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Psychological Agency: Evidence from the Urban Fringe of Bamako

Elise Klein*

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Abstract

There is a large deficit in the theorisation of psychological elements of agency and empowerment in the development literature. Instead, empowerment is generally defined as a favourable opportunity structure, as choice, or as the distribution of power. Further still, an examination of the psychological literature reveals a lack of empirical research related to non-Western contexts and development policy. In view of this, I present the results of an empirical study using inductive mixed methods to examine the central factors contributing to initiatives people undertake to improve personal and collective well-being. Informants articulated that the psychological concepts of *dusu* (internal motivation) and *ka da I yèrè la* (self-efficacy) were most important to their purposeful agency.

Keywords: psychological agency, agency, empowerment, Mali, social development.

JEL classification: Z1, Z100, Z13

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* Australian National University, [Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Copland Building #24, Canberra, ACT, Australia, 0200, elise.klein@anu.edu.au.

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Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative (OPHI)
Oxford Department of International Development
Queen Elizabeth House (QEH), University of Oxford
3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK
Tel. +44 (0)1865 271915 Fax +44 (0)1865 281801
ophi@qeh.ox.ac.uk <http://www.ophi.org.uk>

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1. Introduction

Human agency is a contested concept in the social sciences (Long 2001). It is contested for its temporal focus (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), its level of analysis (Stewart 2005), its instrumental and intrinsic properties (Sen and Drèze 2002; Alkire 2007), its paradoxical oppressive and emancipatory capability (Foucault 1977, 1982; Butler 1997), and its dialectic relationship with structure (Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1972). Increasingly, intentional and purposeful agency is important in the international development context as a way in which agents negotiate their lives (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2001 Alkire 2008; Kabeer 1999; Drèze and Sen 1995; Batiwala 2007; Mahmood 2005; Chambers 1997; Narayan 2009; Alsop *et al.* 2006; Ray 2000). For example, Amartya Sen in his work on the capability approach has defined the term ‘agency’ as purposive and argued for agency to be at the heart of all processes of development and social change (Sen 1999). Within the capability approach Sen explains the usefulness of expanding human freedoms not just through opportunities or the ‘substantive freedoms’ that the members of a society enjoy, but also through empowerment and agency, which Sen calls ‘process freedoms’ (Sen 1999). Specifically, process freedoms “enhance the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development” (Sen 1999:18). Sen considers empowerment, agency, and systemic process freedom – such as democratic practices, civil liberties, and political liberties – to be central to creating social change. He argues that the process of achieving such freedoms has intrinsic importance, independent of the outcome, and that “the people have to be seen... as being actively involved – given the opportunity – in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs” (Sen 1999:53).

This current research also identifies purposeful agency as central to people’s lives. In a neighbourhood on the urban fringe of Bamako, the capital city of Mali, agency – specifically the initiatives people undertook to improve their livelihoods – was central to people’s daily lives and improving personal and collective well-being. People were purposeful in their actions because they were following their aspirations: to get a job, to have a house, to reap a good harvest, to have their children educated, to overcome poverty. This is not specific to this neighbourhood; in all societies there is a tendency for human beings “to live on the basis of some understanding of what is a better, more desirable or worthier way of being in the world” (Christopher 1999:141). For many of the people in this particular neighbourhood, the aim was working towards what they call in Bambara *hèrè*¹, defined as ‘well-being’ and

¹ *Hèrè* is Bambara for ‘good things’ – not so much ‘things’ in the sense of material goods, but rather happiness and a general sense of wellness in life. When asking about well-being, it was the word *hèrè* that was used. People interviewed and in focus

the ‘good life’. Agency towards the ‘good life’ can be thought of as purposeful – that is, with a target – towards the aspiration of *hèrè*.

Through my inductive study, I explored mechanisms that were central to purposeful agency. After spending time in the field engaging with this question of purposeful action, two important concepts emerged as being central to intentional action: *dusu* (internal motivation) and *ka da I yèrè la* (self-efficacy). This result may seem a little extraordinary at first, given the heavy structural focus of the development literature on Mali. Prior to beginning the study, I had expected responses centred around resources and structures such as education, better government, money and health care, but the concepts of *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* emerged time and time again when I asked about what was necessary for people to overcome hardship in their lives. In order to quantify these concepts, I carried out a household survey. Through these interviews, I was able to gain a better understanding of the nature of *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu*. For example, one woman I interviewed talked about how she dealt with being unemployed as a result of dropping out of school to have children with her husband. She explained that

ka da I yèrè la means you cannot undertake anything if you do not believe in yourself. It means you have to love what you are doing, as if you do not like it first and do not believe in yourself, you cannot do anything.

(Female interviewee, the neighbourhood, 5 January 2011).

This interviewee went on to explain how, thanks to her *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* she was able to begin an informal childcare centre in the neighbourhood. It had been her dream ever since she had children, but because she did not have a proper education, she thought it would be impossible. The woman began the childcare service by talking with friends, who encouraged her to approach mothers who would need assistance with their children whilst they tended to other chores.

This paper will propose working towards integrating the psychological element of purposeful agency in social development. Whilst the paper focuses predominantly on the empirical data that emerged regarding the importance of psychological agency, I do not deny the importance of structural factors in people’s lives and agency. So while I am focusing on psychological agency as an under-studied area of development studies and arguing that *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* are important to agents and their actions towards improvement to personal and community well-being, *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* should never be understood as a silver bullet and the only aspects of social development considered. I will first locate the

groups understood this concept, and no examples of what that could look like were used as a probe. The question was posed using the word *nièta* when talking about the improvement of well-being. *Niè* means ‘forward’ and *ta* means ‘go’.

deficiency in development literature regarding psychological agency (defined as the psychological level of purposeful agency) and then examine the findings of the research in a neighbourhood on the urban fringe of Bamako.

2. Beyond Proxies: Locating Psychological Agency

There is a deficit in the theorisation of the psychological level of agency within the literature on empowerment even though empowerment has featured as a buzzword in many approaches of development (Cornwall and Brock 2005). The exceptions to this assertion are Rowlands (1995, 1997) who wrote about the ‘power within’ and Narayan *et al.* (2005) who articulated ‘self-belief’, both of whom who argue the importance of psychological agency, although neither has defined at length the mechanics of what specifically constitutes agency at a psychological level in people’s lives. Other definitions of empowerment vary quite widely. For example, a study by Alsop *et al.* (2005) showed 15 different definitions of empowerment and another 15 different definitions were again presented in a study by Ibrahim and Alkire (2007). These definitions broadly fall into three categories: empowerment as a favourable opportunity structure (Alsop *et al.* 2006; Narayan *et al.* 2005), empowerment as choice and decision-making ability (Kabeer 2003; Kabeer 1999; Olney and Salomone 1992), and empowerment as relations of power (Wee *et al.* 2008; Batiwala 2007). Whilst these elements of the concept of empowerment are important and it is neither my goal nor intention to say they are not, I would like to show how there is room to enhance each of these definitions by also including a provision for psychological agency. This is important first at the conceptual level in terms of how empowerment is defined and second at the level of measurement, which informs further research and policy. I will now discuss each of the main areas in which empowerment is defined and raise some possibilities as to how these definitions can be expanded to include psychological agency.

2.1 Empowerment and a Favourable Opportunity Structure

Alsop *et al.* (2006) draws on Sen to frame empowerment as a process comprising both agency and a favourable opportunity structure that constantly interact with each other, and which has some instrumental value to development. Alsop defines opportunity structure as “the broader institutional, social, and political context of formal and informal rules and norms within which actors pursue their interests” (Samman and Santos 2009:3). In a World Bank policy publication, Alsop shows how the degree of empowerment is directly related to agency and opportunity structure, which are in turn shaped by each other. This would suggest that agency can influence opportunity structure and opportunity structure can influence agency, which in turn results in degrees of empowerment or disempowerment. A possible issue with defining empowerment in this way is that the process by which structure and agency

come together to create empowerment is complex, and this complexity can be overlooked when broadly stating that opportunity structure influences levels of empowerment without articulating what elements and processes of agency or structure one is referring to for specific contexts. Thus there is an inherent risk that opportunity structure will be defined as the socio-economic characteristics of the agent – at both the conceptual level and in measurement – leaving limited room for psychological ‘power from within’.

For example, in the Malian Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) 2013–14, empowerment is defined (only with respect to women) as “strengthening women’s economic capacity by recognizing their contribution to economic development by introducing them into productive circuits and guaranteeing equal access to economic employment opportunities and production factors” (IMF 2013:28). While it may be partially the case that manipulating an agent’s structural environment, such as by increasing their education, providing better access to markets (like microcredit), and increasing assets, does increase levels of empowerment for many people, viewing empowerment solely through proxies can be problematic as it assumes that resources automatically translate into purposeful agency, which in the findings of my research is certainly not the case (Sen 1992; Collins 2000). Nonetheless, Narayan *et al.* (2009) have expanded on Alsop’s work in the World Bank’s *Moving Out of Poverty* study which she directed – a research project that included over 5,000 people from 15 different countries – to argue that the poor made explicit the importance of self-belief in moving out of poverty and thus suggest that opportunity structure is not solely responsible for empowerment and that psychological agency should be considered. While theirs is a powerful contribution, in the *Moving Out of Poverty* study, Narayan *et al.* purposefully focus on the ways in which empowerment is instrumental to overcoming poverty. While they recognize empowerment has wider values, these are not the focus of concern for that study, leaving room for further theorisation on intrinsically valued dimensions, which I will take up in this paper.

2.2 Empowerment as Choice and Decision-making Ability

In the literature, empowerment is defined as choice and decision-making ability. As Naila Kabeer (2003) argues, this definition of choice implies that there are other options that the agent can choose – which may or may not be the case. Additionally, agents may be unaware of the existence of other choices. Specifically, an illiterate person would have a very different realm of choices available to them than an educated person. Moreover, choice removes the value component of the choice itself (Alkire and Deneulin 2009). For example, a person might not make decisions about minor household choices because she and her husband have decided that this year she will focus fully on her career and her husband will look after domestic matters, which she does not value doing anyway. In this fuller context, not having the choice of whether to buy beans or spinach makes her more, rather than less, empowered.

While Kabeer (1999), who defines empowerment by choice, may qualify these points in her detailed discussions of empowerment, when it comes to operationalising the definition in a set of measures, again we come into trouble with the very one-dimensional view of choice as measured by decision-making ability, which can overlook the consideration of intrinsic value and how some choices align with one's deeper values and others do not. This is a point I will return to later in this paper.

2.3 Empowerment as Relations of Power

Another set of authors – including those writing in the feminist literature – conceive of empowerment as the (re)distribution of power towards those who historically have had none. Wee *et al.* (2008) argue that any enquiry into empowerment “should entail some analysis of the power dynamics that are implicitly in all social, economic, cultural, and political relations” (p. 18). Kabeer (2003), a prominent writer on this topic, argues that empowerment is a process of change and “refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability” (p. 170). Discourse theory scholars working on power also show the depth of oppression at a more subjective level and how the control of knowledge conditions agents' aspirations and how they see themselves (Foucault 1980). In *Discursive Struggles Within Social Welfare: Restaging Teen Motherhood*, Lessa (2006) helpfully elucidates how the impact of oppression and hegemony condition and restrict human agency. While the examination of oppression through power is an extremely important element of empowerment (or the lack of it), it can infer that power is just about oppression, thus overlooking the very emancipatory element of power – indeed the element that constitutes agency. A promising area of study relating to Foucault's later writings challenged the dominant conception that power is just about oppression. To Foucault in his later work, power was present in all human relations, social structures, and the creations of subjectivity. The formation of subjectivity and becoming a subject is part of the human experience and not just about oppression. For example, as humans, we are subjected to power from our parents from the moment we are born (Deleuze and Guattari 1972). Subjectivity is not just about being dominated or oppressed; it also constitutes agency. This is what Foucault described as a paradox of subjectivity (Foucault 1975). In her book *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Judith Butler (1997) draws upon Foucault's paradox of subjectivity to create a theory of subjection, which expands further on how power and structure do not just dominate agency but also enable it. Butler finds Foucault's conception of the subject inadequate because he reduces the formation of the subject to social power but does not account for the unconscious and psychic power (Vasterling 2010). Butler argues that there is indeed a difference between the subject and the psyche where the subject is constituted just by social power yet the psyche is constituted through subjection (social power) but also includes the unconscious which is not necessarily constituted solely by social power. The unconscious is an important element of the psyche, and, McNay

(1999) argues creativity comes from the unconscious, “Creativity is needed not only in order to realise norms and values in concrete practices; the existence of values also presupposes a creative process by which values are fashioned and transmitted” (p.189). Butler argues it is because of the unconscious element of the psyche that agency isn’t determined by structure and so there is a difference between psychic power and social power. In understanding how the process of subjection becomes a site of production, Butler (1997) explains, “A power *exerted on* a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power *assumed by* the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject’s becoming” (p.11). Butler argues that through the process of subjectivity, power shifts from its status as a condition of agency to the subjects’ own agency or the “power within” as found in the writings of Rowlands (1997). Thus Butler argues that power is not deterministic and that not “all agency remains tethered to those conditions and that those conditions remain the same in every operation of agency” (p.13).

Butler (1997) calls the formation of the subject ‘subjection’. The ‘trope’, or turn, is the moment Butler identifies this happening, giving “definition and boundary to what would be otherwise endless drifting” (Borgerson 2008:66). It is the spatial moment in which the subject defines itself from the other and the unknowable. The ‘trope’ or moment in which a person becomes a subject has been not just a site of enquiry for Butler; Kant, Freud, Althusser, Foucault, Hegel, and Nietzsche are just some who have contended with similar questions. Butler (1997) argues that this turning “operates as part of the explanation of how the subject is produced, and so there is no subject, strictly speaking, who makes this turn” (p. 13), yet it is not determined by power either. This is the dialectic of subjection. Butler encourages us to avoid being trapped in the ambivalence of whether the subject is a condition or impasse of agency, but instead to conceptualise the subject as both “the effect of a prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency” (p.14). At a general level the discussion of value formation in Butler’s arguments is helpful in directing how we can understand power as emancipatory; however, Butler stops short of defining and conceptualising the actual mechanics of psychological agency and what exactly constitutes the trope in terms of shifting subjectivities to create social change. Louis McNay (1999), drawing on Alain Touraine (1977), also calls for the emergence of empirical studies on Butler’s conception of agency to explore how social relations between individuals can create subjectivities of change, specifically “how creative or innovative action detaches itself from its original conditions of enactment and may give rise to a set of new values which become resources for further action” (p.189). For the articulation of such, I will turn to such theories found in social psychology. Like Butler, these theories in social psychology adopt the premise that agency is conditioned within sociality, where “the self must be socially constructed through transactional experiences with the environment” (Bandura 1997:164). While these social psychological theories provide a deeper conceptualisation of psychological agency, they are challenged by another set of problems surrounding

the tendency for psychological theories to be universalised from studies and concepts arising from Western thought and to lack substantial research regarding their relevance in other contexts (Stigler *et al.* 1990).

3. Social Psychology and the Instrumental and Intrinsic Value of Agency

Scholars of social psychology have long argued that cognitive and subjective experiences are important for driving personal and social change (Bandura 1982) as well as contributing towards subjective well-being (Ryan and Deci 2000). This instrumental capacity of psychological agency was also shown in the World Bank's *Moving Out of Poverty* study, which argued that self-belief is a fundamental component in people's mobility out of poverty (Narayan *et al.* 2009). Rowlands (1997) in her exploration of power as the 'power within' also conceived of agency as having an instrumental role in "undoing negative social constructions, so that the people affected come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence" (p. 14). To Rowlands (1997), this power from within then drives the agency to achieve specific desired outcomes, giving agents an instrumentally important capacity. These assertions are similar to what Bandura (2005) describes in his self-efficacy theory, in which agency is "gained through development of personal efficacy that enables people to take advantage of opportunities and to remove environmental constraints guarded by those whose interests are served by them" (p. 477). Bandura (1997) argues that efficacy beliefs have an instrumental importance for the agent – instrumental because self-efficacy leads to outcomes of human action. Efficacy can also relate to different levels of human action. For example, collective efficacy refers to the belief of a group in its ability (which is not necessarily the sum of individual members' efficacy as a group creates its own dynamic) and social efficacy refers to the individuals' belief that they can create change within their community or society (Fernandez-Ballesteros *et al.* 2002; Gecas 1989).

Origins of efficacy are, Bandura argues, relative to the person and not totally determined by socio-economic characteristics. This is a particularly important point considering my earlier remarks regarding the risk of elements of an agent's opportunity being reduced to structural characteristics as proxies for psychological agency. Structural elements are not the only elements contributing to human agency: there are other elements such as relations with other actors that impact agency. Therefore we can never expect the perceived effects, constraints, and advantages of one person's efficacy and autonomy to be constant for all people. While subjective perception is deeply embedded and developed through lived experiences

directly related to power within the opportunity structure,² I argue, drawing on Bandura (1997), that the instrumental capacity of internal judgements that the agent has in regard to their opportunity structure can prove to be a much stronger force than what is objectively the case. Where one person could believe that a situation is hopeless, another person with the same socio-economic characteristics may believe the situation is full of opportunities to change.

Bandura has been criticised for not distinguishing between actions that have value or do not have value to the agent because agents with efficacy alone may still be at risk of feeling coerced or compelled into undertaking actions that they do not value even if they feel efficacious at such actions (Ryan and Deci 2006; Alkire 2005). This intrinsic element of psychological agency was something neither Narayan *et al.* (2005, 2009) nor Rowlands (1995, 1997) extended their analysis to include. Scholars such as Sen (1999) and Alkire (2008) have used the term ‘intrinsic’ in the sense that the exercise of agency is valued in part as an end itself. The intrinsic element of psychological agency is articulated in social psychology, showing how acting according to the self’s deeper values is essential to psychological well-being and human flourishing (Alkire 2005). Thus the process of acting according to one’s values is to be appreciated independently of the outcome of the agency (Sen and Drèze 2002). Also, the exercise of agency that is intrinsically valued by the agent is associated with experiences of increased hope (Solbeck 2010; Crapanzano 2003; Jankowiak and Fischer 1992), psychological well-being (Ryan and Deci 2001), motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000; Bandura 1997), creativity (Amabile 1997), and satisfaction in relationships (Knee *et al.* 2005). Self-determination theory (SDT), championed by Ryan and Deci (2000), argues that all human beings are biologically wired towards growth “for their self-motivation and personality integration, as well as for the conditions that foster those positive processes” (p.68). While the existence of a biological element to the regulation of self-motivation is apparent, SDT argues there is a need for agents to grow in a supportive environment for people to flourish. The requirements that SDT has articulated for such psychological well-being are relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Autonomy is a major factor in internal motivation, yet Chirkov *et al.* (2003) argues that many have mistakenly defined autonomy as either independence or individualism relating to liberal political theory. In SDT, autonomy is true self-regulation, where the behaviour one exhibits is in accord with one’s values and interests. In this sense, the opposite of autonomy is not dependence (if it was defined as independence or individualism) but heteronomy, where “one’s actions are experienced as controlled by forces that are phenomenally alien to the self or that compel one to behave in specific ways regardless of one’s values or interest” (Chirkov *et al.* 2003:98). SDT is not the only theory that argues for the

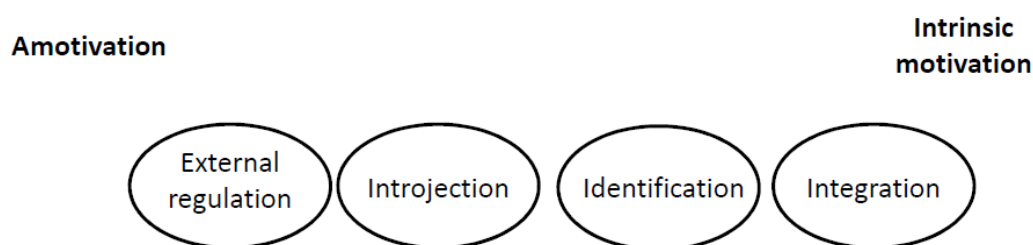
² There is a deep literature on the biological component to psychological agency; see Franks (1999), Summers-Effler (2004), and Archontaki *et al.* (2012).

reinterpretation of autonomy. Feminist scholars such as Freidman (1999), Mackenzie and Stojar (2000), and Nedelsky (1989) also show how the idea of autonomy as acting by one's values is complementary to social relatedness and challenges standard definitions of autonomy prominent in political theory. Autonomy, according to SDT, leads towards authentic motivation, creating "more interest, excitement, and confidence, which in turn is manifest both as enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity" (Ryan and Deci 2000:69). Hence autonomy has a crucial role in driving people to use their agency and change their circumstances, and has both an intrinsic and instrumental value.

Whilst SDT argues that people have an inherent biological tendency towards self-motivation, humans are continually internalising social norms; "children (as well as adolescents and adults) progressively integrate societal values and prescriptions into a coherent sense of self" (Grolnick *et al.* 1997:136). The internalisation of social norms either supports self-motivation or thwarts it. For example, the internalisation of social norms that work against motivation and agency, such as oppression or lack of freedom to self-regulate, would be considered by SDT as social norms that thwart this innate capacity of human agency. In contrast, the internalisation of the norm of having supportive relationships would support autonomy. So SDT differentiates itself from the postmodern stance in that humans are not conforming only to functions of power but also have a biologically based coherent self-organisation that chooses, moderates, or influences action (Ryan and Deci 2001). Processes of power thwart or support the biological element that tends towards agency. This is not necessarily in tension with Butler's account of subjection, where the trope is the embodiment of agency, although there are grounds to argue against the biological determinism prevalent in SDT where the unconscious is changing and not a constant central processing mechanism (Piaget 1984; Lizardo 2004). Butler (1997) herself has accepted the existence of an ego attached to bodily function from the writings of Freud (Campbell 2001). However Butler (1990) has heavily criticized specifically the gendering and sexualizing of the ego particularly apparent in Freud's Oedipus complex and the use of the static language of norms in his writings, which are uncontested as inherent in human nature in some psychological literatures. I would expect a similar approach from Butler to the idea of self-regulation, where particular interest would be focused on the naturalising normative claims that constitute the thwarting or supporting of regulation. Alternatively, psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991) argues for an explicit constructivist account rejecting the ability of the self to regulate towards self-motivation; thus, humans are continually being challenged towards a state of immense saturation by our social environments.

In the ability to self-regulate, humans can adapt to diverse environments. Agents in adverse conditions may change their aspirations in trying to self-regulate towards an equilibrium of psychological well-being or increase their aspirations in prosperous environments (Qizilbash 2009). We can understand adaptation as “thoughts and behaviours that either shape or distort a person’s reality” (Graham 2010:106). However, goals that are adapted are situated along a spectrum of how they relate to self-motivation. Autonomy, then, is not conceived as absolute, in that action is either completely autonomous or not. Rather, actions are more or less autonomous. Indeed, we can imagine autonomous behaviour along a spectrum between the values that are the most autonomous and integrated and the most heteronomous or external ones, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The self-determination scale of autonomy



Source: adapted from Ryan (2012).

So at the lower end of the ‘amotivational’ side of the spectrum is *external regulation*, where a person is acting to procure external rewards or to escape punishment. Following this is *introjected regulation*, where one acts for approval from others or seeks to avoid feelings of guilt deriving from others. Then there is *identified regulation*, which includes everyday behaviours that have personal significance and/or importance. The most autonomous and intrinsically motivated level along the spectrum is *integrated regulation*, where the agent’s actions are aligned to their core values and interests (Chirkov *et al.* 2003). It is important to note that autonomy is not just about effective control, as an individual can still be autonomous when they follow an external influence instead of controlling it themselves, if the agent is aligned and identified with that external influence. Whilst there are similarities with autonomy, choice and decision-making ability cannot be used as proxies for autonomy because choice and decision-making ability do not necessarily capture the intrinsic value of agency (Alkire 2008). Thus, we need to measure autonomy directly and not just assume decision-making ability is a proxy.

While theories of both autonomy and self-efficacy articulate ways of understanding psychological agency, they were born from empirical studies of Western origin and are arguably in their infancy in

understanding their relevance in other societies. Sinha and Tripathi (1994) argue there is considerable variation within cultural groups, and even within individuals, according to changing settings, and Triandis (1990, 2001) argues that there are differences between collectivist and individualistic societies and these different worldviews impact the psychology of the agents. Scholars have attempted to fill this gap in cross-cultural psychology studies of efficacy and autonomy. For example, Chirkov *et al.* (2003) studied how the SDT concept of autonomy is relevant in both collectivist and individualistic cultures (US, Russia, Turkey, and Korea). Chirkov *et al.* (2005) examined autonomy in Canada and Brazil, and, again, Chirkov (2009) examined autonomy education across different cultural contexts. Klassen (2005) analysed more than 20 efficacy studies and found that efficacy beliefs to be less significant for collectivist cultural groups but “when some form of calibration was included, in almost all cases the efficacy beliefs of the non- Western groups were more predictive of subsequent performance” (p. 225). While such studies are important, they need to go further in understanding the relevance of the very construction they are testing and use critical qualitative methods to understand the key concepts of agency and subjection – not just assume its universal applicability or presume a constant central processing mechanism. This requires going further than just being open to the concept’s relevance at differing degrees (Stigler *et al.* 1990). Such critical research may be a challenge to the psychological paradigm which Mansfield (2000) has described as viewing the human psyche as an entity that can be known and explained in its entirety. In contrast to this are theories of psychological postmodernism that argue for no exact structure but instead for the complex and nuanced relationship between power, structure, and agency. But as we have seen in the discussion of the development of autonomy, people are not chameleon-like conformists to contexts and have the capacity to self-regulate, moderate, and influence action (Ryan and Deci 2001). The challenge is to find a balance where empirical studies aiming to understand psychological agency do so through an inductive methodology and critical qualitative analysis in order to be open to deconstructing the very constructs of psychological theory and not to assume one universally stimulated and constant processing mechanism. This is a challenge I have taken up in this study.

4. Description of the Research

The mixed-methods approach used in this research was carried out over a total of six months between December 2009 and March 2011. I returned to the study site in November 2011 as a double-checking exercise that included meeting with people from the initial data collection and other people to discuss the significance of the results and clarify definitions of concepts that had emerged. All of the data collection was carried out prior to the coup d’état of March 2012, which was a key moment in the

current Malian political and humanitarian crisis. While my methods were both qualitative and quantitative, the qualitative methods comprised of the majority of my fieldwork. The qualitative methods used included 26 life histories, 4 focus groups (one each with men, women, male youth, and female youth), and another 25 key informant interviews. Another 30 interviews were conducted when I returned for the double-checking exercise. The quantitative phase of the research consisted of a household questionnaire aiming to collect data from every household in the neighbourhood. I had 307 surveys completed out of a possible 423 households. We then conducted a retest of the household questionnaire with 12.2% of the population to test the stability of the questionnaire tool.

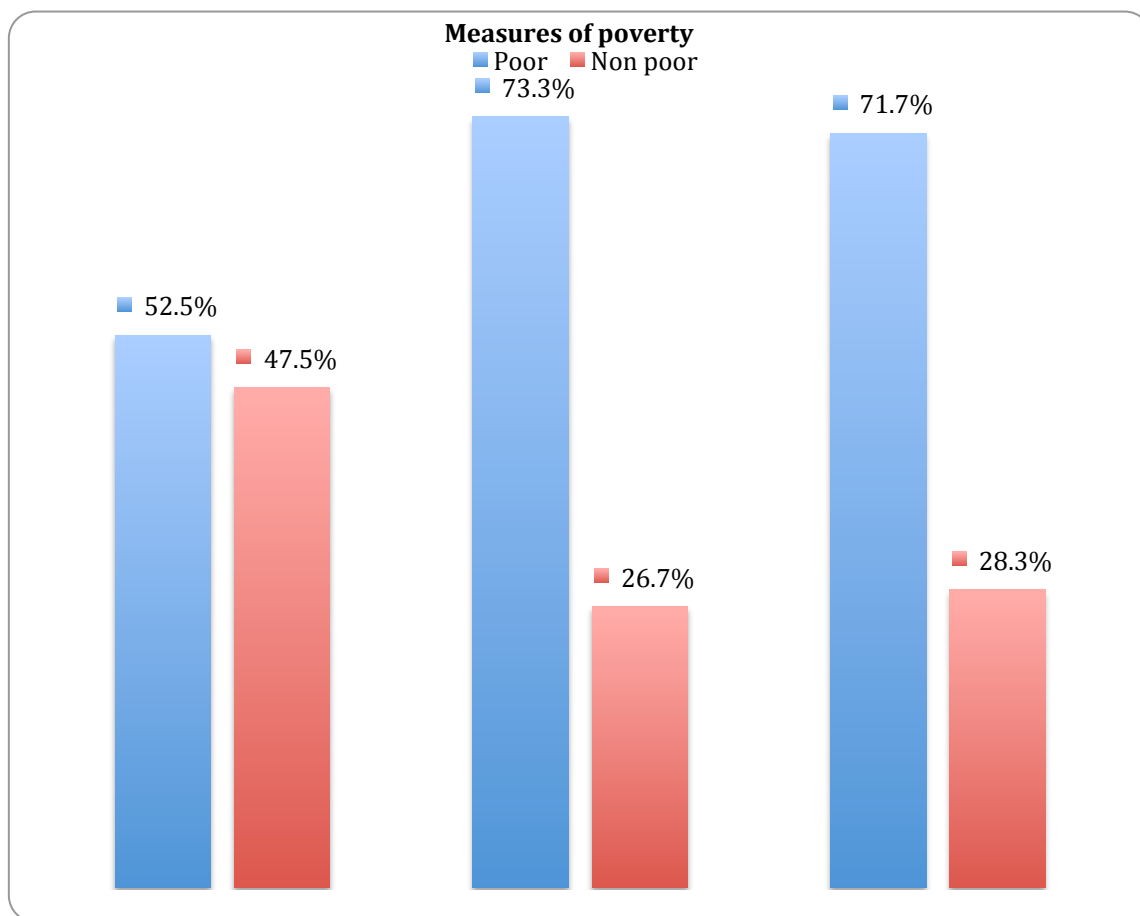
The neighbourhood on the urban fringe of Mali's capital Bamako can be characterised as a site of major urbanisation. Economic and social ties of the neighbourhood are very much mixed with that of the capital that is only 15km away. Seventy point nine per cent of the people living in the neighbourhood were not born there and had migrated from rural villages searching for work. The mix of the population makes the neighbourhood a site containing a myriad of social relations, including relations of gender, age, ethnicity, and kin. Further still, most people living in the neighbourhood struggle with deprivation and poverty.

Defining poverty has been a central issue in development debates. In his 1979 essay *Equality of What?* Sen challenged the assumption that poverty was only related to income deprivation. Sen (1985) then expanded upon this argument and also rejected utility as a suitable measure of poverty. Instead, Sen suggested that poverty was capability deprivation – where capabilities are the ability to achieve functions one values or has reason to value. To illustrate the different ways poverty could be conceptualised, I included measures of poverty both as capability deprivation (using the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), a measure to reflect capabilities) and income deprivation (calculated from the yearly household income based on a poverty line level of below US\$1.25/day) within the household survey. I also used an 'observed' measure where the interviewer made a note if they thought the interviewee was 'poor' as another measure to compare the theoretical measures with. The MPI is based on the methodology developed by Alkire and Foster (2011) to measure deprivation.³ The MPI comprises ten indicators from three dimensions: health, education, and standard of living.

Figure 2 shows the variation in levels of poverty at the household level for all households in the neighbourhood. Here we can see that the observed measures of the interviewers show almost half the households are poor; however, far more are poor according to the income (73.3%) and multidimensional (71.1%) measures.

³ See Alkire and Santos (2010).

Figure 2: Household Deprivation Levels of Households in the Neighbourhood Using Three Very Different Measures: Observation of the Interviewer, the Income Measure, and the Multidimensional Poverty Measure



(N=307).

When I examined the multidimensional poverty results, I found variations in the deprivations by specific deprivation indicator. For example, 69.7% of the households in the neighbourhood are deprived in the dimension of education (a household is deprived if no member has completed five years of formal schooling). For the indicators of health, 32.2% of the households had a child die⁴ and 12.7% were nutritionally poor (anyone in the house was malnourished). Regarding the living standard indicators, 16% of households were deprived in electricity, 20.8% were deprived in sanitation, 19.5% were deprived in drinking water, 42% lacked suitable flooring for their homes, 69.4% used solid cooking fuel, and 4.2% were deprived in assets.

⁴ Forty point three per cent of households (N=298) had at least one child who had died. Miscarriage was also included in this number; 4% of the 40.3% who had lost at least one child (or 5 out of the 120 households) reported miscarriage, the rest were children that had died. Nine per cent of the 40.3% of households who had lost at least one child (or 11 out of 120 households) had lost more than one child with one household having 6 children die.

5. Results and Analysis: A Proposal for Psychological Agency

The data I collected showed that the psychological dimension of purposeful agency and people's empowerment was a legitimate enabler of action and that *dusu* (internal motivation) and *ka da I yèrè la* (self-efficacy) were not necessarily functions of external structures and decision-making ability. Specifically, when I further probed people's understandings of purposeful agency at the study site, a fascinating feature emerged: people spoke clearly and carefully about wellsprings of agency that come from within. It became clear, through repeated conversations with persons of different deprivation levels, ages, genders, and educational levels, that two characteristics – internal motivation and self-belief – underlay expressions of purposeful agency.

Both *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* are 'internal' in the sense that they are related to the person's self-understanding or *nakali*⁵ rather than being dictated by structures or opportunities in the agent's environment. These concepts emerged originally from life story interviews. When people spoke about hardship in their lives and overcoming such situations, they were asked about what helped them get through it. In that moment of the interview process they overwhelmingly referred to the importance of *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* as being a core capability. *Ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* were then further discussed and defined in focus groups. I will now draw on these results by first defining *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* and then analysing their dialectic properties with respect to the respondents' purposeful agency and processes of producing psychological agency and discussing the relevance of *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* to social development.

5.1 Defining *Dusu*

*Dusu*⁶ refers to **an internal motivation experienced by agents that drives purposeful action**. Applied definitions of *dusu* varied depending on people's circumstances, but it was accepted as important for all. As one male interviewee said, "Everybody has got *dusu*, whether you be black or white, African or Westerner. But here in Malian society, we say somebody has *dusu* when he's got the will, the internal force to make change."⁷ Those living with material deprivation in the study site used *dusu* in the context of changing their life circumstances through undertaking a project or an initiative that would help move them out of their deprived state. However, *dusu* was not just relevant for people with material deprivation. People at the study site with no material deprivation also described *dusu* as fundamental to

⁵ *Nakili* is the Bambara word to describe the mentality or subjective space of the agent.

⁶ The exact Bambara definition of *dusu* is internal power, strength, courage. The opposite to *dusu* is *dusutan*, literally meaning no *dusu*.

⁷ Male interview, the neighbourhood, 15th December 2011.

executing any initiative for their livelihoods. Thus *dusu* is described as the internal force driving purposeful action. *Dusu* is described as not just a trait for individualistic action but also fundamental for an individual to contribute towards the collective. In fact, *dusu* is also fundamental in a narrative of change where *nakili* (mentality) capabilities are essential in undertaking any initiative to help the well-being of the family and the collective.

Beyond the instrumental element, *dusu* also contained an intrinsic element that informants described as undertaking action for the love of it, since “it comes from the heart.”⁸ *Dusu* is closely related to SDT’s definition of autonomy, where autonomy is self-regulation of one’s actions according to one’s values (Ryan and Deci 2000). Like the concept of autonomy in SDT, *dusu* has a continuum where at one end you do things because you love them and it comes from the heart, while at the other end you do things because of force, shame, fear, or coercion.

5.2 Defining *Ka Da I Yèrè La*

*Ka I da yèrè la*⁹ can be defined as the belief in one’s ability to initiate action. It also includes trusting your ability to undertake initiatives – as without *ka da I yèrè la* you cannot do or achieve anything. *Ka da I yèrè la* was also described during my interviews as having clarity in your mind about what you want to do and where acting without hesitation will lead to a positive outcome. *Ka da I yèrè la* along with *dusu* was described as the beginning of all action. So in the narrative of change, even if one does not have means (financial or material means), if one has a strong *ka da I yèrè la*, then one is able to start pursuing one’s goals anyway and one will find the means during the process. On top of this, people expressed that the level of financial means and/or the access to education were not proportional to how much *ka da I yèrè la* a person has. They pointed out that one could be materially poor but still have a lot of *ka da I yèrè la* and vice versa.

Self-efficacy theory from social psychology has similarities with *ka da I yèrè la*. Here, efficacy is a belief in the ability to achieve desired outcomes (Bandura 1997). There are strong parallels between *ka da I yèrè la* and confidence in the ability of the self. Bandura and Schunk (1981) have argued that an intrinsic component is inherent in self-efficacy and agency, as self-efficacy is a capability that is inherent in social beings. Bandura (1997) maintains, “Beliefs of personal efficacy constitute the key factor of human agency” (p. 3). Yet for informants in study site, *ka da I yèrè la* is intrinsically important not just for its

⁸ Female Focus group, the neighbourhood, 29th December 2010.

⁹ *Ka da I yèrè la* in Bambara is to believe in yourself (*Ka da* = to believe, *I yèrè la* = yourself). The opposite of *ka da I yèrè la* is *Fugani* – which means you do not believe in yourself, you are lazy, and you have no confidence.

central position in human functioning but also for its built-in element of morality. My informants understood that people who act with *ka da I yèrè la* are also people who are not engaged in dishonest work, not lying to people, and not betraying anyone's trust.

So while this paper suggests there is merit in using social psychology concepts such as self-efficacy theory and SDT to aid in the discussion of the relevance of the psychological constructs of *ka I da yèrè la* and *dusu*, we cannot reduce the definitions of *ka I da yèrè la* and *dusu* to mere abstractions. By parking *ka I da yèrè la* and *dusu* under the umbrella of Western research, we would miss the potential improvements to such psychological theories. Instead, we must see that *ka I da yèrè la* and *dusu* offer the opportunity to bring together the literatures on social psychology and development studies, potentially creating a new field of enquiry within both.

5.3 The Dyadic Value of Psychological Agency

Dusu and *ka da yèrè la* have a dyadic value to the people I met during my fieldwork. These concepts have an *instrumental value* to people and are inherent to the dominant narrative of change, which says that, as long as you have *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu*, you can achieve your aspirations or *hami* towards well-being and *bèrè* even if you are without the means (defined as financial, educational and/or material) to do so. *Dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* also have an *intrinsic value* to informants; pursuing aspirations one cared about was an end and valuable to the agent in itself. An example of the intrinsic value of *dusu* can be seen in the response of one MPI-poor woman who was asked why she carried out initiatives to help her family and others: "It will depend on your heart. Your heart should be full of *dusu* in order to go out and seek things for your family."¹⁰ Because of the value component of the action, psychological agency is different than choice and decision-making, which does not necessarily qualify its importance.

The further relevance of the intrinsic element is that in the rare moments of development literature where psychological elements of purposeful agency are taken into account, it is because of the instrumental value such elements may bring to the project of 'development'. The risk of just focusing on the instrumental element of purposeful agency is that actions are then considered valuable and promoted only as a means to development ends, which are generally seen as growth and modernisation. In this way, very little consideration is given to how 'development' is defined and valued by the populations it is imposed on. This was the case, for example, with a few development projects I witnessed being implemented in villages in Mali during my stay. Although experts carried out sensitisation programmes relating to fertilisers, transplanting, types of wells, and machines for improved agricultural production, the projects were not actually valued by agents living in the intervention site. What is important to

¹⁰ Woman interview 4, the neighbourhood, 17 November 2011.

consider in such cases is the intrinsic dimension and the aligning of action with the deep values of the agent. *Dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* are examples of this.

5.4 Processes of Psychological Agency Production

I also asked my respondents where they got their *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* from. Responses were specifically related to encouragement, generation of positive envy, and watching others succeed.

a) Encouragement

Encouragement by peers is important especially in generating *ka da I yèrè la* and was described in two ways. First, it was described as advice or a sort of education that helps one ‘map out’ ideas leading to the realisation of purposeful agency. People seek this kind of advice or mentorship by embarking on an initiative with someone who is generally more experienced and older or else by studying examples of the success of others. They draw their encouragement from the belief that their mentor has in them. It is the others’ belief in the mentee that gradually shows her how to activate her own self-efficacy. Second, encouragement took the form of the acquisition of knowledge and information on how the world works, which gives people confidence. This knowledge is not necessarily connected to formal education but to other more fluid forms of education such as life experience. For example, after stating that formal education did not matter in the generation of *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu*, one of the participants in a men’s focus group at the research site argued that, “...when you are educated you know how you are, where you came from, and where you are going. This is very important in life and it means you are very useful for society. You know who you are, where you are, then you will be confident in yourself. This means you are more likely to undertake something to be useful for yourself, for your family, for your relatives, and even for the country.”

b) Positive Envy

An important factor in generating *dusu* is watching people succeed. This creates a ‘positive envy’ or *neke* that motivates people to also pursue aspirations individually or as part of the association. It occurs when an individual sees the successes of another and the reaction evoked by such witnessing creates a positive jealousy – a form of inspiration to achieve the same. As one male interviewee described it, “The motivation for what you want to do comes from something you have inside, eating your intestines. You become eager to do this thing, you are really motivated to do it.”¹¹ This positive envy driving *dusu* also helps develop aspirations, creating a desire for achieving those aspirations. Positive envy does not create harm like negative jealousy or *gnegoya*, and should not be mistaken as a derivative of competition; it is purely about evoking motivation to drive action. Interestingly, there is no word in Bambara for

¹¹ Male interview, the neighbourhood, 15 December 2010.

competition. The only word that comes close to it is *gnongondan*, which is used to describe friendly competition in a game of football. Anything beyond this is described as a misunderstanding between people or conflict.

c) *Watching Other People Succeed*

Watching other people succeed also helps increase people's levels of *ka da I yèrè la* but in this case not through the generation of positive envy, but rather through feelings of solidarity in seeing people in similar life situations achieving a particular target. Seeing other successful people helps others to believe they can undertake similar initiatives themselves. For example, one female informant in the women's focus group explained where she found her *ka da I yèrè la*:

What gives us self-belief and heart to undertake something is by seeing other people. For instance, you are sitting here doing nothing but you can see your friend doing something, like selling, and getting some money for herself. When you look at her you think: why not me? This is how you get that power and courage to start undertaking an initiative...you may go and talk to that person and ask them, "Hey you are doing this activity, can you tell me what your solution is, why you are getting successful in this?" And then by getting ideas and advice from her then I can start something. Or, just by looking, I can also learn and begin to undertake the activity.¹²

In other words, the success of others becomes an example of what people themselves can do, instilling self-efficacy.

5.5 Beyond Socio-Economic Proxies

When asking informants where their *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* came from, many people said that formal education, gender, deprivation level, and age were not so relevant. Informants said that people can have *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* irrespective of their socio-economic characteristics. So whether someone is old or young, male or female, educated or illiterate is not necessarily relevant to the processes of watching others like oneself achieve, encouragement, and the generation of positive jealousy. This is not to say that socio-economic characteristics do not condition experiences in people's lives throughout their life trajectories; however, of those interviewed, more agreed that socio-economic variables did not have a significant effect on *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu*.

¹² Women's focus group, the neighbourhood, 29 December 2010.

What is most interesting is that my data suggests that *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* are primarily conditioned by transactional and nuanced experiences that may or may not be caused by their socio-economic characteristics. Receiving encouragement, in the sense described above, is not based on whether you are rich or poor, nor is seeing someone like yourself achieve change entirely based on your age or gender. This data shows an important element missing in the theorisation of empowerment as opportunity structure and decision-making. It also shows the need to consider the nuanced and intricate elements of the construction of *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* and not structural proxies. Bandura (1982) argues a similar point in his theory of self-efficacy when he articulates the conditions in which self-efficacy is constructed. These conditions are very similar to the processes described by informants at the study site – specifically, *enactive attainments* that are developed through mastery of successful tasks, *vicarious experiences* that occur when someone with whom one identifies succeeds, and *verbal persuasion* and positive affirmation that help people believe in their abilities.

What my analysis shows is that processes of *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* formation are relative to the person and not to be coupled with absolute circumstances of their socio-economic characteristics. Therefore we can never expect the perceived effects, constraints, and advantages of opportunity structure on a person's *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* to be constant for all people. One person may believe an oppressive government is the end of the world, while another with the same socio-economic characteristics may believe it is an opportunity for the country to change. Interestingly, Bandura (1995) argues that the subjective judgements that the agent has in regards to their opportunity structure are a much stronger force than what is objectively the case: “People’s level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively the case” (p. 2).

5.6 *Dusu and Ka da I yèrè la* in Social Development

So what do *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* mean for the social development of the study site? The realisation of *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* suggests that psychological agency has three possible types of value with respect to social development: instrumental, intrinsic, and constructive.

a) Instrumental Value to Social Development

Acting with *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* helped people achieve beyond their socio-economic characteristics. The instrumental value of *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* was articulated constantly within my fieldwork through the examples of agents who, even when the structural environment appeared to make any change objectively impossible, were able to use *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* to negotiate processes of power and make their aspirations possible. For instance, one young man I interviewed, when describing the dense spider web of elite connections governing the political and economic relations of Bamako, explained how the only way in which these relations could be broken down was through tenacity – never giving up until

one found a place from which one could penetrate the monolith. At the core of this tenacity was *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la*. The instrumental element of *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* also provides agents with a sense of further hope and belief in future initiatives when they watch others succeed and see themselves making small progress towards well-being goals. Hope is important in the sense of Ernst Bloch (1986), in which a vision of the ‘not-yet-become’ or aspiration contains future possibilities of a world better than the current one (p. 129). *Dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* are elements in a psychological process that helps agents instil hope and aspirations in their lives. For agents in the neighbourhood, who can see themselves and others being able to shift towards well-being achievement, hope is important for continued purposeful agency.

b) Intrinsic Value to Social Development

Second, the pursuit of intrinsically valuable actions can bring psychological satisfaction to informants’ lives. “Doing what you love” was important to people, even those living in desperate situations. While some of my informants acted out of necessity or coercion, they spoke of it not being desirable and not bringing feelings of satisfaction. What did bring satisfaction to people was doing things because they came from the heart and because they were in line with their values. It was not possible for everyone all the time to do things because they ‘loved’ them; most of the people at the study site lived in desperation and so sometimes they did things just to get by. But even when people lived in difficult circumstances, they found ways of undertaking actions that were intrinsically valuable to them and which brought satisfaction – such as pursuing projects in associations that helped themselves or the neighbourhood. Thus the intrinsic element and elements of psychological well-being were not luxuries that were out of reach of those with less favourable socio-economic characteristics such as being poor, illiterate, a woman, or young.

c) Constructive Value to Social Development

Purposeful agency driven by *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* seems to have the ability to create the conditions to shift unhelpful social norms such as the restrictive role of women in the study site. In other words, *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* have a constructive component where, through the pursuit of aspirations, actors could shift social norms and unhelpful structures oppressing them.¹³ The constructive element resulting from agency did not seem to be the initial intent and generally was the by-product of other action. As the social space is not static, production of new structures and norms is always underway and possible, and so the consequences of purposeful agency can put in motion other constructive outcomes (Giddens 1979). For example, one poor women’s association I met with was saving money to pay for a Qur’anic

¹³ Sen (1999a) described democracy as having a constructive element where through public deliberation, new values, priorities, and norms for society are formed.

teacher to teach them the Qur'an so that they could learn the scripts and integrate these teachings more fully into their lives. As a result, these women actually become more influential in the community because their literacy gave them a sort of credibility that legitimated these women to others. This credibility helped these women have access to networks such as Coordination des associations et ONG Feminiens (CAFO), which works towards poor women's rights and access to resources.

Overall, we can understand the 'power within' of *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* and the narrative of change as contributions to social development. While this power within is experienced internally, we can understand it as being relationally constituted through encouragement, positive envy, and watching others succeed. The wellsprings of *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* that my informants at the study site invoked are legitimate elements that contribute towards not just personal development but also social development. Further still, these findings of the importance of *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* in underpinning purposeful agency are in line with Sen's alternative models of development as capability expansion. Purposeful agency is at the centre of this approach to human flourishing and so understanding important elements of agency is crucial. We need to see purposeful agency not just as the expansion of resources, the distribution of power, or the enlargement of decision-making ability, but also as the psychological power within that drives agents above and beyond their own socio-economic characteristics to make positive changes for their own lives and the community around them. While the psychological element is important to agents and helps them actualise initiatives to enhance or achieve some well-being, it is not the point of this research to ever assume that *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* are sufficient for making positive changes in people's lives. It was evident in my fieldwork that even when people activate their *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la*, normally through associations, many barriers remain. Impediments arising from unequal relationships between genders and kin and also economic stratification and conflicting worldviews thwart agency and need to be addressed.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have described the importance of *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* for agents in my research site. *Ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* underpin informants' conceptions of purposeful agency and were fundamental to people improving their personal and collective well-being.

Dusu and *ka da I yèrè la* had both an instrumental and intrinsic value to respondents. *Dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la*, through the narrative of change, drove people to achieve instrumental personal and community change. Through interviews and life histories, as well as observations and general conversations documented during my time in the field, I heard of many individuals and groups overcoming insurmountable odds to improve well-being using such a narrative. *Ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu* are intrinsically important to informants because the very pursuit of purposeful agency can be an end in itself. *Dusu* was described as doing things not just for the outcome but also because you love it – the action itself is an end. *Ka da I yèrè la*, or self-efficacy, is also intrinsically important to informants at this study site where it meant that people were not doing any dishonest work, not lying to people, and not betraying anyone's trust.

I have also analysed the processes involved in the creation of *ka da I yèrè la* and *dusu*. For example, *dusu* came from watching others succeed, which generated positive envy and motivation to pursue initiatives that people valued. *Ka da I yèrè la* came from encouragement and watching other people succeed, which helped instil a belief in oneself. Gender, age, formal education level, and deprivation were only infrequently cited by informants as being conditions necessary for *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la*, suggesting these concepts cannot be reduced to agents' socio-economic characteristics.

Both *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* are significant with respect to the social development of the study site on three levels: through the instrumental achievement of aspirations pursued by the agent, through the satisfaction experienced by the agent undertaking initiatives that are intrinsically valuable to the agent, and through a constructive component where actors pursuing aspirations can potentially shift social norms and unhelpful structures oppressing them (although this is not always intentional). Thus the psychological concepts of *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* are legitimate elements in purposeful agency and social development.

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