

**Agency is resilience in action:
The role of recognition in transforming resistant agency to resilient agency**

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Abstract: The concept of agency has recently been introduced into the conversation about attachment-based psychotherapy. Agency can be a manifestation of resilience, the intrinsic capacity of all living organisms to differentiate between what is beneficial and what is harmful. Although human agency is often equated with the expression of autonomous action, it also functions in the background to provide the relational safety required for autonomous functioning through receptivity and mutual recognition. Relational safety begins with attachment and evolves into varied forms of affiliation that provide security and entail the obligations and accountability that constrain autonomy. The resilient “self-at-best” might be characterized as a state of optimal balance between autonomy and accountability. Agency can also serve a “resistant” rather than resilient function for individuals who do not experience sufficient relational safety, operating in the service of a “false self” or the “self-at-worst.” Psychotherapeutic interventions can restore an adaptive balance between autonomy and relational safety. The relational safety that attachment-based treatment provides is necessary, *but* it is not a sufficient for healing when a client’s agency is compromised - when agency is resistant, inhibited or misdirected, and not resilient. “Attuned disruption” of resistant agency may be necessary to restore and support the resilient function of agency and promote transformance. Case vignettes illustrate the resistant use of agency in misdirecting desire, disguising capability, and sacrificing growth to preserve a sense of relational safety. Active and receptive modes of agency are considered with regard to the importance of mutual recognition in resilience and transformance.

Introduction and overview

We want to fit in, and we want to stand out. We want to feel the safety of connection to others and at the same time the thrill of autonomy. As Shunryu Suzuki, Buddhist master and master of the Zen one-liner, observed, “If it doesn’t sound like a paradox it probably isn’t true.” While attachment theory has displaced psychoanalytic drive theory as a more useful model of human motivation, attachment is only one aspect of what motivates us. Relational safety is a necessary but often not sufficient condition for emotional healing and growth. Human existence requires maintaining a balance between the need for autonomy and the need for relatedness in order to assert our independence and also enjoy the security of connection to others. The term “agency” is often employed to refer to actions that are assertions of independence, particularly in contexts where human interdependence is insufficiently acknowledged and appreciated. Human development has often been mischaracterized as a linear process of increasing autonomy, not the ongoing interplay of individuality and affiliation. But perhaps the “relational turn” in psychodynamic thinking, and the emphasis on relational safety, of which attachment theory is a prime example, was an overcorrection.

Eileen Russell (2021), in her important and thought-provoking article, introduced the concept of agency and the term “agentic self,” into our attachment-centric conversation. Russell’s agentic self is the “embodied sense of being able to act in the world, to have an impact on one’s surroundings and important relationships, and the felt sense of connection between one’s will and desires and one’s goals” (Russell, 2021 p. 246). In an earlier contribution to the AEDP canon, Russell emphasized the role of resilience, defining it as “the self’s differentiation from that which is aversive to it” (2015, p.5). Agency translates desire into action, wanting into willing. If resilience is the capacity to realize one’s desires, then agency is resilience in action.

In the broadest sense, agency is purposeful action, a property of all living organisms. The exercise of agency entails an awareness of need or desire, the capability to take action to fulfill that need or desire, and the evaluation - whether implicit or explicit - of the safety of that action. While agency is often equated with action and assertions of autonomy, in social animals, including humans, it also serves to ensure compliance with social norms, thus serving to maintain relational cohesion in the group. Compliance with social norms is motivated by the desire for connection, not autonomy, and is expressed and recognized as an affiliative intention. Because other animals have co-evolved with their ecological niches, they are “naturally” resilient, insofar as they are epigenetically equipped with the capabilities required for survival and reproduction. Transformance, the upper limit of resilience, is, with few exceptions, largely limited in other animals to the expression of those genetically determined capabilities, with change occurring primarily through differential reproduction rates over generations.

Human agency is uniquely complicated because human life requires both autonomous functioning and the maintenance of relational security within a complex network of social groups and hierarchies. Human infants are equipped with less developed and more plastic nervous systems and are raised in a wide variety of physical and social environments. Different cultures, as well as different families and other groups within the same culture, have varying levels of tolerance for violating social norms. The exercise of agency in balancing the needs for relational safety and autonomous action entails the consideration of family, social and cultural norms, and of needs that emerge throughout an extended and complex life cycle. As a consequence, human existence offers, and requires opportunities for internally motivated transformation, individual expression, and innovation that other animals do not enjoy. It allows for a wider variety of ways to express and experience both autonomy and connection but carries the risks of existential isolation that other animals are largely spared.

At our best, we enjoy a sense of competence in our exercise of agency, and a sense of connection from recognizing others and knowing that we are recognized in return. Our needs for autonomy and for connection are in an adaptive dynamic balance, and we experience a sense of integration and coherence. If our exercise of agency is the translation of desire into action, it requires confidence in our capabilities and an evaluation of the consequences of that action. At our best we can recognize and tolerate the emotional arousal of desire, realistically evaluate whether we could act on our desire, and whether we should. Resilience is knowing what is best for us, the maintenance of an adaptive balance between autonomy and connection. However, we are not, and by definition can’t be, always at our best. Shame and guilt may interfere with our ability to access the embodied expressions of desire or make the risk of failure feel too painful. We may be too afraid of risking the disapproval of others to whom we feel accountable, whether that disapproval is real or perceived, and, fearful of abandonment, we may abandon ourselves.

Realizing new desires, risking failure by extending our capabilities, and re-evaluating our accountability to ourselves and to others over the course of youth, adulthood, and senescence, are manifestations of

transformance, the highest form of resilience. Transformance is bi-directional - both reparative and expansive, - and it has both active and receptive aspects. Like the roots of a plant, it seeks nurturance, and like the leaves, it grows upward toward the light.

Part I

Agency and living systems: Biological and cultural considerations

Agency in the broadest sense is the goal-directed and purposeful action that is a defining characteristic of all living systems (Ball, 2002; LeDoux, 2023; Thompson, 2007). Purpose does not necessarily imply conscious intention or a sense of identity, but simply the capacity to survive and reproduce, to differentiate between what is nourishing, neutral, and aversive. Living organisms maintain an internal metabolic equilibrium by maintaining a boundary between themselves and their environment, incorporating what is nourishing and excluding or eliminating what is toxic. If resilience is “the self’s differentiation from that which is aversive to it” (Russell, 2015), then perhaps it is an essential characteristic of all living organisms, even those without an explicit concept of selfhood. Biologists, some biologists anyway, attribute “minimal cognition” to all living organisms, since their survival requires an evaluative capacity (Godfrey-Smith, 2016). Daniel Dennett refers to this as “competence without comprehension” (2017, p. 336). Biologist J. Scott Turner (2017, p. xv), venturing into “the modern metaphysics of biology... squishy things like purposefulness, intentionality, and consciousness,” argues that agency is “the ineffable striving of all living things to become something.”¹ Gendlin (2012), reflects if Aristotle had had the opportunity to contribute to the discussion, he would have recognized agency as “anima” - the energy that drives plants to seek nutrients, animals to locomote through their domains, and humans (at least on some occasions) to reason.

Agency in animals involves the evaluative exploration of the environment under conditions of safety to seek nourishment or opportunities to reproduce. Animals distinguish between opportunities to have lunch or be lunch, and in the latter case whether to fight, flee, or freeze. The life cycle of most animals follows a simple trajectory of a relatively brief juvenile phase, adulthood with reproduction, and decline. Social animals for the most part remain in a stable group for the duration of their adult lives. The agency of animals - their needs and capabilities - is biologically synchronized and matched to the affordances of the environmental niches they occupy as a consequence of evolutionary adaptation.

It might be argued that animals, if not all living organisms, with the exception of human beings, are naturally resilient, as long as they continue to reside in the ecological niches to which they are genetically adapted. If biological and psychological development is understood as epigenetic, then a stable environmental niche provides the necessary conditions for the expression of genes associated with traits that have evolved within that niche - or perhaps co-evolved with - that niche. Placed in environments sufficiently different from their niches, such as traditional zoos, animals often manifest behaviors that might be termed symptomatic of the emotional disturbances seen in humans (Morgan and Tromberg, 2007). Because we are not epigenetically

¹ “Consciousness” is a dangerously ambiguous term, which may refer to the “sentience” of living organisms, which exhibit agency but only “minimal” cognition, or to the self-consciousness of human beings with a sense of selfhood (and identity, or anything in between).

adapted, after having formed attachments, to any subsequent environmental niche, maybe we can never feel fully at home.

Humans, of necessity, have developed the capacity to adapt to increasingly complex physical and social changes. Human existence takes place in a variety of physical milieus increasingly modified or constructed by perpetual human innovation, what philosopher John Gray (2007) terms a “prosthetic environment.” Along with a constantly evolving material world of functional artifacts, we exist in a social environment of multiple groups and social hierarchies, with different norms and practices, necessitating constant code-switching. The human life cycle barely gets started when we have reached adulthood.

So, *if* resilience is understood as the capacity to maintain an internal sense of coherence and an adaptive balance among desire, capability, and relational safety, then human existence requires more complex manifestations of resilience than those exhibited by other animals. Human beings are born without the innate potential competencies to survive in an environment to which we are epigenetically adapted. Humans are, however, innately endowed with a disposition to respond to others, and to elicit nurturing behavior from parents. We are born into a wide variety of sociocultural environments in which we must learn to survive and thrive. We also need to keep changing, necessitated by our growing older after we have grown up, as our bodies, our needs and desires, our agentic capabilities, our opportunities and obligations change within a social environment that is also constantly changing. If you grew up with manual typewriters and dial telephones, please raise your hand.

Philosopher Charles Taylor (1985, p.16) argues that humans are “self-interpreting animals” whose exercise of agency involves a “strong evaluation,” not only considering the practical consequences of action but also how action would be received by others. Taylor’s philosophical approach reflects a relational turn, characterizing selfhood as a “dialogical” process, and highlighting our inherent accountability to others. Both Taylor, whose focus is on human selfhood, and Kim Sterelny (2001), who examines the evolution of agency from a biological perspective, use the term “second order” to refer to this reflexive, and implicitly relational aspect of human cognition.

Humans are unique in possession of the capacity not only to develop the agentic capabilities required by their environments, but also to imagine new possibilities, and to consider not only what we can do, but what we could do, and what we should do. Animals demonstrate many insufficiently appreciated cognitive capacities and can recognize novel uses for things in their environments. Primates and corvids (crows and ravens) use available objects as tools, but do not create tools for future use². Humans do

² The degree of continuity or discontinuity between humans and other primates is a topic of lively debate (e.g. Andrews & Monso, 2021; Panksepp, 2003). Tomasello (2022), examining agency from an evolutionary perspective, argues that there are “four main types of psychological agency...in evolutionary order of emergence: goal-directed agency can be attributed to ancient vertebrates, intentional agency in ancient mammals, rational agency in ancient great apes, and socially normative agency in ancient human beings” (p.10). Tomasello asserts that his research with chimpanzees demonstrates that their “rational agency” is limited to episodic cooperative hunting by males without sustained relationships beyond the immediate excursion. In dramatic contrast, the late Franz de Waal’s decades of observation of “chimpanzee politics,” “reveal the formation of coalitions of followers by chimpanzee alpha males through grooming and schmoozing, along with instances of deception and betrayal (de Waal, 2022). Alpha chimps are not necessarily

not merely adapt to their environments, they adapt their environments to themselves, or create new environments, beyond making nests. This is not always something to be celebrated. Philosopher Thomas M. Alexander (2013, p. xxxii) suggests that “the main problem of modernity is that the power of science has given us has not been matched by the wisdom to use it.”

If resilience and transformance are, echoing Turner (2017), expressions of “the ineffable striving to become something,” then the “something” that other animals strive to become is the best version of their species. Their agency, which includes their capacity for evaluation, is substantially determined by genetics.

Human agency is a product of biological plasticity and cultural adaptation. The human capacity for “strong” and “second-order” evaluation does not emerge in a uniform way. It follows different paths in different cultures and requires continual revision over the life span. Formulating “second-order” evaluations require more than the resilience exhibited by other animals, despite the similarities. The same actions that are socially acceptable in some contexts may not be acceptable in others. Social practices that marginalize some groups have been recognized as unjust and are challenged by some and defended by others. As we grow, the revision of our “second-order” evaluations - whether spontaneous or assisted by a psychotherapist, requires a “third-order” evaluation, or meta-evaluation, of the “second-order” evaluations that we have been using. In the modern world, embracing and then questioning the evaluative norms instilled by our parents is normative. Pairing and parenting entails reconciling the second-order evaluations of each partner to achieve, with varying degrees of success, a consensus regarding the principles, policies, and practices that regulate family relationships.

No wonder why we feel like we are always playing catch-up. If you grew up with manual typewriters and dial telephones, you can put your hand down now.

Part II Human Agency: Developmental and clinical considerations

Now the first thing I learned in Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy, ironically enough, was to slow things down, and in that spirit, I want to spend a little time parsing the concept of agency.

Agency is often equated exclusively with autonomy. For example, Safran and Muran (2000) in their consideration of fifteen “Fundamental Assumptions and Principles” in psychotherapy, begin by addressing “agency versus relatedness...the innate needs both for establishing and maintaining relatedness to others and for self-definition or individuation” (Safran & Muran, 2000, p.31). They cite David Bakan’s *The Duality of Human Existence: Agency and Communion* (1966) as a primary source of this notion of dual motivation and argue that “the resolution of the tension between the need for agency and the need for relatedness is a dialectic

the strongest or largest male in the group but appear to maintain their authority through consensus-building rather than coercion. De Waal describes manifestations of both competitive and cooperative tendencies among males and females of different animal species, particularly among chimpanzees and bonobos, our closest genetic relatives, noting both commonalities and contrasts with us. He has observed what he terms “reconciliation,” the repair of relational ruptures after conflict, in many species of social animals. In many respects, the relational aspects of agency in social animals appears to have remarkable similarity to human agency.

that lies at the heart of psychoanalytic theory” (p.31). This semantic ambiguity obscures the foundational role of agency in providing relational safety as the context in which autonomy is both exercised and constrained. The conflation of agency and autonomy is an instance of the cultural bias about which Russell (2021) comments: “I am aware of the potential limitations of these developmental theories across cultures, particularly ones that do not prize individuality. For now, I am happy to limit my discussion to Western cultures in which the self is arguably too prominent” (p. 245). Philosopher Edward Harcourt (2018) has observed that psychoanalytic terminology includes invidious distinctions such as immature and mature, or merged and separate, which refer to psychological maturity, mental health, and by implication, moral virtue. He notes that even relational psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell includes “fusion” and “autonomy” to his list of naughty and nice. The very notion of autonomy presupposes that any particular “autonomous” action is a contrasting figure against a ground of norms that are observed. If agency is resilience in action, then relational action to support connection, and the inhibition of actions that threaten social cohesion are also expressions of resilience.

The early development of the agentic self:

The initial function of agency is to both facilitate attachment - and the relational safety it provides - and to provide experiences for the earliest manifestations of selfhood (Benjamin, 2018; see also Stern, 1985/2000). The human infant develops a sense of agency and a sense of relationship to others simultaneously. If agency is action that has a purpose, if not necessarily intention, then the first manifestation of agency is the newborn’s cry of distress, which elicits a comforting response from the parent.

Jessica Benjamin (2018) has described the developmental trajectory of agency, from initial total dependence to the robust sense (or illusion) of autonomy, provided by implicit relational safety. Agency is built by the parent’s provision of various forms of recognition “in different registers.” It emerges from moments of “rhythmic” attunement, of “meeting” – a terminology Benjamin attributes to Louis Sander. “Marking” constitutes recognition in a different, meta-communicative register, in which “the mother simultaneously exaggerates and mirrors the baby’s reaction to show that she understands the baby’s distress but is herself not upset” (Benjamin, 2018, p.149). This process involves “a mixture of rhythmic and differentiating aspects (p. 91). Recognition in this context does not simply imply the registration of something familiar, but the realization of something new, vital, and true. The affirmation of agency by the parent is the process that quickens the sense of agency while providing relational security. Parenting an infant is, among other things, a sequence of attunements and misattunements, ruptures and repairs. “A vital outcome of interactive repair is the infant’s own emergent sense of agency and impact on the mother. Her response to her child’s impact in turn confirms the experience of mutuality” (Benjamin, 2018, p. 88).

Mutuality for Benjamin requires “surrender,” the acknowledgement of the agency of the other without relinquishing one’s own autonomy, neither submission to the agency of the other nor assertion of one’s agency to dominate the other. Benjamin allows that this mutuality is “an ideal state of relatedness [that] can’t be sustained” (p. 7) - like the “self- at-best,” insofar as we can’t, by definition, always be at our best. Mutuality is difficult to sustain, and we all inevitably, to different degrees, collapse into the complementarity of “domination” and “submission,” “doer” and “done-to.” Development can be characterized by increasingly differentiated and integrated functioning (Werner, 1940), by a growing capacity to balance independence with intimacy, and by both confidence in our capacity to will our desires into action and a willingness to surrender to the mutuality that Benjamin describes.

Attachment, for better or worse, establishes a relationship to the world of others – a world that may offer comfort or withhold it, that can be consistent or unpredictable, safe and welcoming, chilly and disapproving, or simply indifferent. The repair of ruptures has both an active and receptive aspect for both parties, a mutual recognition and surrendering. Emotional difficulties begin when we are forced to choose between relational safety and autonomy, or when misattunements and ruptures are not repaired. “As an adaptation-based psychotherapy...AEDP assumes that psychopathology reflects a person’s best efforts at adapting to an environment that was a poor match for the person’s emotional and/or self-expression. Thus, even the most self-destructive or disturbed presentations can be seen as manifesting hope, self-preservation and ingenuity” (Fosha, 2008).

If autonomous strivings jeopardize relational safety early in life, a defensive and inhibitory mode of agency would initially be an expression of resilience. But later in life “adaptations carried over from an earlier time...may no longer be helpful” (Russell, 2015, p.57). Without the development of sufficient “receptive affective capacity” (Fosha, 2009), expressions of autonomous agency remain inhibited, and interpersonal functioning would be skewed toward maladaptive compliance or avoidance. In the absence of relational safety, receptivity is experienced as submission rather than surrender, receptive affective capacity cannot grow, and resilient receptivity is inhibited. The legacy of attachment failures restricts our ability to sustain a necessary degree of mutuality - that sense of oneself as having agency while simultaneously acknowledging the agency of the other.

Some of us relinquish our resilient desires and fail to recognize our capabilities, striving instead for an unattainable degree of relational security and anxiously seeking excessive reassurance, permission, or approval, or by complying with a sense of defeat, resentment, and powerlessness. Some of us protect our sense of autonomous agency by avoiding connection with others.

Agency can operate in a resistant mode as well as a resilient one. Without sufficient relational safety, the “self” on whose behalf agency is exercised, is a compromised self, a “self-at-worst,” a “false self” that relinquishes growth for a sense of security. Resilient agency can become resistant agency. Both the active and receptive aspects of resilient agency are inhibited. While agency is resilience in action, agency is not always an expression of resilience, and resilience is not always manifested in action.

Emmanuel Ghent, one of the godfathers of relational psychoanalysis, has observed our conflicting basic desires - on the one hand, the need for safety, stability, and coherence; on the other, a drive for “new experiences that result in growth and expansion of the self.” He adds that all human activity takes place within this “human envelope” (2018, p.63). Growth of the self, transference, and the expansive exercise of agency, requires sufficient relational security - that “human envelope.” We live in what Alasdair MacIntyre describes as “communities of giving and receiving.” He argues that we are “dependent rational animals” whose lives begin, and often end, in states of helplessness, and include inevitable episodes of illness or injury (MacIntyre, 1999).

Relational safety is both the precondition of and the platform for expansive and exploratory action. If we are scanning the environment for threats, we will neither be seeking satisfaction nor exercising curiosity. Our primary desire is for safety, and openness to change and curiosity are possible only under conditions of safety. Russell (2021, p.260), citing Jaak Panksepp’s research, refers to “safety promoting exploration.” The exploration of the world is the figural activity against a ground of confidence, familiarity and

predictability, derived from secure attachment. The “practicing” phase of development described by Margaret Mahler and her colleagues (Mahler et al., 1975) exemplifies perhaps the earliest manifestation of what Russell (2021) terms an intentional and autonomous “agentic self,” whose tacit awareness of the mother’s presence in the background allows for attention to be directed to exploring the environment as an individual. Agency then begins to be exercised in the service of separation and individuation as well as connection.

If the implicit sense of relational safety in the background makes autonomous activity possible, in a sense maybe we are always just practicing.

Agency: From attachment to affiliation and accountability

As we grow, our desires change, our capabilities increase, and relational safety is provided by interpersonal connections that evolve from our attachment to our parents and to complex networks of relationships and affiliation. Our identity as autonomous selves is derived from our being recognized by others, an irony Jessica Benjamin has observed, and Eileen Russell cites, “The need for recognition entails this fundamental paradox: in the very moment of realizing our own independent will (agentic self) we are dependent on the other to recognize it” (2009, p.39). Different forms of relatedness are provided by siblings, friends, classmates, teachers, teammates, partners, colleagues, children, coreligionists, political allies, and fellow fans of athletic teams and popular artists and entertainers (have I left anything out? I’m certain I have. Feel free to add to the list in the margins). Affiliation provides security and entails obligations to others. Accountability is the price we pay for belonging.

Just as the individuals to whom we are connected change, the forms of accountability we experience change. We owe parents a diminishing level of accountability as we grow and enjoy greater independence and autonomy. Accountability is what we offer in exchange for an allowance, and later for the car keys. Fairness is the entry fee for participating in peer groups of equals, although some peers are invariably more equal than others, and some groups not as egalitarian as others, and a degree of submission may be mandatory. A more abstract form of accountability emerges when along with significant others we hold ourselves accountable to a “generalized other” (Mead, 1934).

We learn “not only how to speak, but also how to speak for the other” (MacIntyre, 1999, p.150). We are not only responsible to others, but for others. Accountability includes accepting legitimate authority (stopping at red lights), exercising benevolent authority (such as with one’s children, at least until they reach the age of 30 or 35), as well as honoring intrarelatational commitments to one’s own values and priorities. Accountability may also require challenging illegitimate authority, when one’s own rights, or the rights of others, are being violated.

Resistant agency and therapeutic considerations

Eileen Russell has introduced the concept of agency into our conversation regarding attachment and how to help people achieve a sense of coherent, confident, and connected selfhood. The inclusion of resilient agency as a complement to relational safety, enriches our working vocabulary, making the emphasis on resilient agency within the context of attachment more explicit and precise. Additionally, she expands State 2

maladaptive core affective experience to include the condition of unformed agency,³ and introduces the concept of defensive agency to State 2 maladaptive experience. Russell has integrated into AEDP the notion that agency can be recruited in the service of defenses by operating on behalf of the self-at-worst. She identifies this phenomenon as “resistant agency.” Resistant agency is active, though resistant rather than resilient.

Resistant agency can emerge as a significant issue in psychotherapeutic treatment, requiring unique interventions. She likens the inhibiting effects of resistant agency to Otto Rank’s notion of “negative will,” a form of paralyzing receptivity. She describes patients who, despite enjoying safety in the therapeutic relationship are nevertheless inhibited by maladaptive shame and helplessness engendered by negative will. She advocates “pressuring with empathy,” to confront the patients’ implicit willingness to abandon themselves. Now she has upped the ante, arguing for the necessity of the therapist playing the role of a “transformational other,” providing not only relational safety but also “attuned disruption.”

Relational psychoanalyst Karen Maroda has recently voiced a similar concern, noting that “Research on early attachments and the need for holding and empathy have prevailed as a model for clinical interventions, creating a parentified and overly passive approach to doing treatment (2021, p. 114).” Don’t confuse relational safety with comfort, Russell and Maroda advise us. Relational safety is a means, not an end. Not a home, but a foundation on which to build a home. As Fritz Perls observed, psychotherapy should be a “safe emergency,” if something new is going to emerge (Perls et al. 1951).

In the absence of sufficient relational safety, agency may be misdirected, serving what Leigh McCullough Vaillant (1997) termed a “hidden agenda.” A history of misattunements and unrepaired ruptures can result in the recruitment of agency in the service of preserving a sense of safety at the expense of growth. If the development of agency is hijacked by a lack of relational safety, agency may be used to seek approval and permission from others, or attempt to control or avoid others, rather than satisfy autonomous desires, at the cost of a more authentic connection with others, and with oneself. The result is a compromised and “false self” that is to varying degrees deficient in the awareness and achievability of desire and is more responsive to others rather than to one’s own core experience.

This resistant use of agency needs to be identified and disrupted in the context of a therapeutic relationship that provides sufficient relational safety. As Emmanuel Ghent (2018, p.54) wisely suggested, “There is more than one way to help a flower grow. Sometimes selectively nourishing or watering is what is required, sometimes clearing the weeds.”

In practicing Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy, we have been implicitly promoting our clients’ agency all along, of course, as well as providing relational safety. We ask permission before probing sensitive issues, and metaprocess our interactions with clients. We acknowledge and repair ruptures in the therapeutic relationship, as do other relational psychodynamic therapists when they address “enactments.” But we also privilege the positive, explicitly expressing our joy and pride at the growth we observe in our patients. We recognize the joint contribution to misattunements, but also celebrate the co-creation of new understandings of painful past experiences. We recognize the victory of courage over fear, in both initiating new autonomous action and in greater relatedness and receptive affective capacity.

³ See Medbo, this issue, for her elaboration of the phenomenon and treatment of the unformed agentic self.

What follows is a consideration of the nature of agency, both resilient and resistant, in both its active and receptive modes, and its relationship to transformance. Case vignettes will demonstrate the utility of an agency-based perspective in psychotherapy, as a complement to other perspectives.

PART III

Clinical examples: Agency misdirected, exercised but unrecognized, or overdetermined

The exercise of resilient agency requires awareness of desire, a sense of capability, and an evaluation of accountability to ensure that action will not jeopardize relational as well as physical safety. The functions of resistant agency are to suppress / inhibit adaptive or transformative desires, deny capabilities, and adhere to a sense of accountability that affords a sense of safety at the expense of flourishing. To address problems of agency with attuned disruption, attunement must precede disruption. Having established a relationship with relational safety, we can activate potential resilience and receptive affective capacity. Following Russell's advice and looking for what is missing, we might recognize desires obscured by "hidden agendas," identify previously-unrecognized capabilities, and address accountabilities that are the legacy of misattunements and unrepaired ruptures.

The following treatment episodes demonstrate how agency has been employed to preserve safety at the cost of growth and how disrupting resistant agency makes room for resilience. These examples reveal agency that is misdirected, exercised yet unrecognized, or overdetermined, serving both resilient and resistant desires. Nevertheless, the very act of seeking treatment reflects a glimmer of transformance striving and what Russell describes as potential resilience – a capacity that coexists with resistant agency.

In the following three case vignettes, identifying information has been omitted or altered.

Vignette 1:

Bernard: Agency misdirected:

Bernard initiated therapy prompted by his inability to finalize the purchase of a motorcycle he wanted and could easily afford, having on several occasions placing a deposit on the motorcycle but then cancelling the transaction. The responsibility of even a modest financial commitment prompted acute anxiety. While Bernard remained close to a group of longtime friends, he took few initiatives to see them, waiting for their regular invitations, and made no efforts to establish new relationships. He had had one extended romantic relationship which ended a number of years before because he was unwilling to commit to marriage and children.

Bernard lived in a house he had inherited a decade before from a childless uncle and aunt. Although he did not see himself as particularly handy - unlike his father and younger brother, he devoted himself to making repairs and improvements. His installation of new baseboard in the living room, and the challenges it imposed were a major focus of the initial sessions. Bernard was deeply committed to doing an acceptable job, and seemed to accept the fact that he did not have the skills that his father and brother had. But the therapist realized that something was missing, that the therapist was missing something. The therapist pivoted from focus on

Bernard's comparison of his carpentry skills to his father's and brother's, to his capacity to realize his desire, to the nature of the desire itself, and Bernard's "hidden agenda" (McCollough Vaillant, 1997).

Bernard's relationship to his father emerged as a primary theme in treatment. Bernard reported resentfully "holding the flashlight" for his father while the latter was involved in various projects or having to assist his father in meticulous groundskeeping. Bernard just wanted to play with his friends, or have his father play with him. But Bernard's father was nevertheless a source of reassurance for him, tacitly approving of Bernard's choice to pursue an advanced degree in an area of which his father had little understanding. Bernard yearned for his reserved and slightly formal father to be expressive and physically affectionate, and he saw his father as a sad and martyred figure, enslaved by responsibilities to the house and grounds, Bernard's mother's urgent demands, and by his father's devotion to the Catholic church. Bernard's father often left the house early to assist in the service of an early morning mass before going to work. His father seemed to have no desires of his own, and Bernard had fantasies of buying his father a sports car, although he knew his frugal father would have been perplexed rather than delighted by the gift and concerned about such a frivolous and impractical purchase.

In the spirit of "attuned disruption," the therapist began to question the accuracy of Bernard's characterization of his father, whose life as described sounded to the therapist purposeful and satisfying if not joyous. The therapist noted that Bernard was quite different from his father in some ways and like him in other ways. Both Bernard and his father were committed to being of service to others, although his father's service was grounded in his deeply held religious beliefs, while Bernard chose a secular route to provide service to others. The therapist observed that Bernard's father's commitment to being of service to others was not "servitude." Bernard became aware of how much of his commitment to home maintenance and improvement, about which he frequently complained, had to do with his wish to have been closer to his father, but did not achieve that implicit goal, and he began to reflect on the extent to which this conflicted with acting on his own desires.

Patient: Everything comes back to him. Why I couldn't make him happy. I always wanted to make him happy. I always assumed there was something to fix.

Therapist: As opposed to accepting him for who he was. Being loyal to him to try to feel closer to him, but not being true to yourself.

Patient: It still hurts sometimes. I just wish I had experienced more closeness.

In subsequent sessions, Bernard began reflecting on how his father was different from him, and considering the possibility that while he imagined his father was sad, he could have been actually content doing something that Bernard himself would have hated doing. He recognized the differences and the distance between his father and himself, and the sadness that came with that realization.

At the next session, Bernard began by reporting that he had visited his father's grave after the previous session, "closing something."

Patient: I understand who he was, how he was. I wish he'd followed in my footsteps a bit. But he couldn't. I had to express that to him...Coincidentally, my father's grave and the bike store are both in (name of town). I

looked at the bike. Then driving home, I got anxious...I hate maintaining the house. I can't do it like Dad would do it. I was always prioritizing the house, me versus the house. Always either / or, never a balance.... I'm struggling accepting that my Dad liked to work.

Therapist: You like to work. Just not the same kind of work...

Patient: (recalled eating liverwurst sandwiches with his father, and both enjoying them.) It was a true moment, he and I were the same...I miss that...Something was just coming up, but it gets stuck here (indicates his chest). That was my Dad being affectionate, bringing me along with something that feels good. I hadn't labeled it as his way of being affectionate. It feels very settled, peaceful. This feels like the important stuff I got. The other stuff feels like bullshit, not as relevant.

Therapist: It was real, not what you imagined

Patient: Oof...It's a different level. My experience of my Dad, not a cognitive thing.

Therapist: Thoughts in your head, as opposed to something actually between you.

Patient: Thanks for that. It puts me in a space I haven't been...

Vignette 2:

Wendy: Agency exercised but unrecognized

Wendy had been employed at a geriatric facility for almost a decade. Over the course of her employment she demonstrated unique interpersonal skills leading to a significant promotion. In recognition of the crucial role she had been playing, a new position was created for her, with a substantial increase in her salary. Prior to her promotion, she had initiated psychotherapeutic treatment to deal with anxiety concerning her competence at work, and despite her promotion, she continued to doubt her interpersonal skills. She attributed her success to "just being a hard worker."

While Wendy was quite evidently sensitive, confident, and decisive in dealing with the delicate politics of the facility, and was highly regarded, she was often anxious and self-critical in her accounts of her work activities with the therapist. She would interrupt herself with self-deprecating or apologetic remarks, and provide excessive, and unnecessary, amounts of detail to justify decisions she made and actions she initiated. Although she was clearly extremely effective, she was unable to recognize the agency she was exercising. While recounting what she had done, her emotional state shifted, and she became anxious and self-critical, despite the appreciation of her "clients" and the acknowledgement by the facility's administration and coworkers.

Wendy's older sister was a university professor, and in the autobiographical narrative that emerged over the course of therapy, her sister was "the smart one" and Wendy was "the social one." Wendy's sister was an academically outstanding but extremely shy individual, and their mother at one point gave her a book entitled "How To Make Friends." If Wendy's sister was smart but not social, Wendy concluded, then her being social implied intellectual deficiency. She revealed that her dream was to become a psychotherapist, but she believed that she, unlike her sister, was not smart enough to achieve that goal. "I'm just a hard worker."

The therapist contrasted Wendy's beliefs about herself with her accounts of her spontaneity, sensitivity, competence and confidence. She became aware that her image of her sister was a frequent presence when she was dealing with peers and those she regarded as authority figures, including the therapist, and became aware of shifts from confidence to self-consciousness in her interactions. Her receptive affective capacity developed to the point that she was able to accept another advancement in her career, and her effectiveness was recognized by her supervisors, the administration, and increasingly by herself.

Frank: Overdetermined agency, resilience with a “hidden agenda

Frank and his wife were referred for couples therapy by the wife's psychotherapist, but within a few sessions it was clear that Frank's absorption with work made him emotionally, and even often physically unavailable to participate in family life. When his wife's distress was made more explicit and urgent to Frank, he agreed to start individual sessions. By his mid-forties, Frank had ascended to a position as executive officer of a mid-sized corporation. He was gifted with considerable organizational and managerial skills as well as with warmth, sensitivity, creativity, and a sense of humor. In one of the smaller companies, he had worked for on his way to the executive suite, in addition to his varied responsibilities in operational and fiscal areas, he became the de facto Human Relations director - the member of the management team best equipped to deal with employees on a personal basis.

Frank was deeply committed to his children and his wife - who like him was highly intelligent, ambitious, multi-talented - in principle, but in practice he was so deeply absorbed in his work that his availability, even when he was home, was constrained by telephone calls and emails to which he felt compelled to reply. He derived tremendous satisfaction and a sense of pride in his meeting increasing professional challenges and providing generously for his family, and his presentation reflected enthusiasm, risk tolerance, and vitality. Perhaps not coincidentally, on his first date with his wife, when they were barely out of high school they went sky diving.

On the few occasions when his wife became angry with the work-life imbalance that Frank maintained, he became briefly but profoundly depressed and felt a deep sense of abandonment. As therapy proceeded, Frank explained that along with the exuberance he experienced in finding new challenges at work, and even at home (he was an extremely gifted chef, and often enlisted his children, who enthusiastically participated in meal preparation), he felt that he had to “earn his keep.”

Frank, the oldest of three children, was charged with preparing school lunches for himself and his younger sisters from almost as early as he could remember. By the time he was eight years old, was tasked with preparing dinner and supervising homework. His father was a colorful figure who worked in popular media and travelled a great deal of the time, and his mother was involved in varied activities that kept her away from the home many evenings. In reporting this, Frank was rather matter of fact, and it appeared that he accepted those unusual responsibilities, along with conventional chores such as making his bed in the morning, as normal and reasonable. Challenges, even ones that might have been burdensome and onerous to others, seemed to be opportunities to exercise his capacities for problem solving and leadership. There appeared to be minimal conflict among Frank and his sisters, who willingly assisted him in preparation and clean up, and when he left home for college, one said her life had been ruined by his departure.

Frank's "earning his keep" was a "hidden agenda" (McCullough Vaillant, 1997) that was obscured most of the time by his exuberant exercise of resilient agency, but while he was extraordinarily good at doing, he did not much capacity for just being. The occasions when his wife expressed her dissatisfaction and withdrew from him had caused Frank tremendous distress. He became aware of the uneasiness he felt if he was not constantly performing, or in one way or another, "earning his keep." Frank's parents never acknowledged that his fulfillment of his extraordinary family obligations was anything other than routine and completely taken for granted. Over the course of therapy he began to realize that a component of fear had been obscured by the joy he derived from meeting challenges. He and his wife began to make time to be together without any other agenda, and Frank's life began to assume a healthier and more satisfying balance.

Conclusions from clinical cases

The exercise of agency involves the awareness of desire and the evaluation of one's capability and accountability. The vignettes of Bernard, Wendy, and Frank illustrate the various ways that agency can be recruited in the service of resistance rather than *resilience*.

Bernard failed to recognize the extent to which his desire for a deeper connection with his reserved father was transformed into the resentful execution of home improvement projects similar to the ones he endured, such as "holding the flashlight" for his father while wishing his father would play with him. His admiration and affection for his father made it difficult for him to recognize and accept that his own desires were often very different from his father's priorities.

Wendy was well aware of her desire to become a psychotherapist, although it took quite some time for her to express that desire to her own psychotherapist. She saw herself as "social" and "hard-working," unlike her college professor sister, who was "the smart one." Wendy accepted working as an activities director after receiving her degree, rather than seeking a clinical position. While her capacity for empathy, for instilling trust, and for negotiating complicated institutional dynamics was recognized by her coworkers and her therapist, she did not recognize it in herself. "Attuned disruption" of her attribution of her success to being merely "hard working" led to a more realistic appraisal of her skills and potential, as well as an increase in receptive affective capacity.

Frank evidently enjoyed a constitutional proclivity to undertake daunting challenges with authentic enthusiasm. His account of cooking dinner for his sisters, with both his parents offstage, did not suggest any inherent conflict for him. His sense of mastery was so salient that his parents' emotional distance did not register, and "earning his keep," like Wendy's ("I'm just a hard worker)," were ego syntonic rationalizations that required "attuned disruption." Frank's relationship with his wife activated long-suppressed relational needs. The therapist's observation that the love that he and his wife expressed to each other was not earned by action, but that those actions were motivated by love and generosity. His recognition of his own generosity, as well as fear of loss and craving for acknowledgment, made it possible for him to recognize that his wife's love for him was not predicated on or maintained by his frantic "earning his keep."

It is not a coincidence that the term "recognition" appears of each of these case vignettes. As previously noted, recognition can refer not only to the routine registration of something previously known, but also to the realization of something new that feels true - perhaps like Bollas' (2018) "unthought known," something that never previously recognized, but was somehow known all along. Maybe, following Taylor (1985), we should call this "strong recognition."

The varied concepts and observations discussed in this article underscore the complexity and multifaceted nature of agency - agency is, indeed, a many-splendored thing. To conclude, I will summarize my main points in the list below.

Conclusion

The varied concepts and observations discussed in this article underscore the complexity and multifaceted nature of agency - agency is, indeed, a many-splendored thing. To conclude, I will summarize my main points in the list below.

1. Agency is purposeful action, a characteristic of living organisms. Agency in other animals, even other social animals, is a relatively uncomplicated expression of resilience. Living organisms differentiate between what is beneficial and what is harmful. They are genetically (and epigenetically) endowed with agentic potentialities and capabilities that are matched to the affordances of the environmental niches that have co-evolved with them. For social animals, other than us, safety was provided by collective existence, living in groups with relatively stable social hierarchies.

As human evolved we increasingly adapted our environments to ourselves, rather than adapt to them, ultimately creating a diverse range of artificial (or artifactual) physical and cultural environments. Neuroplasticity makes it possible for us to develop the agentic capabilities necessary to navigate within a wide variety of cultures. Learning through anticipation and imitation expanded upon "instinctual" knowing, fostering our unique capacity for invention, innovation, and imagination. This creative potential, paired with our fundamental need for collective existence, generates an inherent tension between autonomous agency and social cohesion.

Temperamental differences and the vicissitudes of attachment may determine a particular individual's relationship to the norms of a particular culture, as cultures vary widely in the celebration, tolerance, or censure of different expressions of autonomy. Even within a particular culture, we exist in multiple subgroups, each with their own status hierarchies and norms. So human agency is a very complicated matter.

2. It has been argued that human agency is manifested in various ways, not only in the service of autonomy but also in adjudicating the tension between self-interest and accountability to others—the yin and yang of social existence. The balance between individualism and collectivism, between independence from and solidarity with others, is negotiated in different social contexts and within each individual in every culture. Resistant agency can obscure authentic desires and distort the evaluation of capabilities and accountabilities. Resilient agency promotes an adaptive balance between the individual and the culture in which the individual exists. Resilient agency includes attunement to biological and psychological needs and desires, as well as both habits and conscious decisions. Over the course of the human life cycle, transformative agency entails the recognition of new desires, the expansion of capabilities, and the re-evaluation of accountabilities as we grow up and grow old.

4. Like agency, transference, too, is a many-splendored thing. Eileen Russell equates it with “surrender, peak experiences, flow, self-actualization, and flourishing” (2015, p. 35). Diana Fosha (2008, p. 292), in her initial formulation of the term transference, described it as “an overarching motivational force, operating in both development and therapy.” She explicitly credited Emmanuel Ghent for proposing that “surrender” could be the opposite of “resistance,” but noted that “transference” had a broader connotation, referring to development in general, not merely the relinquishing of defenses. Benjamin (2018) uses the term “surrender” to describe the shift from complementarity to mutuality, from a dyadic configuration of dominance and submission to the acknowledgment of the agency of the other without relinquishing one’s own agency. While Ghent’s use of surrender might be seen as limited to the psychotherapeutic change from resistant to resilient agency, Benjamin’s surrender is a developmental, not exclusively psychotherapeutic, achievement. Surrender is receptivity and recognition of something both new and true.

5. Many paragraphs ago, it was observed that agency is often conflated with autonomy and activity. Its function in the service of relational safety and its receptive aspect were both often overlooked. Benjamin’s understanding of surrender suggests that the development of agency requires not only the active exercise of agency but the surrender of agency as well. The achievement of mutuality that Benjamin outlines is a paradigmatic instance of transference. Benjamin’s surrender is not submission, and agency is retained, not relinquished, and recognized both by and in the other person as a “like subject” rather than an object. Experience of the self now includes awareness of the experience of the other. If resilience is action on behalf of the self, transference may be, among other things, an expansion of the experience of the self.

6. What is the relationship between recognition and agency? Benjamin’s (2002) discussion of Louis Sander’s notion of “the rhythm of recognition” between infant and caregiver describes an alternation of reactivity to the caregiver and then a “creative disengagement... in a state of equilibrium,” in which the infant experiences a sense of autonomy—not “absolute autonomy” but rather agency within an interactive system (p. 45)—a nascent mutuality “like the rhythmic structure or pattern that two or more partners simultaneously create and surrender to” (p. 49). Mutual recognition involves not only recognizing the other but also recognizing that the other is recognizing you. Psychological change, the reorganization of schemas of beliefs, emotions, and expectations, occurs when we experience, if we can borrow Piaget’s terminology, a “disequilibrium”—when the assimilatory assumptions can no longer be applied (Wachtel, 1981). This is a disruptive recognition, a new and unfamiliar experience. It requires surrender, making room for something new, either relinquishing or modifying one’s experience: a reaction, followed by an internal reorganization. Benjamin argues that “the concept of recognition entails the idea that having an impact on the other directly affects one’s own sense of agency” (2002, p. 45). Recognition in this sense is not simply the registration of something previously known but a realization, an active and expansive receptivity. The strong recognition that is a manifestation of transference is the realization of something new and something true—an unconditional and unconventional acceptance.

7. Attuned disruption of the patient’s fear-based expectations of others may occur when the therapist meets the patient with both protective authority and compassion, with the therapist’s own surrender to an appropriate degree of emotional openness and self-disclosure. This may make it safe for the patient to likewise surrender to mutuality and greater receptive affective capacity, to accept a degree of dependence without relinquishing a sense of autonomy. Karen Maroda, way back in 1999, noted that “although the literature on the topic of

surrender, either unilateral or mutual, may be almost nonexistent” (p. 53), the surrender of the therapist as well as the patient was crucial, and that “we communicate to the patient that we have shared his or her emotional experience and ‘emerged intact,’ ” not merely “containing” the patient’s experience, “calm, in control, and above the fray” (p.55). Metaprocessing both the patient’s emotional experience and the patient’s emotional experience of the therapist’s emotional experience of the patient’s emotional experience can build receptive agency and may be an essential prerequisite for more active expressions of agency and transference.

8. Transference strivings expressed by the decision to engage in a psychotherapeutic relationship are quickened by the therapist’s receptivity. Utilizing Benjamin’s terminology, the therapist’s initial “meeting” is succeeded by “marking,” which incorporates empathic attunement and cognitive differentiation. The safety of the therapeutic relationship elicits greater receptivity and the possibility of the disruption of resistant agency. The therapist as True Other can recognize the patient’s previously unrecognized desires and capabilities and provoke the reassessment of accountabilities, allowing the patient to receive recognition in a new way.

9. Jeremy Safran’s meditation on agency and surrender (2016) noted that the Taoist concept of *wu-wei* was often translated (or perhaps mistranslated) as “nonaction” but did not imply passivity. He noted Ghent’s observation that Western individualistic cultural biases might obscure the distinction. Safran related surrender to gratitude and grace, to unconditional acceptance. Surrender is purposeful, a manifestation of receptive agency, what Erich Fromm (2016) calls “inner action.” Danny Yeung (2024, p. 28) describes a process of surrendering a preoccupation with presence in order to experience presence, an “effortful emptying” that “results in the effortless emergence of presence.” Recognizing and relinquishing our intention in order to receive—perhaps like exhaling fully with intention to allow your lungs to be refilled without effort.

10. Agency is purposeful action, whether in the service of safety or autonomy, expressed in resistant, resilient, and transformational action. But agency also has a receptive aspect, a surrender to create a space that can be filled by something new. Transformational agency involves deeper awareness of both the embodied self and what is beyond the boundary of the self. It is activity and receptivity, autonomy and accountability, generosity and gratitude, mastery and limitation, pride and awe. It is the satisfaction and the surrender of desire. It is will and willingness.

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