

## Summary

After reading Ortner's chapter, we came to understand agency as 'one's capacity to have the capacity to act'. Ortner's distinction between routine practices and agentive acts seems to suggest that agency is some kind of intervention. Routine practices are unexamined and unreflected, and this is an example of how a structure makes us perform (in Giddens' sense). Giddens' theory of structuration helps us to understand how, even when our agency is embedded and to some extent conditioned by structures, we have the power to change the structure by exercising agency. Agency is not opposed but constituent of structure.

For instance, going to school at 8:30 just because it is the rule, what the teachers tell you to do, or what all the other students are doing. Agentive acts can be seen in (1) not going to school at 8:30 as an act of 'resistance', but also in (2) going to school at 8:30 because you do not want to face consequences of disobeying, but still looking for alternative ways to subvert the structures and acting upon in (e.g., form a group of students to protest against the rule). So, the essence of agency is reflexivity.

Do we reflect when we act? Do we reflect on whether it is the right thing to do? For example, crossing roads with a green light or red light. Do we cross the road with a green light because we reflect that it is the right thing to do (for safety, or for being a good example for other people)? If reflection and intentionality are the essence for agency, what about unconscious intent? We might not reflect every time we cross the road with a green light that it is the right thing to do, but our behaviour might be guided by the principles that we have. In this sense, reproducing the status-quo can also be an agentive act too.

Ortner examines the critiques that are made by some scholars about the overemphasis on 'intention' attached to agency (e.g., Comaroffs). Ortner calls their take on agency the 'soft definition' of agency: this definition does not place intention as a central element of agency, and emphasizes the social embeddedness of agency and unintended consequences of one's action (the gap between intention and outcome). The British sociologist, Giddens, for instance, argues that intentionality is a process: not that actors have goals consciously held in mind during their activities. By examining these critiques, Ortner herself, seems to place 'intentionality' (i.e., motives, dreams, and desires) central to her concept of agency.

Reading this chapter and following Ortner's exploration of the question of 'does agency inherently involve intentions?', allows us to understand the position of other scholars, for instance the famous French philosopher Latour, who argue that objects can have agency. If intention is not central to the concept of agency, their argument makes sense.