual (see Bronfenbrenner 1979; Trommsdorff and Dasen 2001). At the same time, culture is influenced by individual behaviour. When the self-construal is seen as the basic psychological framework for predicting a person's behaviour (including person-perception and social explanation), cultural differences of the self-construal and related behaviour are of special interest.

Cultural Differences in Self-Construal: the Independent and Interdependent Selves

In the following, we focus on different cultural conceptualizations of the self based on the influential description by Markus and Kitayama (1991) of the

'independent' and 'interdependent' self. The authors describe the notion of the self as an independent, separate entity in Western, individualistic cultures, in contrast to the notion of the self as interdependent with other persons and inseparable from the social context in non-Western collectivistic cultures. More specifically, the authors maintain that the *independent* view of the self includes the assumption of autonomy and distinctiveness (in attributes and processes), internal attributes and processes as determinants for behaviour, individual differences in behaviour on account of different internal attributes and processes, the value of distinctiveness (as expressed in behaviour). The *interdependent* view of the self includes the assumption of interdependence and relatedness – the self is part of social relationships, relationships with other persons and responsiveness to the others with whom one is interdependent as determinants of behaviour, variability of behaviour due to the social context and the sensitivity to social expectations in different contexts, the value of relatedness (as expressed in behaviour). There is ample evidence from several ethnographic studies of Asian and Pacific Island cultures which describe a more interdependent conception of the self (Geertz 1975; Hsu 1985; Lebra 1994). Hsu (1985) describes the meaning of the Chinese word for 'man' (*yen*) as the place of the individual in the network of interpersonal relationships; the person's wishes and behaviour are evaluated according to the way they inhibit or foster these relationships.

The assumption that cultures can be characterized according to differences in self-construals has been criticized, however, since cultures are not homogenous systems and their complexity cannot be accurately described according to these broad dichotomies (Kagitcibasi 1996; Matsumoto 1999). It is rather assumed that the self in all cultures can be viewed as incorporating both independent and interdependent aspects in various degrees while the salience of the different selves becomes more or less accessible in different contexts (Matsumoto 1999; Church 2000; for a critical meta-analysis see Oyserman et al. 2002).

Cultural Differences in Social Explanation and Self-Construal: Attribution Bias

Conceptualizations of the self are connected to thinking, feeling and behaviour, including beliefs about agency. In the following we focus only on self and person-perception (social explanation) in order to discuss the role of agency. According to the assumptions by Markus and Kitayama (1991), self-construal and person-perception vary in line with cultural values. Therefore, it can be assumed that in individualistic as compared to collectivistic cultures, and for persons with independent as compared to interdependent self-construal, explanations of one's own and of other people's behaviour will focus more on internal, global and context-free causes as compared to external situation-specific causes.

Attribution bias: individual versus group dispositions. In mainstream social psychology, it is traditionally assumed that people attribute actions to

properties of the actor. There is ample empirical evidence that people tend to attribute observed behaviour to personal dispositions of the actor. This bias has been called the 'fundamental attribution error' (Ross 1977). It is discussed in the literature as 'correspondence bias', which has been described as a universal human tendency (Gilbert and Malone 1995).

As a matter of fact, the empirical studies in Western settings and with Western persons are in line with the assumption that people tend to explain observed behaviour by internal and stable properties of the actor (e.g., Jones and Harris 1967). However, it is unclear whether this attribution bias also holds for persons from other cultural settings. In India, this result could not be replicated (Miller 1984). Hindus (children and adults) explained various kinds of observed social behaviour (transgressions and prosocial behaviour) more often by external, situational conditions as compared to persons from the United States. In several further experimental studies on judgements of social stimuli, participants from the United States showed a bias towards personal dispositions (traits) and Chinese favoured social situations (environment) to explain behaviour (Morris and Peng 1994).

Several cross-cultural studies on person-perception and social explanation in East Asia produced somewhat inconsistent results with respect to the effect of discounting dispositions (Morris and Peng 1994). Most studies confirmed Heider's (1958) description of a bias towards attribution to personal dispositions as a bias held by Western (American and European) but not by Asian (Chinese) people. Possibly, this is a result of the generalized assumption in Western cultures that individual autonomy is most important. This exaggeration of individuality is not shared in Asian countries. Especially when people have to explain ambiguous behaviour, Chinese as compared to American people are less likely to attribute these to internal traits as opposed to contextual factors (Morris and Peng 1994; Morris et al. 2001). When taking into account culture variance, some interesting results appear. In the case of a cognitive style associated with conventionality, a preference for the culturally preferred attribution style can be observed (attribution to personality traits in the case of Americans; attributions to social conditions in the case of Chinese) (Chiu et al. 2000; Nisbett et al. 2001; Norenzayan, Choi and Nisbett 2002).

According to the above-cited studies, the general result is that people all over the world tend to attribute behaviour to internal dispositions at least to some degree (in Western cultures more than in Asian cultures). As for the attribution of behaviour to external causes (situations), a significant effect of culture can be observed: people from Western cultures prefer situational inferences significantly less compared to people from Asian cultures.

Agency in Cross-cultural Perspective

The main questions addressed in the next section are: how does agency affect development and behaviour? Have individual and cultural differences to be taken into account? According to our conceptualization of

agency, we will deal with autonomy, achievement and control as main aspects of agency.

Autonomy

Most recent developmental theories, at least implicitly, assume that agency underlies the process of development. In Western theorizing, agency is regarded as an expression of autonomy, self-efficacy and control (see the above-cited summary by Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994). A prominent example of this view is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan 1995; Ryan and Deci 2000). According to SDT, autonomy, competence and relatedness are defined as the basic needs of the person; fulfilment of these needs increases well-being, psychological growth and personal integrity. Cross-cultural studies on SDT focus on the ways various cultural forms support and fulfil these basic needs (Ryan and Deci 2000).

The assumption that autonomy constitutes a universal basic need has stirred controversial discussions based on culture-relevant studies. Several empirical studies indicate that differences in the value of autonomy exist among Western and Asian countries. These differences are in line with cultural variations in the preference of independence. Thus, socialization strategies differ significantly between East Asian and Western families (for a summary see Choi and Choi 2002; Trommsdorff and Kornadt 2003; Rothbaum and Trommsdorff 2007). In Western (European and American) countries, independence and autonomy of children's behaviour are expected at an earlier age as compared to East Asian countries (Japan, China). The age of autonomy expectations in the development of children and adolescents is influenced by cultural values (Feldman and Quatman 1988; Feldman and Rosenthal 1990). Autonomy expectations of Chinese, as compared to American mothers and teenagers, are significantly delayed and at the same time more correlated between the generations (Stewart et al. 1999). The same pattern of results was found by Schwarz et al. (2005) for German as compared to non-Western mothers.

A problem with these empirical studies is that the authors used different conceptualizations for defining autonomy. Some authors claim that autonomy is closely related to individualism and independence. Since individualism is related to giving priority to the individual's needs and goals rather than to the group's needs and goals, autonomy is usually regarded as part of individualistic orientations and independence while independence is usually understood as being separate from or not relying on others. However, such a conceptualization of autonomy cannot be used in cross-cultural studies, especially not in cultures favouring interdependence, tradition and duty-based relationships (Miller 2003). From a culture-informed perspective, autonomy is not the same as independence and is also different from individualism and separateness (Rothbaum and Trommsdorff 2007; Trommsdorff and Rothbaum in press). Autonomy can be expressed as behaviour of a person serving the needs of

the group. Accordingly, a person may be autonomous either when pursuing goals of an embedded self or of an individualistic self. The person may be autonomously independent and individualistic or the person may be autonomously interdependent and collectivistic. According to SDT, autonomy is based on the degree of internalization of values (no matter whether individualistic or collectivistic) when pursuing a goal. SDT theory regards culture as providing more or less support for fulfilling these basic needs ('cultural fit'). A relatively poorer fit with basic needs may explain why some cultural values are less easily internalized than others.

Achievement

Attribution, self-efficacy and control beliefs influence decision making and behaviour. One example is the influence on achievement. In his influential studies on achievement motivation Weiner (1992) demonstrated clear differences in achievement depending on the attribution of success and failure (to internal, external, stable and variable factors). For example, persons who prefer to attribute their success to internal and stable factors show higher achievement; the reverse is true in the case of attribution of failure to internal and stable factors. This 'fundamental attribution error' refers to a bias towards explaining one's own failure by external factors. This self-serving bias is related to a tendency to reinforce a positive self image. However, this result holds only for Western cultures.

Recent cross-cultural research has demonstrated that these results cannot be replicated in non-Western countries (Campbell et al. 2004). This may be explained by a culture-specific meaning of achievement, success and failure (see Kornadt et al. 1980; Maehr and Nicholls 1980; Yan and Gaier 1994). Achievement for personal benefit is valued in the United States but not in Asian countries where in-group benefits are more important. Also, the concept of failure has a different meaning in Western and Asian cultures. It is considered a failure in the West when personal standards (which result from social and individual comparisons) are not met; in Asian cultures, it is considered a failure when expectations of the in-group (e.g., own family, colleagues) are not met. Furthermore, for Asians it has often been demonstrated that the self-serving bias based on the need for positive self-regard is not common; rather, the reverse tendency can be observed (Heine et al. 1999). This is a result of the socio-centred thinking and belief that one should not present oneself as superior to others.

Another approach to the effects of attribution on achievement has been suggested by Dweck (1999). Her approach to self-theories and their role in motivation and agency is based on the assumption and substantive empirical evidence that 'entity theories' (belief in stable factors of self) as compared to 'incremental theories' (belief in malleable factors of self) set up conflicts between learning and performance goals; e.g., effort is avoided since it gives a negative message about one's ability. In contrast, in incremental theories effort is in the service of learning. Therefore, the

emphasis on the malleable factors (intelligence, effort) allows for more learning and achievement, as can be seen in East Asian cultures (Trommsdorff and Rothbaum in press).

Control

Studies on control beliefs have their origins in social learning theory. Locus of control theory differentiates between internal (personal) and external control over outcomes and assumes individual differences in this belief and effects on learning and achievement (Rotter 1966). Cross-cultural studies, however, have demonstrated that empirical results on the relation between internal control and achievement could not be replicated in non-Western societies (e.g., Lefcourt 1973; for a summary see Weisz, Rothbaum and Blackburn 1984). Several authors have therefore suggested that control beliefs are influenced by the cultural context, and that the individual belief in control can be understood as a sociocultural construction of reality (e.g., Mirowsky and Ross 1984; Fung, Abeles and Carstensen 1999; McKean Skaff and Gardiner 2003;). In their 43–country study Smith, Trompenaars and Dugan. (1995) showed that three dimensions emerge on the basis of the Rotter items, which represent internal/external control, individual/social orientation, and a luck/chance dimension.

Other cross-cultural studies which can be related to cultural differences in agency beliefs have demonstrated the usefulness of differentiating among cultures in terms of individualistic and collectivistic orientation (e.g., Triandis 1995; Hofstede 2001). Furthermore, agency as conceptualized from a culture-informed view should be differentiated with respect to *primary and secondary control* (Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder 1982; Azuma 1984; Kojima 1984; Weisz, Rothbaum and Blackburn 1984; Weisz 1990; Essau and Trommsdorff 1996; Trommsdorff and Essau 1998). *Primary control* is defined as control based on the intention of inducing changes in the environment. Here, the target is the environment, and assimilation is the dominant behaviour. *Secondary control* is understood as based on the intention of controlling the reactions of the self, and of altering the self rather than the environment. Here, the target is the actor, and accommodation is the dominant behaviour. Both, primary and secondary control, have been further differentiated into subcategories such as vicarious, illusory, predictive and interpretative control (Azuma 1984; Weisz, Rothbaum and Blackburn 1984).

Other authors apply the distinction between primary and secondary control to the development over the life span and the study of aging (Schulz and Heckhausen 1999). This approach is confined to studies in Western cultures and clearly favours primary control as a superior form of control as compared to secondary control. This view overlooks differences in the preference of control in different cultural groups and for different life domains. Accordingly, Gould (1999) questions the ecological validity of giving primacy to primary control. This criticism is in line with the view by

Weisz et al. (1984) and Rothbaum et al. (1982), who distinguish between primary and secondary control as two culture-specific pathways to control (their studies deal with the Japanese and the European American cultural contexts). In further culture-informed studies, socio-instrumental control based on interpersonal relations was shown to describe the specific control orientation of Chinese but not Anglo-American workers (Spector et al. 2002). Morling and Fiske (1999) prefer to use the concept of 'harmony-control' (separate from primary and secondary control) to describe the specific tendency of Hispanic as compared to Anglo-American persons to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships – a primary goal which is pursued by harmony-control behaviour. Empirical studies are needed to test whether harmony control is more closely related to secondary control.

In further studies, three dimensions of control have been elaborated: agents of control, means and mechanisms of control, and the ends or targets of control (Skinner 1996). The agent of control may reside within an individual or a group with which the person identifies (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Here, the notion of internal locus of control is extended by taking into account the fact that the controlling self can be an individual or a collective actor (group as collective actor) (Miller 2003). Also, one may exert control through the help of other persons (powerful others). The target of control varies depending on whether the individual directs control efforts towards the environment or towards the self (including inner attributes such as needs, wishes and beliefs). This again is related to primary and secondary control.

Proxy control and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy theory suggests that the persons' beliefs about their abilities to act in a certain way influence their goals, their outcome expectancies, and thereby their actions, such as the effort they put forth to achieve their respective goal. According to Bandura (2001; Bandura and Locke 2003), the concept of self-efficacy allows for assessment of an individual's control belief. Negative self-efficacy is related to the belief that the person does not have a certain (domain-specific) competence. According to Bandura's work, self-efficacy has turned out to be a powerful concept for predicting well-being in many parts of the world.

Control and coping. Recently, the concept of primary and secondary control has been successfully applied to different coping styles of persons preferring an independent versus interdependent self-construal in different ethnic groups (Lam and Zane 2004). Here, the self-construal mediates cultural differences in primary and secondary control when coping with interpersonal stressors. This underscores the importance of studying agency with respect to the relation between cultural variables and coping.

Control beliefs and social behaviour. The preference of control beliefs as part of the self-construal and agency influences social behaviour. So far, consistent cultural differences have been documented with respect to the preference of conflict and cooperation (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Group harmony plays an important role in social interactions especially within the in-group in East Asian cultures, while the reverse is the case for social interactions in

North America. Less conflict and competition is observed in social interactions in East Asian groups as compared to the United States. However, there are cultural differences in social behaviour which even though they might appear contradictory can be explained by differences in control beliefs. Depending on culture and related control beliefs, prosocial tendencies may be inhibited. In cultures valuing interdependence and harmony, prosocial behaviour should be more dominant especially within one's in-group, as compared to cultures where independence and negotiation of individual interests are highly valued. Interdependence should foster empathy, which has been widely recognized as activating prosocial motivation and reducing aggressiveness (e.g., Trommsdorff 2006). However, prosocial motivation does not necessarily induce prosocial *behaviour*. The behavioural outcome depends on situational constraints which may induce cognitive processes such as attributions, self-concept and control beliefs blocking prosocial behaviour, even in the case of an interdependent self-construal and high empathy for the other person. Here the belief in secondary control and accommodation is higher than in the case of an independent self-construal (Trommsdorff, Friedlmeier and Mayer in press).

Thus, agency comprises more than motivation; it includes cognitive processes of evaluations of the self and the environment (including the relation between actual and intended behaviour). This cognitive evaluation can give rise to different cultural meanings of behaviour. Prosocial behaviour usually means to act on behalf of the other person (by exerting primary control); it can also mean to make the other person lose face. Empathy and related prosocial motivation can therefore be in conflict with the belief in secondary control and thus intentionally constrain prosocial behaviour. Or empathy could stimulate prosocial behaviour, which means to intentionally choose secondary control and refrain from any interaction. Thus, seemingly ignoring the other person's needs can mean empathic awareness of this need and an agentic choice of secondary control by intentionally refraining from helping.

In our own studies we have observed a high degree of uncertainty and intrapersonal conflict when Japanese children observe another person in distress (Trommsdorff 1995). The children become quite distressed and tend to focus their empathic attention onto the other person without engaging in active help. This is in contrast to German children, who actually help in the case of empathy, presumably on the basis of their higher primary control beliefs (and belief in self-efficacy). Accordingly, cultural differences in control orientations as an aspect of agency have implications for various aspects of behaviour, including coping and interpersonal behaviour.

Shared Agency

Control beliefs are part of the cultural belief system. Culture can provide different meanings for control based on independent versus interdependent

actions. Such cultural meaning systems extend to another aspect of agency, which has traditionally been ignored by ideocentric Western psychology. Control can be shared by the group rather than deriving primarily from the self, a concept known as 'shared agency' (Bratman 1999). Bandura (2001) has similarly dealt with the notion of group-based agency, which he calls 'collective efficacy'. Shared agency derives from being part of a group. This conceptualization is interpersonal but at the same time it is individually experienced, as can be seen by the culture-specific meaning of duty (see Miller 1984; 2003). In individualistic cultures which value independence, the concept of duty is regarded as a constraint on freedom and agency while in socio-centered, interdependent contexts duty is conceived as a part of one's very personal experience. A similar perspective is taken by studies on the Japanese self and agency (Azuma 1986; Lebra 1994). Agency in Japanese culture is based on the interpersonal relationships which constitute the functional unit of the self. Thus, agency is characterized by experiencing interpersonal relationships and shared agency in the in-group (Markus and Kitayama 2002). Accordingly, agency can be experienced as having its source not in the self but in others – in the group, or in the relationship with others. This notion of 'shared agency' has not yet been sufficiently recognized by mainstream psychology even though it is a phenomenon observed in many non-Western parts of the world.

Implications for a Culture-informed Approach to Agency

Cross-cultural and culture-psychological studies on the aspects of agency highlight the fact that the mainstream psychological approach cannot account for the cultural diversity of conceptualizations of agency. However, the problem is to conceptualize cultural differences in a psychologically acceptable way by using psychological constructs which go beyond economic or political descriptions. While the description of cultures along single psychological dimensions such as individualism and collectivism implies oversimplification, such approaches may be a useful start, as studies by Hofstede (2001) or Inglehart (1997) have shown.

Cultural patterns. The dimension of individualism-collectivism is one important axis (beside other dimensions such as uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, power distance, and long-time perspective) along which cultures have been differentiated (Hofstede 2001). While the cultural level of value orientation has to be differentiated from the individual level of personal beliefs (Triandis 1995), the psychological characteristics of individuals from these cultures have been described in close relation to the theorizing of Markus and Kitayama (1991). In individualistic societies independence is encouraged, and in collectivistic societies, interdependence is highly valued. In both cultural contexts, independence and personal boundaries are valued very differently. According to Schwartz (1994), two aspects are related to the individualism-collectivism dimension. One aspect emphasizes the relative importance of personal

versus common interests. The other aspect focuses on autonomy (independence) versus embeddedness (interdependence) of the individual in relation to the group. Accordingly, Kagitcibasi (1996), criticizing the one-dimensionality of the concept of autonomy, differentiates between two cultural models: the model of relatedness refers to interdependent relations, and the model of separateness refers to independency where autonomy and personal boundaries are more important. Kagitcibasi also suggests an integration of these two models as part of social change.

From this discussion one can conclude that culture cannot be ignored in the study of human agency. We do not support a deterministic view on culture but rather assume moderating effects of culture. First, cultures are not homogenous entities. There are significant individual differences in behaviour which sometimes amount more to intracultural than intercultural differences. There is a wide variance in the numbers of people who identify with prominent cultural values (Trommsdorff and Friedlmeier 2004). Also, differences in value preferences between people from different generations have been demonstrated in several studies (e.g., Inglehart 1997; Trommsdorff, Mayer and Albert 2004) even though in more traditional societies, these differences are not very pronounced (Trommsdorff in press). Secondly, cultures do not directly influence behaviour, since cultures consist of multiple, more or less consistently, interrelated subsystems on various levels of the society which interact with each other and with the individual behaviour (for the ecological model of development see Trommsdorff 2007; Trommsdorff and Dasen 2001).

To summarize, we cannot assume that cultures are stable entities which determine individual behaviour. Instead, the question rather arises in which ways and by which processes culture influences human agency. Therefore, we have to take into account processes which affect the relationship between culture and individual behaviour (Trommsdorff and Friedlmeier 2004). A prominent view on such processes is the notion of the 'developmental niche' (Super and Harkness 1993), which consists of parental naïve developmental theories, developmental goals, beliefs and behaviour. The developmental niche can be regarded as a culture-specific context which provides the basis for agency and its development.

The difficult question remains as to how culture is transmitted over time from one generation to the other. Here, the questions of socialization processes and intergenerational relations in the transmission of culture become relevant from a cross-cultural perspective (Trommsdorff 2006; Trommsdorff in press). Such studies may demonstrate that people play a role in modifying and altering cultural belief systems and cultural scripts while at the same time serving to preserve certain culture-specificities which may constitute cultural 'models of agency' (Markus and Kitayama 2002). Thus, cultural models are both reflected in and stabilized by individual agency, e.g., by specific conceptualizations of autonomy.

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