Agency in Work Organisations

The entry deals with agency in work organisations. By agency is meant here in what ways and to what extent individuals direct their actions with their own choices and to what extent external factors influence and determine their actions. The entry focuses on constraints set and resources provided by work organisations for agency. Further, the entry gives research examples of methods to support individual agency and at the same time to redistribute agency among the stakeholders.

Keywords: agency ; work organizations ; workplace ; constraints of agency ; resources of agency ; enhancing agency

1. Introduction

Agency has been used in social sciences as a concept which describes the ways how socio-economic structures set constraints and provide resources for human action. The key questions have been to what extent individuals direct their actions with their own choices and to what extent social and economic structures and cultural norms direct or determine individual action. The most influential definition of agency has been presented by Anthony Giddens.

According to Giddens (1984) [1] agency concerns events which an individual perpetrates, first in the sense that he/she could have acted differently, and second in that whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened. In his definition both the intention and the consequence of the act are necessary conditions for agency. Giddens (1984) [1] argues that the necessary conditions for agency are, first, that the actor is capable of doing things that follow from his/her intentions and that he/she has the option and power to make a different choice. In concrete situations, for example in the middle of organisational changes or reforms of public sector, the conditions for agency depend on knowledgeability of those concerned and their autonomy to act. Different disciplines have applied the concept of agency with their specific focal points, which may differ from the definition given here [2].

2. Agency in Work Organisations

The following Figure 1 draws attention both to the context which may limit or support agency and elements of resources which contribute to agency.
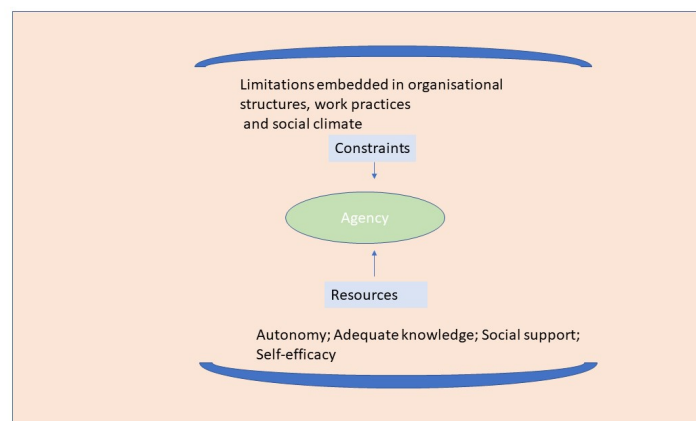
Figure 1. The constraints and resources of agency in work organisations.

Autonomy is a necessary condition for agency. In work organisations autonomy is regulated by the division of labour, delegation of work tasks, work content and management practices. Also, the general social climate in the organisations has an effect on, for example, to what extent individual initiative is encouraged or tolerated. Another necessary condition

for agency is that the individual has the required skills, abilities, and adequate knowledge to do the intended acts. Self-efficacy refers to individual capacity, to a person's belief in his or her capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations [3]. Social support is a contributing factor in agency.

One strand of discussions around agency in organisations comes from management studies [4]. Organisations are in a continuous need to adapt their activities to the market demands. From the point of view of agency line-managers are an intriguing focus group. In processes of change they have an intermediary role where their actions might have some influence both upward and downward in the organisation. Caldwell (2009) [5] calls their double fields of influence as strategic agency and sense-making agency. Strategic agency refers to the proactive involvement of line-managers in strategic change. Sense-making agency refers to attempts to interpret and make sense of the events and outcomes of the intended change. In addition, line-managers have a role to play in the regulation of social climate in the units which belong to their responsibilities. Social climate may courage or discourage agency among the subordinates.

Another strand of studies of agency in organisations comes from the field of action research where the aim has been to influence both the organisational and individual conditions of agency. The following section presents examples of such studies.

The examples relate to situations where the aim is to support individual agency and at the same time to redistribute agency. When agency is redistributed the action or operations of a range of different stakeholders may combine to produce an outcome they all accept. This has connections to distributed agency that refers to situations where, for example, people with same type of aims meet in social media and unite to work together [6].

3. Applications

Agency in work organisations is used and needed both in daily work and during special organisation development phases or projects. Well established and accepted development projects seem to weaken the constraints and to enhance the resources of agency. In some cases, necessary phases may consist of learning: learning how to use one's agency already possessed or learning to adopt agency as a part of one's identity.

Action research projects have showed how learning to use agency is often a prerequisite for any organisational learning that is required when evaluating organisational structures and making renovation plans within working communities. For example, applying communicative spaces for societal and organisational challenges, like workplace development, may be built on the presupposition that those participants, who are already in positions that both allow and demand the use of their agency, apply their learning results in the own organisations. Another possibility is that those participants, who are used to work under supervision, are offered opportunities to express their perspectives to all others while those participants, who are used to supervise and decide, are offered opportunities to hear the others. Both these phenomena present challenges and tasks for learning as a part of redistributing agency that takes a concrete form in new practical action. [7]

In addition to meeting current challenges by joint action, the objective in action research projects may sometimes be to learn new type of interaction and dialogue among those concerned. In Democratic Dialogue -oriented projects inherent values emphasise work experience of every participant. This is essential to grass-roots-level employees. When they see that dialogues enable (or sometimes oblige) them to express their perspectives and to take stands, they may find their resources to be active agents in their work organisations. [8]

There are also methods, for example identity work, that enhance specifically self-efficacy. Identity work concentrates on individual agency but will benefit of a multi-level model. The process of becoming a subject in a community, for example at a workplace, also means becoming an active agent. Along the process the subject gains reflective awareness of her/his identity position in the community and her/his active voice contributes to the dialogues constructed and maintained in the community. [9]

4. Continuous Need for Agency

In working life change challenges are mundane. People at all levels of organisational positions face the need to cope with the change demands. The reviewed studies in this entry show that there are methods which effectively support both individual agency and the redistribution of agency in the process of making changes.

This entry is adapted from

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