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Concepts and Measures of Agency[1]

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Abstract
Agency is inescapably plural in both concept and measurement. In Sen's account of agency, i) agency is exercised with respect to goals the person values; ii) agency includes effective power as well as direct control; iii) agency may advance wellbeing or may address other-regarding goals; iv) to identify agency also entails an assessment of the value of the agent's goals; v) the agent's responsibility for a state of affairs should be incorporated into his or her evaluation of it. This chapter refracts the literature on agency measurement through the first four of these characteristics, showing how particular survey-based measures of individual agency elucidate or obscure each distinction. It also observes that existing measures used in development tend to focus on control but not effective freedom, on goals the agent has reason to value rather than goals she values, and on own rather than other-regarding agency. The literature on measurement also raises a number of very relevant issues for the conceptual approach.

Keywords Agency, Autonomy, Empowerment, Efficacy, Effective Power, Control, Imperfect Obligation, Well-being Freedom

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I. Motivation

In his autobiography, the escaped slave Frederick Douglass wrote of how, on learning to read, "the silver trump of freedom … roused my soul… It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition"(Douglass 1845). He also described the journey of conviction. For example an altercation with his master Mr. Covey as "the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood… I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact." Douglass then focused his energies on freedom from "the galling chains of slavery," (Ch V) a freedom he finally acquired, and for which he worked powerfully on others' behalf. For these reasons his writings have been widely drawn upon by those engaged in other struggles.

The importance of action by people such as Douglass to confront situations of serious oppression and deprivation has led many working on poverty reduction to introduce measures of agency, autonomy, empowerment, self-direction, and self-determination into poverty analyses. A number of studies draw conceptually on the human development and capability approach developed by Amartya Sen and others (Kabeer 1999; Alkire 2002; Clark 2002; Narayan 2002 inter alia; Clark 2003; Gasper & Van Staveren 2003; Hill 2003; Alkire 2005; Alsop & Heinsohn 2005; Gibson & Woolcock 2005; Mcgillivray 2005; Narayan-Parker 2005; Alsop et al 2006; Ghuman et al 2006; Alkire 2007b; Ibrahim & Alkire 2007). Sen argues that agency – a person's ability to act on behalf of what he or she values and has reason to value – is intrinsically valuable, instrumentally effective in reducing poverty, and of central importance. Drèze and Sen describe the capability approach to analyzing India's development as one "which puts human agency (rather than organizations such as markets or governments) at the centre of the stage" (2002, p. 6).

This paper will explore how Sen's concept of agency might be put to use in one sharply defined context, namely the selection of quantitative agency measures at the individual or household level. Given that many authors engaged in measuring agency or empowerment motivate their

discussion of agency with reference to Sen's work, the chapter first presents Sen's account of agency, drawing attention to its internal pluralism of. It then refracts the literature on agency measurement through four of these conceptual distinctions, showing how particular agency measures elucidate or obscure each distinction. It also observes some omitted features in Sen's account that the surrounding literature raise and address. While the focus of the paper is solely upon the 'operationalization' of Sen's concept of agency with respect to such measures, it may in passing demonstrate steps by which many have applied the capability approach, as the closing section mentions.

This chapter focuses on conceptual considerations in selecting agency measures. Any choice of indicators will also be guided by the context and the purpose for which data are being collected, and by empirical features of the data: whether the indicators prove to be accurate, valid, and robust; whether they have explanatory power in analyses, are sensitive to changes over time, are not too highly correlated with other indicators, and can be feasibly fielded. This chapter does not discuss these issues which also necessarily influence the final choice of indicators for any survey or analysis.

II. Agency

The objective of development, Sen argues, is to expand capabilities and to support people's agency. Capabilities are people's real freedoms to enjoy beings and doings that they value and have reason to value (Sen 1980; Sen 1985a; Sen 1987; Nussbaum 1990; Sen 1992; Sen 1993). Capabilities, like budget sets, convey information on the range of valuable opportunities that a person enjoys. In addition to capabilities or *opportunity freedoms*, development also should advance *process freedoms*. These including personal process freedoms related agency.[2] Sen's capability approach views people, including poor people, as active agents. Agency is an assessment of "what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good " (Sen 1985b, p. 206). People who enjoy high levels of agency are engaged in actions that are congruent with their values. When people are not able to exert agency, they may be alienated from their behavior, coerced into a situation, submissive and

[2] A full discussion of process and opportunity freedoms can be found in (Sen 2002) Ch 19-21.

desirous to please, or simply passive (Ryan & Deci 2004). For development and poverty reduction activities to promote agency, "the people have to be seen… as being actively involved—given the opportunity—in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs" (Sen 1999, p. 53). This requires attention to the processes by which those outcomes are attained, in particular the extent to which different groups of people are able to engage actively and freely.

Sen's account of agency has five characteristics that are relevant for measurement. First and implicit in its very definition, agency will be exercised with respect to *multiple* aims; indeed agency cannot be defined except in relation to goals. Further, agency goals with respect to one's own well-being may be quite *diverse*, and include the goal of maintaining warm and vibrant family relationships, the goal of finding a more stimulating reading group, and the goal of continuing a new swimming regime.

Second, agency may include effective power as well as control. *Effective power* is the person's or group's 'power to achieve chosen results'. In situations of effective power, no matter how choices are actually made and executed, power is "exercised in line with what we would have chosen and because of it" (Sen 1985b, p. 211). Note that effective power at times only pertains to collectivities and groups, not individuals: "Given the interdependences of social living, many liberties are not separately exercisable, and effective power may have to be seen in terms of what all, or nearly all, members of the group would have chosen…" (Sen 1985b, p. 211). *Control* refers instead to the person's ability to make choices and to control the procedures directly (whether or not he or she is successful in achieving the desired goal) (Sen 1985b, p. 208-9).

Third, for many people, capability – as the space in which we consider well-being freedom – is related to agency, for example because whatever goals and commitments people are able to advance, whether through their work or in a personal or voluntary capacity, contributes, in part, to their sense of well-being. 'For an integrated person it is likely – possibly even inevitable – that the person's well-being will be influenced by his or her agency role' (Sen 1985b, p. 187). However the

agency and well-being perspectives remain importantly distinct. Agency does not have to advance well-being at all; it may be *other-regarding*. The distinction is sharply apparent in circumstances in which acting as an agent may reduce other aspects of well-being. For example if a person selflessly volunteers late into the evening at a homeless shelter, it may advance his or her agency goals, and simultaneously result in tiredness and anxiety which decrease well-being. Thus agency has *open conditionality* in the sense that it is "not tied to any one type of aim" but advances any goals the person thinks important, whether for themselves, their community, or some other entity or group altogether.

Fourth, agency is, by definition, related to goals that the person *values*. Yet in addition, the identification of agency entails some assessment of those goals. "The open conditionality view of agency does not imply … that anything that appeals to [a person] must, for that reason, come into the accounting of his agency freedom… The need for careful assessment of aims, allegiances, objectives, etc., and of the conception of the good, may be important and exacting" (Sen 1985b, p. 204). This requirement, in essence, imposes upon agency similar conditions to capability – namely that agency pertains to the advance of objectives 'people value *and have reason to value.'* I use the foregoing phrase in subsequent discussions to summarize this consideration, and it will prove pivotal in distinguishing autonomy from ability. A standing issue that this distinction raises especially sharply is how to assess agency for very young children (who may, quite defiantly, *not* value going to school) or those who are severely impaired in reasoning, and indeed at what age to begin to incorporate agency into measures of children's poverty, and with respect to what domains. Sen's conception, which presumes rational agents, must be extended to address other groups (Nussbaum 2000).

Fifth, the assessment of a 'responsible agent' regarding a situation or state of affairs, and his or her subsequent response to it, will include, if relevant, an assessment of his or her responsibility in bringing about that situation (Sen 1983; Sen 1985b). That is, in Bernard Williams' famed case, Jim is faced with a choice of watching as a bandit kills 20 people, or killing one of them himself and

saving the others. Of this situation Sen writes, "Whereas others have a straightforward reason to rejoice if Jim goes ahead, Jim has no option but to take serious note of his own responsibility in that state and his agency in killing someone himself". However this fifth characteristic seems to pertain not to agency per se, but to the assessment of a state of affairs – which should include one's role (for good or ill) in creating it and hence should convey responsibility. The examples of manslaughter (Jim), and murder (Lady MacBeth, Othello) Sen uses to illustrate this point rest uneasily against the concept of agency as something people value and have reason to value. Murder seems unlikely to be considered an unproblematic exercise of agency, as another's death is not necessarily considered a reasonable goal to value. We will not consider this fifth issue further, as it pertains to the inclusion of one's own causal responsibility in the overall assessment of states of affairs. It does spark the observation that, by defining 'evil' out of agency, Sen's concept of agency can not be used to analyze the problems of action-for-ill (oppression, cruelty, theft) (Crocker 1995; Qizilbash 1996; Qizilbash 1998; Stewart 2005).

Sen's account of agency draws our attention to distinct and plural features: i) agency is exercised with respect to goals the person values; ii) agency includes effective power as well as direct control; iii) agency may advance wellbeing or may address other-regarding goals; iv) to identify agency also entails an assessment of the value of the agent's goals; v) the agent's responsibility for a state of affairs should be incorporated into his or her evaluation of it. The first four of these features will be useful in clarifying the distinct kinds of information that agency measures convey or do not convey.

III. Measures of Agency

If we are quizzical enough to wish to use the capability approach, and we analyze the information that would be required to implement it (See Sen 1979; Sen 1985b), we see at once that information on agency, as well as on capabilities, is required. The measurement of agency has received considerable attention in the context of the difficult but vital problem of measuring empowerment, and a number of recent literature surveys are available (Kabeer 1999; Kabeer 2001;

Oakley 2001; Narayan 2002; Alsop 2004; Holland & Brook 2004; Alsop & Heinsohn 2005; Malhotra & Schuler 2005; Narayan-Parker 2005; Alsop et al 2006; Alkire 2007b; Ibrahim & Alkire 2007).

It could be quite useful to measure agency in the context of poverty reduction activities for a number of reasons. As some development activities aim to increase people's agency because of its intrinsic value, measures are needed to evaluate whether or not this objective has been realized. Moreover, it is often argued that when poor people act as agents they reduce their own poverty rather effectively (of course they may do other beautiful or valuable things besides). Hence exploring the instrumental interconnections between the agency of poor persons and their poverty reduction in different contexts may identify more effective interventions. Also, people's agency is deeply informed by their own knowledge and values, and research that identifies people's varied understandings of appropriate agency (for example, for women) may catalyze constructive public discussions that further shape how people value their own and others' agency. Hence the significance of agency parallels the significance of related capabilities such as participation and democracy, and lies in: "(1) its *intrinsic importance*, (2) its *instrumental contributions,* and (3) its *constructive role* in the creation of values and norms." (Sen 1999, p. 157). Concrete measures are needed to explore such aspects of agency in many different settings (Alkire 2006).

Agency is inescapably plural in concept and hence measurement. Considerable interest and new research on agency measurement is emerging; indeed over 30 definitions of empowerment (a related but often differently defined term) have been proposed by those working on measurement issues, and hundreds of indicators are in use or under development for use in the context of poverty reduction and women's empowerment activities (Alsop & Heinsohn 2005; Ibrahim & Alkire 2007). While it could be interesting to review this literature using different concepts of agency, for the sake of brevity this chapter uses Sen's concept as it is among the most cited conceptual sources for agency measures.

The remainder of the chapter will categorize and analyze existing agency measures according to their relationship with Sen's concept of agency. We begin with 'proxy' measures of agency. Subsequent sections categorize measures according to their positions on Sen's four distinctions: Agency as *Global* or *Multidimensional,* as *Direct Control* or *Effective Power,* as advancing *Well-being Freedom* or *Other Commitments,* and as *Autonomy* or *Ability.* At present, most 'direct' indicators explore a person's agency with respect their *own well-being*, and probe their *control* (and in some cases its efficacy) in one or more areas that are assumed to matter (*ability*). This chapter thus draws attention to measures that might probe the less-represented facets of agency: autonomy, effective power, and commitments to goals beyond well-being. The forceful articulation of the reach and limits of existing empirical measures of agency may give rise to more incisive and specific analyses that support the expansion of human agency.

IV. Proxy Measures of Agency

By far the most commonly used agency measures direct attention to assets that are presumed pre-requisites of agency. By measuring the presence or absence of these pre-requisites one can, it is presumed, identify the agency-poor person. Common proxy measures for agency include literacy, frequency of radio/TV listening, membership in organizations, employment history, food expenditure, health status, or ownership of land or tools (Alsop & Heinsohn 2005). The primary appeal of such measures is that they are concrete and tangible, yet (arguably) represent a complex concept. To take an analogy from the measurement of shame, Adam Smith described a man as unable to go about without shame if he lacked a linen shirt and leather shoes:

> ...in the present times, through a greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct. Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. (Sen 1981) p 118 citing (Smith 1776) p 351-2.

Given this definition any self-respecting analyst of shame would immediately set about to measure the possession of linen and leather (shame being too wooly to anticipate measuring adequately).

However there are a number of problems with using assets as proxy indicators of agency. First, assets may not translate into agency in the same way for different individuals. This problem is parallel to the issues with resources as a sufficient indicator of functionings, and arises because of human diversity. The difference may relate to the agents' objectives, or to their personal characteristics. Hence Kabeer calls for far greater attention to the presumed interconnections between assets and agency: "studies which use measures of women's access to land as an indicator of empowerment seldom reflect on the pathways by which such 'access' translates into agency and achievement, let alone seeking to understand these pathways empirically" (Kabeer 1999, p. 443). As an example, consider two persons who own the same amount of land and set of agricultural tools (assets). If we are using an asset-based indicator of agency, their respective agencies would be judged equal. However one desires to leave agriculture and play the guitar in the city but does not because of his aging parents. The other has farming in her blood and hopes to live and die on the land with the smell of meadow grass on the wind. These two are indeed equal when it comes to tool ownership. However their ability to advance personal employment-related goals they value and have reason to value is quite different because their goals are different. Again, two people may have identical newspaper reading frequencies (asset measure), but very different levels of political agency (agency); further scrutiny of the intervening processes are required. Thus equality in the space of assets or resources need not imply equality of agency.

Also, an identical expansion of agency may be created by multiple assets or resources, and the link between them may not be predictable except in certain time- and context-specific situations. For example, if, between two waves of panel survey, a woman's decision-making power within the household increases dramatically, this expansion of agency could be triggered by some or not changes in assets. She might have attended a woman's group that trained members in assertiveness and provided social support (membership in organisation). A friend or aunt might have moved

nearby who was quite empowered, and she might have learned from their example (bridging social capital). She might have recently started to listen to a radio program that made her more aware of alternative role-sharing models (access to radio). Her husband may have fallen ill, or lost interest in home life. Or he might have taken a gender-sensitivity training course and changed his habits to suit his newly adopted identity as a feminist (no change in her assets). Alternatively, the pair may have worked out for themselves that a change in their roles brought better balance to the household (no asset change). In this example the same agency expansion could be related to changes in diverse assets in a myriad of ways. It may for that reason be desirable to measure agency and its expansion more directly, rather than to extrapolate agency changes from changes in assets.

A related quite evident but surprisingly under-reported problem is that many proxy measures of agency are actually *identical* to measures traditionally used in poverty analysis, such as years of schooling, or employment status or asset ownership or health status. The interpretation differs, not the data. For example, in the country studies that accompanied Alsop and Heinsohn's masterful review of the literature, literacy and level of income was used to reflect agency in Ethiopia, Nepal, and Honduras. Redundancy of agency and poverty indicators preclude meaningful empirical study of the interconnections between agency and poverty. Yet such analyses are important to clarify the instrumental role of expanding agency in poverty reduction.

Thus three problems challenge the use of proxy (asset) measures as agency measures. First, the conversion of assets to agency is assumed to occur evenly (which it may not – not all who attend assertiveness or gender sensitivity training become equally assertive or gender sensitive agents). Second, agency expansions caused by a different trigger (or no external trigger) may be overlooked. Third, it is impossible to explore interconnections between agency and poverty when the same indicators are used to represent both phenomena. We now turn to review more direct measures of agency.

V. Global and Multidimensional

Our conceptual account of agency recognizes internal pluralism among kinds of agency. Is such pluralism required for measures of agency? Some measures of agency are 'global' in the sense that a single indicator is interpreted to proxy the individual's agency. An example of a 'global' measure of agency is the 'Ladder of Power' question that is employed, for example, in the *Moving Out of Poverty* Study (Narayan & Petesch 2007). "Imagine a 10-step ladder, where at the bottom, on the first step, stand people who are completely powerless and without rights, and on the highest step, the tenth, stand those who have a lot of power and rights. On which step of this ladder are you today? And on which step were you 10 years ago?"

Such questions provide a general sense of a person's agency. Any interpretation is complicated by the fact that we do not know how respondents defined 'powers and rights' when answering the question. Was it in relation to their spouse, their government, their former self, or their boss, or did they think of all of these briefly and take a mental 'average' across them? We do not know whether different people (or the same person at different points in time) have the same definition of 'powers and rights' in mind or whether one respondent was thinking about herself as an employee; another his citizenship (as an election was coming up) and so on. Perhaps the most important critique of proxy measures, and one that emerges regularly in literature on women's agency, is that the same person may achieve quite different levels of agency in different spheres of life: The same person can be fully empowered as a wife and mother, but excluded from the labor force by social conventions, recently empowered to vote by a grassroots political process, but not confident to travel alone. Any one 'global' measure of agency will obscure these informative variations.

An understandable assumption might be that although agency levels differ, there are permeable boundaries between kinds of agency – perhaps because there are common 'skills' to the exercise of agency in different domains. According to this assumption if a person becomes more empowered to act as an agent in one sphere – such as by holding office in her women's

organization – this will feed over into another sphere – such as her agency within the household. So one measure of agency might suffice to represent agency in different domains. Scrutiny of the evidence has called into question such general assumptions, so separate measures for different dimensions of agency should supplement 'global' measures.[3]

An example of a dimension-specific measure is this question from the demographic and health survey, which enquires who makes household decisions with respect to six domains:

The money you earn

Your husband's/partner's earnings

Health care for yourself

Major household purchases

Purchases for daily household needs

Visits to your family or relatives[4]

In practice, the domains in which agency is (or is not) exercised that have been selected represent either a) *kinds of goals* the person has; arenas in which he or she acts (as above), or b) *potentially coercive forces* that could impede agency (spouse, government). The measurement literature has developed attention to b) considerably and raises many issues for conceptual debate. At present let us just notice that the question above presumes that one primary group poised to displace agency is the spouse or family. The set of domains listed in a) represent a value judgment regarding domains in which people *have reason to value* an expansion of agency.

Note that the domains in a) might be the same domains used in multidimensional poverty analyses for any given community. The conceptual motivation for this symmetry is most apparent in the negative: if we do *not* regard agency with respect to employment, for example, to be important (although employment status is a dimension of poverty) we are saying in essence that it is acceptable

[3] This parallels the subjective well-being literature discussion regarding the accuracy of a 'global' question (how satisfied are you with your life overall?) vs a domain-specific question (how satisfied are you with your children's educational attainment) – the answers to the latter being arguably more amenable to accurate interpretation (Cummins 1996; Cummins 2000).

if one's employment is forcibly allocated by the government or landowner, or imposed by tradition or a family decision against one's will.

The conceptual plurality of agency gives rise, in measurement, to a preference for multidimensional measures of agency. The dimensions are likely to distinguish the kind of goal sought, and may also distinguish the potential coercive force. The choice to use only a global measure for this concept of agency might need to be justified by empirical characteristics of the data, for example the interconnectedness (and high intercorrelation) of agency in the relevant set of domains. In the absence of such justification, plural or multidimensional measures of agency will be appropriate.

VI. Effective Power and Control

Current indicators of agency by and large focus upon agency as 'direct control', and rather less clearly on agency as 'effective power.' This is seen in the leading definitions used in the measurement literature. For Alsop *et al.*, "Agency is defined as an actor's or group's ability to make purposeful choices—that is, the actor is able to envisage and purposively choose options" (Alsop et al 2006, p. 11). The person or group's direct action (in this case, choice-making) defines agency; effective power would not, in this definition, be attributed to agency. Control measures clearly form an indispensable part of agency measures but, in Sen's concept, need to be complemented by measures of effective freedom.

Perhaps the most common direct question regarding agency control is the following, taken from the Demographic and Health Surveys: "Who usually makes decisions about **X**: you, your husband/partner, you and your husband/partner jointly, or someone else?" [(Orc-Macro 2006) Q. 820-826]. X is filled in by the six domains mentioned above. In many cases a focus on control is exactly what is required; however it is worth bearing in mind some limitations of the information arising from such questions.

[4] A compilation of the 'domains' that have in fact been used by different surveys is available in the Appendix to Ibrahim and Alkire which appears on the website www.ophi.org.uk. On the choice of dimensions for

One limitation of some control measures is that they do not convey whether the lack of control (in this case decision-making) may be *favored* by the respondent (people may prefer *not* to be bothered with certain decisions but delegate them to others). Alsop and Heinsohn commend that, for each decision not made solely or jointly by the respondent, the following counterfactual question be posed: 'if you wished to make decisions with respect to X, could you?' (2005). This supplemental question potentially generates information as to whether the abstention from decision-making created a situation of effective freedom (or a division of labor) or allowed the coercive imposition of another's view. It thus improves the accuracy of the information.

Another limitation of control measures is that they do not convey whether the actions were 'successful' in terms of the agency goals. This is a point at which the measurement literature enriches the prior conceptual analysis. It observes that even in the case of control versus effective freedom, an adequate exercise of agency must not only enjoy control but also be effective in creating desired outcomes. For example, Alsop's framework considers the efficacy of agency goals (3. below) to the extent that this is mediated through the exercise of a choice – that is,

> 1. Whether an opportunity to make a choice exists (*existence of choice*).
>
> 2. Whether a person or group actually uses the opportunity to choose (*use of choice*).
>
> 3. **Whether the choice brings about the desired result** (*achievement of choice*) (Alsop et al 2006, p. 17).

Similarly, Narayan and Petesch, cited above, argue that when outcomes can not be guaranteed because they result from the interaction of different groups, it is still important to consider whether agency is likely to be effective in realizing agency goals (in this case, 'escaping poverty'). For them, agency "is about men and women having the means to envision and make choices that *can* lead to their escaping poverty. The term 'can' is stressed because the likelihood or chance of this outcome will be a product of two broad forces: incentives and structures in the wider

multidimensional poverty measurement – a similar issue – see (Alkire 2007a).

society… *plus* the assets and capabilities—both individual and collective—that poor and disadvantaged people can marshal in pursuit of their goals" (Narayan & Petesch 2007). In essence, they are requesting attention to something like effective power, whether or not control is exercised.

Neither these authors, nor others, would use the term *agency* to refer to effective power. Yet as they acknowledge, it may be useful to consider develop measures of effective power at the individual level. However the measurement of 'effective power' is clearly more challenging than that of 'direct control' because it is less immediate, and entails an analysis of the situation, and some ability to predict others' actions. It will be noted at once that the focus thus far on the efficacy of directly controlled decisions is only one kind of effective power. One might also be concerned, as Sen is, with one's effective power in situations in which one is merely one of several multiple actors, or indeed where one is not among the actors at all.

The search for conceptually adequate measures of effective power leads into a different discipline, to indicators of efficacy developed by Albert Bandura (Bandura 1995; Bandura 1997; Bandura 1998; Bandura 2000; Alkire 2005). Bandura's measures probe people's perceived self-efficacy, "people's belief in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over given events" (Ozer & Bandura 1990, p. 472). Respondents are asked to rate the strength of their perceived efficacy, or their effective power (in our terms) to be achieve a certain state of affairs. The scale ranged from *complete uncertainty* to *complete certitude*. For example, a "practice" question Bandura suggests is, "Can you lift an object weighing x pounds?" (x = 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500, 1000). What Bandura terms 'personal efficacy' corresponds to the assessment that not only does one have direct control in a situation, but that control is likely to achieve the desired outcome. However, like Sen, Bandura recognises that attention on agency "has centered almost exclusively on the direct exercise of personal agency [understood as direct control]" (Bandura 2000). He introduces two additional measures, which relate more closely to Sen's effective power, namely *proxy* and *collective*. Regarding proxy agency, he writes:

> In many activities… people do not have control over social conditions and institutional practices that affect their lives. Under these circumstances, they seek their well-being and security through the exercise of proxy agency. In this socially mediated mode of agency, people try to get other people who have expertise or wield influence and power to act on their behalf to get the outcomes they desire. People also turn to proxy control because they do not want to saddle themselves with the arduous work needed to develop requisite competencies, and to shoulder the responsibilities and stressors that the exercise of control entails (Bandura 2000, p. 75).

Bandura also develops measures of collective agency, namely agency that pertains to outcomes "achievable only through interdependent efforts" (Bandura 2000, p. 76). He refers to this as an 'emergent group level' property, which may be better or worse than average individual agency levels: "For example, it is not uncommon for groups with measured who are talented individually to perform poorly collectively because the members cannot work well together as a unit. Therefore, perceived collective efficacy is not simply the sum of the efficacy beliefs of individual members" (Bandura 2000, p. 77)

Bandura's measures thus do endeavour to measure peoples perceptions of their effective power, and illustrates that the measurement issues, although challenging, are not insuperable. Objective indicators for effective power at the individual level should also be identified.

While many agency measures focus on control, measures of effective power are required – whether or not agency-as-control is present; Bandura's proxy and collective agency comprise one strand of measures not currently used in agency measurement, that might be fruitfully explored.

VII. Advancing Well-being Freedom and Other-Regarding Commitments

All existing agency measures focus on agency goals that relate to oneself, one's family or community or others with whom one has sympathy, or the political unit of which one is a part. That is, the measures focus on agency that has, as a direct or indirect goal, the expansion of one's own

well-being freedom. For example, Narayan and Petesch write that "Agency… is about people's ability to act individually or collectively to further *their own interests*" (Narayan & Petesch 2007, p. 15). This is a natural and constructive focus, given that the purpose of many agency studies, such as the *Moving out of Poverty* study by Narayan, Petesch and others, is in part to explore the instrumental force of agency and empowerment in reducing poor people's own poverty broadly conceived. Yet in comparison with Sen's description of agency, this view is more restrictive, because it cannot include people's commitments to other-regarding goals that they might have such as saving the rainforests or supporting hip-hop music or caring for orphans. In some evaluative exercises, other-regarding agency may not be relevant, but in some it may be.

Consideration of 'other-regarding' agency is complex may require analyses rather than simple measurement. Yet this perspective raises a pivotal issue of responsibility that has not been addressed in previous agency measures. However delicate an issue it might be, it could be of quite immediate practical interest to analyze the effective power people have that *could* be exercised on behalf of others. People themselves may not grasp their potential effective power, and such oversight may fuel inaction (I feel badly, but what can one person do?). Further, if people do have such power to effect change for others' well-being, they may be encouraged to consider their '*imperfect obligation'* to use such power on behalf of others (Sen 1999; Anand & Sen 2000; Sen 2000).

Imperfect obligations are "inexactly specified (telling us neither who must particularly take the initiative, nor how far he should go in doing this general duty)." This duty is not a strictly legal one, and is not specified with reference to a particular person, nor is the content of the obligation specified. Nonetheless, imperfect obligations are "general - and sometimes loosely specified - duties of others to help a human being who is seen to have certain rights by virtue of his or her humanity." (Sen 2000) p. 495 both quotes. In addition, part of some people's own freedom may enhanced by such abilities to act on others' behalf. As Douglass described his work towards other slaves' freedom, "I could do but little; but what I could, I did with a joyful heart." Foster's account of 'external capabilities' in this volume identifies a very similar issue, and the measurement of external

capabilities for the 'helper' would be likely to parallel measures of effective power on behalf of others. For that reason, it seems appropriate not to exclude this consideration but to wrestle with it to obtain better ways of capturing empirical assessments of other-regarding agency.

VIII. Autonomy and Ability

Current measures of agency mainly focus on domains of agency that it is presumed people value, which is a key feature of agency. However in doing so, measures do not investigate people's own opinions and values: whether they value the agency they possess or lack. In other words, current measures ignore what we will call *autonomy,* and do not probe the positionally objective values people hold. Perhaps such assessments are deemed too controversial or difficult to accomplish in a way that is at once robust and comparable.

It will prove helpful to distinguish *autonomy* measures from agency measures that focus instead on *ability*. The distinction may seem trivial at first glance, but is arguably of some importance. Agency, as Sen formulates it, can never be captured empirically by one indicator because the term itself has a twist. Agency is a person's ability to act on behalf of things they *value and have reason to value*. We can document, empirically, two distinct aspects of agency:

1) *Autonomy:* Whether people are able to act on behalf of what they themselves **value** (it matters not whether the respondent has reason to value them)
2) *Ability:* Whether people are able to act on behalf of things that they are assumed to **have reason to value** (whether or not the respondent actually values them).

Autonomy probes the person's own self-understanding of their situation; it reflects their own assessment and valuation of goals and activities. *Ability* probes the objective powers that a person enjoys and/or uses – such as being able to take a child to the emergency room, being able to seek legal assistance for divorce, being able to make minor purchasing decisions on behalf of the household, being able to vote, being able to go to a nearby town alone. It relates to people's competence, their skills, their knowledge and so on – but unlike autonomy, a study of *ability* vests no interest in the person's own values and preferences; only in their effective power or control with

respect to certain agency goals. Agency indicators used in poverty reduction to date implicitly probe people's *ability* such as a woman's ability to make household decisions, and this is a key but incomplete aspect of agency.

In many cases autonomy and ability will coincide. In other words, people will value what they have reason to value *and* will have the skills necessary to use their autonomy, so an autonomy measure will represent ability and vice versa – and both will represent agency. But in some cases, autonomy and ability may diverge, and such divergences can be quite informative. People may have certain abilities (right to vote) but feel coerced into using them. The coercion could be of distinct kinds – for example due to social pressure or due to a local militia. If information about ability and autonomy are both gathered, and divergences between them explored, this could be quite a useful tool to understanding agency.

A concrete measure of autonomy has been developed by psychologists Richard Ryan, Ed Deci, Valery Chirkov, and others working in Self Determination Theory (SDT)(Deci & Ryan 1985; Ryan & Deci 2000; Chirkov et al 2003). They implement a widely used and well-validated measure of autonomy. The measure is multidimensional, as persons are asked about their autonomy with respect to different domains. Studies to date have found it to be cross-culturally comparable. Furthermore, the measure frames autonomy in a way that is valued in individualistic and collectivist cultures alike – which is important as most indicators of agency are correlated with individualism (Chirkov et al 2003).

According to the SDT formulation, a person is autonomous when his or her behavior is experienced as willingly enacted and when he or she fully endorses the actions in which he or she is engaged and/or the values expressed by them. People are therefore most autonomous when they act in accord with their authentic interests or integrated values and desires. SDT contrasts autonomy with *heteronomy,* 'in which one's actions are experienced as controlled by forces that are phenomenally alien to the self, or that compels one to behave in specific ways regardless of one's values or interests' (Chirkov et al 2003, p. 98). This contrast coheres with Sen's concept of agency,

and observes that the opposite of a person with agency is someone who is forced, oppressed, or passive.

To determine autonomy, the survey question enquires whether respondents engage in certain practices (related to each of the domains, such as children's education, respondent's employment, house hold duties, healthcare, mobility, and participation in groups). Respondents are then asked to rate each of four possible reasons why they felt or believed or engaged in the practice, from a low number *not at all because of this reason;* to a high number *completely because of this reason.* Reason 1, called External regulation, establishes to what extent the person felt coerced or forced to act (by another person, or by force of circumstances); Reason 2 called Introjected regulation gauges the extent to which others' opinions and expectations accompanied by the avoidance of feeling guilt or shame influenced her choice. Reason 3 called Identified regulation appraises whether she herself valued it as an important practice, and Reason 4, called Integrated regulation, whether her thoughts on the matter were integrated with her wider vision about her own life.

The measures of autonomy, like many self-report measures, are not unproblematic to interpret, for they are likely to contain an unpredictable mixture of people's reflected values and their adaptive preferences. For example, people may feel themselves to be autonomous (for example, in relation to their husbands), but others looking from the outside may question their values– perhaps their values have been shaped too much by their circumstances, they cannot imagine another way of living which would be more truly autonomous. In recent work in Kerala, this issue arose with respect to the domain of "household duties" – which most women deeply valued as integral to their conception of what it was to be a good and responsible woman. The enumerators and researchers questioned the extent to which women's values had adapted to the local culture of women as mothers and care givers, the lack of possibilities they had to avoid household work, and the social norms of decency and honor (Alkire et al Mimeo). Interesting work on the statistical and conceptual analyses of 'adaptive preferences' is underway and will facilitate the interpretation of such questions (Qizilbash 1997; Nussbaum 2001; Ravallion &

Lokshin 2001; Burchardt 2003; Burchardt 2005; Cookson 2005; Barr & Clark 2007; Clark 2007). For it does seem important to develop measures that reflect not only the agency a person has reason to value, but also the agency they deeply value.

IX Conclusion

By refracting the existing agency measures through four conceptual distinctions, this chapter has encouraged a broadening of agency measures to encompass new features, as well as a clearer articulation of the strengths, weaknesses, and complementaries among different agency measures. At the same time, the existing literature on agency measurement identifies further conceptual issues for the capability approach.

This chapter observed that asset proxy measures of agency are at best to be interpreted with considerable care; distinctive and direct measures of agency are also required. The existing direct measures of agency are clearly relevant and explore certain features of agency with a great deal of gusto (control, ability, advancing own well-being). Other characteristics are relatively unexplored by empirical measures thus ripe for research.

Agency measures might be categorized according to four categories. First, agency may be measured with respect to one or several domains of capability (including consumption, health actions, work and livelihoods, childbearing, children's education, marriage, politics and other-regarding activities). Second, the effective exercise of agency may involve direct control by the person or group; in other situations agency is exerted as 'effective power' by an individual or group and measures are required for both. Third, agents usually advance their own well-being and that of their family; yet responsible agents may advance other goals which do not necessarily expand their own well-being and indeed may decrease it; yet further exploration of this ability to exert other-regarding agency is tremendously important in clarifying imperfect obligation, and enabling people who wish to create external capabilities for others to do so. Fourth, we are fundamentally interested in two questions: a) are people able to act on behalf of things *they value*? And b) are people able to act on behalf of things it is presumed they *have reason to value*? While in practice, often these will be

identical, empirical measures are required for both a) *and* b), as no single measure can capture both aspects.

Douglass claimed that, "A person's greatness consists in his ability to do, and the proper application of his powers to things needed to be done." The development of stronger and more nuanced measures of individual agency may be useful to support the kinds of agency that made Douglass and others like him agents of change on behalf of themselves and many others.

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