

## 2 Agency: An Abstract and Multifaceted Construct

The aim of this chapter is to provide clarity about the concept of human agency.<sup>4</sup> In a first step, the workplace learning (WPL) literature is reviewed to explain how agency is used, how it is conceptualised, and how it is theoretically related to other constructs (Section 2.1). Unfortunately, the discussion of agency within this literature is rather abstract in nature. The discussion allows neither derivation of an operational definition of the concept nor construction of a nomological network of relevant antecedents and consequences of agency in work contexts. It is therefore necessary to consult literature of other disciplines to overcome this shortcoming (Section 2.2). Research conducted in social-cognitive psychology, life-course research, and organisational behaviour theorisation on proactivity especially is suited to improve the conceptual understanding of agency and to derive a conceptual framework that links agency to both antecedents and outcomes. Both literature reviews are brought together in Sections 2.2.4 and 2.3. The latter section develops a working definition of agency as well as a first conceptual framework that is later used to empirically investigate the relationship of agency and expertise development. The chapter closes with a summary in Section 2.4.

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4 From this point on the shorter term agency will be used to describe the notion of human agency. Ideas of non-human agency will be excluded from all further discussions.

## 2.1 Agency in the Workplace Learning Literature

Based on a larger review, Tynjälä (2013) suggested that the concept of agency has been used threefold within the WPL literature. First, agency has been described as an individual-level feature that affects how employees interpret learning and work situations as well as whether and how they engage in different learning activities. Second, agency has been employed to describe learning activities as such. Within this second category agency is understood as something employees do (see also Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Third, agency has been described as a consequence of learning processes. Agency is understood as something that changes due to learning experiences.

Unfortunately, Tynjälä (2013) cites only very few references for each of the three suggested categories (Billett, 2002, 2004a, 2011a; Hänninen & Eteläpelto, 2008; Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008). In addition, she does not describe how agency is defined or conceptualised within the referenced writings.<sup>5</sup> It follows that a more comprehensive review is necessary to get a deeper understanding what agency is and how scholars interested in learning and professional development use the concept. The next sections therefore give a comprehensive overview of the WPL literature concerned with the concept of agency. The three derived categories of Tynjälä's review are used to structure and systematise this literature: Section 2.1.1 reviews literature that conceptualises agency as a prerequisite of learning in work contexts; Section 2.1.2 discusses all literature that understands agency as an activity—that is, as something individuals do; and Section 2.1.3 focuses on agency as an outcome of work-related learning. Each of these sections first describes the theoretical conceptualisation of agency and then reviews the empirical findings based on the particular theoretical ideas. Section 2.1.4 summarises the main findings and discusses potential limitations of the literature reviewed.

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5 It should be noted that Tynjälä's review did not focus on agency alone. The review sought to give a systematic overview about research conducted on learning for and through work in general. Agency only emerged as one of the relevant concepts within these discussions.

### **2.1.1 Agency as a Prerequisite of Work-Related Learning**

This section discusses the two most prevalent theoretical models that incorporate the notion of agency as an important prerequisite of learning in work contexts. Within the underlying literature review of this thesis, Billett's co-participation model as well as Eraut's double-triangle model emerged as the two most often referenced theoretical frameworks that explicitly include such ideas of agency. Both models are genuinely concerned with questions of how individual agency and workplace characteristics interact and thereby explain employees' professional development processes.

#### **2.1.1.1 Billett's Co-Participation Model**

Billett's (2001c, 2004b, 2006, 2011a) co-participation model is one of the best elaborated and described theories concerning agency in the WPL literature. The model describes the interdependence of work practices (i. e., activities and interactions) and individuals' participation in those work practices to explain learning at work. It strongly emphasises that both workplace characteristics and the agency of employees determine how and what is learnt at work.

Billett's ideas are rooted in the sociocultural paradigm of learning (e. g., Lave, 1993; Rogoff, 1991, 1995; see also Hager, 2011). An important assumption of this school of thought is that learning is a process of participation within social goal-directed activities (Billett, 2004b, 2011a; Billett & Smith, 2006; Hager, 2011; Sfard, 1998). The development of work-related knowledge, skills, and abilities—within these accounts—is therefore inseparably connected to individuals' engagement and participation in work-related practices. It follows that the quality and quantity of learning processes at work are strongly determined by the kind of practices in which individuals are able to participate. Individuals with only limited access to work-related practices will have limited access to learning opportunities at work. Conversely, individuals with access to a wide range of such practices also have access to a wide range of learning opportunities at work.

The access to work activities and therefore learning opportunities is not necessarily equally distributed within organisations. Opportunities to engage in certain work practices are largely determined by the power structure and the

interests of different stakeholders at work (Billett, 2001c, 2004b, 2011a). More concretely, the distribution of workplace affordances—the opportunities to participate in certain work practices (activities, interactions, guidance)—is based upon workplace hierarchies or the affiliation to different status groups. Managers, for instance, reserve crucial and prestigious activities and tasks to themselves, and full-time employees may restrict the access to workplace practices for their part-time counterparts. Workplace affordances are also distributed according to the personal characteristics of employees. For example, innovative and demanding tasks are more often delegated (i. e., afforded) to younger employees who are characterised as being more capable than their older counterparts (age-biased task discrimination; Bender, 2010).

Although the access to work practices is a crucial element in his co-participation model, Billett (2004b) argues that “situational factors alone are insufficient to understand workplaces as learning environments. What is required is an understanding of the way individuals’ agentic action and intentionalities [...] shape how they participate in and learn through work” (p. 316). Consequently, Billett (2001c, 2004b, 2011a) introduces the concept of agency in his model to acknowledge that individuals are not fully subjugated by the social context and learning is not just a product of socially afforded or even enforced practices. On the one hand, the concept is used to explain that individuals do not just reactively and passively participate in work practices, but actively elect whether and to what extent they want to engage in affordances provided at work. On the other hand, agency is used to express that individuals also actively decide how to engage with constraints that are imposed by the workplace. For instance, an employee might actively try to bypass age-biased task discrimination by agentially asking her<sup>6</sup> employer for more innovative and demanding tasks. It therefore follows that, although important, workplace characteristics alone do not explain what and how individuals learn at work.

Billett (2004b, 2006, 2011a) describes the role of agency on an even more fundamental level. With reference to Valsiner (1998), he notes that individu-

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6 Within this manuscript all generic individuals (i. e., no concrete persons like authors, or study participants) are referred to with the female form. This is thought to avoid lengthy formulations like “he or she” or “his or her”. All female references automatically include the male form.

als have to be highly selective in what they react to and how, in the steady stream of social suggestions they encounter in daily (work) life. Agency determines how much attention is directed towards encountered social suggestions (e. g., work-related problems, new task assignments, etc.) and how individuals mentally and overtly engage with them. Individuals actively decide what is “judged worth of participation” (Billett, 2004b, p. 320). Under this perspective, individuals are able to choose actively from a range of responses between fully engaging in the activities that are suggested by the workplace to (almost) completely ignoring or rejecting them.

It follows that agency can also be exercised in situations that exert very high levels of social pressure to participate in certain social practices at work (e. g., because non-engagement could lead to dismissal). Individuals can, for instance, still choose to employ least-effort strategies in such situations. From an external perspective, the adoption of such a “good enough” (Jensen, 2007, p. 498) mentality might still sufficiently satisfy performance requirements. However, individuals adopting these kinds of strategies do not necessarily engage with afforded activities in a deep cognitive way (Billett, 2001c, 2004b).

Furthermore, employees are also able to fully deny engagement in work practices. Billett (2000, 2001c) gives the example of a young recruit who rejects the guidance offered by a mentor provided by his company. The recruit did not appreciate the mentor’s help and was therefore highly reluctant to engage in any mentoring. In another study, Gustavsson (2007) reports on technical operators in a paper mill openly acknowledging that—based on their interest and motivation—they decide whether they want to participate in certain problem situations or whether they reject their participation. Resistance at work can therefore be seen as one particular manifestation of agency.

From a different perspective, employees are also able to create opportunities to participate in affordances that are not naturally provided by the workplace. The exercise of agency can therefore also directly foster learning in work contexts. Billett (2001b), for instance, reports about a worker who used any opportunity to get in touch with colleagues from a different department in which he wanted to work (see also Billett, Barker, & Hernon-Tinning, 2004). He followed colleagues’ discussions on a two-way radio and also sat with them during lunch breaks in order to learn as much as possible about their work. This

example illustrates how employees can overcome existing barriers to learning and developing by actively creating learning opportunities that were not available before.

Through exercising their agency individuals are therefore able to affect how and what they learn at work. Work-related learning outcomes are strongly related to how employees elect to engage in what is afforded to them. However, individuals must not be seen as completely independent from their social context; individuals are not fully free to act on their own behalf. Work-related learning has to be conceptualised as relational: it is related to both social practice and (personal) agency (Billett & Smith, 2006). Work-related learning simultaneously depends on what is afforded at work and on how individuals deal with the afforded opportunities.

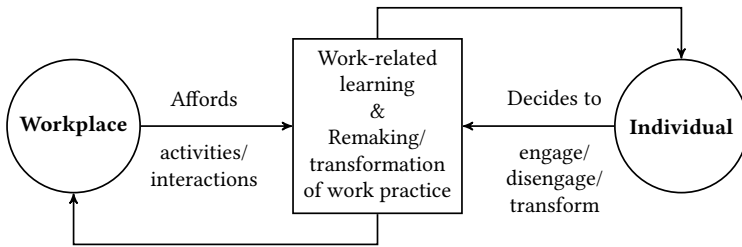
This proposed interdependency is not important only for work-related learning. In his model, Billett (2006, 2008b, 2011a; Billett & Smith, 2006) also emphasises the interconnected role of activities and interactions afforded at work and the influence of agency in the remaking and transformation of social practice. Through the engagement in activities and interactions afforded at work individuals continually reproduce work-related practice. However, the remaking of work practices does not happen uniformly across all involved employees. As proposed before, individuals are not fully subjugated by social experience. They rather exercise agency by controlling both the kind of affordances they want to engage in and the intensity of that engagement. Consequently, individuals can either elect to remake or to transform social practice (Billett & Smith, 2006). Reproducing work practice requires employees to willingly—or at least uncritically—engage in activities provided by the workplace. Transformation of practices in contrast requires individuals to reshape and change afforded activities based on their own prospects and visions.

How and in what way agency is exercised at work is strongly related to individuals' identities, goals, interests, and beliefs that have developed through their particular personal life history (i. e., ontogeny; Billett, 2001c, 2004b, 2006, 2008b). Because individuals all make a unique set of work and non-work related experiences over their lifespan, there are no two humans alike. That is why individuals react differently to identical social suggestions and some engage qualitatively more in afforded workplace activities than others. So for

example, some of the operators interviewed by Gustavsson (2007) might perceive the repairing of machines at work as interesting and, hence, might engage in this kind of activity. However, others might see fixing machines as not part of their work identity and therefore may avoid such kind of work. In another empirically derived example, R. Smith (2006) reports about newly employed fruit workers. Of the three observed workers, one had the goal to be a salesman. That is why this particular employee willingly took every chance to engage with activities seen as connected to a career in sales (i. e., answering the phone). Concerning the transformation of social practice, Billett et al. (2004) describe how a grief counsellor managed to transform his counselling practice in a way that allowed more engagement in face-to-face counselling. This particular kind of counselling overlapped more with this counsellor's interests and beliefs about what exactly characterises good counselling practice.

Although Billett uses agency as a central concept in his model he does not explicitly define it. However, two different implicit notions of agency could be extracted. In some of his writings (e. g., Billett, 2006), he uses agency to describe individuals' intentionality, subjectivity, and identity or their general interests and dispositions (Billett & Somerville, 2004) that are the foundation of goal-directed behaviours. However, in other publications he uses agency as a placeholder for intentional actions exercised by individuals in their daily (working) life (e. g., Billett, 2008a, 2008b). Those actions are termed manifestations of agency in still other publications (e. g., Billett, 2001c). It therefore seems that Billett uses agency—at the same time—as the cause of intentional actions and the actions themselves.

Figure 2.1 provides a graphical summary of the co-participation model. To sum up, the model describes the relational interdependence between social practice and agency in explaining both work-related learning and also the re-making and transformation of work practices. Learning at work “is shaped through interaction between social and individual contributions, yet with individuals playing a highly agentic role in those interactions” (Billett, 2006, p. 58). The concept of agency is used to explain how individuals deal with social suggestions at work. It is used to account for individuals' intentionalities—that is, “the focus and direction of engagement by individuals with what is experienced socially” (Billett & Smith, 2006, p. 151), as well as the degree of intensity



**Figure 2.1.** Co-participation model.

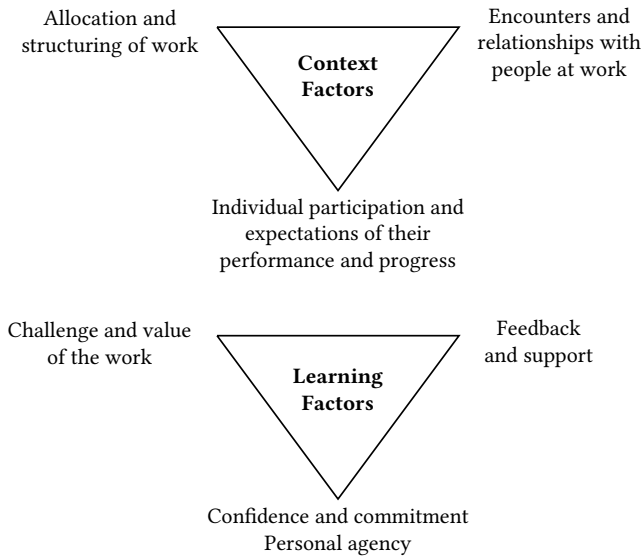
of this engagement—that is, the “priority and potency of the exercise of personal agency” (Billett & Smith, 2006, p. 151).

### 2.1.1.2 Eraut’s Double Triangle Model

Eraut’s double-triangle model (see Figure 2.2) is another commonly cited theoretical framework that includes agency as a central presage component. The model was constructed based on a range of studies investigating employees’ professional development processes in their early and mid-career phase (Eraut, 2007, 2010b, 2012; Eraut & Hirsh, 2007). Unfortunately, Eraut does not describe or discuss the single components of his model in great detail.

The upper part of the model depicted in Figure 2.2 focuses on context factors that are relevant to explain learning at work. The first set of context factors is concerned with the allocation and structuring of work. Eraut (2007) argues that work has to be sufficiently stimulating by being challenging but not overwhelming. Only workplaces that afford challenges that do not constantly diminish incumbents’ confidence in their own abilities are described as being conducive to learning. However, workplaces that are constantly under-challenging also do not contribute to employees’ professional development. The second set of context factors describes encounters and relationships with people at work. Work that provides opportunities to legitimately observe and work alongside more experienced employees allows individuals to progress developmentally. It is both the support that other employees provide during the engagement in new tasks as well as their feedback about current levels of performance that enable new incumbents to further develop their work-related





**Figure 2.2.** Double-triangle model. Reprinted and adapted from “Eraut, M. (2007). Learning from other people in the workplace. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33(4), 403–422, p. 418” with permission from Taylor & Francis.

skills, knowledge, and abilities. The last set of factors is labelled individual participation and expectations of their performance and progress. Here, Eraut (2007; Eraut & Hirsh, 2007) mainly refers to employers’ implicit or explicit expectations about the performance of their employees and employees’ gradual progress in mastering the particular practices of the workplace in question. In the best case, employees are well familiar with such expectations and the expectations are personally manageable for them. Unrealistic expectations might rapidly demotivate new employees to meet them in the first place. However, employees might also be less motivated to learn and develop if expectations are unknown or even non-existent.

The second part of the model (the lower triangle in Figure 2.2) focuses on the individual and the learning process as such. This triangle is thought to mirror the first part of the model. This is particularly obvious for both factors at the top of the triangle. As argued before, learning at work mainly depends on the

provision of appropriate challenges for the employee as well as the feedback and support afforded by the workplace. It is the active engagement in appropriately challenging tasks at work as well as the experience of feedback and support from other individuals that jointly allow a learner to develop professionally. The third factor introduced by Eraut is termed personal agency, confidence and commitment. Eraut (2007) argues that a large share of workplace learning occurs because individuals act proactively by deliberately seeking out learning opportunities. Proactive behaviours like asking questions, getting information, locating resources, or listening and observing are described as manifestations of personal agency (Eraut, 2007, 2010a). In this context, Eraut argues that employees need to be sufficiently confident to proactively seek out appropriate challenges, support, and feedback at work. Confidence hereby means having both sufficient beliefs about one's own capacities and abilities (e.g., self-efficacy beliefs) and also confidence about the support one gets from co-workers and supervisors when tackling new challenges (Eraut & Hirsh, 2007).

Eraut therefore argues that workplace learning is partly based upon the initiative of the employee. First and foremost, the workplace is a context of work where learning opportunities are not necessarily provided to everybody in an automatic way (see also Goller & Billett, 2014). In certain circumstances development opportunities might only occur if the individual proactively seeks them out.

Again, Eraut does not give an explicit definition of agency in his writings. Agency is understood as an abstract capacity that is necessary to proactively take on new challenges at work. It is the requirement that individuals show initiative and deliberately engage in learning-related activities (Eraut, 2010b). It is not, however, clear whether confidence and commitment are a part of agency or more antecedents that enable individuals to exercise agency in the first place.

To sum up, Eraut (2007, 2010b; Eraut & Hirsh, 2007) argues that agency is central to all kinds of learning in work contexts. The learning of employees largely depends on their proactivity. They have to ask questions, seek out information or ask for guidance and support. Agency is used to describe the capacity and willingness to do so.

### 2.1.1.3 Empirical Evidence

A few empirical studies used Billett's co-participation model as an explicit theoretical framework (e. g., Bryson et al., 2006; A. Fox et al., 2010; A. Fuller & Unwin, 2005). Probably one of the most comprehensive is the qualitative study conducted by Bryson et al. (2006), who interviewed 10 employees working in different hierarchical and functional positions at a vineyard. The main focus of this study was to investigate the interaction of workplace affordances and individual engagement as well as their role for competence and expertise development. Drawing on Billett's model, agency is seen as the foundation of individual engagement, whereby individual engagement was defined as the process where employees elect or refuse to participate in learning opportunities provided by the workplace (Bryson et al., 2006). Bryson and colleagues used the concept of proactivity, conceptualised as employees' active approach towards work in showing high levels of initiative in seeking information and creating favourable situations (see Section 2.2.3 for a further discussion of this concept), to explain individual differences between employees in their engagement in workplace affordances. It was assumed that individuals with a proactive personality should show more individual engagement.

Among other results, the study found evidence that proactive individuals did indeed "shape the nature of development affordances" (Bryson et al., 2006, p. 291) by taking initiative. Proactive employees could create learning opportunities even in rather hostile work environments where learning-relevant affordances were strongly restricted. Some employees proactively asked for and sought out both on-the-job learning affordances and institutionalised training opportunities which are usually not automatically provided to them. Others used their leisure time to deliberately engage in activities that provided positive spill overs to their daily work activities.

Fox and colleagues (A. Fox et al., 2010; A. Fox, Wilson, & Deaney, 2011; see also A. Fox & Wilson, 2015) employed both Billett's co-participation model and Eraut's ideas on self-initiated learning opportunities to investigate the workplace learning of beginning teachers. The authors conducted interviews with 17 novice teachers that mainly focussed on the teachers' perceptions of the learning support offered by their training schools. Another focus was laid

on how the individuals engaged with the support offered by the school and how they dealt with more restrictive learning environments. Agency was conceptualised as the degree to which novice teachers attempt to take control over their work-related lives; agentic behaviour was defined as goal-directed, effortful, and proactive engagement in work practices (A. Fox et al., 2011).

The analysis of the interviews revealed that the existence of highly supportive working environments (e.g., environments that afforded strong opportunities to interact and exchange ideas with colleagues) did not automatically guarantee that beginning teachers used the support afforded. They still had to exercise agency in order to access the support provided to them. At the same time, a more restrictive learning environment did not automatically hinder workplace learning for all employees. Teachers who proactively engaged in networking activities could expand their professional support network far beyond the support structure initially afforded by their workplace. Fox and colleagues (2010) attribute the observed differences between teachers to different capacities and/or tendencies to exercise agency:

Some individuals appear proactive in finding and using support from school and external sources. Some, while not being actively encouraged, make the best of support available. Still other BTs [beginning teachers] appear more passive or less willing to seek and use available sources of support. (p. 224)

Van Veldhuizen (2011; van Veldhuizen, Simons, & Ritzen, 2012) conducted a study that investigated the self-directed learning of teachers by also using Billett's model as the main theoretical framework. In this study, agency was operationalised via a measure of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. Strong self-efficacy beliefs are believed to represent a strong sense of personal agency (again, similar to Eraut's ideas on agency). Furthermore, the study hypothesised that highly agentic individuals will engage more often in advanced learning activities that result in better learning outcomes. This effect should be especially strong in work contexts where job resources (e.g., variation and challenge, open and learning-oriented culture) outweigh job demands (e.g., pressure of work, job insecurity). In order to test these hypotheses van Veldhuizen (2011) gathered and analysed a rich dataset including competence tests of 15 teachers working in the Dutch education system as well as interviews with these teachers and their respective school leaders.

The analysis returned inconclusive results. At first glance, it seems that strong self-efficacy beliefs are indeed positively related to more desirable learning outcomes. At the same time, however, most teachers with high self-efficacy beliefs also experienced disproportionately more job resources than job demands. The positive learning outcomes can therefore be explicitly attributed neither to agency nor to context factors. Furthermore, the data did not allow confirmation of the hypothesis that a combination of strong self-efficacy beliefs and work contexts where job resources outweigh job demands leads to more elaborated learning outcomes.

All of the three reported studies conceptualised agency as an individual feature that predicted to what extent the study participants took control over their working life and to what extent they deliberately engaged in development-related activities at work. Both the studies of Bryson et al. (2006) and van Veldhuizen (2011) used proxy variables to explain why individuals engage qualitatively differently with their working environment. The concept of proactive personality was used in the first study and the concept of self-efficacy beliefs in the second. The study of A. Fox et al. (2011) did not theoretically conceptualise agency as a difference variable. However, in their data they found strong evidence that some novice teachers tend to take more control over their professional development than others. These differences were interpreted as differences in individuals' agency.

The studies of Bryson et al. (2006) and A. Fox et al. (2011) present evidence that directly speak in favour of both Billett's and Eraut's ideas. It seems that learning partly depends on how individuals agentially elect to engage in learning-relevant affordances provided by the workplace. The results of van Veldhuizen's (2011) study cannot be used as evidence for the influence of agency on professional development. However, his results do not speak against the models of Billett and Eraut.

### **2.1.2 Agency as Something Individuals Do**

Some authors explicitly deny that agency is a property or some kind of feature of human beings (e. g., Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). They rather conceptualise agency as something individuals do (Lipponen &

Kumpulainen, 2011). Agency is understood as decisions and goal-directed behaviours. There are a few theoretical and empirical articles that have adapted this view. Within the WPL community the working group around Anneli Eteläpelto has developed the most elaborated and best established theoretical account of this agency perspective. In a first step this subject-centred sociocultural perspective of agency is discussed in Section 2.1.2.1. Section 2.1.2.2 then presents empirical research that was based on this particular understanding of agency. Thereafter another set of studies that discuss and investigate agency as individuals' choices and actions is presented (Section 2.1.2.3). While they do not refer to the subject-centred sociocultural perspective, these studies still understand agency as certain kinds of activities initiated and exercised by the individual.

### **2.1.2.1 Subject-Centred Sociocultural Perspective**

In their influential review, Eteläpelto and colleagues (2013; see also Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Vähäsantanen, 2013) recognise the prominence of the concept of agency in the literature on learning in general and on workplace learning in particular. At the same time, the authors highlight that the concept lacks conceptual clarity because of "the absence of any explicit definition of its core meaning" (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 46). One of their main aims therefore was to derive a precise definition of agency that can be used in discourses on learning in work contexts. They labelled their concept professional agency.

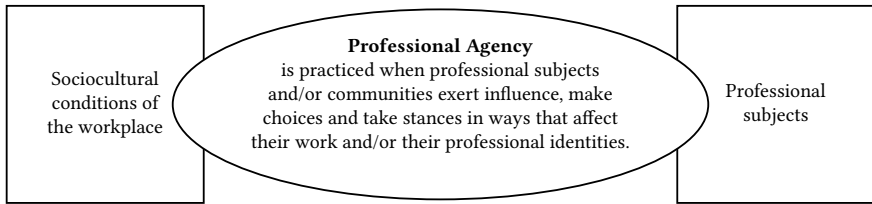
In order to derive this definition, Eteläpelto et al. (2013) analysed and reviewed an extensive body of literature on agency. The authors included literature from educational and social science as well as from psychology and gender studies in their review. Based on their analysis, four distinct lines of discussion could be identified: (a) social science discourses, (b) post-structural discussions, (c) sociocultural learning research, and (d) identity and life-course notions of agency.

Within social sciences, agency mainly comprises ideas of choice and goal-directed action initiated by an individual (e. g., Giddens, 1984). The concept is often implicitly or explicitly used as a notion of human freedom, individual volition, or power within a given social structure. An important part of the

social science discourse is concerned with the questions of whether agency exists at all (e. g., Fuchs, 2001), how much agency individuals have (e. g., D. J. Campbell, 2000), and how agency and structure interrelate (e. g., Archer, 2000; Giddens, 1984). Post-structural discussions build upon the idea that language shapes and even constructs social reality. Radical post-structuralists therefore conceptualise agency almost exclusively as a discursive and collective phenomenon closely linked to language. Intermediate post-structural notions understand agency as “people’s lived experience of their social relations and their capacity for self-reflection and action” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 60) within a socially constructed world. In sociocultural discourses individuals are perceived as agentic actors situated in a social world. Agency is related to and cannot be separated from individuals’ subjectivities and professional identities (e. g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2003). Manifestations hereof might be found in decisions either to participate in afforded practices or to rebuff them (see also Billett, 2004b, as well as Section 2.1.1.1). Life-course notions of the concept mostly discuss agency as being related to choices and efforts that construct, influence, and shape individuals’ life courses (i. e., biographies). However, agency is not understood to be exercised within a social vacuum. All kinds of agentic efforts are necessarily understood to be embedded in historical and social circumstances (e. g., Gecas, 2003; a more detailed discussion of theoretical discourses on agency within the life-course literature and especially the idea of bounded agency can be found in Section 2.2.2.3).

Informed by these four lines of theoretical discussion, Eteläpelto et al. (2013, 2014) developed a subject-centred sociocultural understanding of agency (see Figure 2.3 for a graphical depiction). This particular perspective is called “subject-centred” because it explicitly focuses on how subjects (i. e., a single subject or a group of subjects) (re-)negotiate their identities and how they construct their life courses over time. Both are understood as active learning processes. Consequently, learning and development are perceived to be inseparable from the notion of agency.

Eteläpelto et al. (2013) also agree with sociocultural accounts of thinking (see Section 2.1.1.1). Agency can only be understood as situationally and contextually bound. In other words, agency is—at the same time—facilitated and constrained by social and historic factors. Thus, an analysis of agency at work



**Figure 2.3.** Subject-centred sociocultural understanding of agency. Reprinted and adapted from “Eteläpelto, A., Vähäsantanen, K., Hökkä, P., & Paloniemi, S. (2013). What is agency? Conceptualizing professional agency at work. *Educational Research Review*, 10, 45–65, p. 61” with permission from Elsevier.

has always to take into account material conditions, workplace culture, power relations or support structures (Eteläpelto et al., 2014). In accordance with this subject-centred sociocultural perspective, Eteläpelto et al. (2013) proposed the following definition of professional agency (i. e., agency exercised in relation to work contexts): “Professional agency is practiced when professional subjects and/or communities exert influence, make choices and take stances in ways that affect their work and/or their professional identities” (p. 61).

The subject-centred sociocultural understanding of agency is inseparably connected to the idea of professional identities (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, 2014; Vähäsantanen, 2013). Professional identities are defined as “subjects’ conceptions of themselves as professional actors” (Eteläpelto et al., 2014, p. 650) which include subjects’ individual sets of commitments, ideals, beliefs, interest, and values. It is argued that in order to successfully cope with constantly changing job market conditions as well as developments within their corresponding work domains, employees are required to regularly reflect and reconstruct their self-perception as professional actors within changing work contexts. This identity renegotiation is understood as a constructive learning process that takes place within the social context—the work culture, the material conditions of the workplace, as well as the relationships to colleagues or other work contacts. Individuals have to actively decide whether or to what extent they want to appropriate socially suggested identities.



Imagine a newly employed car mechanic who is mainly concerned with delivering high-quality service to her customers. However, her new employer does not appreciate quality as much and demands a more pragmatic way of work. One way to resolve this identity conflict would be that the mechanic tries to understand the reasons of her employer. Her preoccupation with high quality might cease soon as she understands that most customers do not value high-quality repairs on their old cars and are therefore not willing to pay for such services. This way, the mechanic would renegotiate and therefore eventually change her identity in a way that better fits her current workplace. However, another option is that the employee is not willing to adapt her identity. This may lead to less commitment towards her employer and even a job change later on. Yet another option would be that the employee tries to find ways to change the current practice such that simultaneously high-quality repairs are ensured and low-cost repairs are offered to the customers (for a similar example see Goller & Billett, 2014). All three options require the active engagement of the employee. She has to take decisions and act according to them. All three options also provide learning opportunities: (a) understanding of the idiosyncrasies of the new workplace, (b) reinforcement of one's own belief system, and (c) development of new working strategies that combine high-quality management and high-cost awareness.

At the same time, professional identities are perceived to affect the direction and manifestation of employees' agency at work. For instance, employees might deliberately engage in certain development activities because they aspire to become an expert in their field and because they are committed to their work. However, others may decide to disengage with certain parts of their job because they do not perceive them as worth pursuing or they are not really interested in them (e. g., Gustavsson, 2007).

It should be noted that this conceptualisation understands agency as something individuals do and not something individuals possess (in the sense of a disposition or a competence). Individuals' agency is expressed when they choose, prioritise, and eventually direct their behaviour towards self-set goals and aspirations over their (professional) life-course. Manifestations of work agency are, for instance, "suggestions for new or more productive work practices, inter-professional work strategies, or the reshaping of one's own work

roles and identities” (Eteläpelto et al., 2014, p. 658). Nevertheless, the authors emphasise that agency also manifests itself when individuals actively reject suggestions by others. In fact, criticism and resistance is an important part of agency within the subject-centred sociocultural understanding of agency.

To sum up, the subject-centred perspective of agency is based upon a large body of literature and provides a first explicit definition of the concept. The proposed conceptualisation of professional agency is strongly intertwined with the idea that individuals are able to make choices and base their actions on these choices. This goal-directed behaviour can manifest itself as identity (re-)negotiation, deliberate learning efforts, efforts that are directed towards the transformation of the work environment or resistance against externally imposed reforms. Most importantly, it has therefore to be emphasised that subject-centred sociocultural perspectives understand agency as something individuals do.

Despite these positive aspects the subject-centred perspective of agency has still to be slightly criticised. First, it remains open whether the actions described as agency have to be initiated by the individual or can also be triggered by other agents. Such a broad conceptualisation, however, is not helpful to operationalise a phenomenon like agency. Second, a strong interrelation of agency and identity has been emphasised in several writings of Eteläpelto and her colleagues. However, their identity concept remains as abstract as the agency concept itself. Both concepts are occasionally used in a seemingly overlapping and indistinguishable way. Third, Eteläpelto and colleagues acknowledge the importance of the sociocultural context on professional agency. The material conditions of the workplace, the physical artefacts, the power relations, the work culture, as well as the support structure at work are seen as highly relevant factors that determine how individuals make choices and how they are able to act on these choices. Unfortunately, the authors do not explicitly explain how social context variables affect the exercise of agency at work. The notion of the importance of context factors therefore also remains quite abstract.

### **2.1.2.2 Empirical Studies Directly Based on the Subject-Centred Sociocultural Perspective**

Eteläpelto and her colleagues conducted a range of empirical studies that employed the subject-centred sociocultural understanding of agency (e.g., Eteläpelto & Saarinen, 2006; Forsman et al., 2014; Hökkä et al., 2012; Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, Eteläpelto, Rasku-Puttonen, & Littleton, 2008; Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). For instance, Vähäsantanen et al. (2009) interviewed 16 vocational teachers to investigate their agency during boundary-crossing episodes. The teachers were asked about their experience of workplace visits as a new part of their teaching job. During these visits their assignment usually comprised tasks like guidance and evaluation of students' workplace learning, support of the workplace trainers, as well as the provision of general information on the newly introduced workplace learning scheme. Based on their analysis the authors identified five distinct ways of exercising agency in this kind of situation. Teachers categorised as exercising restricted agency (first category) tried to fade into the background completely and did not want to disturb the working personnel. These teachers denied any critical stance against observed workplace behaviours that should have been judged as problematic or inappropriate from a professional perspective. In other words, they did not exercise any agency and felt quite restricted by the social context. In comparison, teachers categorised as exercising extensive agency (second category) used every opportunity to inform workplace personnel about the pedagogical idea of the students' workplace experience periods as well as about the correct conduct of their profession. It seemed as if these teachers were almost not affected by social suggestions (e.g., negative attitudes of the employees against the teachers) of their specific workplace contexts. Participants categorised as exercising multifaceted balancing agency (third category) are instead very aware of such context variables. However, because of this awareness they attempted to actively gain trust of the other employees in order to implement their own ideas. Teachers falling into the fourth category (situationally diverse agency) exercised agency in some situations but not in others. For instance, one teacher deliberately invested time to ensure the learning and development of the students he had to supervise. However, at the same time he was reluctant to ini-

tiate any efforts to influence work practices even if he could have done so. Teachers of the last category (relationally emergent agency) exercised agency only in such situations where they felt they already had a relationship of trust with the workplace personnel. If these teachers had to collaborate with unfamiliar workers they did not intervene in malpractice. However, after getting familiar with them and building up trust they often used opportunities to exercise agency by taking a critical stance against inappropriate work activities.

In conclusion, the study of Vähäsantanen et al. (2009) found that different teachers exercised distinctive forms of agency based on their sense of professional selves and their perceived professional function. Where some teachers exercised extensive agency by bringing in their own ideas and resisting social suggestions in the particular workplace setting, other teachers only exercised restricted agency by complying with given conditions. Those situations in which agency was extensively exercised created learning opportunities for students, the teacher, as well as the workplace personnel.

The study of Hökkä et al. (2012) investigated how Finnish teacher educators exercised their professional agency at work, how these teachers constructed and renegotiated their professional identity, and how different work contexts affected their identity construction. The two different contexts comprised their work as teachers and their duties as researchers within a teacher education department at a Finnish university. To answer the research questions empirically, the authors conducted qualitative interviews and collected ethnographic data in the form of diary records.

The most striking finding of this study was that the participating teacher educators described their opportunities for exercising agency and identity construction as very different between the two working contexts. During their teaching duties most teachers felt a strong sense of agency. They felt that they had “total ownership” (Hökkä et al., 2012, p. 90) over their own teaching practice which contributed largely to their construction of a strong teacher identity. This sense of agency or ownership was closely related to the high autonomy the participants experienced. In comparison, the teachers reported a strong feeling of being constrained and restricted in their work as researchers. The lack of resources especially (i. e., time, communication, and cooperation) led to an experience of agency deprivation in the university context. This was also

perceived as the reason why most participants had not constructed an identity that interwove teaching and research. To sum up, social context factors like autonomy or time pressure seem to affect the sense and the exercise of agency in work contexts. Furthermore, a lack of agency might constrain the identity construction of employees.

Quite similar results were found by Vähäsantanen et al. (2008). The authors interviewed 24 teachers who belonged either to a vocational institution or teacher education department of a university. The work culture at the vocational institution was characterised as strongly controlling without much job discretion. On the contrary, the work culture at the university department could be described as less controlling and affording much more autonomy (see also Vähäsantanen, 2013). The interview data indicated that teachers in the vocational institution saw themselves as less agentic, especially when it came to relevant educational reforms. However, the same teachers experienced a strong sense of agency in their teaching work. Although the vocational institution was hierarchically organised and autonomy was low, teachers could still freely plan and implement their teaching. Teachers within the university department reported a strong sense of agency both in their daily work life as well as in regard to reforms.

### **2.1.2.3 Further Empirical Evidence**

Not all studies that are concerned with the idea of agency as something individuals do explicitly refer to Eteläpelto et al.'s (2013) subject-centred sociocultural understanding. Some of them loosely refer to Billett's ideas of agentic engagement or Eraut's notions of agency.<sup>7</sup> Others use the concept without explicitly referring to any theory. Nevertheless, all of these studies use agency as a placeholder to describe individuals' choices and self-initiated actions that are assumed to be linked to favourable learning outcomes. The next paragraphs aim at summarising and briefly discussing the theoretical groundings as well as the findings of those studies that conceptualise agency as something individ-

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the studies discussed in this section do refer to Billett's or Eraut's theoretical framework but do not discuss agency as an individual feature. That is why these studies are discussed in this section and not in Section 2.1.2.2.

uals do but do not explicitly adopt Eteläpelto and colleagues' subject-centred sociocultural understanding of agency.

Evans et al. (2004; see also Evans & Kersh, 2006) interviewed 60 individuals in order to investigate their relationship of life and work experiences, learning outcomes, and professional achievements. Similarly to the study of Bryson et al. (2006), the authors found evidence that workers engaging in agentic actions expand the learning opportunities of their workplace. The authors report upon interviewees referring to instances in which they proactively sought out further training courses by discussing and negotiating new learning and career options with their supervisor. However, in comparison to Bryson et al. (2006), they did not attribute this to a proactive personality but rather to a broad range of unspecific dispositions and attitudes. Although Evans and Kersh (2006) emphasise the constructive potential of individual agency they also argue that within the analysis of WPL the individual learner is always constrained by contextual factors and should not be perceived "as the prime determinant of learning" (p. 92; see also P. Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004).

In a different study, Skår (2010) investigates the learning experiences of Norwegian nurses in nursing homes and different hospital wards. The empirical material was derived from individual interviews with 11 nurses as well as two focus groups that employed data from the individual interviews as stimulus for further discussions. As a theoretical framework, amongst others, Billett's co-participation model was used. The data analysis revealed that an important part of work-related learning is a function of intentional efforts exercised by the nurses themselves—in other words, agency. For example, study participants reported actively seeking out colleagues for support who sometimes became role models or mentors. Furthermore, nurses proactively initiated discussions on work matters that helped them to gain new knowledge and skills. In other instances, nurses emphasised how they actively engage in knowledge-seeking efforts by consulting the internet, books or technical manuals.

Hoekstra, Korthagen, Brekelmans, Beijaard, and Imants (2009) studied experienced teachers' workplace learning as well as their perception of the work environment. Data were collected from 32 Dutch teachers using a multi-method approach including questionnaires and written reports about learning experiences. The authors also recorded some school lessons on video and conducted

interviews after each lesson. Based on these data, two teachers were selected to represent the sample in the sense that they differed from each other the most. The first case (Miranda) represents a rather agentic teacher and the second one (Paul) a rather reactive one. Miranda actively engaged in introspection and reflection of her teaching activities, used the provided autonomy at work to learn from self-initiated experiments (e. g., trying out new teaching methods), and proactively sought out feedback from different sources. In comparison, Paul largely acted reactively. He did not actively try to reflect on work-related experiences. Furthermore, the provided work autonomy was perceived as stressful because it did not provide the guidance Paul would have liked. Similarly to the first case the school environment did not automatically provide much feedback. However, instead of proactively seeking out feedback (as Miranda did) Paul accepted this restriction.

In yet another study, the workplace learning of 24 sports coaches in New Zealand was investigated by Rynne, Mallett, and Tinning (2010). Theoretically, the study was—to some extent—based on Billett's ideas of agency. The authors were particularly interested in the relationship between learning opportunities afforded at work and agency exercised by the coaches. The work environment was described as competitive without offering much in the way of learning affordances. Interaction between coaches was rather limited because of a perceived competitiveness within the employing sport institute. At the same time, however, such interaction was highly valued by the coaches. The interviews revealed that coaches have to agentially foster interactions in order to regularly exchange information with colleagues. Without exercising agency, coaches remained largely isolated at work. Furthermore, Rynne et al. report that those coaches with a strong sense of control and security regarding their coaching practice as well as their employment status engaged more often in agentic actions.

To sum up, within this and the last section it has been presented that a few empirical studies have investigated the phenomenon of agency as individuals' choices and self-initiated actions. Some of the studies explicitly adopted the theoretical framework proposed by Eteläpelto et al. (2013) (see Section 2.1.2.1). Other studies used the notion of agency in a less confined way or referred either to Billett or Eraut (see Section 2.1.1). Either way, all of the presented

studies conceptualised agency as something individuals do. Evidence could be presented that employees engage in a range of different agentic actions that are indeed related to learning outcomes. For instance, the studies report about individuals negotiating training opportunities and career options, actively seeking out colleagues to discuss work-related matters, or engaging in active reflection over incidents experienced at work. These studies also generated empirical evidence that some individuals tend to engage more often in agentic behaviours than others. These differences were most often traced back to differences in the particular social and physical work contexts. In particular, the lack of autonomy, time, and a culture of openness pose restrictions on personal agency.

### **2.1.3 Agency as an Outcome of Work-Related Learning**

Only one study investigated the promotion and development of agency at work: Hänninen and Eteläpelto (2008) adapted an understanding of agency similar to the subject-centred sociocultural perspective. With regard to Holland et al. (2003) agency was defined as “human possibilities for actions that go beyond current constraints” (Hänninen & Eteläpelto, 2008, p. 100). The authors evaluated the outcome of an empowerment programme that aimed at fostering participants’ agency in work contexts. The programme consisted of different workshops in which 19 hospital workers tried to further understand the relationship of their private and working life, their work-related social relationships, as well as the social dynamics of their organisation. Objects of this analysis were the work culture, the organisational philosophy, and the personal competencies of the participants. The explicit aim of the workshops was to foster self-awareness, self-respect, the capacity for interaction, and the experience of inner strength (i. e., self-efficacy). Six of the 19 participants were interviewed again 4 years after the completion of the 1-year programme. The focus of the interviews was directed towards the effects of the workshops on the participants’ agency and their perceived well-being at work.

The interviews revealed that the workshop participants learnt to further understand the structure of their work organisation and especially their own role within this larger system. This made it much easier for the participants to find



opportunities that allowed them to agentially translate their own interests and aspirations into goal-directed actions. This knowledge also helped them to realise impediments to such efforts. These insights allowed the participants to make choices concerning their work duties including their position within the organisation. For instance, some participants managed to deliberately enlarge their job profile by adding new and more demanding tasks to their job position. Others enrolled in further education courses to develop their work-related expertise. Other participants decided to resign from their former work or go into retirement.

In addition to the construction of new knowledge the workshops helped the participants to develop new tools to exercise agency at work. Maybe most importantly, the participants learnt new strategies to express their own opinions constructively. Due to the new tools as well as to new knowledge, participants developed a stronger sense of empowerment and more self-efficacy which made it easier for them to exercise agency even in rather contested situations. The interviews reported higher general satisfaction with the current work situation and this was attributed to the improved capacity to exercise agency at work.

A rather important conclusion of this study is that agency can be fostered as long as individuals are provided with opportunities to develop a stronger self-awareness and self-efficacy as well as the right tools and strategies that allow aspirations and decisions to be translated into feasible actions.

### **2.1.4 Recapitulation and Conclusion**

It has been argued that the concept of agency has been used as a prerequisite of learning, as something individuals do, and as an outcome of work-related learning processes (Tynjälä, 2013). This early categorisation was used to identify and categorise both theoretical discussions of agency and empirical studies that are concerned with the phenomenon of agency. The majority of the theoretical and empirical contributions could be classified in the first two categories. Only one single study that used agency as an outcome variable was identified. Furthermore, this study used an understanding of agency that is largely overlapping with the subject-centred sociocultural perspective which

has been predominant in the second category (agency as something individuals do.)

All literature covered in this review emphasises the relevance of agency in the context of learning at work. Similarly, the relevance of agency for the transformation of established (work) practices is a recurring element in the writings of many authors. It is surprising that an explicit definition of agency is missing in almost all of the contributions discussed here (except for Eteläpelto et al., 2013) despite the centrality of the concept. However, all discussions use agency as something related to actions that are based upon individuals' choices. Individuals are understood as active agents and are therefore conceptualised as the origin (or cause) of choices and actions.

The most striking difference between the conceptualisations of agency is that some authors (e. g., Bryson et al., 2006; Eraut & Hirsh, 2007) understand the concept more as an individual difference variable while others explicitly argue that agency can only be understood as an activity (e. g., Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen, 2013). The latter perspective does not consider agency as an individual feature in the sense of a difference variable. Agency is rather conceptualised as something individuals do. Table 2.1 summarises both conceptualisations in an idealised form.

**Table 2.1.** Idealised conceptualisations of agency.

Agency as an individual feature	Agency as something individuals do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Antecedent of certain kind of actions</li> <li>• Requirement to engage in agentic actions</li> <li>• Relatively stable (pre-)disposition or tendency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal-directed behaviour</li> <li>• Certain kind of self-initiated actions</li> <li>• Mainly situation specific</li> </ul>

However, some authors do not strictly restrict agency to one of the two perspectives. Both notions have been used in Billett's (2001c, 2004b, 2006, 2011a) co-participation model. Furthermore, although many studies privilege one of the two perspectives they also incorporate the other in their analysis. Eraut and Hirsh (2007), for example, speak about proactive individuals (proactive

tendency as a difference variable) who initiate learning opportunities (e. g., proactively asking questions; i. e., a goal-directed and self-initiated action). Although researchers committed to the subject-centred sociocultural approach understand agency as something individuals do, one of their studies (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009) found that some of the study participants seem to exercise more agency than others. The intervention study of Hänninen and Eteläpelto (2008) even explicitly assumes that agency can be fostered. It follows that although these researchers do not understand agency as an individual feature they still acknowledge individual differences in the capacity or tendency to exercise agency.

Based on these insights it follows that Tynjälä's (2013) early suggestion for classifying the writings of some scholars as either being concerned with an understanding of agency as a prerequisite of work-related learning (e. g., Billett, 2004b, 2011a) or agency as a learning activity (e. g., Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008) might better not be interpreted as a strict classification system. Although both of these idealised conceptualisations of agency can indeed be identified in the literature it is not always possible to unequivocally classify each conceptualisation into only one of the two categories. Apart from that, only one study was found that investigated agency as an outcome variable of learning and development processes (the third of Tynjälä's categories). At least at the moment this category seems to be less relevant in the WPL literature.

An important similarity between all theoretical accounts is that agency is always discussed in relation to the sociocultural and/or material context. It is acknowledged that individuals are not living in a social or material vacuum. All choices and actions are always—to a certain extent—influenced by social and material context factors. The exercise of agency depends on the affordances provided (e. g., social support, having sufficient autonomy; e. g., Lukic, Littlejohn, & Margaryan, 2012; Rynne et al., 2010) as well as on the constraints imposed by the workplace. However, apart from Billett's (2001c, 2004b, 2006, 2011a) discussion of the importance of workplace affordances and Eraut's (2007, 2010b, 2012; Eraut & Hirsh, 2007) enumeration of important workplace characteristics, the discourse on the relationship of sociocultural context factors and agency at work seems to be rather unsystematic. It is not possible

to derive an empirically testable model that links context factors with agency based on the discussed literature.

In a similar vein, the relationship of individual level variables and the exercise of agency remains largely unaddressed in the WPL literature. The list of possible antecedents or drivers of agency comprises self-efficacy beliefs (van Veldhuizen, 2011), confidence and commitment (Eraut & Hirsh, 2007), proactive personality (Bryson et al., 2006), and interests (Billett & Somerville, 2004), as well as the rather abstract notion of identity (Billett & Somerville, 2004; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). The last one especially is used as an umbrella term to describe commitments, ideals, beliefs, interests, and values (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

All empirical studies discussed in this chapter used qualitative methods. Not one of the reviewed studies used strict hypothesis-testing methods to investigate the relationship of work agency and other work-related phenomena (e. g., professional development, transformation of work practices). The striking absence of an operational definition of agency can be seen as the main reason behind this shortcoming. However, Eteläpelto et al. (2013) recently proposed a definition that might allow operationalisation of the concept in future studies. Another reason for the absence of quantitative empirical studies is the lack of a consistent set of hypotheses that describe the relationship of individual difference variables (e. g., self-efficacy), social context variables (e. g., autonomy at work), agentic behaviours (e. g., transformation of practices or seeking feedback at work), and certain learning outcomes (e. g., expertise level of individuals). Although such relationships are mentioned in the reviewed literature neither the direction nor the mechanism behind the relationship is discussed. At most, there is mutual consent that agency is positively related to professional development as well as to the transformation of work processes and structures. To sum up, there is presently nothing similar to a stringent and comprehensive theory suited to deriving a research model that can be tested with hypothesis-testing methods.

## 2.2 Agency in Other Research Traditions

This chapter gives an overview of the discussion on agency in other research disciplines that helps to overcome the shortcomings concluded in the last section. Eteläpelto et al. (2013) identified four distinct research traditions that discuss the concept: sociology, poststructural feminism, sociocultural approaches, and life-course research. Agency has also been central to discussions within welfare/development economics (e. g., Sen, 2001), philosophy (e. g., Ecclestone, 2007; Wisniewski, 2008), development psychology (e. g., Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002), social-cognitive psychology (e. g., Bandura, 2006b), and organisational behaviour research (e. g., Bindl & Parker, 2011). The latter two, as well as the literature on life-course research, discuss agency in relation to the development of individuals in general or to individuals' actions within work contexts; they have developed a nomological network of antecedents and outcomes of agency, and have already generated quantitative empirical research. Furthermore, they conceptualise agency in a way similar to the workplace learning literature. Hence, these research strands connect well to the research on agency discussed so far and will be the focus of the following literature review.

On the contrary, research on agency in development economics<sup>8</sup> and philosophy<sup>9</sup> either conceptualise agency in a way that is less compatible to the discussion outlined in Section 2.1 or do not empirically investigate the concept at all. It was therefore decided to exclude both of these research strands from the following overview. In addition, research on agency within development psychology is largely based on discussions originating in social-cognitive psychology as well as life-course research. In order to avoid repetition it was decided not to include development psychology writings in the overview given in this chapter. Excluded from this review also were sociological, poststructural fem-

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8 Agency within the welfare/development literature is mostly discussed from a macro-political perspective. This thesis, however, is concerned with agency from a subject perspective.

9 Discussions of agency within philosophy are exclusively theoretical in nature. In addition, a range of philosophical ideas have already been included in discussions of agency within the literature on life-course research as well as the different research strands discussed in the review of Eteläpelto et al. (2013).

inism, and sociocultural discussions because they are already incorporated in the subject-centred sociocultural understanding of agency. Although life-course perspectives of agency are also already included in Eteläpelto and colleagues' (2013) agency conceptualisation (see Section 2.1.2.1) they are discussed here again because the empirical results of this research tradition were not fully addressed in their review.

This literature review is structured as follows: Section 2.2.1 discusses literature on social-cognitive psychology. Notions of agency within the life-course literature are then discussed in Section 2.2.2. A discussion of agency-related research within the organisational behaviour literature can be found in Section 2.2.3. Section 2.2.4 summarises and discusses the main findings of this literature review in respect to the findings presented in Section 2.1.

## **2.2.1 Social-Cognitive Psychology**

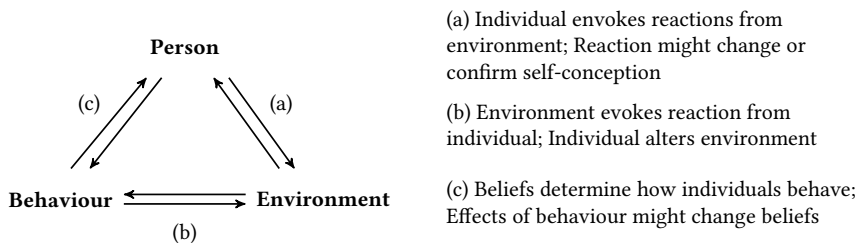
Social-cognitive theory is a comprehensive psychological effort to explain human functioning and behaviour developed and promoted by Bandura (1982, 1986, 1989, 2012). The theory emphasises that human beings are inherently capable of shaping their own development and their life-course (Bandura, 2012). Individuals are understood as self-directed and agentic instead of just being reactive in nature. The aim of this theory is to explain the psychological mechanism behind the exercise of agency. The description "social-cognitive" was chosen to describe how the theory simultaneously accounts for the social origin of most human thought and action as well the relevance of different kinds of cognitive processes (Bandura, 1986, 2012).

The next two sections briefly describe and discuss the foundations of Bandura's social-cognitive theory (Section 2.2.1.1), his understanding of agency, as well as his theoretical ideas of how agency is related to desirable life outcomes (Section 2.2.1.2). It is followed by a review of studies that empirically investigated the main propositions put forward by Bandura (Section 2.2.1.3).

### **2.2.1.1 Triadic Reciprocity of Causality**

At the core of social-cognitive theory lies the triadic reciprocity of causality. Bandura (1978, 1982, 1986) assumes that personal factors, behaviours, and en-

vironmental characteristics have to be understood as interactively related and therefore to reciprocally determine each other. The proposed relationship is depicted in Figure 2.4. Relationship (a) describes the interdependence between the person and their environment. For instance, a person might involuntarily activate environmental reactions just due to her social role, status or physical appearance. At the same time, the environmental reaction has the power to reinforce or mitigate the individual's self-perception as well as the individual's expectations about the environmental effects produced by her characteristics. The arrows marked as (b) represent the interaction between the person's behaviour and the environment. Situational characteristics—constraints and affordances—directly affect what behavioural options are at an individual's disposal in the first place. Contrarily, behaviour also alters the environment in ways which then determine the constraints and affordances the individual has to face in the future (this idea is also present in Billett's co-participation model; see Section 2.1.1.1). The last relationship, (c), concerns the reciprocal effects of behaviour and personal characteristics (especially cognitive processes). For example, individuals might only engage in behaviours which they expect to produce desired outcomes. Control beliefs are therefore thought to be important personal characteristics that predict behaviour (see Section 2.2.2.2 for a more detailed discussion of control beliefs). Such beliefs are then positively or negatively altered by the experience of success or failure that results from a particular behaviour.



**Figure 2.4.** Triadic reciprocity of causality. Reprinted and adapted from “Bandura, A. (1978). The self system in reciprocal determinism. *American Psychologist*, 33(4), 344–358, p. 345” with permission from APA.

The described reciprocal determinism is not thought to be a holistic theory where all the “classes of determinants act simultaneously as a fused whole” (Bandura, 2012, p. 359). The reciprocity is based on causal feedback loops between the three determinant classes which are assumed to unfold over time rather than simultaneously (Bandura, 1982).

### 2.2.1.2 Human Agency within Social-Cognitive Theory

Bandura’s (1982, 1986) understanding of agency is strongly based on the just introduced triadic reciprocity framework. He denies that individuals can be understood either as autonomous agents that are fully in control of their actions (autonomous agency) or as sole instruments of external influences that do not themselves have any self-directive abilities (mechanical agency) (Bandura, 1986, 1989). He argues that humans

...make causal contribution to their own motivation and action within a system of triadic reciprocal causation, action, cognitive, affective, and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants. Any account of the determinants of human action must, therefore, include self-generated influences as a contributing factor. (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175)

Within social-cognitive theory agency is understood as an emergent interactive phenomenon (Bandura, 1986) that can be defined as the “capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one’s life” (Bandura, 2001, p. 1). This conceptualisation explicitly acknowledges that individuals are self-determined and that they can intentionally influence their development as well as their current or future life circumstances (see also Bandura, 1986, 2001, 2006b, 2012).

The proposed developmental effects of agency can be explained through the causal feedback loops assumed to exist between behaviour, personal factors, and environmental characteristics within the model of triadic reciprocity. All behaviours—over time—affect the situational characteristics an individual has to face as well as personal factors like skills, knowledge, interests, beliefs, and so on. Although individuals are somehow determined by the environmental characteristics of their current situation as well as their present personal qualities, behaviour can be directed towards changing these features. Through



intentional goal-directed behaviour—namely, agentic actions—individuals are able to change their life circumstances as well as their personal capacities. Any kind of environment an individual selects to be part of determines the individual's future scope of actions and the development of personal capacities (like skills and knowledge) as well as other personal characteristics (e. g., beliefs). It therefore follows that individuals are able, by exercising agency, to put themselves in more advantageous situations that are physically and socially less constrictive and that offer a range of options for personal development.

Consider a low-qualified individual in a marginalised occupational position that is in financial troubles. Career opportunities with better remuneration are not automatically offered. However, the employee agentially engages in training and career negotiation with her supervisor. This might then lead to offered training courses which enable the employee to secure a better job position in the future. This new job might then lead to even more training opportunities and new career options. A less agentic employee would not have negotiated any career advancements and would therefore still be working in her marginalised position.

Social-cognitive theory advocates that individuals are highly in control of their life trajectories. However, Bandura (2001, 2006b) also acknowledges that many aspects of human lives cannot be controlled directly and are rather products of fortuity. Social-cognitive theory is concerned with how individuals manage this fortuity. The central argument is that agentic individuals are able to pursue life courses that increase “the level and type of fortuitous encounters they will experience” (Bandura, 2001, p. 12) as well as to actively use the opportunities that are connected to unforeseen but promising events. In other words, agentic individuals select circumstances that are more likely to produce desired outcomes and are better equipped to recognise and use them. An employee, for instance, might be offered the opportunity to present at a business meeting because her supervisor is unable to attend on a short notice. This employee might then use this rather unforeseen opportunity to get herself introduced to the senior management and demonstrate her work-related skill set. This might lead to new career-related opportunities in the future.

To summarise, the notion of agency in social-cognitive theory is mainly related to the idea of how individuals exercise control over their life by engaging

in goal-directed behaviour. Bandura (2001) describes “the power to originate actions for given purpose” as “the key feature of personal agency” (p. 6). Therefore, only intentional acts can be described as agentic. Reflexes or activities done by accident are not agentic in nature. Furthermore, it is important to separate the consequences of intentional actions from the action itself. Within social-cognitive theory the effect an intentional action brings about—whether it is intended or not—is not part of agency (see, for very similar ideas, Giddens, 1984).

Bandura (1982, 1986, 2001, 2006b) does not only describe the characteristics and possible effects of agency. His theory is also concerned with the psychological mechanism behind the exercise of agency. The following mechanisms explain how the formed intentions translate into agentic actions and also give initial insights into why some individuals might be able to exercise more agency than others:

1. *Forethought*: Intentions are understood as present commitments to realise future actions (Bandura, 2001; for a discussion on the effects of intentions on actions see Ajzen, 1991). To build up such commitments individuals set personal goals, anticipate potential outcomes of possible prospective actions, and select those that are most likely to produce the desired consequence. Individuals therefore create current motivators that help to direct and energise actions by cognitively representing future events. Through this mechanism individuals are able to bypass the dictate of current situations and therefore shape their own life trajectories. Bandura (2001, 2006b) calls this temporal extension of agency forethought. Without a goal to leave her current marginalised job position the low-qualified employee in the example above would not have engaged in any negotiation with her supervisor.
2. *Self-reactiveness*: After committing to certain goals individuals have to be able to translate and shape those commitments into action plans. More general and distal goals have to be broken down into a hierarchically structured goal system. In comparison to distal goals, proximal sub-goals allow individuals to sketch out much more detailed and motivating action plans. They help to “mobilize self-influences and direct what one does in the here and

now” (Bandura, 2001, p. 8). Based on these sub-goals, individuals can self-monitor their progress towards the general and more distal goal and correctively self-regulate their actions if necessary. The sole goal to improve her financial and social situation would not have been specific enough in the example described above. So it was necessary that the low-qualified employee broke down this distal aspiration into more achievable sub-goals like getting more work-related qualifications that enable her to progress within the organisation.

3. *Self-reflectiveness*: Social-cognitive theory assumes that humans are inherently capable of reflecting upon their capabilities to act and exercise control in the world (Bandura, 2001, 2006b). They are assumed to constantly self-examine whether they think they are capable of engaging in envisioned actions and whether there is at least a chance that the pursued actions will result in the desired outcomes (i. e., proximal or more distal goals). Self-reflectiveness is the most central mechanism behind agency. In social-cognitive theory it is not the actual capacities that determine whether an individual decides to engage in a certain goal-directed behaviour but judgements about whether these capacities suffice to do so (Bandura, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1997, 2001, 2006b). “Unless people believe they can produce desired results and forestall detrimental ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties” (Bandura, 2001, p. 10). Judgements about one’s own capacities to successfully execute a particular behaviour are subsumed under the concept of self-efficacy beliefs in Bandura’s writings. Applied to the examples discussed before, one can see that neither would the low-qualified employee have engaged in the offered training opportunity nor would the other employee have agreed to present at the business meeting without being convinced that they could succeed in these actions. Individuals without self-efficacy beliefs would have probably declined the given opportunities.

With regard to the earlier sketched out triadic reciprocity one can now argue that the successful exercise of agency leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Individuals who successfully engage in goal-directed behaviours reinforce their self-efficacy beliefs giving them a strong incentive to set new—even higher—

goals and to engage in efforts that help them to succeed (Bandura, 1989, 2001). In a similar manner, individuals who manage to seize fortuitous opportunities might end up in life circumstances that offer even more fortuity in the future (Bandura, 2006b). Furthermore, Bandura (2001) argues that agency—that is, the capability to set goals, to translate those goals into action plans, and judgements that oneself is able to engage in the necessary actions—helps individuals to avoid detrimental paths that might be opened up by fortuitous events. For example, the self-set goal to pursue a professional degree combined with a feasible action plan based on more proximal goals as well as high beliefs in one's own capacity to master the study program might help an individual who lives in a very low socioeconomic status neighbourhood to resist the temptation of joining a criminal gang. The opportunities that result from the professional degree might then open up new development trajectories that would otherwise not have been accessible.

To sum up, Bandura explicitly defines agency as a capacity and therefore as an individual feature. Furthermore, social-cognitive theory of agency explains the psychological mechanism behind agentic actions and gives a rationale for why the exercise of agency should lead to positive effects for the agentic individual. Central aspects to his theory are self-efficacy beliefs which have also been exploited by life-course researchers (see Section 2.2.2). In Bandura's theory of agency, highly developed self-efficacy beliefs in combination with self-regulatory capabilities can be interpreted as requirements for all agentic actions. Such personal agency capacities help people to expand their freedom of action such that they are able to select, influence, and construct their life circumstances. Furthermore, they also help individuals to seize fortuitous opportunities they encounter (Bandura, 1986, 2001, 2006b). However, social-cognitive theory does not provide any rationale for why individuals should set certain development goals in the first place.

### **2.2.1.3 Empirical Evidence**

Bandura's social-cognitive theory and in particular his ideas about the centrality of self-efficacy beliefs gave rise to a large amount of empirical research in a range of different domains (e. g., work, education, health issues) that employed

a great variety of different methods (e. g., experiments, questionnaire studies, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies). Over time, many reviews and meta-analyses aimed at summarising the results of this research. This section aims to give an overview of the findings generated by these studies. A particular focus will be laid on the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and work-related actions as well as desirable outcomes variables.

Strong evidence could be found that self-efficacy beliefs are positively related to academic performance ( $r = .38, p < .01, k = 38$ , Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991;  $\beta = .08, p < .05$ , based on longitudinal data,  $k = 60$ , Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004), performance in work settings ( $r = .38, p < .01, k = 157$ , Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998;  $r = .23, p < .05, k = 12$ , Judge & Bono, 2001;  $\beta = .28, p < .05, k = 8$ , S. D. Brown, Lent, Telander, & Tramayne, 2011), and specific task performance at work ( $r = .32, p < .05, k = 123$ , Judge, Jackson, Shaw, Scott, & Rich, 2007), and even performance in sport settings ( $r = .38, p < .01, k = 84$ , Moritz, Feltz, Fahrback, & Mack, 2000). Furthermore, self-efficacy beliefs seem to be positively related to persistence in academic settings ( $r = .34, p < .01, k = 18$ , Multon et al., 1991), commitment of teachers to their profession ( $r = .32, p < .001, k = 33$ , Chesnut & Burley, 2015), job satisfaction ( $r = .45, p < .05, k = 12$ , Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001), and the setting of higher goals at work ( $\beta = .48, p < .05, k = 8$ , S. D. Brown et al., 2011). Another meta-analysis found that high self-efficacy beliefs within a certain academic domain (e. g., math, English) is positively related to interest in this particular domain ( $r = .59, p < .05, k = 53$ , Rottinghaus, Larson, & Borgen, 2003). Furthermore, Shoji et al. (2015) just recently presented evidence that high self-efficacy beliefs might prevent burnout ( $r = -.33, p < .05, k = 57$ ).

These meta-analyses speak much in favour of Bandura's claims that strong self-efficacy beliefs should be an important predictor of desired life outcomes. However, it has to be noted that most of the studies cited only took cross-sectional data into account. Although these studies usually speak of self-efficacy beliefs as a predictor of the criterion variables, a clear causal relationship cannot be established on such data sources. However, a few longitudinal studies did investigate the causal direction of the relationship of self-efficacy beliefs and other variables. For instance, Sitzmann and Yeo (2013) found evi-

dence that self-efficacy beliefs are rather a product than a predictor of performance (see also Holzberger, Philipp, & Kunter, 2013). Nevertheless, Judge et al. (2007) based their meta-analyses on longitudinal data and could find evidence for the assumed causal relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and task performance. Furthermore, based on their longitudinal study, Caprara, Vecchione, Alessandri, Gerbino, and Barbaranelli (2011) found evidence that self-efficacy is a causal predictor of school grades in later years ( $\beta = .20-.31, p < .05$ ). In another recent study, Abele and Spurk (2009) could show that occupational self-efficacy at graduation positively predicts career satisfaction after 7 years of work experience ( $\beta = .26, p < .001$ ), salary after both 3 and 7 years of work experience ( $\beta = .10, p < .01$ ;  $\beta = .08, p < .05$ ), and hierarchical status ( $\beta = .09, p < .05$ ).

Another critical point that has to be emphasised is that the presented meta-analyses only investigated the direct relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and certain outcome variables. However, the social-cognitive theory of agency explicitly assumes that this relationship is mediated by agentic actions in which the individual is deliberately involved. At least three meta-analyses focussed on this mediation. Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz (2001) could show that job search self-efficacy beliefs are significantly related to job search behaviour ( $r = .27, p < .05, k = 28$ ) as well as to the unemployment period an individual has to face ( $r = -.12, p < .05, k = 4$ ), the chance to find a job after a certain period ( $r = .09, p < .05, k = 11$ ), and the number of job offers one gets after sending out applications ( $r = .28, p < .05, k = 5$ ). Karsten, Mitra, and Schmidt (2012) investigated whether computer self-efficacy beliefs predict the use of computers. In their meta-analysis they found evidence that these task-specific self-efficacy beliefs are both positively related to the intention to use a computer ( $r = .35, p < .05, k = 30$ ) as well as to the actual use of computers ( $r = .34, p < .05, k = 32$ ). The early study of Sadri and Robertson (1993) analysed the relationship of self-efficacy beliefs and a range of work-related behaviours (e. g., career-related choices, propensity to change processes at work) and behavioural intentions (e. g., considering career options). Based on eight samples they found that self-efficacy beliefs positively predicted both actual choice and behavioural intentions ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ). In a more qualitative literature review, Lent and Hackett (1987) also claim that there is much empirical

support that self-efficacy beliefs are an important predictor of career-relevant behaviour like college major choices or utilising development-relevant situations.

A few other studies investigated the relationship of self-efficacy beliefs and agentic efforts that are either related to professional development or the transformation of work practices. Maurer, Weiss, and Barbeite (2003) investigated the antecedents of U. S. workers' participation in development activities. They could show that self-efficacy beliefs are positively related to participation in various development activities mediated via attitudes towards development and intentions to participate in development activities (indirect effect  $\beta = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In an earlier study, Maurer and Tarulli (1994) found that strong self-efficacy beliefs positively predicted the voluntary participation in non-in-house learning and development activities of non-management employees (partial  $r = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ , controlled for a range of other predictors) as well as the future participation in learning and development activities (partial  $r = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Using regression analysis, Kyndt, Govaerts, Dochy, and Baert (2011) found evidence that self-efficacy beliefs are positively related to the learning intentions of low-qualified employees ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, using a hierarchical regression approach on a larger sample those results could not be replicated (Kyndt, Govaerts, Claes, De La Marche, & Dochy, 2013). On a similar account, Renkema (2006) found that self-efficacy beliefs positively predicted the intention to engage in formal learning activities (i. e., trainings) for both employees working in technical installation ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and elderly care ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In a study with teachers, van Daal, Donche, and De Maeyer (2014) reported that self-efficacy beliefs are positively related to certain workplace learning activities (experimentation at work:  $\beta = .50$ ,  $p < .001$  and informal interaction:  $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Similar results were found by Oude Groote Beverborg, Slegers, and van Veen (2015). In their study of VET teachers they found evidence that self-efficacy beliefs are positively related to information sharing and social reflection ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .01$ ), self-reflection ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $p < .01$ ), experimentation ( $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and keeping up-to-date by obtaining new information related to their professional field (e. g., reading professional literature;  $\beta = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Hetzner, Heid, and Gruber (2015)

found evidence that self-efficacy beliefs are an important predictor of reflection at work for employees working in banking ( $\beta = .25, p < .05$ ).

Hirschi, Freund, and Herrmann (2014) investigated the relationship of self-efficacy beliefs and proactive career management behaviours (i. e., activities that are directed towards the development of one's own career). For both the student ( $r = .33, p < .001$ ) and the working sample ( $r = .21, p < .001$ ) the authors found a positive relationship between both concepts. Tims, Bakker, and Derks (2014) used data from a diary study of employees to test whether daily changes in workers' self-efficacy beliefs could predict daily job crafting efforts (i. e., efforts to proactively change the current work situation; see also Sections 2.2.3.1 and 3.3.1 for a discussion on this concept). Based on a multilevel structural equation modelling approach the authors found that self-efficacy positively predicts both the crafting of variety at work ( $\beta = .23, p < .001$ ) and the crafting of development opportunities ( $\beta = .22, p < .05$ ).

Most of the studies reported in this chapter used relatively short self-reporting scales to measure self-efficacy beliefs. Amongst others, scales exist that measure general self-efficacy beliefs (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; see also Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001), teacher sense of efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy Woolfolk, 2001), job search self-efficacy (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & Van Ryn, 1989), mathematics self-efficacy (Betz & Hackett, 1983), geriatric nursing self-efficacy (C. S. Mackenzie & Peragrine, 2003), and occupational self-efficacy (Rigotti, Schyns, & Mohr, 2008). Usually the scales exhibit relatively good psychometric properties.

However, it has to be noted that Bandura (1997, 2006a) explicitly emphasises that self-efficacy beliefs are highly domain specific. He argues that measures of self-efficacy beliefs will only predict individuals' engagement in certain actions if they are strongly targeted towards the behaviour of interest. Self-efficacy measures on a more general level (e. g., general self-efficacy beliefs) will lose predictive power of behaviours in specific domains (e. g., work-related behaviours). Evidence for this assumption could be shown through moderator analyses of some of the meta-analyses reported above (e. g., Chesnut & Burley, 2015; Moritz et al., 2000; Valentine et al., 2004; Chesnut & Burley, 2015; Moritz et al., 2000; Valentine et al., 2004; however, Shoji et al., 2015, could not find a moderating effect of the specificity of the measurement and job burnout).



To sum up, almost all empirical studies that used Bandura's social-cognitive theory focused on the hypothesised (central) relationship of self-efficacy beliefs and the engagement in certain kind of behaviours and/or desirable life-course outcomes (e. g., performance in different contexts, job satisfaction, income). The results of many studies speak much in favour of Bandura's hypothesis. Individuals' agency is related to their beliefs about their capacities to pursue certain actions that might result in desired outcomes. Strong self-efficacy beliefs are strongly related to the choice of more challenging goals, firmer commitment, and to the deliberate efforts individuals will invest to actually reach those goals even in the face of obstacles and failures. Furthermore, a range of short self-reporting scales exist that are developed to measure self-efficacy beliefs in a range of domains. Both the strong empirical evidence that speaks in favour of the important role of self-efficacy beliefs in the exercise of agency and the ready availability of suitable scales for questionnaire-based research might be the reason why many studies interested in the phenomenon of agency used self-efficacy beliefs as a proxy of the concept (e. g., van Veldhuizen, 2011; see also next section) or as an important antecedent of agentic actions (see Sections 2.2.3.2 and 2.2.3.3).

### **2.2.2 Life-Course Research**

Life-course research studies the life trajectories of human beings (i. e., individuals or groups) over a substantial part of their life spans (Elder, 1998, 2003). It is not a solitary scientific discipline (George, 2003) but rather an interdisciplinary scientific community with members from anthropology, psychology, history, economics, and—mostly—sociology (Elder, 2003; Mayer, 2009). The shared interest of those scholars lies in the identification of a prototypical or even normative “pattern of age-graded events” (Elder, 2000, p. 1614) and the explanation of variations from such a pattern (Elder, 1998, 2000). In other words, life-course research sets out to explain the causes and/or effects of changes that occur within individuals' biographies.

One of the core assumptions within life-course research is that individuals actively construct their own life courses through the choices they make and the actions they take (Elder, 1998, 2003). Individuals are perceived to have the

capacity to shape their own biographies by proactively formulating and persistently pursuing life plans. Individuals are thereby understood as the architects of their own life course (Gecas, 2003) or, put differently, as active agents who are able to actively orchestrate their life trajectories.

In a first step, the conceptualisation of agency from a life-course perspective will be shortly presented (Section 2.2.2.1). It is followed by a discussion on how life-course researchers explain the differences between individuals' agency (Section 2.2.2.2) and how socio-historic circumstances can both support and restrict the exercise of agency (Section 2.2.2.3). Empirical evidence of the positive effects of agency over the life course will be presented in Section 2.2.2.4.

#### **2.2.2.1 Conceptualising Agency from a Life-Course Perspective**

Within the life-course literature, agency is the concept used to express the capacity of individuals to exert control over their own lives (Shanahan & Hood, 2000; see also Crockett, 2002; Hitlin & Elder, 2007b). Although agency is central to discourses on life-course research the concept is still contested. Hitlin and Elder (2007b) criticise the concept as very slippery because of definitional inconsistencies and a high level of abstractness of the existing definitions. In their influential publication they distinguish four types of agency that are used in the literature: (a) existential agency, (b) pragmatic agency, (c) identity agency, and (d) life-course agency. Existential agency describes the universal human potential to self-initiate actions and to exert some kind of free will in their daily life. Pragmatic agency is concerned with the deliberate direction of attention, time-critical choices, and actions based on those choices in situations where automatised responses fail (e. g., in situations that are novel for individuals). Identity agency refers to all kind of actions that are mainly based on social roles and social commitments. Hitlin and Elder (2007b) argue that agency—in the sense of identity agency—is also existent when individuals try to live up to social commitments or when they try to actively internalise them in the first place. The last type called life-course agency is concerned with the capacity to make choices and to engage in actions that help to meet self-set goals. Manifestations of agency in the life course are the selection and formula-

tion of long-term plans (i. e., setting goals), the implementation of those plans via goal-directed behaviour, as well as perseverance in the face of problems and obstacles (e. g., Crockett, 2002; Hitlin & Elder, 2007b).

This typology is important to understand that agency is—at the same time—a universal capacity that all individuals exercise all the time and something in which individuals might strongly differ. Hitlin and Elder (2007b) argue as follows:

We can differentiate between agency as a capacity that all individuals possess, like existential agency, and a variable capacity that some people utilize with greater facility. [...] We can analytically separate the pure capacity for life course decisions from the ability to successfully implement them. (p. 183)

Life-course research is mainly interested in individuals' differences of their ability to exercise agency in order to actively construct their biographies. The next paragraphs are concerned with psychological mechanisms that explain such differences.

#### **2.2.2.2 Explaining the Differences between Individuals' Agency**

Differences in individuals' abilities to actively construct their life-courses are explained by two partly consecutive mechanisms (for a summary see Table 2.2). The first mechanism is based on Clausen's (1991) theory of planful competences. Clausen (1991) argues that individuals who are able to come up with advantageous and achievable life goals and who are able to translate these life goals into long-term plans are also able to make more "positive events happen" (p. 810) during their life course. He summarises these abilities in the concept of planful competence and assumes that some individuals are more competent than others. For Clausen, planful competence incorporates the ability to recognise and know one's own strengths (or weaknesses) as well as preferences. Put simply, competent individuals know themselves better than less competent ones. Furthermore, planful competence also encompasses the ability to figure out and choose goals that match these strengths and preferences. It is necessary that individuals are able to construct cognitive representations of possible and also reasonable future selves (see also S. Cross & Markus, 1991; Hitlin & Elder, 2007b). In other words, life-course agency requires that individuals have an idea what kind of person they want to be in the future. At the

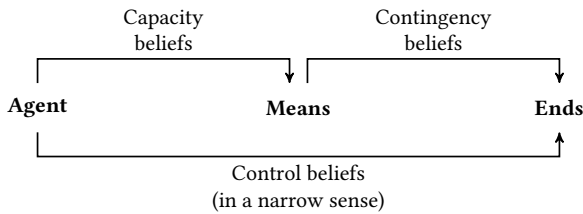
same time, the notion of planful competence also includes the idea that long-distance goals alone are not enough to motivate behaviour. Individuals need to be able to find, evaluate, and select courses of actions and social settings that permit them to meet the long-term goals in the best possible way (see also Shanahan & Elder, 2002). As can be seen, Clausen's ideas about planful competence partly match with Bandura's notion of forethought and self-reactiveness (see Section 2.2.1.2).

**Table 2.2.** Agency mechanism proposed in the life-course research literature.

Planful competence	Control beliefs
<p>Encompasses the ability to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reflect about the abilities and preferences,</li> <li>• come up with cognitive representations of future life states, and</li> <li>• translates objectives into actions plans.</li> </ul>	<p>Beliefs about the extent of control an individual has about</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• her capacity to cause certain means,</li> <li>• the contingency between means and desired or undesired outcomes, and</li> <li>• her capacity to affect life events.</li> </ul>

The second mechanism behind life-course agency is concerned with the effects of individuals' perceived control. Some life-course scholars (e. g., Gecas, 2003; Hitlin & Elder, 2007b) assume that strong beliefs about one's capacity to exert control over one's own life and to achieve certain goals are an important requirement for exercising agency (see also Section 2.2.1.2).<sup>10</sup> Only individuals who believe in themselves will decide to take actions to meet certain goals and persist during set-backs and the encounter of obstacles. Skinner (1995, 1996) distinguishes three types of control beliefs that have been employed in the life-course literature (see Kristiansen, 2014). A graphical representation of the proposed typology as the relationships between agents (i. e., the individual herself), means (i. e., certain kinds of goal-directed behaviours), and ends (i. e., possible outcomes of the behaviours in question) can be found in Figure 2.5.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Clausen (1991) also emphasises the importance of strong self-confidence—that is, the feeling of trust to be capable of dealing with current and future circumstances—within his writings (see also Shanahan & Elder, 2002).



**Figure 2.5.** Typology of control beliefs. Reprinted and adapted from “Skinner, E. A., Chapman, M., & Baltes, P. B. (1988). Control, means-ends, and agency beliefs: A new conceptualization and its measurement during childhood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(1), 117–133, p. 118” with permission from APA.

Capacity beliefs are concerned with an individual’s perception about whether and how she has the capacity to cause certain means. Contingency beliefs “refer to generalized expectancies about the extent to which certain means or causes are sufficient conditions for the production of ends or outcomes” (Skinner, 1995, pp. 30–31). And finally, control beliefs in a narrow sense refer to expectancies about whether and how one can produce (or prevent) desired (or undesired) outcomes. Sometimes these three control beliefs are also summarised as an individual’s general sense of agency (e. g., Bandura, 2006b; Hitlin & Elder, 2007a; Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015; Hitlin & Long, 2009).

Within the life-course literature different potential empirical measures of agency have been discussed (Hitlin & Long, 2009; Kristiansen, 2014). The most important of these measures are concerned with the sense of agency and can therefore be classified in Skinner’s (1995) proposed typology (see Kristiansen, 2014). The capacity to exercise agency in the life course has most often been related to individuals’ self-efficacy beliefs (Gecas, 2003; Hitlin & Elder, 2007a, 2007b; Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015; Hitlin & Long, 2009). Since self-efficacy beliefs are defined as “conviction that one can successfully execute [a] behavior required to produce [an] outcome” (Bandura, 1977, p. 193) they can be characterised as a measure of capacity beliefs (see Section 2.2.1.3 for different scales that try to capture self-efficacy beliefs).

As a measure of contingency beliefs the concept of locus of control has been introduced (e. g., Hitlin & Long, 2009). Locus of control refers to individuals’

stable expectancies about whom or what controls the events in their lives. Individuals with an internal locus of control expect life events to be mainly caused by their own actions. On the contrary, individuals with an external locus of control tend to believe that events in their life are largely a product of external forces (Rotter, 1966; see also Steca & Monzani, 2014). A shortened version of Rotter's original forced-choice scale consisting of 11 items was developed by Valecha and Ostrom (1974). An overview about existing locus of control measures can be found elsewhere (Furnham & Steele, 1993; Steca & Monzani, 2014). In their meta-analysis, Ng, Sorensen, and Eby (2006) found evidence that an internal locus of control positively correlates with general well-being in life ( $r = .33$ ), job satisfaction ( $r = .31$ ), job commitment ( $r = .17$ ), job motivation ( $r = .22$ ), job performance ( $r = .15$ ), and career success ( $r = .11$ ;  $p < .05$  for all correlations).

Three different constructs have been proposed to directly measure control beliefs in a narrow sense: (a) mastery, (b) personal control, and (c) dispositional optimism. Mastery and personal control are conceptually similar. Mastery has been defined as "the extent to which one regards one's life chances as being under one's own control in contrast to being fatalistically ruled" (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 4; see also Pearlin, Nguyen, Schieman, & Milkie, 2007). It could be empirically shown that a strong sense of mastery was positively related to health outcomes over the life course (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Pudrovska, Schieman, Paerlin, & Nguyen, 2005). Mastery as a latent personality trait can be measured using a short 7-item scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Personal control is defined as "a learned expectation that outcomes depend on one's own choices and actions" (Mirowsky & Ross, 1998, p. 419). It is assumed that individuals with a sense of personal control tend to seek much more information that helps them to take charge of their lives and to generate desired outcomes than individuals who do not feel in control over their lives (Mirowsky & Ross, 1998). Again, a strong sense of personal control has been found to be empirically related to markers of better health (Ross & Mirowsky, 2013). A short 8-item scale measuring personal control exists (Mirowsky & Ross, 1991).

The last construct, dispositional optimism, can be interpreted as a sense of agency that entails a long-term perspective (Hitlin & Elder, 2007a). Peterson

(2000) defines optimism by referring to the definition of Tiger (1979) as “a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future—one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his [or her] advantage, for his [or her] pleasure” (p. 44). The relatively stable tendency to display an optimistic attitude is called dispositional optimism (Zagorski, 2013). Hitlin and Elder (2007a) use optimism to refer to an individual’s stable expectation about her ability to bring about desired outcomes or to prevent undesired ones. “The more optimistic a person is, the more they will have efficacious and positive influences on their lives and in their choices” (Hitlin & Elder, 2007a, p. 43). A 10-item scale that measures both optimism and pessimism has been proposed by Scheier, Carver, and Bridges (1994). In their review, Carver and Scheier (2014) argue that optimism is positively related to mental well-being and physical health. One possible explanation put forward by Carver and Scheier (2014) is that optimistic individuals adopt more often an agentic approach towards avoiding future health problems.

### **2.2.2.3 Life-Course Agency and Socio-Historic Circumstances**

The two proposed mechanisms behind the exercise of agency are both located at the level of the individual. However, at the same time, life-course scholars have explicitly recognised that agency cannot be fully disentangled from social and historical circumstances (Elder, 1998). Social and historical contexts always determine—to a certain extent—how individuals can shape and construct their own life courses. The work and family situation of an individual as well as the current political and social conditions might either constrain or permit the exercise of agency (Crockett, 2002; Elder, 1998; Elder & Shanahan, 2007). Consider a single mother of three who aspires to a higher education degree. This plan might only be feasible if she finds affordable day care for her children as well as a reliable source of income that allows her to pay for the tuition and the living costs during her study. In a society that offers low-interest student loans and provides special day care facilities for students such an endeavour might be more feasible than in a society that does not offer such opportunities. Furthermore, a general environment that supports the idea of women advancing on the educational track might also make it more probable

that she will eventually do so. In comparison, a society where higher education is largely reserved for already well-educated males, like in the first half of the 20th century, might even prevent her from formulating the goal of a degree in the first place.

Thus, agency has always to be conceptualised as bounded (Shanahan & Hood, 2000; see also Evans, 2002, 2007)—but not fully dictated (Crockett, 2002)—by social and historical circumstances that manifest in constraints and opportunities to make choices and take actions within the life course (Elder, 1998; see also Mayer, 2009). Especially in such situations where certain options are not easily available, agency becomes more important (Shanahan & Hood, 2000). Reconsider the single mother from above. A social environment that generally supports (or even expects) women to enrol in higher education makes it easily possible that she will study because it is the normal thing to do. Strong agency is not necessarily required in such a situation. However, in less supportive social and/or historic situations she would have to expend much more effort to secure the goal of a higher education degree. Agency becomes more important to reach desired outcomes when individuals are situated in less supporting environments. Certain social conditions provide more options than others. However, some social-historic contexts tend to restrict options. Such contexts then are more likely to allocate individuals into certain predetermined life trajectories without much contribution from the individuals themselves. Within life-course discourses these ideas are summarised in the concept of bounded agency (Shanahan & Hood, 2000). In a certain sense this is very similar to Bandura's (1986, 2001, 2006b) notion of fortuity (see Section 2.2.1.2).

To sum up, agency is a central theoretical construct in life-course research. It is conceptualised on the level of the individual and life-course scholars explicitly acknowledge that individuals do indeed differ in their capacity to exercise agency. Within the life-course literature two main mechanisms that explain the differences between individuals' agency capacities are proposed. The first mechanism is concerned with the competence to reflect about one's own abilities and preferences, the ability to come up with cognitive representations of future selves (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b), and the ability to translate objectives into suitable action plans. The second mechanism is concerned with the ef-



fects of individuals' control beliefs and how these beliefs affect engagement in goal-directed behaviours. Several scales have been proposed to measure certain kinds of control beliefs. Although agency is understood as an individual difference variable, the life-course literature also strongly acknowledges that social and historical circumstance may always either constrain or foster the exercise of agency.

#### **2.2.2.4 Empirical Evidence**

Agency is a central concept within life-course discourses. However, only a few empirical studies exist that have actually studied the phenomenon using the measures proposed above (Clausen, 1991; Hitlin & Elder, 2007a; Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015; Shanahan & Elder, 2002). Three of these four studies used longitudinal data to investigate the effects of agency on several outcome measures. In comparison to cross-sectional studies this longitudinal approach generates much more reliable results. The findings of all four of these studies will be briefly sketched out below.

For his analysis, Clausen (1991) merged three samples of the Berkeley longitudinal studies (see also Eichorn, 1981). These studies first gathered different data from young children in the years 1928 to 1931 and did various follow ups years later (the remaining individuals were 53 to 62 years old in the last follow up). A subsample of 60–70 cases that contained all necessary information required was used for further analyses. Clausen found strong evidence that his operationalisation of planful competence positively predicts educational attainment before high-school graduation for males ( $\beta = .54, p < .01, R^2 = .55$ ), controlling for parental socio-economic status (SES) and the IQ measured at age 17 to 18. Furthermore, another regression analysis revealed that planful competence measured during adolescence also predicts occupational status for male participants at the age of 53 to 62 ( $\beta = .50, p < .01, R^2 = .54$ ) controlling for parental SES, IQ at age of 18, and educational attainment. It therefore seems that planful competence in younger years is—for males—strongly related to both educational and occupational outcomes during the life course. However, no such evidence could be found for females.

Shanahan and Elder (2002) used the rich data of the Stanford-Terman longitudinal study (see also Terman & Oden, 1959) for their analysis. For this study 856 males with an IQ of more than 135 born between 1904 and 1917 were studied in 12 waves over 69 years of their lives. The dataset includes data on work, marriage, achievement, ageing, and certain psychological trait measures. The original sample was divided in two subsamples (older cohort,  $n = 448$ ; younger cohort,  $n = 408$ ) and used to estimate different structural equation and regression models. The structural equation models assume that planful competence measured during adolescence should positively predict educational achievement in the year 1940 as well as occupational status in 1954 mediated by self-direction (including persistence, confidence, and purposefulness) measured during early adulthood controlling for family SES. The direct effect of planful competence on educational achievement and occupational status was also included in the model. The analyses revealed that planful competence positively predicted self-direction for both the older ( $b = 0.14, p < .01$ ) and younger cohort ( $b = 0.22, p < .001$ ).<sup>11</sup> Self-direction was, furthermore, positively related to educational achievement for the older cohort ( $b = 0.37, p < .01$ ). In addition, the estimated model suggested that planfulness was also a direct predictor of educational achievement for the younger cohort ( $b = 0.32, p < .001$ ). The second model revealed that planful competence was positively related to occupational status mediated by self-direction (indirect  $b = 0.50$  for the older cohort; indirect  $b = 0.80$  for the younger cohort; all direct paths are significant at the 1% level or below).

Hitlin and Elder (2007a) used cross-sectional data from a representative sample of 20 754 U.S. adolescents. The dataset included measures on health issues, social environment characteristics, family and relationship issues, as well as psychological features. The authors operationalised agency by using items that were argued to measure self-efficacy beliefs, optimism, and planful competences. Self-efficacy beliefs and optimism were used as effect indicators whereby planful competence was included as a causal indicator. The latent path analysis disclosed a positive relationship between agency and school cohesion ( $\beta = .57$ ) and negative relationships between agency and school prob-

11 Only unstandardised path coefficients are reported in the study of Shanahan and Elder (2002).

lems ( $\beta = -.58$ ), violent activity ( $\beta = -.31$ ) and criminal activity ( $\beta = -.29$ ) within the last 12 months ( $p$  values for the path coefficients have not been included; however, the presented fit indices speak much in favour of all estimated models).

The last study (Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015) used a panel dataset of 636 cases. The dataset included data measured in 1988 (SES of parents), 1991 (age 17–18, agency measures), and 2005 (age 31–32, outcome measures). Pearlin's (1978) mastery scale and the perceived life chances scale of Jessor, Donovan, and Costa (1988) were used as measures for agency. The latter can be understood as a mixture of optimism and the forethought aspect of Clausen's (1991; see also Bandura, 2001) planful competence. The regression analyses show that the perceived-life-chances measure was positively related to years of education ( $\beta = .60, p < .001$ ), hourly earnings ( $\beta = .17, p < .001$ ; only participants who were employed were included), and self-rated health ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ). In addition, the perceived-life-chances measure was also negatively related to financial problems ( $\beta = -.33, p < .05$ ) and depressive symptoms ( $\beta = -.14, p < .05$ ). In contrast, the mastery measure was only significantly related to financial problems ( $\beta = -.33, p < .05$ ) and depressive symptoms ( $\beta = -.14, p < .05$ ). An additional analysis, however, showed that individuals who loaded low on both mastery and perceived life chances in their early years systematically scored worse on all outcome variables in the data measured at the age of about 30.

To sum up, empirical research on the effects of agency over the life course is still scarce, although three of the existing studies exploited longitudinal datasets with measurement points that expand over at least 18 years. The earliest and last measurement points of the Stanford-Terman longitudinal data are even 69 years apart. Although the study of Hitlin and Elder (2007a) was only cross-sectional in nature it still employed a representative sample with more than 20 000 individuals. Based on these sample characteristics the findings of these studies have to be assessed as highly robust and reliable. Interestingly, agency was operationalised very differently (mastery beliefs, optimism, self-efficacy beliefs, planful competences). However, each study found evidence that their agency measure significantly related to desirable life outcomes.

### 2.2.3 Organisational Behaviour Research on Proactivity

Organisational behaviour (OB) is the part of industrial and organisational psychology (Vinchur & Koppes, 2011) that is concerned with the study of human behaviours within organisational settings (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1993; Schermerhorn, Osborn, Uhl-Bien, & Hunt, 2000). Although it has a strong psychological orientation OB also draws heavily on the theories and empirical findings of other fields like sociology, business administration, and anthropology (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1993; Rollinson & Broadfield, 2002; Vinchur & Koppes, 2011).

Issues of agency have mainly been discussed within the OB community under the broader topic of proactivity at work. Proactivity describes all kinds of “self-starting, future-oriented behaviour that aims to bring about change in one’s self or the situation” (Bindl & Parker, 2011, p. 567; for similar conceptualisations see Grant & Ashford, 2008; S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010; Tornau & Frese, 2013). At first glance this understanding of proactivity strongly overlaps with the agency conceptualisation put forward by Eteläpelto et al. (2013). Both focus on efforts initiated by the individual that aim to change either her own characteristics (e. g., knowledge) or the broader environment. However, OB scholars very seldom use the term agency within their discourses (see for occurrences: Grant & Ashford, 2008, p. 6, p. 9; Marinova, Peng, Lorinkova, Van Dyne, & Chiaburu, 2015, p. 105–115; S. K. Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010, p. 829). The different terms in use might explain why scholars concerned with proactivity mostly neglected the theoretical accounts that were proposed in the workplace learning (see Section 2.1) and life-course discourses (see Section 2.2.2). Only Bandura’s (1997, 2001, 2006b) social-cognitive theory and especially his ideas about the central role of self-efficacy beliefs have been strongly exploited in research on proactivity at work (e. g., Grant & Ashford, 2008). At the same time, research on proactivity has scarcely been taken into account by scholars interested in the phenomenon of agency. The only exceptions are the empirical study of Bryson et al. (2006) that operationalised agency as proactive actions, and the theoretical contribution by Harteis and Goller (2014) that firstly introduced the connection of both research strands (see also Goller & Billett, 2014). Although Eraut (2007, 2010b; Eraut & Hirsh, 2007) used the term proactivity

in his double-triangle model (see Section 2.1.1.2) he did not refer to any of the relevant OB literature.

The following section (2.2.3.1) describes conceptual issues of agency within the OB literature. Section 2.2.3.2 then discusses several possible psychological mechanisms that explain individuals' engagement in proactive behaviour. Sections 2.2.3.3 and 2.2.3.4 are then concerned with individual and situational difference variables that predict proactive behaviour. Potential outcomes of proactive behaviour are discussed in Section 2.2.3.5. Empirical evidence that support the hypothesised relationships is reviewed within all three sections.

### **2.2.3.1 Conceptual Issues**

The discourse within the OB literature has been mostly phenomenon driven in the sense that—more or less independently from each other—different researchers noticed, conceptualised, and investigated particular behaviours that employees proactively engage in at work (Grant & Ashford, 2008; S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010). Amongst others, the phenomena of interest were: taking charge (employees voluntarily initiate constructive change at work; Morrison & Phelps, 1999), voice (employees make constructive suggestions for change at work; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), issue selling (employees actively try to make other individuals aware of certain issues; Dutton & Ashford, 1993), feedback and information seeking (employees deliberately seek feedback about their work performance as well as information of how to deal with the requirements of their work; Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Morrison, 1993b), career initiative (employees actively attempt to take control over their career advancements by engaging in deliberate career planning or skill development; S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010; see also Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001; Tharenou & Terry, 1998), and job crafting (employees deliberately change the tasks and the relational boundaries that compose their job; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Only later these behavioural phenomena were summarised under the larger concept of proactive behaviour (e. g., Crant, 2000) and integrated into a wider nomological network (e. g., Bindl & Parker, 2011; S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010; Tornau & Frese, 2013). According to S. K. Parker et al. (2010) all proactive behaviours feature three unifying attributes: they are self-starting, change ori-

ented, and future focused (see also Tornau & Frese, 2013). Self-starting refers to the idea that individuals might not only passively react to current circumstances but rather engage in discretionary efforts that try to proactively take control over situations that affect themselves. Change oriented means that proactive behaviours are aimed to change ill-fitting conditions in comparison to just accepting the status quo. And finally, future focused refers to the notion that proactive behaviours are not simply just-in-time reactions to current issues. They are rather anticipated responses that aim to bring about desired states in the future or to prevent undesired ones (see also Grant & Ashford, 2008).

Parker and Collins (2010; see also S. K. Parker et al., 2010) summarised the multiple proactive behaviour constructs in a larger higher-order category structure (see Table 2.3 for a summary). The first category was named proactive work behaviour and refers to all kinds of behaviours that “focus on taking control of, and bringing about change within, the internal organizational environment” (S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010, p. 636). Both taking charge and voice fall within this category. Behaviours within the second category are “concerned with taking control of, and causing change in, the broader organization’s strategy” (p. 639). An example for this category is issue selling. The last category contains all deliberate efforts that aim to improve the individuals’ fit with the organisational environment (person-environment fit, PE). This category contains concepts like feedback and information seeking, career initiative, and job crafting. The hypothesised higher order factor structure could be confirmed in an empirical study with 622 managers (S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010). The correlations between the three factors were all positive but differed in size (proactive work behaviour and proactive strategic behaviour:  $r = .71$ , proactive work behaviour and proactive PE fit behaviour:  $r = .38$ , proactive PE fit behaviour and proactive strategic behaviour:  $r = .39$ ). These results can be used to argue that the different proactive behaviours proposed in the OB literature are conceptually and empirically different from each other. However, they are similar enough to group them into three different subsets. Each subset contains proactive behaviours that target similar domains of interest.

In general it seems that within the OB literature proactivity is conceptualised as a set of behaviours that relate to a range of outcomes that are desir-

**Table 2.3.** Categorisation of proactive behaviour.

	Proactive work behaviour	Proactive strategic behaviour	Proactive PE fit behaviour
<i>Aim</i>	Aimed to bring about change in one's own work environment (or one's own workplace).	Aimed to bring about change in the broader organisation's strategy.	Aimed to improve the fit between one's own characteristics and the work environment.
<i>Focus</i>	Directed towards organisational processes or structures within one's own direct work environment.	Directed towards organisational processes or structures that are outside one's own direct work environment.	Either directed towards the individual or the organisation.
<i>Example</i>	Deliberately improving the customer handling.	Deliberately convincing managers to engage in more socially responsible practices.	Deliberately developing work-related competencies or changing the task structure of one's own job.

able mainly from the organisation's perspective.<sup>12</sup> For instance, it is assumed that individuals initiate constructive change at work when they engage in taking charge efforts (Morrison & Phelps, 1999) and the voice concept has been explicitly conceptualised as constructive suggestions that lead to better per-

<sup>12</sup> At this point it is also necessary to emphasise that proactivity is conceptually not the same as organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (see also Bindl & Parker, 2011). At the first glance OCB is similarly defined as proactivity. OCB contains all discretionary behaviours that aim at the effective functioning of the organization in question (Organ, 1988). However, Frese and Fay (2001) argue that OCB is more about compliance. In comparison, the exercise of proactivity at work often requires the violation of existing rules (i. e., the opposite of compliance). Furthermore, Frese and Fay (2001) maintain that OCB is more directed towards directly observable positive outcomes. Positive outcomes as the result of proactive behaviour might, however, only occur in the long run. Short-term effects of proactive behaviour might even be perceived as destructive in nature.

forming structures and processes at work (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Quite similarly, feedback and information seeking has been assumed to be related to individuals' work performance (Ashford & Black, 1996). In fact, a large amount of studies could back up these claims (see below). However, Tornau and Frese (2013) observe that counterproductive efforts—that is, behaviours that harm the organisation or the people belonging to the organisation (Spector & Fox, 2010)—might indeed also be self-started, change oriented, and future focused. To delineate behaviours that aim at destructive outcomes Tornau and Frese (2013) proposed the term destructive proactivity.

Apart from these behavioural phenomena, proactivity has also been discussed as a personality trait (e. g., Bateman & Crant, 1993; Fay & Frese, 2001; Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng, & Tag, 1997). This conceptualisation defines proactivity as a stable disposition that explains why some individuals engage more often in a range of proactive behaviours than others (Bindl & Parker, 2011; Tornau & Frese, 2013). A stronger proactive personality is hypothesised to positively predict individuals' proactivity (e. g., Crant, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001; S. K. Parker et al., 2010; S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010; see also Section 2.2.3.3).

Historically, two different personality conceptualisations were developed: (a) proactive personality (Bateman & Crant, 1993) and (b) personal initiative personality (Fay & Frese, 2001; Frese et al., 1997). The former was originally described as “a personal disposition toward proactive behaviour, defined as relatively stable tendency to affect environmental change” (Bateman & Crant, 1993, p. 103). The latter was defined as “a behavior syndrome that results in an individual taking an active and self-starting approach to work goals and tasks and persisting in overcoming barriers and setbacks” (Fay & Frese, 2001, p. 97). Both concepts strongly overlap and have been treated as interchangeable. The strong conceptual overlap could also be shown empirically (Fay & Frese, 2001; Tornau & Frese, 2013). Short self-reporting scales with 10 and 7, respectively, items exist for both concepts (proactive personality: Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999;<sup>13</sup> personal initiative: Frese et al., 1997).

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13 This is the short version of Bateman and Crant's (1993) 17-item scale. In addition, see also Schwarzer and Schmitz (1999) for a relatively similar scale that, however, is not based on the original scale developed by Bateman and Crant (1993).

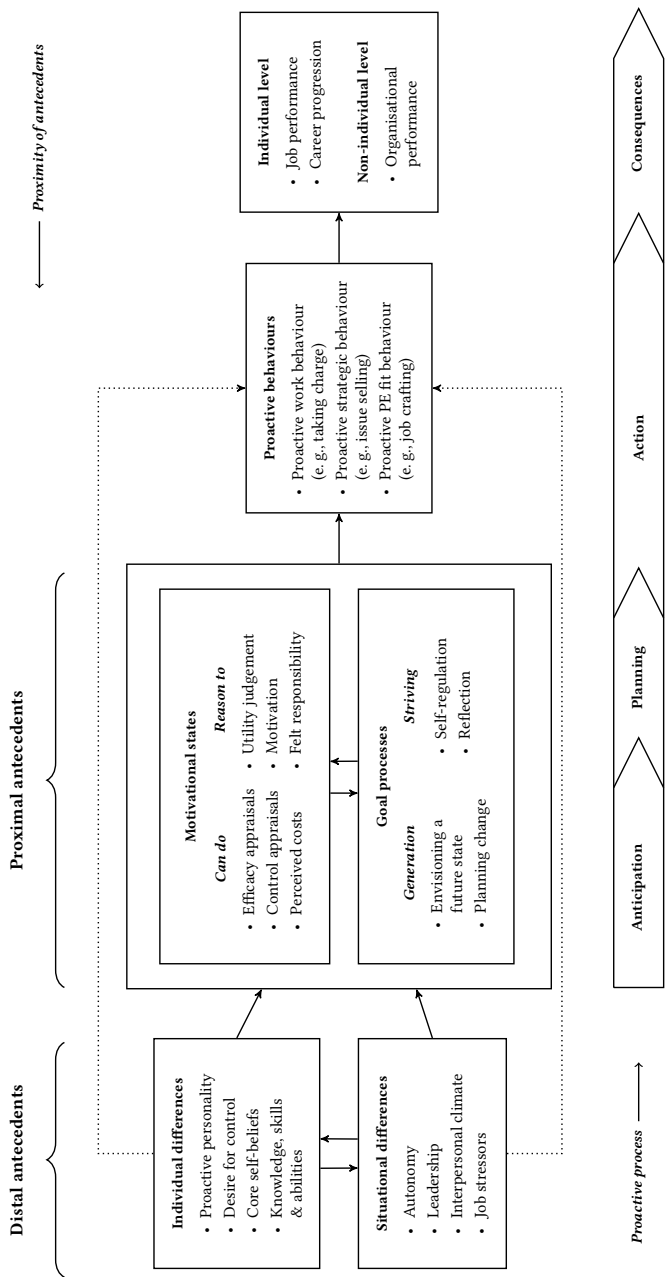


A large number of OB scholars did not only discuss such conceptual issues but also tried to explain the psychological mechanisms behind proactivity as well the consequences of such behaviour. The next sections aim to summarise the current state of these attempts (see Figure 2.6 for a graphical depiction).

### **2.2.3.2 Psychological Mechanism behind Proactive Behaviour**

In his early review, Crant (2000) criticised that the proactivity literature was mainly concerned with conceptual issues as well as the identification of different antecedents that either foster or hinder individuals' proactivity (see also Grant & Ashford, 2008). In his opinion a theory of cognitive processes that actually explains whether and how individuals engage in proactive behaviour is largely missing. Such a theory would allow the question of why and how certain antecedents affect the propensity to engage in proactive behaviours to be resolved. Subsequently a few scholars tried to close this research gap.

Grant and Ashford (2008) argued that all proactive behaviours follow the same general cognitive process consisting of three phases that are directed towards changing future states: (a) anticipation, (b) planning, and (c) action. The anticipation phase requires the individual to discretely imagine possible and desirable futures that are different from the status quo. These possible futures can be related to oneself (e. g., a higher position at one's current organisation) or to the work environment (e. g., a less error-prone working process). Furthermore, the cognitive representation of possible futures might also allow mental trade-offs of the potential costs and benefits associated with each single considered future. If benefits are thought to exceed the costs of the behaviour a future state is considered to be attractive. The second phase is called planning. Within this phase individuals translate their goals (i. e., their envisioned and desired future states) into more detailed action plans. Action plans consist of "steps that link one's anticipations and future goals to concrete actions and outcomes" (Grant & Ashford, 2008, p. 10). Planning is therefore concerned with the consideration of feasible ways to implement the desired future state. Within the action phase the individual actually engages in a concrete behaviour that is directed towards materialising the desired future. Grant and Ashford define actions as the "physical manifestation[s] of anticipation and planning" (p. 11).



**Figure 2.6.** (Process) model of the antecedents and consequences of proactive behaviours (based on Bindl & Parker, 2011, p. 568; Grant & Ashford, 2008, p. 13; as well as S. K. Parker et al., 2010, p. 830).

Those actions might then result in some kind of consequences. Consequences can be either on the individual (e. g., higher job performance, career progression, increased well-being, changed work identity) or the organisational level (e. g., group effectiveness and performance, performance of the organisation because of transformations of work processes) (see also Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). However, it has to be noted that the realised consequences might not always be intended ones. The realisation of desired future states is not necessarily in the realm of the individual.

S. K. Parker et al. (2010) also acknowledge the process character of proactivity. However, in their model they particularly focus on Grant and Ashford's (2008) anticipation and planning phase and specifically try to further explain the psychological mechanisms behind both phases. Similarly to Grant and Ashford they assume that proactive behaviour is a product of the mental representation of possible future states as well as the discretionary planning activities that help to bring about the desired future. These fundamental processes are referred to as goal generation.

Another important process is called goal striving. Goal striving subsumes both the actual engagement in behaviours as well as all supporting psychological mechanisms that aim to achieve the desired future state. The most important supporting mechanisms are self-regulation and reflection.

Self-regulation can be defined as the capability to alter one's own behaviour in order to meet goals or certain standards (Baumeister & Vohs, 2012). Probably the most important form of self-regulation is the resistance against momentary urges that are not in line with long-term goals. For instance, individuals might be distracted by other—at least on a short-term basis, apparently more enjoyable—tasks. Successful self-regulation in such cases includes either the postponement or the negligence of such urges. However, self-regulation is also needed when obstacles prevent individuals from directly reaching their initial goals. In such cases successful self-regulation allows individuals to either persist in the face of challenges or to find new strategies that help them to handle the encountered problems (see also Pintrich, 2005).

Strongly related to self-regulation is reflection. Within the model of S. K. Parker et al. (2010), reflection “consists of an individual's effort to understand the success, failure, or consequences of his or her proactive behaviour” (p. 833).

Reflection is necessary to gain information about one's own progress towards self-set goals as well as possible requirements to regulate one's action strategies.

In a next step, S. K. Parker et al. (2010) argue that a model of proactivity also needs to incorporate motivational states that explain whether an individual engages in proactive behaviour or not. On the one hand, these motivational states are strongly related to goal generation and goal-striving processes.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, they allow for an explanation of how more distal antecedents affect proactive behaviour. Two often discussed motivational states are included in their model: "can do" states and "reason to" states (see also Bindl & Parker, 2011; J. B. Fuller, Marler, & Hester, 2012; S. K. Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006).<sup>15</sup>

The first type of motivational state is related to the question of whether an individual is able to engage in a certain behaviour and whether the individual expects the behaviour to be linked to the desired outcome (can do). S. K. Parker et al. (2010) assume that proactive behaviour is always associated with certain risks (e. g., risk of failing, risk of meeting resistance from other people) or perceived costs (e. g., lost time or energy, resentment of coworkers). They therefore argue that an individual will only be proactive if she judges herself to be competent to engage in the proactive behaviour and if she is convinced of being able to deal with (possible) corresponding consequences. In the model depicted in Figure 2.6 such judgements are summarised as efficacy appraisals. In addition, Parker et al. suggest that individuals also need to be convinced that their self-initiated actions indeed lead to the desired outcomes. The concept of control appraisals is used to refer to the perceived link between certain actions and their consequences (see also Section 2.2.2.2).

The second type of motivational state is concerned with individuals' reasons to engage in proactive behaviour. S. K. Parker et al. (2010) argue that at

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14 The authors suggest that motivational states drive goal processes in a unidirectional way. This, however, has not necessarily to be the case. Existing goals (or envisioned future states) might also affect an individual's motivational states. That is why the relationship between motivational states and goal processes is depicted as being interrelated in Figure 2.6.

15 These ideas are strongly related to expectancy-value theories (see e. g., Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

least three broad categories of possible reasons exist. The first category of reasons is related to utility judgements. Utility judgements describe the degree to which an individual assumes that a certain behaviour will contribute to a current or future goal (e. g., career advancement). Individuals have a stronger incentive to engage in a behaviour they judge to be highly supportive for more distal goals. The second category of reasons is strongly related to the three basic needs postulated in the self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1993, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). SDT assumes that all individuals are strongly inclined to engage in such actions that are self-determined and that allow both a feeling of competence and social relatedness. Individuals especially strive to engage in activities that are highly interesting and strongly enjoyable (intrinsic motivation). However, individuals are also highly motivated to engage in actions if they can strongly identify with the underlying values and corresponding goals of the behaviour (integrated motivation; e. g., changing the work processes in order to avoid mistakes in the future) as well as actions that are perceived to be personally important or highly valuable (identified motivation; similar to utility judgements if the more distal goal is highly relevant for oneself). The three types of motivation are sometimes summarised as autonomous motivation. The third category of reasons to states is concerned with individuals' feeling of responsibility (see also Crant, 2000). S. K. Parker et al. (2010) emphasise that individuals only perceive a reason to engage in proactive behaviour if they feel personally responsible for the accomplishment of a desired future state.

The effects of the just described proximal antecedents of proactivity can be summarised as follows: Proactivity requires the individual to envision a future state that is different from the current situation. This future state will be translated to concrete action plans if the individual has a reason to do so. For instance, the envisioned future might be judged to be instrumentally relevant for more distal goals or the future might be perceived to be highly compatible with the individual's own value system. Furthermore, the individual needs to feel personally responsible or accountable to create the future in question. If an individual has good reason to act proactively she still balances the perceived costs and benefits of the behaviour and considers whether she is capable of engaging in certain behaviours as well as the chances that the action actually

result in the desired outcomes. Provided that all these considerations turn out positively the proactive behaviour in question will be started. Self-regulation processes and constant progress monitoring help to persist in the face of obstacles and setbacks.

### 2.2.3.3 Individual Antecedents

A range of individual difference variables that explain variance in individuals' proactivity could be identified in a number of different studies. The most relevant ones are summarised in Figure 2.6 as individual distal antecedents. These difference variables are mainly assumed to affect proactive behaviours mediated by the proximal antecedents (motivational states, goal processes) described above (see continuous arrow in Figure 2.6). However, the model in Figure 2.6 also contains the direct, unmediated effect of these antecedent variables on proactive behaviours (dotted arrow). This is the case because an adequate explanation of how the distal and proximal antecedents interact to generate proactive behaviours is not presented for each single difference variable in the literature.

The most prominent individual difference variable discussed in the OB literature is proactive personality. A large number of studies included this stable personality trait as a direct predictor of proactive behaviour (e. g., Major, Turner, & Fletcher, 2006; S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010; S. K. Parker et al., 2006; Seibert et al., 2001; Thompson, 2005). Two recent meta-analyses found strong evidence that measures of proactive personality are indeed related to proactive behaviours. B. Fuller and Marler (2009) reported a medium-sized correlation ( $r = .32, p < .05, k = 38$ ) between proactive personality and a range of different proactive behaviours (e. g., voice, taking charge, career initiative). In a similar vein, Tornau and Frese (2013) found correlations between different proactive personality measures (Bateman & Crant's self-reporting measurement; both a self-reporting and an interview measurement of personal initiative) and different proactive behaviours (taking charge and voice) between .28 and .50 (all  $p < .05, k = 5-10$ ).

In other models, proactive personality is included as a predictor mediated by more proximal antecedents (namely cognitive-motivational states; e. g., Bindl

& Parker, 2011; Frese & Fay, 2001; S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010; S. K. Parker et al., 2006). Unfortunately, the scholars promoting these models do not theoretically explain how proactive personality is assumed to influence motivational states. However, a potential explanation might be that individuals with a strong proactive personality more often feel responsible to deliberately influence their own life and their environment. Furthermore, by definition individuals with a strong proactive personality strongly identify with the idea of deliberately taking charge of things. Based on the self-determination theory, such a strong identification with proactivity should lead to autonomous forms of motivation (see above). It therefore follows that proactive personality might be mainly related to “reason to” motivational states in the model proposed in Figure 2.6. Especially for the first explanation some empirical backup can be found. S. K. Parker and Collins (2010) found a positive correlation between proactive personality and the felt responsibility for change ( $r = .30, p < .01$ ) in a sample of 622 managers. Furthermore, based on the same study they report correlations between felt responsibility for change and taking charge ( $r = .55, p < .01$ ) as well as voice ( $r = .41, p < .01$ ). In their meta-analysis, Tornau and Frese (2013) report medium-sized correlations between personal initiative measures and responsibility for change ( $r = .31-.38, \text{all } p < .05, k = 3-5$ ). A correlation of  $r = .61$  ( $p < .05, k = 3-5$ ) was found between taking charge and responsibility for change.<sup>16</sup>

Desire for control is another trait variable that has been linked to proactive behaviour. Desire for control can be defined as a relatively stable inclination of a person to take control over events in her own life (Burger & Cooper, 1979).<sup>17</sup> The concept was first used by Ashford and Black (1996) to explain why newcomers in organisations engage in proactive socialising activities (see also Crant, 2000; S. K. Parker et al., 2010). Ashford and Black’s (1996) theoretical argument was that job entry situations are always characterised as highly uncertain. Newcomers with a high desire for control should therefore proactively engage in a range of behaviours that help to reduce this uncertainty. In their

16 Correlations between responsibility for change and voice could not be reported because of an insufficient number of studies included in the meta-analysis ( $k < 3$ ).

17 Theoretically related concepts are effectance motivation (R. W. White, 1959) and need for competence (Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002).

study, Ashford and Black found empirical evidence that desire for control is indeed related to activities like information seeking ( $\beta = .30, p < .01$ ), general socialising ( $\beta = .24, p < .05$ ), and active networking ( $\beta = .29, p < .01$ ). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) suggest that desire for control should also be a strong motive to engage in job crafting. Activities that change either the task structure or the relational boundaries of one's own job help to control what kind of events one experiences over the work day. Generally speaking, it therefore follows that individuals who are high in the desire for control should experience a strong "reason to" motivation to engage in all kind of behaviours that actually help to take control over all aspects of their life including their work.

Individuals' core self-beliefs are also hypothesised to affect whether employees engage in proactive behaviour or not (see Grant & Ashford, 2008; S. K. Parker et al., 2010). Core self-beliefs (or self-evaluations) are defined as "fundamental, subconscious conclusions individuals reach about themselves, other people, and the world" (Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998, p. 18). This psychological meta-trait is argued to represent a common factor that comprises individuals' self-concept, self-esteem, degree of neuroticism, locus of control, and self-efficacy beliefs (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002; Judge et al., 1998; Pajares & Schunk, 2002).<sup>18</sup> Within the OB literature on proactivity the last one especially has been repeatedly discussed and empirically studied. Strong self-efficacy beliefs are believed to enhance "can do" motivational states because individuals tend to be convinced that they are able to translate their goals into effective actions. Furthermore, individuals with strong self-efficacy beliefs tend to set higher goals and tend to persist more frequently in the face of challenges and obstacles (i. e., positive effects on goal processes; see also Bandura, 1977). Empirical research largely confirms these hypotheses (e. g., Bandura, 1978; Multon et al., 1991; Schunk, 1981; Taylor, Locke, Lee, & Gist, 1984; Wood & Bandura, 1989; see also Section 2.2.1.3). However, most studies

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18 Although all of these concepts have been studied separately it is important to note that the meta-analysis of Judge et al. (2002) could show that the concepts self-esteem, neuroticism, self-efficacy beliefs, and locus of control highly correlate with each other and indeed strongly load on one common factor. In order to avoid multicollinearity problems further studies should therefore consider including only one of these scales in their analyses.



on proactivity included measures of self-efficacy beliefs as direct predictors of proactive behaviour without explicitly specifying the assumed underlying psychological mechanism (e. g., Frese, Garst, & Fay, 2007; J. B. Fuller et al., 2012; Morrison & Phelps, 1999; S. K. Parker & Collins, 2010; S. K. Parker et al., 2006; see also Sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2.2 as well as the meta-analysis by Tornau & Frese, 2013). Nevertheless, self-efficacy proved to be a significant and important predictor of individuals' engagement in proactive behaviour in almost all of these studies.

The last individual factors considered here are knowledge, skills, and abilities. All three are assumed be important antecedents of proactive behaviour (Fay & Frese, 2001; Frese & Fay, 2001; Grant & Ashford, 2008; S. K. Parker et al., 2010; Tornau & Frese, 2013). At least three mechanisms have been suggested that explain how knowledge, skills, and abilities influence individuals' engagement in proactive behaviours. First, knowledge about work processes and the work environment in general allows individuals to better anticipate potential risks and benefits that are connected to a proactive behaviour in question (S. K. Parker et al., 2010). This should lead to sounder decisions whether to engage in proactive behaviour and therefore also to more mastery experiences. In the long run, mastery experiences should then increase self-efficacy beliefs (Frese & Fay, 2001) which have already been discussed as important predictors of proactive behaviour (see above). Second, individuals with thorough work-related knowledge should be more able to identify those work structures and processes that require improvement or change (Fay & Frese, 2001). Furthermore, thorough knowledge enables the individual to identify and choose the most appropriate and effective set of proactive actions to meet certain goals both in the beginning and in the case of setbacks or problems (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Tornau & Frese, 2013). More knowledgeable individuals should therefore be able more often to envision desirable future states, to translate their goals more effectively into actions plans, and to self-regulate their behaviour in a better way than their less knowledgeable counterparts. Third, highly routinised skills (i. e., proceduralised knowledge; J. R. Anderson, 1982) help individuals to free cognitive resources through the automaticity of familiar tasks (Palmeri, 2006). Those freed cognitive resources can then be invested in the identification of possible future states and translation of goals into action plans (goal

generation) as well as in self-regulation and reflection processes (goal striving) (see also Norman, Eva, Brooks, & Hamstra, 2006; Ohly, Sonnentag, & Pluntke, 2006).

Only a few studies have investigated the relationship of proactive behaviour and measures of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Unfortunately, these studies used measures of individuals' qualification level or obtained education as proxies for knowledge, skills, and abilities. Whether these measures are valid proxies remains open to debate. Fay and Frese (2001) reported that job qualification correlates moderately positively with personal initiative behaviours for both a sample of East German participants ( $r = .31-.48$ ,  $ps < .01$ ) and West German participants ( $r = .24-.46$ ,  $ps < .01$ ). In contrast, a non-significant correlation between general education and taking charge behaviour ( $r = .19$ ) was found by J. B. Fuller et al. (2012). Tornau and Frese (2013) used meta-analytical procedures to summarise all relevant studies. They reported average correlations of  $r = .12$  ( $p < .05$ ,  $k = 10-15$ ) between personal initiative behaviour and educational level as well as average correlations of  $r = .18$  ( $p < .05$ ,  $k = 3-5$ ) between personal initiative behaviour and general mental ability.

To sum up, many studies on proactivity investigated a range of individual difference variables. Both proactive personality and different core self-beliefs were included most often. Much empirical evidence speaks in favour that these antecedents are indeed positively related to proactive behaviour. Desire for control is another trait-like measure that has been proposed as a predictor of proactive behaviour. Only a few studies have investigated this relationship. However, those studies found a positive relationship between both constructs. It has also been theorised that knowledge, skills, and abilities are important antecedents of proactive behaviour. Unfortunately, the empirical studies that investigated this relationship came to a rather inconclusive result.

#### **2.2.3.4 Situational Antecedents**

Similarly to the investigation of individual characteristics much effort has been invested in identifying situational antecedents of proactive behaviours. In the next paragraphs the ones that are most commonly included in empirical models are described and discussed. Again, the situational antecedents are assumed

to affect proactive behaviour either directly (by a dotted arrow) or mediated by the more proximal psychological antecedents described above (see Figure 2.6).

Autonomy at work is assumed to strongly predict the occurrence of proactive work behaviours. Job autonomy (or job control) is defined as the “degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out” (Hackman & Oldham, 1975, p. 162). In the literature, three mechanisms have been discussed that explain how job autonomy relates to proactive behaviour via motivational states. First, high levels of job autonomy should increase individuals’ efficacy and control appraisals. In jobs that provide much discretion and control individuals can (relatively) freely decide how to tackle tasks and problems. Such situations signal to employees that they have the general option to engage in proactive behaviours that do not fully comply with familiar ways of practice. These signals should enhance judgements of efficacy in the sense that one is allowed and able to be proactive (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Furthermore, job autonomy directly affects how controllable a situation is for an individual (S. K. Parker et al., 2006) and therefore also increases employees’ control appraisals which, in turn, are also related to proactive behaviours (Frese & Fay, 2001). Second, high levels of job autonomy should allow individuals to make mastery experiences in regard to self-started behaviours and therefore strengthen their respective self-efficacy beliefs in the long run (Frese & Fay, 2001; S. K. Parker et al., 2006). On the contrary, jobs that are tightly defined and do not provide much autonomy do not provide employees with any opportunities to make mastery experience. In such jobs, individuals learn to be reactive rather than proactive (Seligman, 1972, 1992). Third, Tornau and Frese (2013) suggested that individuals who experience high job control also feel more responsible for a wider range of issues connected to their work (see also S. K. Parker & Turner, 2002). This perceived responsibility might then motivate individuals to proactively engage in problem-solving activities they would otherwise just not have cared about.

Two recent meta-analyses summarised the empirical studies that investigated the relationship between job autonomy and proactive behaviour. Tornau and Frese (2013) report a medium-sized correlation between job control and personal initiative behaviour ( $r = .30, p < .05, k = 6-9$ ), taking charge ( $r = .33,$

$p < .05$ , no information given about the number of  $k$ ), and voice ( $r = .21-.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $k = 3-9$ ). Marinova et al. (2015) also report a medium-sized relationship between job control and change-oriented proactive behaviours ( $r = .25$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $k = 31$ ). The empirical results therefore speak in favour of the hypothesis that job autonomy is related to proactive behaviours (see also Bindl & Parker, 2011, for a more qualitative review).

Another situational factor that is considered as an important antecedent of proactive behaviour is leadership. Leadership refers to the way managers and supervisors interact with subordinates in organisational contexts (Bratton & Gold, 2007; Rollinson & Broadfield, 2002). Within the OB literature on proactivity discussions on leadership are mainly concerned with supervisors' and managers' support for, as well as their general openness regarding, proactive behaviours. A culture of support and openness for proactivity strongly signals to employees that proactivity is both accepted and potentially even something that is highly desired (Tornau & Frese, 2013). It therefore follows that employees have to fear less resistance and therefore also perceive less costs ("can do" motivational state) when they engage in behaviours that try to change work practices (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). Furthermore, if a supervisor perceives proactivity as something highly desired individuals might even interpret this as a reason to engage in such behaviour.

The empirical studies concerning the influence of leadership paint a rather inconclusive picture (for a summary see also Bindl & Parker, 2011). Three studies found evidence that leadership styles that either strongly value subordinates' contributions (participative leadership) or that expect employees to question current perceptions and assumptions (transformational leadership) are indeed related to different proactive behaviours. Rank, Carsten, Unger, and Spector (2007) report that a participative leadership style positively predicts proactive service performance above a range of other individual and situational variables ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In another study, Rank, Nelson, Allen, and Xu (2009) found that a transformational leadership style is a positive predictor of proactive innovation behaviours ( $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Belschak and Den Hartog (2010) found evidence that transformational leadership is positively related to proactive behaviour focussing on the organisation (e.g., suggesting new ideas for company problems;  $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as well as focussing

on the interpersonal level (e. g., deliberately taking over colleagues' tasks in need;  $\beta = .32, p < .01$ ). However, no significant relationship could be found between transformational leadership and personal proactive behaviour (e. g., career-related actions;  $\beta = .17, p > .05$ ). In an early study, Morrison and Phelps (1999) reported that top management's openness to encourage and support suggestions and initiatives for change was positively related to taking charge behaviour ( $\beta = .15, p < .01$ ). In addition, Ohly et al. (2006) found evidence that supervisor support is a predictor of personal initiative behaviour ( $\beta = .15, p < .05$ ). However, two studies failed to find evidence for a relationship between supportive supervision and proactive work behaviour (Fay & Frese, 2001; S. K. Parker et al., 2006).

Interpersonal climate within organisations is the third context factor that has been discussed in the OB literature on proactivity. Interpersonal climate refers to the general collegial support and trust that an individual experiences when engaging in proactive behaviours. Interpersonal climate is strongly related to "affective support, confirmation of an individual's behaviour and group standing, and direct help" (Tornau & Frese, 2013, p. 55). Theoretically, a constructive interpersonal climate should foster individuals' engagement in proactive behaviour via both "can do" and "reason to" motivational states. Similarly to supervisor support, collegial support is also a strong signal for employees that proactive behaviour is accepted and something that is desired (Tornau & Frese, 2013). Collegial support and a high level of trust therefore increases psychological safety that leads to lower perceived risks that are connected to proactive behaviour (S. K. Parker et al., 2010; see also S. K. Parker et al., 2006). Furthermore, S. K. Parker et al. (2006) argue that a supportive collegial environment should also lead to more confidence in one's own actions. It is believed that other employees' trust and support enhance an agent's efficacy appraisal.

Only a few studies investigated the claimed relationships. Concentrating on proactive job search behaviours, Kanfer et al. (2001) found a medium-sized correlation of .24 ( $p < .05, k = 15$ ) between social support and such activities in their meta-analysis. In their own study of 282 production employees in the U. K., S. K. Parker et al. (2006) found only a relatively small correlation between coworker trust and proactive behaviour ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ). Fay and Frese (2001) cited an unpublished thesis (Vennekel, 2000) that investigated the relationship

between perceived psychological safety and personal initiative behaviour in the domain of health work. This study reported a medium-sized correlation between the two measures ( $r = .25, p < .01$ ). Griffin et al. (2007) reported that coworker support is positively related to proactive behaviour directed towards change at the individual ( $r = .11, p < .01$ ), the team ( $r = .17, p < .001$ ), and the organisational level ( $r = .08, p < .05$ ) in a health care organisation. However, in an organisation that is concerned with environmental management a significant relationship could only be found between coworker support and team-level proactivity ( $r = .12, p < .001$ ). The correlations between coworker support and proactive behaviour directed toward the individual as well as organisation did not reach significance. Besides other independent variables, Morrison and Phelps (1999) employed a scale that measures the extent how well change within an organisation is both supported and encouraged. However, this did not reach significance in the conducted regression analysis to explain engagement in taking charge behaviour ( $p > .05$ ).

The last category of situational antecedents that are assumed to explain individuals' engagement in proactive behaviour is labelled job stressors. Stressors are defined as "external factors that impinge on a person and potentially result in stress" (Rollinson & Broadfield, 2002, p. 278). Job stressors are assumed to foster proactive behaviour because they are thought to represent disparities between a desired situation and the status quo (Bindl & Parker, 2011; Fay & Frese, 2001; Frese & Fay, 2001; S. K. Parker et al., 2010). Such a mismatch should give individuals a reason to engage in proactive behaviours that are directed towards the reduction of the perceived discrepancy (S. K. Parker et al., 2010; see also Carver & Scheier, 2005). A typical job stressor that was empirically considered in proactivity research is time pressure. For instance, a longitudinal study of Fay and Sonnentag (2002) found evidence that time pressure positively predicts proactive behaviour at work ( $\beta = .21, p < .01$ ). Ohly and Fritz (2010) also included time pressure as an independent variable in their experience sampling study. Based on their multilevel regression analysis they found that chronic time pressure positively predicts daily proactive behaviour ( $b = 0.34, p < .05$ ). Furthermore, they also report a positive relationship between daily time pressure and daily proactive behaviour ( $b = 0.23, p < .01$ ).

However, it has to be emphasised that Bindl and Parker (2011) argue that job stressors might inhibit proactivity in the long run. For instance, constant time pressure can easily restrain individuals to think about new ways of working because they are just happy to get the work done in the first place. In such cases individuals might just not find the time to consider potential ways to affect the work environment. The goal generation process in particular might therefore be affected. In addition, Bindl and Parker (2011) used resources theory (e. g., Hobfoll, 2001) to suggest that repeated exposure to job stressors also easily drains individuals' resources like efficacy beliefs.

To sum up, research on proactivity generated much evidence that situational characteristics like job autonomy, supervisor support, collegial support and trust, as well as time pressure are important antecedents of self-initiated behaviour at work.

### 2.2.3.5 Consequences of Proactivity

Within the OB literature proactive behaviour has also been argued to predict a number of outcome variables. These outcome variables can be grouped into variables that directly affect the individual (job performance, career progression, career satisfaction, and work identity) as well as consequences of proactivity that are not directly related to the individual (e. g., organisational performance). All relevant outcome variables are depicted as consequences of proactive behaviour in Figure 2.6

Individual job performance is probably the most prominent consequence of proactivity discussed and investigated by OB scholars. Job performance is used here in a rather broad sense and can be defined as an incumbent's proficiency in carrying out the tasks that were specified in the job description (Griffin et al., 2007) as well as the outcomes of these tasks that contribute to the performance of the organisation (see J. Campbell, 1990, or Sonnentag & Frese, 2002, for discussion on the performance construct). Three recent meta-analyses investigated the proposed effect of proactivity on different measures of job performance. B. Fuller and Marler (2009) found that a proactive personality is positively related to overall job performance ( $r = .38, p < .05, k = 14$ ), performance in certain job tasks ( $r = .23, p < .05, k = 8$ ), and even objective

performance measures (e. g., sales productivity;  $r = .23, p < .05, k = 6$ ). Quite similarly, Thomas, Whitman, and Viswesvaran (2010) reported that both measures of proactive personality based on Bateman and Crant (1993) and Frese et al. (1997) positively predicted overall job performance ( $r = .21-.25, p < .05, k = 15-25$ ). In addition, their meta-analysis showed that both voice ( $r = .24, p < .05, k = 9$ ) and taking charge behaviour ( $r = .33, p < .05, k = 4$ ) were also positively related to overall performance. However, the relationship between voice and objective performance measures (e. g., employee sales) did not reach significance ( $p > .05, k = 4$ ). Tornau and Frese (2013) found evidence that taking charge ( $r = .43, p < .05, k = 3-5$ ) and voice ( $r = .52, p < .05, k = 6-9$ ) were positively related to supervisor-rated performance. Furthermore, medium- to large-sized correlations could also be found between personal initiative behaviour and supervisor-rated ( $r = .54, p < .05, k = 6-9$ ) as well as objective ( $r = .30, p < .05, k = 10-15$ ) performance.

As a possible mechanism that explains the relationship between proactivity and performance the following three potential links were proposed: First, proactive individuals should more often actively create situations that are strongly conducive to high performance working practices (Crant, 1995; see also B. Fuller & Marler, 2009; Thomas et al., 2010). Second, the active and constant engagement with different organisational problems should lead to a better understanding of one's own job as well as the whole organisation (Frese & Fay, 2001; Thomas et al., 2010). Third, proactive individuals should engage more often in deliberate efforts that are explicitly aimed at developing skills and abilities (Thomas et al., 2010; see also Chapter 3 for a discussion on the effects of such efforts). For instance, individuals might actively seek for information and feedback (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Morrison, 1993a, 1993b; Renn & Fedor, 2001) or negotiate desired formal development opportunities (e. g., trainings; Hornung, Rousseau, & Glaser, 2008).

Career progression is another often assumed and investigated outcome of proactivity. Career progression is an umbrella term that simultaneously refers to positive outcomes of job searches as well as both subjective (e. g., career satisfaction) and objective (e. g., salary) measurements of career success. Frese et al. (1997; see also Seibert et al., 1999) explained the hypothesised relationship between these measures and proactivity as following: Proactive individuals



are assumed to have a long-term future perspective that allows them to make more elaborated and detailed career plans than their less proactive counterparts. In addition, proactive individuals should also be particularly good in the transformation of goals into action plans and action plans into a set of feasible behaviours. Career progression, for instance, can be achieved by deliberately selecting promising positions or by the proactive negotiation of development opportunities. It therefore follows that, on average, proactive individuals should progress faster and further in their careers than less proactive individuals. Two meta-analyses support these claims. B. Fuller and Marler (2009) summarised several studies that investigated the relationship between proactive personality and career success measures. They found small- to medium-sized effects. Proactive personality was positively related to salary ( $r = .14, p < .05, k = 10$ ), number of promotions ( $r = .11, p < .05, k = 6$ ), perceived career success ( $r = .26, p < .05, k = 4$ ), career satisfaction ( $r = .31, p < .05, k = 13$ ), and job satisfaction ( $r = .30, p < .05, k = 21$ ) (see also Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005, for an earlier meta-analysis that reported similar relationships). In a similar vein, Tornau and Frese (2013) found significant positive relationships between job satisfaction and personal initiative behaviour ( $r = .10-.11, p < .05, k = 3-9$ ), taking charge ( $r = .10, p < .05, k = 3-5$ ), and voice ( $r = .14-.22, p < .05, k = 6-9$ ).

Proactive behaviour is not only considered to be related to outcomes on the individual but also the organisational level. In particular, the potential relationship of proactivity and organisational performance has been discussed. Organisational performance hereby refers to three potentially related outcomes that an organisation generates (Richard, Devinney, Yip, & Johnson, 2009): (a) financial performance (e. g., profits), (b) product market performance (e. g., sales), and (c) shareholder return (e. g., economic value added). Both Frese and Fay (2001) and Bateman and Crant (1999) argued that organisations benefit from proactive behaviour of their employees. For instance, proactive employees are assumed to tackle problems more independently or to come up with more innovative products, services, and processes. A proactive workforce should therefore provide a competitive advantage for organisations (see also Barney, 1991). Empirical support for these claims, however, is very limited. For instance, Koop, de Reu, and Frese (2000) reported that among the highly success-

ful microbusiness owners in Uganda, proportionally more individuals were rated as being highly proactive (29%) than being very low on the proactivity scale (13%). Similar results were found in a sample of business owners in Eastern Germany (Zempel, 1999). In their studies with Dutch small-scale business owners, Frese, van Gelderen, and Ombach (2000) and van Gelderen, Frese, and Thurik (2000) found that a rather reactive business strategy (i. e., the opposite of proactive behaviour of the owner) was negatively related to entrepreneurial success ( $\beta = -.35, p < .05$ ;  $\beta = -.27, p < .05$ ).

In conclusion, much empirical evidence speaks in favour of the proposition that proactive behaviour is positively related to measures of job performance as well as career success. Whether the hypothesised link between proactive behaviour and organisational performance holds empirically is still open. Only a few studies could present convincing empirical evidence for such a relationship.

## 2.2.4 Recapitulation and Conclusion

All three research strands discuss and investigate the phenomenon that individuals are active agents who deliberately exercise control over themselves and/or the environments in which they live. This phenomenon is discussed either under the explicit notion of agency (social-cognitive theory, life-course research) or the concept of proactivity (organisational behaviour literature).

On the conceptual level agency is defined as a capacity within the literature on social-cognitive theory and life-course research. In these research strands, agency is understood as an individual quality that explains why some individuals engage more often in self-initiated behaviour than others. Within discourses of proactivity agency is mainly conceptualised as a specific set of goal-directed behaviours that aim to bring about change in the work environment or in regard to oneself. However, at the same time proactivity research acknowledges that some individuals are more agentic than others. It is assumed that individuals qualitatively differ in their tendency to engage in self-initiated behaviours. Historically this disposition has mostly been discussed under the concept of proactive personality.

Apart from these conceptual issues each of the three research strands is concerned with the identification of psychological mechanisms behind the exercise of agency, individual and situational antecedents that predict individuals' engagement in agentic behaviour, and potential consequences of individuals' agency. Moreover, all three research strands are heavily concerned with the empirical investigation of the phenomenon of agency. The key findings of these efforts can be summarised as follows:

1. Exercising agency can be understood as a process in which individuals imagine a desired and personally fitting future state that is different from the status quo, set the goal to create this desired future state, translate the goal into more concrete sub-goals, derive feasible action plans and engage in agentic behaviours that help to materialise the desired future. This process requires individuals to have the capabilities to actually follow this process from the beginning till the end (i. e., the engagement in certain actions), to be personally convinced that they are capable of engaging in the actions necessary to bring about the desired future state, and that these actions stand a chance of actually closing the gap between the status quo and the envisioned future. Individuals also need a reason to start the process in the first place.
2. Based on the proposed psychological mechanisms behind agency a range of different individual predictors of agentic behaviour were discussed in each of the three research strands. Particularly strong empirical evidence exists for the following predictors: (a) self-knowledge and self-regulation capabilities to imagine desired future states, set (sub)goals, translate these goals into a set of feasible actions, and appropriately deal with setbacks and problems; (b) control beliefs which signal to oneself that one is able to engage in the required actions to bring about the desired future state; and (c) personality traits that give a dispositional reason to engage in agentic actions.
3. Although agency is discussed mainly from an individual perspective all three research strands strongly acknowledge that social context variables also determine whether and how individuals engage in agentic behaviour.

Rather abstractly, both social-cognitive theory and life-course research conceptualise the social context as an opportunity structure. This context might either permit or constrain the exercise of agency. Within proactivity discourses this idea has been made more concrete by identifying particular situational characteristics that either foster or hinder engagement in proactive behaviour. Empirical evidence for such relationships exists for the following characteristics: job control, leadership style, coworker support, and job stressors.

4. In general, the exercise of agency is conceptualised as something positive that is supposed to relate to a range of desirable outcomes. Within the three research strands, agency could be empirically linked to individuals' educational accomplishments, career success, objective job performance, subjective job satisfaction, as well as health outcomes. Slightly different mechanisms have been proposed to explain why agentic individuals should be able to realise such positive outcomes during their life course. However, the general idea is that agentic individuals tend to take control over their life by more often setting long-term goals that match their own preferences and strengths, by being more able to actually translate those goals into appropriate actions, by being more inclined to actually engage in such actions, by being more persistent in the face of obstacles, and—in the end—by being more likely to succeed in meeting their long-term goals than their less agentic counterparts. Agentic actions might either target the individual itself (e. g., developing own competences to fit into a given social context) or the individual's social and physical context (e. g., changing work structures to fit one's own personal characteristics).
5. The theoretical discussions on agency and agentic behaviour within the three research strands promoted a large amount of empirical work. Almost all of those studies used quantitative measures of agency or agentic behaviour (subjective self-rating scales or more objective external assessments) to test hypotheses that are derived from the more theoretical literature. These studies were mostly cross-sectional in nature. However, scholars interested in life-course research especially collected impressive evidence about the positive effects of agency on certain life-course outcomes

using longitudinal datasets. Apart from correlation analysis, the most often used techniques to examine the data were regression and structural equation modelling. A range of meta-analyses summarised the most often studied relationships proposed in the literature on social-cognitive theory and proactivity.

Quite obviously, all three research strands are deeply interested in the phenomenon that individuals exercise control over themselves and/or the environments in which they live. Unfortunately, the three research strands are not well integrated with each other. The scientific community concerned with proactivity seems not to recognise the literature on life-course research and vice versa. Cross-references between both literature strands do not exist. Bandura's ideas of the important role of self-efficacy beliefs are used by both the proactivity and the life-course research. However, his theoretical ideas on the psychological mechanisms behind agency have not explicitly been taken up (although the ideas on the psychological mechanisms behind proactivity and life-course agency are quite similar to a certain point). At the same time, nevertheless, Bandura's discussion on agency also does not incorporate any ideas put forward by scholars writing about proactivity or life-course matters.

A missing integration has also to be witnessed between the literature reviewed in Sections 2.1 and 2.2. Although a few studies (including Eteläpelto et al., 2013, and van Veldhuizen, 2011) indeed recognise the central role of efficacy beliefs put forward in the social-cognitive literature as well as the conceptual ideas discussed within the life-course community, especially the discussions of psychological mechanism behind agency, the important efforts to operationalise agency, and the empirical findings of these research strands have not been taken into account. Furthermore, the discussion of proactivity within the OB literature has been almost completely ignored (for exceptions see Bryson et al., 2006; Goller & Billett, 2014; Harteis & Goller, 2014). At the same time, the discussion on agency within the workplace community has not been picked up by any of the three research strands.

To sum up, this chapter has reviewed the agency-related discussions within the social-cognitive, the life-course, and the proactivity literature. These discourses are deeply concerned with the conceptualisation, the modelling of psy-

chological mechanisms, the identification of individual and social antecedents, as well as the empirical investigation of the phenomenon that individuals exert control over their lives by exercising choice and by engaging in intentional actions. Both the theoretical and the empirical work done in these research strands complement the agency discussion within the workplace learning literature threefold (see Section 2.1.4 for a summary and critique of this research): First, each research strand operationally defined agency either as capacity or as agentic behaviour and proposed different quantitative measures. Operational definitions and therefore also quantitative measures of agency are still missing in the workplace learning discussion. Second, all three research strands proposed nomological networks that link agency with both antecedents and outcome variables. These nomological networks have been used to derive testable hypotheses concerning agency. Such testable hypotheses do not yet exist within the workplace learning discussion on agency. Third, a large number of empirical studies already tested whether these hypotheses hold. Empirical models that attempt to investigate the relationship of agency and learning in work contexts can incorporate these research findings.

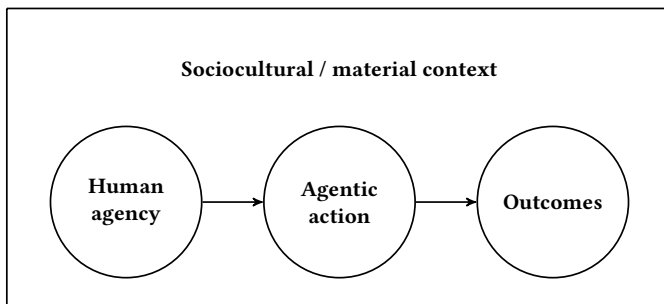
## **2.3 Deriving a Working Definition of Agency**

The aim now is to use the discourses presented in the preceding sections to derive a working definition of agency and a (preliminary) conceptual framework which links agency with the development of expertise. Both the working definition and the conceptual framework are required to develop a more specific research model as well as an operational definition that will guide the empirical investigation that is planned as a later part of this thesis.

Within the reviewed literature two main conceptual perspectives of agency emerged (see Sections 2.1.4 and 2.2.4). The first perspective conceptualises agency as an individual feature that allows individuals to make choices and to engage in actions based on these choices to take control over their life or their environment. This perspective implicitly or explicitly assumes that individuals differ in the extent to which they take control over their life or their

environment. The second perspective is more concerned with the intentional choices and actions as such.

In order to distinguish both conceptualisations the first one will be labelled as agency and the second one will be referred to as agentic action from here on. The consequences that follow from the engagement in agentic actions are labelled as outcomes. This conceptualisation allows for the integration of both conceptual perspectives of agency in a single conceptual framework. A graphical depiction of this conceptual framework can be found in Figure 2.7.



**Figure 2.7.** Conceptual framework.

Although agency plays a role in all kinds of life domains of individuals the following discussion will be constrained to work contexts. The main concept of this thesis will therefore be referred to as work agency. Work agency can be understood as a domain-specific instance of agency.

In this thesis, work agency is understood as the main driving force behind an individual's engagement in agentic actions in work contexts. Work agency will be defined as the capacity and tendency to make intentional choices, to initiate actions based on these choices, and to exercise control over the self and the environment in work-related contexts.<sup>19</sup> The term capacity includes both the

<sup>19</sup> The wording of this definition has been inspired by the definition proposed by Eteläpelto, Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, and Collin (2010). In more recent publications, however, Eteläpelto et al. (2013) adapted a slightly different definition (see Section 2.1.2). This new definition conceptualises agency as something individuals do. In comparison, the definition suggested here conceptualises agency as an individual feature. It should also be emphasised that an almost identical definition of work agency was proposed by Harteis and Goller (2014).



**Figure 2.8.** Hypothetical agency continuum.

actual abilities and the underlying beliefs that are required to engage in such agentic actions. Within this definition the term tendency expresses that work agency is conceptually understood as a disposition. Dispositions are individual characteristics that “determine the a priori probability of adopting a particular goal and displaying a particular behavior pattern” (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, p. 269).

The proposed definition therefore explicitly assumes that some individuals tend to be both more capable and more inclined than others to take control over their working lives and, thereby, to actively shape their own destinies. The former are referred to as agentic and the latter as non-agentic.<sup>20</sup> The two concepts are used as opposing extreme points on a hypothetical continuum (see Figure 2.8). At the one end, agentic individuals frequently exercise agency by making intentional choices and engaging in agentic actions. They actively take control over their lives and tune their environments in regard to their own visions. At the other end, non-agentic individuals do not exercise work agency at all. Non-agentic individuals tend to react and to comply with external forces and conditions. Quite obviously, this categorisation is purely analytical in nature. In reality neither purely agentic nor purely non-agentic individuals exist. However, this idealised continuum still allows categorisation of some individuals as more and some as less agentic.

It follows that this definition treats work agency as a latent variable that explains these differences. Within the literature on social-cognitive psychology, life-course research, and organisational behaviour three facets of such a latent

<sup>20</sup> Such a categorisation is not a completely new one. For instance, Little, Cunningham, Shahr, and Widaman (2002) write with reference to De Charms (1970), Ryan and Deci (2000b), as well as Skinner (1995) that an “agentic individual is the origin of his or her actions, has high aspirations, learns from failures, and, overall has a greater sense of well-being. In contrast, a non-agentic individual can be a pawn to unknown extra-personal influences, has low aspirations, is hindered with problem-solving blinders, often feels helpless, and, overall, has a greater sense of ill-being” (p. 390).



variable have been described: (a) agency competence, (b) agency beliefs, and (c) agency personality. Agency competence describes the individual’s ability to visualise desired future states, to set goals, translate these goals into actions, to engage in these actions, and to deal with potential problems that might occur. In other words agency competence refers to the ability to exercise agency in work contexts. Agency beliefs are concerned with the individual’s perception about whether she has these abilities or not. Some scholars would also call this a sense of agency. And last but not least, agency personality describes the individual’s predisposition or tendency to make choices and to engage in actions based on these choices to take control over their life. Agency personality can be understood as a psychological trait. In this thesis, the combination of these three agency facets is assumed to primarily predict whether an individual acts more or less agentially—that is, engages in more or less agentic actions. Table 2.4 summarises the characteristic of each of these three facets.

**Table 2.4.** Agency facets.

Agency competence	Agency beliefs	Agency personality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Capabilities to make decisions and to translate these decisions into actions</li><li>• Capabilities for self-regulation</li><li>• Knowledge about own preferences and capabilities</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Beliefs into one’s own capabilities to exercise control over one’s life and over environment</li><li>• Generalised expectancies about the extent to which certain means can be caused and how these means help to realise certain outcomes</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inclination to take control over one’s own life and over environment.</li><li>• Psychological trait</li><li>• Relatively stable over time</li></ul>

Based on the literature discussed in this chapter it is not clear how exactly these three facets interrelate with each other. All three facets have been discussed as similarly important constituents of agency. It is therefore assumed that agency competence, agency beliefs, and agency personality are predictors that equally determine whether and how individuals engage in agentic

actions. A description on how exactly these three facets are used to operationalise agency at work can be found in the methodology parts of the empirical studies described later on (see Sections 6.2.1 and 7.1.4.4).

The observable manifestations of work agency are called agentic actions. For the purpose of this thesis, agentic actions are defined as self-initiated and goal-directed behaviours that aim to take control over the work environment or the individual's work-related life course. Agentic refers to the idea that the person them self has to be the origin of these choices and actions. The individual as such has to actively make a choice and then to initiate a single action or a range of actions based on these choices. All actions that are either reflexes or mere reactions to external forces (e. g., the choices of other individuals or situational pressure) cannot be characterised as agentic. Moreover, agency requires that it be future oriented. This means that only such choices and actions can be conceptualised as agentic that aim to affect or control the future by either actively attempting to change it or by deliberately working towards maintaining a current state.

Within the literature two distinct sets of targets of agentic actions have been differentiated (see also Harteis & Goller, 2014). First, agentic actions can be directed towards the individual them self. By exercising this individual-oriented agency individuals try to take control over their personal life trajectories. For instance, an employee might want to become more proficient in a certain part of her job and therefore deliberately engages in every appropriate development opportunity she can find. Second, agentic actions can also be directed toward the individual's current environment. In work contexts, this externally-oriented agency comprises all deliberate efforts that try to take control over current work practices or organisational structures. It is assumed that agentic individuals engage more often in both individually oriented and externally oriented agentic actions. Table 2.5 gives an exemplary insight of how agentic individuals tend to act in comparison to their less agentic counterparts.

The conceptualisation of work agency and agentic actions proposed here acknowledges that individuals do not live or act in a social and/or material vacuum. Whether and how individuals engage in agentic actions does not only depend on their individual characteristics (i. e., agency competence, agency beliefs, agency personality) but also on sociocultural and material context factors.

**Table 2.5.** Conceptualisations of the behavioural tendencies of agentic vs. non-agentic individuals. Reprinted and adapted from “Harteis, C. & Goller, M. (2014). New skills for new jobs: Work agency as a necessary condition for successful lifelong learning. In T. Halttunen, M. Koivisto, & S. Billett (Eds.), *Promoting, assessing, recognizing and certifying lifelong learning: International perspectives and practices* (pp. 37–56). Dordrecht: Springer, p. 44” with permission from Springer.

Orientation	Agentic individuals	Non-agentic individuals
<i>Individually-oriented</i>	Tendency to make a difference in or for the self, e. g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliberately pursue learning and development activities</li> <li>• Shaping one’s own career</li> </ul>	Tendency to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comply with existing career patterns</li> <li>• Accept others’ definitions of self and role</li> </ul>
<i>Externally-oriented</i>	Tendency to make a difference in the current work practice, e. g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop or transform work practices</li> <li>• Create new work practices</li> <li>• Address tensions in work practices</li> </ul>	Tendency to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passively accept existing work practices even if problems are obvious</li> <li>• Overlook tensions in work practices</li> </ul>

Such context factors are assumed to alter the a priori probabilities of adopting agentic behaviours (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Some factors might inhibit the exercise of agency even if an individual has a strong predisposition to be agentic. For instance, a very tight leadership style might easily constrain an individual’s tendency to address tensions at work. However, other context factors might encourage less-agentic individuals to take control over their working lives and their environment. For example, a supervisor who strongly supports the idea of change can easily encourage an employee to suggest new work practices. In the long run, it is also conceivable that sociocultural and material context factors directly affect an individual’s capacity and tendency to exercise work agency. Individuals might develop their abilities to translate goals into action plans because of learning experiences provided in particular contexts

(e. g., family, schools). At the same time, individuals might consider themselves as less capable of influencing their lives because the socio-historic context just does not allow this. Such a deprivation of control beliefs has also been discussed under the concept of learnt helplessness (Seligman, 1972, 1992). And last but not least, context factors also affect the consequences of agentic actions. Some circumstances make it easier than others to achieve intended goals. The outcome of a goal-directed behaviour might not always be the intended one. Within Figure 2.7 the relevance of the sociocultural and material context is illustrated by the box that encloses the earlier discussed agency framework. The theorised chain of agency, agentic actions, and outcomes are embedded in the sociocultural and material context.

As could be seen in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, work agency has been related to a range of different outcomes. Within the workplace learning literature the exercise of agency is understood as a requirement for learning and development. At the same time it is acknowledged that the exercise of agency at work is associated with the development of work practices. Similar ideas have been proposed within the social-cognitive, the life-course research, as well as the organisational behaviour literature. Theoretically and empirically the notion of agency has been linked to positive health outcomes, higher qualifications levels, career attainments, as well as better functioning work processes and structures. It can therefore be summarised that—in general—the exercise of agency seems to result in a variety of desirable outcomes. However, the concrete agentic actions that help to realise these outcomes strongly vary between the different life domains. For instance, deliberately taking control of one's own health might require one to pay attention to health issues, to exercise regularly or to avoid unhealthy diets. In contrast, taking control of one's own educational career might demand individuals to actively seek learning opportunities and to deliberately invest time to improve themselves.

The focus of this thesis will now be constrained to the assumed relationship between work agency and expertise development. It is necessary to understand what agentic actions are related to learning and professional development. Furthermore, it is necessary to identify sociocultural and material context factors that either hinder or foster the engagement in such learning- and development-related agentic actions. On a theoretical level this helps to

further specify the preliminary model proposed in Figure 2.7. In a later step this further specified model will be empirically tested. Chapter 3 therefore attempts to explain how individuals can agentially affect their own expertise development and what external factors influence this process.

## 2.4 Chapter Summary

As can be seen in Section 2.1 the idea of agency has been quite prominent in discussions about learning and development in work contexts. The concept has mainly been used to describe and explain individuals' choices and their engagement in learning-related activities at work. However, in spite of their centrality within these discourses, ideas of agency have mostly been discussed in a rather abstract way. Many authors do not define the concept and empirically testable research models are still largely missing. It has been only very recently that a first explicit definition was proposed by Eteläpelto et al. (2013). Empirical studies that investigate the explanatory power of the concept using hypothesis-testing methods do not yet exist.

In order to compensate for this theoretical shortcoming, social-cognitive psychology, life-course research, as well as organisational behaviour literature related to ideas of agency was reviewed and discussed in Section 2.2. Each of these research strands is heavily concerned with the role of agency in individuals' development and/or the role of agency in relation to work matters. In comparison to the WPL literature these discourses explicitly defined their agency understanding, related the concept to both antecedent and outcome variables, and proposed empirical measures of agency.

Informed by the literature reviewed in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, an individual definition of work agency as well as a preliminary conceptual model was derived. Work agency is understood as an individual characteristic that allows individuals to engage in agentic actions. Agentic actions are then defined as all kinds of self-initiated and goal-directed behaviours that aim to take control over the work environment or the individual's work-related life course. The engagement in agentic actions is assumed to result in certain kinds of out-

comes. This whole causal chain is embedded in the particular sociocultural and material context that characterises the individual's situation.

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