Understanding Sexual Agency

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Debates on human agency, not least female and sexual agency, have permeated the social scientific literature and health educational practice during multiple decades now. This article provides a review of recent agency debates, illustrating how criticisms of traditional conceptions of (sexual) agency have led to a notable diversification of the concept. We propose a comprehensive, inclusive description of sexual agency, focusing on the navigation of goals and desires in the wider structural context, and acknowledging the many forms sexual agency may take. We argue there is no simple relation between sexual agency and sexual health. We propose the following description: Sexual agency refers to a continuum of dynamic, everyday, situated modalities of action related to sexuality in which agents navigate (contrarieties between) personal goals, desires and preferences on the one, and personal living conditions, normative expectations and the wider structural context on the other hand. A diversity of internal (e.g. self-identification) and/or external goals (e.g. maintain social relationships or challenge the status quo) motivate and direct sexually agentic behavior. Sexual agency may aim for change as well as for endurance, continuity and stability. It may be overt or tacit. It varies with individual (e.g. temporal orientation) as well as situational variables (e.g. novelty). Sexual agency may reproduce but also resist and renegotiate (aspects of) prevailing norms and the status quo. There is no simple relation between sexual agency and sexual health or well-being. Modalities of action as well as the constructiveness of their (multiple) effects always depend on personal frames of reference as well as on the opportunities and restrictions provided by the (immediate and distant) personal and structural context, including moral and ideological frameworks and dominant sexual stories.

sexual agency | sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) | comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) | meaningful youth participation (MYP) | agency-structure | empowerment | navigation

1. Introduction

Scientific debates on (sexual) agency (generally understood as “effective human acting”) stretch over more than half a century and have co-evolved with broader societal and scientific developments. Agency has been a subject of interest in a variety of social (sub) disciplines from psychology to sociology, anthropology to philosophy, gender studies, cultural and media studies, youth and health studies, and the international development literature. A view of agency as an individual psychological capacity has been prominent throughout, following an increasing emphasis on individualization and choice in late modernity [1]. However, parallel to the dominant individualistic approach, quite some efforts to conceive of agency in more contextually sensitive ways have also been put forward

in an extending body of theory [2]. Evidence from research among “the poor” and other “vulnerable groups”, such as children, has drawn attention to agency’s “boundedness” by contextual opportunities and restrictions. Sociology bears some honorable attempts to bridge the structure–agent divide and understand the interaction between individuals and their (restrictive) environments [1][3][4]. Paradigm wars between voluntarism and determinism, prioritizing either the power of free will or the determination by societal circumstances, have been permeating debates on agency (and other issues in the social sciences).

Interest in female agency specifically has always been key in feminist and gender studies. After all, in order to change the ideological and structural conditions of patriarchy, we have to act [5]. Here as well as in international development studies, the study of female agency is closely linked to the desirability of female empowerment. The interest in female agency has become particularly intense in feminist cultural and media studies concerned with the sexualization of women and girls. Psychological traditions of media effects research came to be criticized for failing to capture the complexity of women’s experiences in dealing with the ever-presence of their objectification and sexualization. This may have caused what has been called a “turn to agency within feminism” [5]. Controversies over women’s objectification versus their subjectivity and agency continue to dominate feminist studies and activism to date. Consideration of female sexual agency specifically has evidently become central to these discussions. Pressing concerns with widespread sexual violence against women and the threat of STI/HIV risk have further strengthened the prime position of female sexual agency on the (feminist) scientific and activist agenda. Likewise, agency has gained a central position in international development cooperation in the areas of gender and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Here as well, agency is seen as an essential mode of conduct in the process of empowerment. Empowering young people to make safe and informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health and lives through increasing their (sexual) agency is central to many SRHR programs and donor funding frameworks. Yet, few NGO’s and donors have formulated a good working definition of (sexual) agency that is helpful in guiding Theories of Change, program development, and monitoring progress and program outcomes. Discussions on definitions and connected usefulness of (sexual) agency as a program objective thrive.

2. Recent Agency Debates

Originally, conceptions of agency have heavily drawn on psychological theory, inherently qualifying it as an individual feature and as an intrinsic trait. As such, agency is associated with intentionality, (problem-directed) coping behavior, resilience, competency, assertiveness, mastery, autonomy, and self-efficacy. Additionally, agentic behavior is often supposed to be self-asserting, self-serving, and liberating. It is expected to resist toxic ideologies and circumstances and to transcend harmful domination by others [6]. Sulkunen (2009) [7] qualified the conventional emphasis of agency on self-realization, rationality, and strategic conduct as the “standard view of action”.

Such a construal of agency has met with a number of criticisms. First and foremost, it has been pointed out that contextual factors are connected to agency at many levels in either supportive or restrictive ways. Restriction comes in many shapes and faces, ranging from socioeconomic adversity to normative limitations, from an overall lack of life options to direct social threat, violence, or coercion. Gender inequality and normative, ideological

conceptions of agency as inherently masculine form inevitable restrictions on notably women's agency in many areas. Gender stereotypes work against the display as well as the recognition of female agency. Women suffer backlash for being agentic [8]. Additionally, since stereotypes about competence deficiency are even stronger for Black than for White women, the agentic penalty may be even harsher for them [9]. Clearly, gender and ethnicity as well as other intersecting demographic factors, such as age and class, may be strongly restrictive of agentic opportunities for large groups in any society. The same holds for sex and gender minorities due to social stigmas attached to non-conformative sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI). People occupying multiple social minority positions, like, for instance, bicultural gay youth whose cultural or religious identities intersect with their sexual identities, may find their agentic options affected in complex ways [10]. Restrictive conditions should clearly not be mistaken for a presumed lack of agency, a deficiency on the part of the actor. Individuals' agency must be seen as indivisible from the "micro, meso, macro, and chronosystems through which it is constituted, channeled, and disciplined" [11] (p. 468). According to "a capabilities approach" [12], we should not ask what a person should do but what he or she can do. Conversely, put differently: we should understand the choices people have before looking into the choices they make.

Pushing this argument a bit further yet, scholars have criticized considering circumstances and individual action as essentially separate elements. The "selves" that interact with social structures in the exercise of (types of) agency are socially patterned as well [13]. Social influences on identity development and personal experiences color all individual acts to begin with. A "generative concept of agency" [7] further acknowledges that actions also generate structures, which then become the conditions of action while also being its product. Poststructuralist perspectives on agency understand subjectivity and social structures as produced in concert [14]. From this perspective, people are seen to engage ongoingly, habitually, and agentically with their structuring environments while at the same time reinforcing, challenging, or weakening them [15]. The daily enactment of gender roles and the sexual double standard specifically has been cited as "doing gender" [16]. Crucially, agency is thus not necessarily effectively resistant, liberating, or world-changing, nor is it necessarily gender transformative either. Behaviors that are notably conforming, stabilizing, accommodating, or even disempowering still form part of the many modalities that agentic engagement with one's environment may take.

There is yet another critical angle to the heralding of agency as primarily self-determined, self-serving, and empowering. A view of agency that highlights individual mastery has been considered an exponent of the individualism that characterizes neoliberal ideology, a worldview that sees commercial markets and competition rather than governmental protection as the way to individual freedom. Individual mastery is seen as a neoliberal norm but is principally unattainable for many. The emotional burden it puts on present-day (sexual) actors, notably on girls and women, has therefore been criticized as too high [17][18]. Neoliberal ideology tends to deny structural oppression and inequality, leading Gill and Donaghue [5] to jeer that "the agent is the ideal subject of neoliberalism". What good at all does the focus on agency do for feminism or for social justice", these authors wonder. Neoliberalism promotes "free choice", "being your own (wo)man", and "putting your mark on the world" but ignores the many limitations to live up to these norms. Critical analyses further show how concepts such as agency, choice, and empowerment may be co-opted, distorted, and abused by omnipresent commercialization, corporate interests,

and conservative forces. Agentic behavior is not seldomly promoted, framed, and molded in interests other than those of the agents themselves.

3. Sexual Agency Revisited

To a remarkably large extent, the current agency debates take place in the area of sexuality, notably of young peoples' and especially girls' sexuality. In this area as well as in others, agency as a concept has been employed rather self-evidently and unproblematically until recently. In line with "standard views of action", sexual agency has typically been understood as the ability to initiate sex, make sexual choices, communicate one's desires, and meet one's needs [19][20][21]. Definitions often focus on autonomy, on "the rights and ability to define and control your own sexuality, free from coercion and violence" [22]. Operationalizations, such as sexual (refusal) assertiveness, health protective self-efficacy, and sociosexual competence, have been used [23]. Overall, in (sexual) health psychology and programming, sexual agency and related concepts have long predominantly been viewed as intrinsic traits rather than as molded by extrinsic forces and as a quality that needs to be strengthened at the level of the individual.

In more sophisticated models of sexual empowerment and of healthy sexual development [24][25][26], sexual agency is invariably assumed to be of the essence. These models do take available (individual) resources and opportunity structures well into account. Sexual agency is seen as appropriate use of available resources, possibly leading to positive outcomes or achievements. Rather than as a personality trait, sexual agency is thus considered as the use of a set of skills that, (provided they are well-developed) supports, for instance, "voice, choice, and power" [25], freedom of movement, voice, and behavioral control and decision making [27] or "decision-making, collective action, and leadership" [24]. In these models, (sexual) agency is mostly understood as successful navigation of the proverbial winds, waves, streams, and shoals presented in the sex- and gender-related environment, and especially of the many possible contrarieties encountered in them. Navigation is a continuous process of negotiating multiple (possibly opposing) desires, norms, and possibilities. Developing navigation skills is considered a key element of healthy sexual development and an essential element of (sexual) empowerment.

Parallel to a focus on sexual agency as principally a powerful outward performance in the service of self-realization, personal interest, and individual or collective empowerment, we see increasing attention to types of sexual agency that are "different" and may not be recognized as agentic in the first place [11][28][29][30][31][32]. The scientific literature on the matter provides many alternative descriptors for "different" agency. "Bounded" agency is the general term, coined by Evans [29], to indicate that sexual agency is situated "comprising a mix of internalized, personal frames of reference and external, institutional influences" [33] (p. 191). "Bonded" agency is also used to indicate the connection of actors' selves to cultural sexual systems and, more specifically, to reveal their loyalty to the prescriptions and expectations of family, peers, and intimate partners [34]. It is important to note that sexual agency specifically is, to a substantial extent, principally bonded because much of sexual agency takes place and shape in sexual interaction with another human being in the first place. Likewise, notably in the area of sexuality, young people have dealings with parents or caretakers who, in many cases and certainly when daughters are involved, hold opposing values and want to restrain their children's sexual behaviors. Gay youth may also have to

deal with relatively strong opposition from parents and family. Bell [35] uses the concept “restrained agency” to relate to the interaction of young people with their parents or elders as custodians of social values.

Other concepts used to describe agentic behaviors while taking (restrictive) contexts into account are, for instance, “habituated” (as opposed to “imaginative”) agency [15], “subtle” (as opposed to “public”) agency [35], and “thin” (as opposed to “thick”) agency [36]. Still other suggestions are: “tacit or hidden” [33], “weak” [37], and “symbolic” agency [32]. Mai [30] shows that individuals may be inclined to “act within rather than against” normative options. Crucially, all these studies reveal that sexual agency is comprised of “multiple ways of resisting or inhabiting norms” [38]. Moreover, these studies show that multiple goals and motivations underly the diversity of agentic behaviors. In addition to the aspiration to challenge or change one’s circumstances and act upon the world (as is characteristic of “thick” agency), people may rather (be obliged to) aim for continuity and stability [33], for maintenance of relationships [28][39], for positioning oneself in moral frameworks [34], or for simply “making sense of the world” [40] and of one’s self [34] or merely “getting by” [41]. Bay-Cheng [11] provided some examples of behaviors that may not be considered agentic at first, such as choosing to be in an exploitative sexual relationship to be away from abusive parents or consenting to sex for the sake of much needed relational stability. Cense and Ganzevoort [10] highlighted subtle rather than public agentic strategies among bicultural gay youth in the Netherlands, such as showing respect to parents by adjusting to their sensitivities and avoiding explicit statements about one’s sexual orientation instead of admitting to the Dutch norm of being “out and proud”.

What these examples show, firstly, is that agentic behaviors may be motivated by multiple, contradicting, and competing considerations, which may result in compromising, compliant, and possibly ambivalent agency rather than outright unapologetic, independent, self-serving acting. When sexual agency is employed in service of limited life options, to keep the peace and not stir dissent or to endure and persist in unfavorable conditions, sexual agency may seem to be unhealthy, disempowered, or “thin”. However, “thin” acting often is overly creative, resilient, strategic, and strong, considering the circumstances. Even if it is outright self-defeating, it is still agentic in the sense of navigating one’s options and enacting self and identity. If we only define agency as outward, resisting, and clearly self-serving and healthy acts, we overestimate its potency and underestimate its presence at the same time [11].

3.1. Sexual Agency as a New Criterion of “Good” Conduct

In addition, it is important to realize that employment of an unnuanced, one-sided reading of agency as clear-cut independent self-realization, works as a key criterion for “good” sexual conduct in neoliberal times, stigmatizing those it supposes not to live up to it. As such, it affects some groups more than it does others. Foremost, is affects women and girls relatively strongly, as heteronormativity is traditionally accompanied by noted ambivalence towards their sexuality. Female sexual strategies may thus be routinely met with ambivalence in the first place. Male agentic strategies may be overvalued as normative, “masculine”, and positive.

Moreover, as Bay-Cheng [17] argued, the unjust casting of certain girls (and boys) as non-agentic, as lacking control and self-determination, or as “falling below the Agency Line” tends to follow common “discursive tracks that

degrade and dehumanize particular groups on the basis of class, race, and other marginalized statuses" [17] (p. 286). Negative evaluations are more likely to affect those already suffering disadvantage, stigmatization, and exclusion. Being cast as deficient may also strengthen perceptions of victimhood, particularly in girls, not as the result of violation by another person but as the manifestation of one's principal weakness and failure and one's ineptitude as an agent, compelling self-blame. This prescribed normative space may inspire self-interest and control in some but disapproves and largely disempowers many even further, and that reifies racial and socioeconomic inequalities.

3.2. The Victim–Agent Schism

In scholarly work in the area of gender and sexuality, many have pointed to the undesirability of the presumed paradox between women's vulnerability and women's agency and personhood [42][43]. It has been stressed that binary thinking and simplistic either-or approaches may confirm rather than undermine gender/sex stereotypes and promote exclusion and stigma and are basically a "parody of agency's complexity" [2]. Nevertheless, they appear to be highly prevalent in both the scientific literature and sexual health programming.

For instance, Shefer [43] evaluated the dense literature on heterosexuality in the light of HIV/AIDS in the South African context. This literature elaborates on the multiple barriers to women's access to sexual pleasure and agency in their heterosexual relationships. The dominant picture arising here is a noted "binaristic" one, Shefer found. Heterosex is framed as "a male preserve", with women's sexual agency foregrounded as, at best, complicated. In an effort to counter this binarism, some studies then glorify women as agents and as "survivors" of normative gender roles. "The flipside of women being constructed as inevitable victims (or resistant agents) is the reproduction of the stereotype of men as inevitably powerful and controlling in relation to women in heterosexual relationships", Shefer pointed out [43] (p. 216). It is her primary concern that addressing inequitable heterosexual relationships in a binaristic way may function to reproduce the very discourses that underpin such inequalities in the first place.

It is also worth noting that, even in the case of blatant sexual victimization, victimhood is never complete [44]. The sexual victim is not necessarily (if ever) harmed or helpless all the way down; even the most proverbial victim also displays agency: in defending oneself, in strategizing, and in mitigating negative effects. For these (and other) reasons, many prefer the term "survivor" to "victim". In hegemonic discourses on victimhood, the all or nothing notion of victimhood is incompatible with agency. The productive way forward is to resist a binaristic picture of women as either victims or agents. We have to carefully articulate a more nuanced understanding of young women's disputed and complex agency as a multi-layered range of needs, options, goals, perspectives, and types of conduct. Victimhood as well as agency may show not as much in clear blacks and whites but in many shades of grey in overlapping, in-between, mixed, and ambivalent experiences.

3.3. A Continuum of Modalities of Action

Underlying an understanding of sexual agency as entailing multiple modes of action, is the acknowledgement of its multiplicity of purposes in a multiplicity of situations and time frames. Hitlin and Elder [13] distinguished four types of

agency, varying by concrete situations, lived experiences, and temporal orientations. According to them, “existential” agency may be enacted in all circumstances and all temporal scopes, basically referring to a fundamental level of human freedom and connected capacity for self-directed action. Even in the most restrictive of contexts, choices are made; one might always have acted otherwise [1]. “Pragmatic” agency is employed in novel situations, in “knives’ edge” moments, and refers to the ability to innovate when routines break down. “Identity” agency, on the other hand, is employed in routine situations and refers to “the capacity to act within socially prescribed role expectations” that, often but not necessarily, lead to the reproduction of structures. Hitlin and Elder stressed that maintaining routine interactions and performing identities do require effort and do define us as agents. We do not passively enact our identities; we exercise agency in the very performance of those identities no matter how conforming or complying they may be.

“Life-course” agency, lastly, is a longer-range version of existential agency. It occurs with a broader sense of our futures involved and comprises actions with long-term implications. Essential to life-course agency are retrospective analyses of decisions made at turning points and transitions as well as a feeling of confidence in one’s ability to make (and stick to) advantageous long-term plans. Clearly, some people have more opportunity to develop a sense of confidence due to experiencing more comfortable life conditions and having made more successful decisions in the past. However one looks at it, agency is always dynamic and evolves according to the situation [30]. Van Reeuwijk [45] applied Hitlin and Elder’s model of temporal ordinations to understand the sexual decision making of children and young adolescents in Tanzania in a context of conflicting sexual norms and expectations set by parents, caretakers, peers, and partners, which inform and compete with individual goals and situational demands. The children she studied used secrecy, lies, silence, exaggerations, deceptions, “skinning” (taking money without giving sex in return), seduction, flirting, and assessing the reputation of potential partners as concrete agentic strategies to benefit from sexual relationships while managing risks to their reputation, education, self-worth, and health.

From this and many other studies, it can be concluded that sexual agency is employed to serve internal as well as external goals: to navigate sexual contexts and expectations, to manage sexual risks, to negotiate desires and preferences, to make sense of experiences, and to maintain relationships. Sexual agency is not only heavily colored by one’s overall life options but also by previous (sexual, relational) experiences. It may vary according to the actor’s short- or long-term perspective or according to situations being novel versus familiar, like in new or casual versus steady, intimate relationships.

4. A New Description of Sexual Agency Proposed

Options, motives and enactments of sexual agency thus show huge variety, both within the individual and between individuals. Under patriarchal, heteronormative rule, differences between women and men or girls and boys, are apparent. But even highly dominant systems like heteronormativity are not homogeneous and do not produce uniform effects for all women and girls (Wieringa, 2012), or for all men and boys for that matter. It is well-established that sexual choices are influenced by many intersecting factors such as ethnicity, class, age, and religion. The ‘marketplace of sexual options’ is

far from evenly distributed (Ninsiima et al., 2020). Nevertheless, agency is everywhere, and all people are agents in their dealing with their identities, their lives and their sexual options (cf. Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The full scope of sexual agentic conduct can only be recognized if we accept its full-blown, mutual entanglement with available options and limitations. Likewise, we need to confess to its complexity, situatedness, temporality and diversity, to its omnipresence and its everyday character, as well as to its possible irrationality, ambivalence and awkwardness.

With the aim to promote a comprehensive, inclusive understanding of sexual agency, we propose the following description:

Sexual agency refers to a continuum of dynamic, everyday, situated modalities of action related to sexuality in which agents navigate (contrarieties between) personal goals, desires and preferences on the one, and personal living conditions, normative expectations and the wider structural context on the other hand. A diversity of internal (e.g. self-identification) and/or external goals (e.g. maintain social relationships or challenge the status quo) motivate and direct sexually agentic behavior. Sexual agency may aim for change as well as for endurance, continuity and stability. It may be overt or tacit. It varies with individual (e.g. temporal orientation) as well as situational variables (e.g. novelty). Sexual agency may reproduce but also resist and renegotiate (aspects of) prevailing norms and the status quo. There is no simple relation between sexual agency and sexual health or well-being. Modalities of action as well as the constructiveness of their (multiple) effects always depend on personal frames of reference as well as on the opportunities and restrictions provided by the (immediate and distant) personal and structural context, including moral and ideological frameworks and dominant sexual stories.

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