



THE CAPACITY TO ACT

Popular science



What is the capacity to act?

It is defined as the capacity of an individual to take personal initiative to achieve certain goals, whether this initiative involves the self, others, or the world in general. It's the act of initiating actions that allow the individual to reach said goals and to follow up with the execution of the actions effectively by interacting with their environment and the people around them.

The capacity to act comprises two key elements: **self-efficacy** and **agency**.



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Self-efficacy

What is self-efficacy?

Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs individuals have about their capacity to behave in a certain way.

“Efficacy in dealing with one's environment is not a fixed act or simply a matter of knowing what to do. Rather, it involves a generative capability in which component cognitive, social, and behavioral skills must be organized into integrated courses of action to serve innumerable purposes.” Bandura (2000)

For many psychologists, self-efficacy is the main behavior regulation mechanism.



Albert Bandura, founder of Self-Efficacy

Canadian Professor of Psychology at the University of Stanford, Albert Bandura OC is one of the most influential researchers in Psychology of the 20th century.

He introduced the **Social Cognitive Theory** which argues that human functioning is the product of a dynamic and permanent interplay between **cognitions, behaviors, and environmental circumstances**, and that, in return, individuals produce their environment.

We are therefore both the **products** and the **architects** of our environment.



The foundations of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy relies on different **cognitive resources** (reasoning, memory, attention, mental flexibility, etc.), but also on **emotions** and **personal beliefs** that are partly determined by what we receive from our environment.

Then, to develop one's self-efficacy, one must act equally on one's **cognitive competencies**, **behaviors**, and **beliefs/attitudes** that allow the person to interact efficiently with their environment.

Moreover, it is possible to establish the **optimal environmental conditions** that allow for the development of a collective feeling of self-efficacy.



Improving Self-Efficacy



Experience successes

Experiencing successes boosts self-efficacy while failures undermine it, especially in developmental phases.

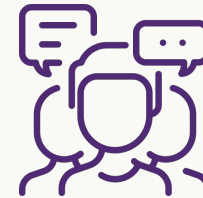
However, if success is too easy to attain, it will not be as effective. The experience needs to invoke one's resilience, which is the ability to adapt after a failure.



Social modeling

Seeing someone succeed after much effort is a source of inspiration and motivation to develop one's self-efficacy (= vicarious learning).

In the same way, witnessing failures could lead to a decrease in self-efficacy.



Social persuasion

Giving and receiving constructive feedback, doing self-evaluations, and limiting social comparison promote self-efficacy.

Also, it is preferred to use terms such as "behaviors" and "attitudes" rather than "personality" when talking about self-efficacy. While behaviors can be changed, it is harder to work on personality, which is more stable.



Emotion regulation

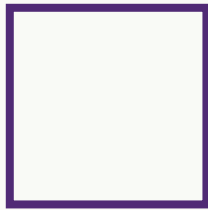
Pain and fatigue can be interpreted as physiological signs of a weak self-efficacy and vice versa. Reducing stress and learning to manage emotions is a good way to stabilise one's self-efficacy. Recognizing one's limits and the signs that signal mood and emotional changes train the individual to positively influence their self-efficacy.

Scope

Self-efficacy is a strong concept that can be applied in multiple fields:



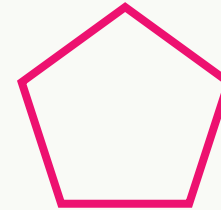
Education and
training



Work



Health



Socio-political

Education and training

Working on **students'** self-efficacy allows them to improve their performance and love for learning.

Promoting **teachers' and trainers'** self-efficacy gives their job and their transmission of knowledge meaning.

Optimising a pedagogic **entity's collective self-efficacy** in having programs that encourage students to achieve their personal goals is a source of positive and efficient work culture.

What to remember?

Collins (1982): Children with the same cognitive skills perform differently in school depending on their self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is more predictive of school performance than cognitive skills.

Work

The speed in which change and innovation are happening leads to an **obsolescence of skills** that is increasingly pronounced in the job market.

Often times, individuals have the responsibility to improve their skill set so as to avoid being useless amidst a “crisis of uselessness” (Yuval Noah Harari, 2019).

The **capacity to adapt** is then paramount to maintain one’s self-efficacy on the long-term in a VUCA world. To promote adaptation, the best tools are the ones that aim to develop one’s metaskills.

The **framework provided by one’s job** can also strongly impact employees’ self-efficacy (work culture based on empowerment, regular trainings, feedback, help with stress management).

What to remember?

Lecomte (2004): Self-efficacy positively influences motivation at work, the act of setting of high goals, managing one’s efforts well, persevering after failures, taking more risks, and asking for help when in difficulty.

Health

Self-efficacy is a protective factor when it comes to treatments for anxiety disorders, depression, and even addiction, but it is also useful in any kind of **clinical treatment**.

By promoting self-efficacy, the clinician maintains the psychological factors that contribute to patients' **quality of life** and autonomy, and to the slowing down of their cognitive decline.

Through its effect on agency, reinforcing self-efficacy gives patients the **power to act**, rendering them responsible for their own health and progress. It also limits the negative effects of having a passive and dependent position on therapeutic techniques and traditional medication*.

What to remember?

Bandura (1995): the positive effects of self-efficacy on health were studied in a variety of situations: physical and mental health (stress and anxiety management, phobias, substance abuse, chronic illnesses, post-surgery recovery, etc.), personal growth (rational emotional therapy), maintenance of cognitive functions in elderly people.

*Please note, however, that making patients responsible for their own disease is not always recommended, especially if the margin for clinical progress is very low (= risk of unnecessary self-blame).

Socio-political

The feeling that citizens have of being able to incite change through their actions is a determining factor in their **collective commitments**.

The **rapid changes in society** change how humans feel about their capacity to be responsible for their future and to plan it.

Navigating uncertainty and constant changes put one's self-efficacy to the test and emphasizes the concept of agency.

What to remember?

Bandura (2004): People with a strong sense of self-efficacy express their opinions the most and participate in socio-political debates on the internet. In fact, they participate strongly in political agendas.



.AGENCY

and the role of environmental factors

Agency

Agency is an individual's **ability to act autonomously and freely**, to monitor their environment to select and perform efficient actions to achieve an **intended goal**.

Being an **agent** of one's own life means that individuals initiate the necessary steps to reach their goals.

Agency is expressed more or less naturally depending on **personal characteristics** (e.g. self-efficacy) but also on the way we interact with our environment.

In any case, agency can be **worked on and enhanced**.



A reductive but concrete example:

When you go home and decide to do the dishes, you show agency. You deliberately decide to do so to improve your state or your environment.

Your actions are guided by the fact that you felt capable of executing this action (self-efficacy), and that you felt this action would have a positive impact on you.



Sources of agency

Agency is essentially driven by **self-efficacy**, but it also varies according to **environmental factors** and our ability to adjust to the different situations we face daily.

Environmental factors don't impact individuals' agency in the same way, some **inhibit** it, others **facilitate** it.

It is then possible to take advantage of certain elements of one's environment to promote self-efficacy and agency, and also to learn how to regulate and manage those that are harmful.



The environmental factors that influence agency

Perceived stress

Refers to how 'threatening' certain life situations are perceived to be, i.e. when they're unpredictable, uncontrollable, and distressing.

Perceived stress is different from **real** stress as it pertains to our personal evaluation of a threat or potential loss, and to an evaluation of the resources we have to handle the threat.

Perceived stress that is too strong leads to a decrease in agency.

Perceived control

Refers to a belief that a given situation is influenced by our own **internal factors** (actions, efforts, skills) or by **external factors** (chance, destiny, karma).

Generally, a internal perceived control promotes the reinforcement of agency.

Perceived social support

Refers to the evaluation of one's **social network** and of its relevance/pertinence in a given situation. Perceived social support implies a relative degree of satisfaction with a particular network present in the environment.

Perceived social support is a good tool to improve agency.

Coping strategies

Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts that individuals put into managing a situation that uses up their resources.

A **problem-focused** coping strategy refers to one's attempts to reduce the demands of a situation or to increase one's resources to face it.

An **emotion-focused** coping strategy refers to one's attempts to regulate emotional tension induced by a situation.

Seeking social support as a coping strategy consists in trying to get others' sympathy and help to manage a situation.

Problem-focused coping promotes agentic behaviors.

Perception, belief, feeling...

What do we mean by these?

Our beliefs guide our thoughts about the world; they are driven by **perception** and **interpretation**. Since we think what we believe is true, our beliefs aren't necessarily universal, and they can't be verified. They, however, represent a **psychological reality**.

Perceiving one's environment, interpreting it, reacting to it, that's what we call **compromising with one's environment**.

Therefore, there aren't good or bad reactions to a given situation, there is an **adjusted** or unadjusted reaction to a situation.



Compromising with one's environment

Effectively compromising with one's environment comes down to **transforming** the environmental factors into useful resources to develop our capacity to act on ourselves and on others.

This ability isn't innate, it requires:



Introspection



Observation



Self-evaluations



Attempts and
perseverance



Resilience and
goodwill

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observatory of the capacity to act

Measuring the capacity to act

Humans Matter is developing a tool that can measure the capacity to act, a complex skill related to human functioning and that is embodied in any and all project aiming to encourage a **transition to sustainable acts** and a positive change in behaviors directed to the self, others, and the world.

Measuring the capacity to act via a developmental approach* allows for the:

- **Prevention** of its decline in different fields (work, health, education)
- **Detection** of the key elements that slow down and optimise its development.
- **Evaluation** of projects and events' impact on the evolution of the capacity to act.

*approach that allows us to appreciate the evolution of an individual in the long-term at different time points.



How to measure the unobservable?

Attitudes, thoughts, and intentions to act are all human variables that are called **latent** variables since they can be approximated via the amalgamation of many variables that are directly observable on the field.

For a set of variables to become a scale that measures a latent variable, researchers need to verify the **validity** and **reliability** of the variables, i.e. that the concept is described by all the items, that each item is associated with the concept that it's theoretically linked to, and that all the items measure the same concept. A scale's reliability requires that the items be homogeneous and give the same results in the concerned population, across time and space.

Therefore, the scientifically validated scales that measure **self-efficacy** and **agency** used are:

- **Self-efficacy**: Self Efficacy Scale (SES) created by Sherer et al. (1982) and translated to French by Chambon, Cornillon-Jacouton, Germain, Assouline, Landazuri and Marie-Cardine (1992).
- **Agency**: Yamaguchi et al.'s scale (2020) translated and validated by Stéphanie de Chalvron (2022)

Understanding and measuring how we interact with our environment

The relationship between individuals and their environment is **dynamic and reciprocal** which makes it difficult to probe.

This complex dynamic relationship is in perpetual evolution and is the subject of numerous studies in Psychology which allowed for the emergence of powerful **statistical models** that can account for such phenomena.

To underscore the processes that are at play in the interaction between individuals and their environment and to set apart what is an individual's responsibility and what is due to a contextual factor, moderation and mediation analyses are used in a longitudinal study (semiparametric mixed model)



Mediation/moderation: the plumbing analogy

If the general water flow is activated and you do not have a faucet in your kitchen, you will experience a flood in your apartment. If it isn't activated and you do not have a faucet, you will not have water at all.

The faucet is what creates the link between the general water flow and whether or not you have water; the faucet is the mediator.

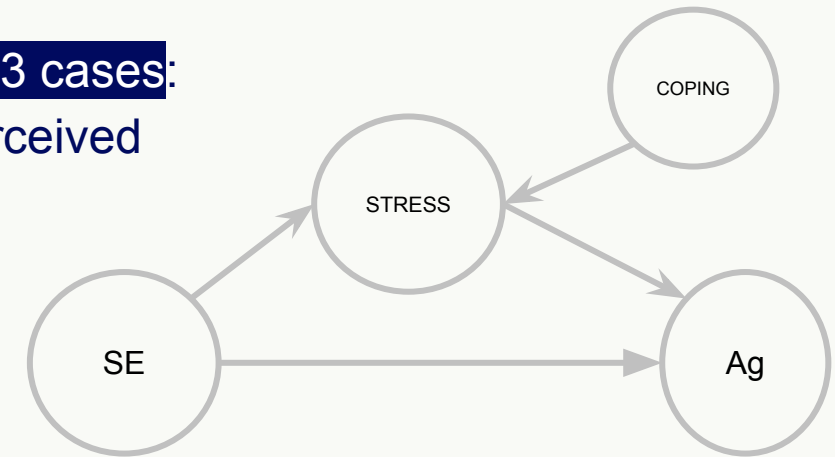
However, to get hot or cold water or to decrease or increase the flow, you will need a mixer tap; that's what we call a moderator.



An example of perceived stress

Self-efficacy can improve agency but if the individual perceives stress, **3 cases**:

- The link between self-efficacy and agency remains the same = perceived stress is not a mediator.
- The link is strengthened or inhibited = perceived stress is a partial mediator.
- The link was cut = perceived stress is a full mediator.



BUT IF... the individual adjusts and adapts correctly to the perceived stress thanks to coping strategies, the impact of stress on agency decreases. Coping is a moderator in the relationship between the effect of stress on self-efficacy and agency.

This moderator is determining since it represents a **lever for action** to stabilise or increase agency. The moderating and mediating environmental factors of the capacity to act can be directly used by the individual to act and organise the optimal conditions for their development.

A flexible and scalable model

4 determining environmental factors for the capacity to act were identified by the research team at Humans Matter:

- Perceived stress, → Card: perceived stress
- Perceived control, → Card: perceived control
- Perceived social support, → Card: perceived social support
- Coping strategies. → Card: coping strategies

More to come! There is a possibility of integrating new factors at any moment in the Observatory to enrich the model and discover more levers for action.

*Do you have an environmental factor in mind that could influence the capacity to act?
Come talk to us about it, we might discover the next lever for action together.*

