

# Exercise of Human Agency Through Collective Efficacy

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## Abstract

Social cognitive theory adopts an agentic perspective in which individuals are producers of experiences and shapers of events. Among the mechanisms of human agency, none is more focal or pervading than the belief of personal efficacy. This core belief is the foundation of human agency. Unless people believe that they can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act. The growing interdependence of human functioning is placing a premium on the exercise of collective agency through shared beliefs in the power to produce effects by collective action. The present article analyzes the nature of perceived collective efficacy and its centrality in how people live their lives. Perceived collective efficacy fosters groups' motivational commitment to their missions, resilience to adversity, and performance accomplishments.

## Keywords

collective agency; collectivism-individualism; emergent properties; interdependence; perceived self-efficacy; social cognitive theory

People are partly the products of their environments, but by selecting, creating, and transforming their environmental circumstances they are producers of environ-

ments as well. This agentic capability enables them to influence the course of events and to take a hand in shaping their lives. A substantial body of literature based on diverse lines of research in varied spheres of functioning shows that, indeed, people motivate and guide their actions partly by their beliefs of personal efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Perceived efficacy plays a key role in human functioning because it affects behavior not only directly, but by its impact on other determinants such as goals and aspirations, outcome expectations, affective proclivities, and perception of impediments and opportunities in the social environment. Efficacy beliefs influence whether people think erratically or strategically, optimistically or pessimistically; what courses of action they choose to pursue; the goals they set for themselves and their commitment to them; how much effort they put forth in given endeavors; the outcomes they expect their efforts to produce; how long they persevere in the face of obstacles; their resilience to adversity; how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands; and the accomplishments they realize. Statistical analyses that combine the findings of numerous studies confirm the influential role of perceived self-efficacy in human adaptation and change.

## FORMS OF HUMAN AGENCY

Conceptions of human agency have been essentially confined to

personal agency exercised individually. But this is not the only form of agency through which people manage events that affect their lives. Social-cognitive theory distinguishes among three different forms of agency—*personal*, *proxy*, and *collective*.

The theorizing and research on human agency has centered almost exclusively on the direct exercise of personal agency and the cognitive, motivational, affective, and choice processes through which it exerts its effects. In many activities, however, people do not have direct control over social conditions and institutional practices that affect their lives. Under these circumstances, they seek their well-being and security through the exercise of proxy agency. In this socially mediated mode of agency, people try to get other people who have expertise or wield influence and power to act on their behalf to get the outcomes they desire. People also turn to proxy control because they do not want to saddle themselves with the arduous work needed to develop requisite competencies, and to shoulder the responsibilities and stressors that the exercise of control entails. These dissuading conditions dull the appetite for personal control.

People do not live their lives in individual autonomy. Indeed, many of the outcomes they seek are achievable only through interdependent efforts. Hence, they have to work together to secure what they cannot accomplish on their own. Social cognitive theory extends the conception of human agency to collective agency. People's shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results are a key ingredient of collective agency. A group's attainments are the product not only of shared knowledge and skills of its different members, but also of the interactive, coordinative, and synergistic dynamics of their transac-

tions. For example, it is not uncommon for groups with members who are talented individually to perform poorly collectively because the members cannot work well together as a unit. Therefore, perceived collective efficacy is not simply the sum of the efficacy beliefs of individual members. Rather, it is an emergent group-level property.

The locus of perceived collective efficacy resides in the minds of group members. A group, of course, operates through the behavior of its members. It is people acting coordinatively on a shared belief, not a disembodied group mind that is doing the cognizing, aspiring, motivating, and regulating. There is no emergent entity that operates independently of the beliefs and actions of the individuals who make up a social system. Although beliefs of collective efficacy include emergent aspects, they serve functions similar to those of personal efficacy beliefs and operate through similar processes (Bandura, 1997). People's shared beliefs in their collective efficacy influence the types of futures they seek to achieve through collective action, how well they use their resources, how much effort they put into their group endeavor, their staying power when collective efforts fail to produce quick results or meet forcible opposition, and their vulnerability to the discouragement that can beset people taking on tough social problems.

### MEASURING COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

There are two main approaches to the measurement of a group's perceived efficacy. The first method aggregates the individual members' appraisals of their personal capabilities to execute the particu-

lar functions they perform in the group. The second method aggregates members' appraisals of their group's capability operating as a whole. The latter holistic appraisal encompasses the coordinative and interactive aspects operating within groups.

One could also measure perceived collective efficacy by having group members arrive at a concordant judgment. The deliberative approach has serious limitations, however. Forming a consensual judgment of a group's efficacy via group discussion is subject to the distorting vagaries of social persuasion by individuals who command power and by pressures for conformity. Assessment by constructed consensus may itself change the efficacy beliefs. Moreover, a social system is not a monolith. A forced consensus masks the variability in efficacy beliefs among factions within a system.

The two informative indices of perceived collective efficacy differ in the relative weight given to individual factors and interactive ones, but they are not as distinct as they might appear. Being socially situated, and often interdependently so, individuals' judgments of their personal efficacy are not detached from the other members' enabling or impeding activities. For example, in judging personal efficacy, a football quarterback obviously considers the quality of his offensive line, the fleetness and blocking capabilities of his running backs, the adeptness of his receivers, and how well they all work together as a unit. In short, a judgment of individual efficacy inevitably embodies the coordinative and interactive group dynamics. Conversely, in judging the efficacy of their team, members certainly consider how well key teammates can execute their roles. Players on the Chicago basketball team would judge their team efficacy quite

differently depending on whether or not Michael Jordan was in the lineup.

Given the interdependent nature of the appraisal process, linking efficacy measured at the individual level to performance at the group level does not necessarily represent a cross-level relation. The two indices of collective efficacy are at least moderately correlated and predictive of group performance. The fact that appraisals of group efficacy embody members' dependence on one another has important bearing on gauging emergent properties. It is commonly assumed that an emergent property is operative if differences between groups remain after statistical methods are used to control variation in characteristics of individuals within the groups. The analytic logic is fine, but the results of such statistical controls can be quite misleading. Because judgments of personal efficacy take into consideration the unique dynamics of a group, individual-level controls can inadvertently remove most of the emergent group properties.

The relative predictiveness of the two indices of collective efficacy will depend largely on the degree of interdependent effort needed to achieve desired results. For example, the accomplishments of a gymnastics team are the sum of successes achieved independently by the gymnasts, whereas the accomplishments of a soccer team are the product of players working intricately together. Any weak link, or a breakdown in a subsystem, can have ruinous effects on a soccer team despite an otherwise high level of talent. The aggregated holistic index is most suitable for performance outcomes achievable only by adept teamwork. Under low system interdependence, members may inspire, motivate, and support each other,

but the group outcome is the sum of the attainments produced individually rather than by the members working together. Aggregated personal efficacies are well suited to measure perceived efficacy for the latter types of endeavors.

### CONTENTIOUS DUALISMS

Conceptualizations of group functioning are replete with contentious dualisms that social cognitive theory rejects. They include personal agency versus social structure, self-centered agency versus communality, and individualism versus collectivism. The agency-sociostructural duality pits psychological theories and sociostructural theories as rival conceptions of human behavior or as representing different levels and temporal proximity of influences. In the social cognitive theory of triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986, 1997), personal agency and social structure operate interdependently. Social structures are created by human activity, and sociostructural practices, in turn, impose constraints and provide resources and opportunities for personal development and functioning.

A full understanding of human adaptation and change requires an integrative causal structure in which sociostructural influences operate through mechanisms of the self system to produce behavioral effects. However, in agentic transactions, the self system is not merely a conduit for external influences. The self is socially constituted but, by exercising self-influence, human agency operates generatively and proactively on social systems, not just reactively.

Nor can sociostructural and psychological determinants be dichotomized neatly into remote and

proximate ones. For example, poverty is not a matter of multilayered or remote causation. Lacking the money needed to provide for the subsistence of one's family pervades everyday life in an immediate way. Analyses of paths of influence involving educational, familial, occupational, and political spheres of functioning lend support for a multicausal model that integrates sociostructural and personal determinants. Economic conditions, socioeconomic status, and family structure affect behavior through their impact on people's sense of efficacy, aspirations, and affective self-regulatory factors rather than directly.

Another disputable duality pits self-efficacy, misconstrued as a self-centered individualism and selfishness, against communal attachments and civic responsibility. A sense of efficacy does not necessarily spawn an individualistic lifestyle, identity, or morality. If belief in the power to produce results is put to social purposes, it fosters a communal life rather than eroding it. Indeed, developmental studies show that a high sense of efficacy promotes a prosocial orientation characterized by cooperativeness, helpfulness, and sharing.

Another variant of dualism inappropriately equates self-efficacy with individualism and pits it against collectivism at a cultural level. In fact, high perceived efficacy is vital for successful functioning regardless of whether it is achieved individually or by group members working together. A collective system with members plagued by self-doubts about their capabilities to perform their roles will achieve little. A strong sense of personal efficacy to manage one's life circumstances and to have a hand in effecting societal changes contributes substantially to perceived collective efficacy (Fernández-Ballesteros, Díez-Nicolás, Ca-

prara, Barbaranelli, & Bandura, 1999).

Cross-cultural research attests to the general functional value of efficacy beliefs. Perceived personal efficacy contributes to productive functioning by members of collectivistic cultures just as it contributes to functioning by people raised in individualistic cultures (Earley, 1994). But culture shapes how efficacy beliefs are developed, the purposes to which they are put, and the sociostructural arrangement under which they are best expressed.

Cultures are not monolithic, static entities as stereotypic portrayals indicate. Both individualistic and collectivistic sociocultural systems come in a variety of forms. Moreover, there is substantial heterogeneity in communality among individuals in different cultural systems, and even greater intraindividual variation across different types of social relationships.

### IMPACT OF PERCEIVED COLLECTIVE EFFICACY ON GROUP FUNCTIONING

A growing body of research attests to the impact of perceived collective efficacy on group functioning. Some of these studies have assessed the motivational and behavioral effects of perceived collective efficacy using experimental manipulations to instill differential levels of perceived efficacy (Durham, Knight, & Locke, 1997; Earley, 1994; Hodges & Carron, 1992; Prussia & Kinicki, 1996). Other investigations have examined the effects of naturally developed beliefs of collective efficacy. The latter studies have analyzed diverse social systems, including educational systems (Bandura, 1997), business organizations (Earley, 1994; Hodges & Carron, 1992; Little & Madigan, 1994), athletic

teams (Carron, 1984; Feltz & Lirgg, 1998; Mullen & Cooper, 1994; Spink, 1990), combat teams (Jex & Bliese, 1999; Lindsley, Mathieu, Heffner, & Brass, 1994), and urban neighborhoods (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). The findings taken as a whole show that the higher the perceived collective efficacy, the higher the groups' motivational investment in their undertakings, the stronger their staying power in the face of impediments and setbacks, and the greater their performance accomplishments.

The conjoint influence of perceived collective political efficacy and trust in the governmental system predicts the form and level of people's political activity (Bandura, 1997). People who believe they can achieve desired changes through their collective voice, and who view their governmental systems as trustworthy, are active participants in conventional political activities. Those who believe they can accomplish social changes by perseverant collective action, but view the governing systems and officeholders as untrustworthy, favor more confrontive and coercive tactics outside the traditional political channels. The politically apathetic have little faith that they can influence governmental functioning through collective initiatives, and are disaffected from the political system, believing it ignores their interests.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Significant progress has been made in understanding the nature, structure, and functions of perceived collective efficacy. However, much work remains to be done in evaluating the different ways of gauging collective efficacy, refining analytic procedures for identifying emergent properties arising from the social dynamics of

whole systems, and developing socially oriented strategies for enhancing collective efficacy to improve the quality of life and shape the social future.

The revolutionary advances in electronic technologies and economic globalization have transformed the nature, reach, and loci of human influence, and the way people live their lives. These new social realities vastly expand opportunities and create new constraints, often by social forces that know no national borders. People's success in shaping their social and economic lives lies partly in a shared sense of efficacy to bring their collective influence to bear on matters over which they can have some command. With growing international embeddedness and interdependence of societies, the scope of cross-cultural research must be broadened to elucidate how global forces from abroad interact with national ones to shape the nature of cultural life. As globalization reaches ever deeper into people's lives, a resilient sense of shared efficacy becomes critical to furthering their common interests.

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### Note

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