

## Chapter VIII

# The Emergence of Agency in Online Social Networks

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### ABSTRACT

*Social and group interactions in online and virtual communities develop and evolve from expressions of human agency. The exploration of the emergence of agency in social situations is of critical importance to understanding the psychology of agency and group interactions in social networks. This chapter explores how agency emerges from social interactions, how this emergence influences the development of social networks, and the role of social software's potential as a powerful tool for educational purposes. Practical implications of agency as an emergent property within social networks provide a psychological framework that forms the basis for pedagogy of social interactivity. This chapter identifies and discusses the psychological processes necessary for the development of agency and to further understanding of individual's engagement in online interactions for socialization and learning.*

### INTRODUCTION

Social and group interactions in online and virtual communities develop and evolve from expressions of human agency. Agency is the capability of individuals to consciously choose, influence, and structure their actions (Emirbayer & Mische,

1998; Gecas, 2003) and is an active exercise of ability and will. The ways in which individuals express agency are associated with their motivational orientation, intentionality, and choice (volition), and relates to their ability to engage these characteristics in social contexts to achieve their goals. As agents, individuals formulate inten-

tions, execute decisions, and produce motivation in an effort to communicate. Understanding how agency develops and emerges within social networks is a key factor in identifying *why* online social networks develop and *how* they influence individual processes such as cognition, motivation, behavior, and ultimately learning.

The exploration of the emergence of agency in social situations is of critical importance to understanding the psychology of agency and group interactions in social networks. Research in social psychology provides a context in which to investigate the psychological effects of online social software as it relates to motivation (see Ryan & Deci, 2000), interactions within the social networks (see Thompson & Fine, 1999), and how individuals vary in their ability to express agency (see Martin, 2003, 2004).

Agency emerges out of interactions and goal directed activities within social networks. Similarly, social networks emerge through the interactions and characteristics of agents support their formation, development, and evolution. Socially situated emergent properties of agency and social networks connect them as a dynamic complex system. Social software is software that “supports, extends, or derives added value from human social behavior” (for a review see boyd, 2007; Coates, 2005). Online friendship websites, massively multiplayer online games, and social groupware, such as Facebook (2008), MySpace (2008), Bebo (2008), and Second Life (Linden Research Inc., 2008) provide frameworks in which social dynamics can mediate the development of agency within social networks.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the concept of agency as it relates to the formation, development, and evolution of social networks. This chapter explores how agency emerges from social interactions, how this emergence influences the development of social networks, and the potential role of social software as a tool with educational applications. Practical implications of agency as

an ability to engage within social networks provides a psychological framework that forms the basis for a pedagogy of social interactivity. This chapter discusses the psychological processes necessary for the development of agency, how these processes affect an individual’s engagement in online interactions for both socialization and learning, and how social software such as Facebook (2008), MySpace (2008), Bebo (2008), and Second Life (Linden Research Inc., 2008) can be used in educational contexts. As agency directly affects how an individual understands their various roles, beliefs, and decisions in social contexts, there are far reaching implications for social software as an educational tool.

## **AGENCY**

Agency is an ability developed through social means and human experience (Mead, 1932, 1934). As an ability to act independently despite the immediate situation, agency engages habit, imagination, and judgment (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). Agency also involves the knowledge, experience, and the ability to achieve one’s goals (Little, Hawley, Henrich, & Marsland, 2002). Within the social framework, agency abilities develop through the interaction of social processes, the dynamics of which can be explained using action theory.

For action theorists (e.g. Parsons, 1968), agency is captured in the notion of *effort*. In this view, agency acts as the force that achieves, where conditions for achievement are at one end of a spectrum and the normative rules are at the other (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Agency ability is ultimately a *temporal* continuum through which an individual exercises personal influence and in return affects environmental processes that ultimately affect other personal self-processes. Thus, personal influence becomes a reciprocal collective determinant even though it also determines

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