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Ethically Managing Theories of Agency in Counseling and Psychotherapy

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Informed by personal and professional cultures, clients and therapists inevitably hold various assumptions and attributions about the possibility of free will. Given that these "theories of agency" may not always align, and in light of the ethics codes for psychotherapists and counselors, it is imperative, as a matter of cultural competence and responsivity, that therapists seek training in understanding different cultures of agency. To that end, and to help therapists navigate cultural differences and mitigate the risk of personal and professional values imposition, this article provides a conceptual framework for organizing the common formal and informal theories of agency that clients and therapists regularly bring into their work together. Given that traditional conceptual frameworks tend to obviate the possibility of genuine free will, and in light of the likelihood that many clients and a number of practitioners practice a faith in which agency is of critical importance, the conceptual framework offered here reflects a contextual approach to agency that replaces causes with constraints and includes theistic perspectives. This framework is elucidated and applied to several common personal and professional theories of agency to illustrate how conflicts can be identified and ethically managed in a way that is sensitive to cultural differences.

Keywords: culture, ethics, free will, theory of agency, therapy

Introduction

In his pioneering work on attribution theory, the social psychologist Fritz Heider (1958/2013) asserted that when observing others' behavior, as well as our own, people inevitably act like lay scientists drawing causal inferences from their observations, such as the degree to which a behavior stems more from the disposition of the person or from the circumstances of the situation. For Heider and social psychologists who expanded upon his theory of attribution (e.g., Kelley, 1967; Jones & Nisbett, 1972), this tendency to assume reasons behind people's actions is a fundamental feature of social perception. The kinds of reasons we assume, however, are not universal. Scientists, for example, attribute human action to material causes, like genes and brains (Slife et al., 2010), or environmental causes, like past events and reinforcements (Scott et al., 2023). People of faith often include in their attributions divine will and activity as necessary factors (Reber et al., 2012). Most people also assume that free

will plays a role in bringing about a person's behavior. Indeed, recent research suggests that a belief in free will "is endorsed by a high percentage of people from around the world in different cultures, . . . although people do differ in the degree to which they perceive their will as free and the extent to which they endorse the belief in free will" (Feldman et al., 2018). Thus, whether scientific, philosophical, theological, or lay-minded, one thing is clear, people observe and analyze human behavior, and when they do, their ideas about what causes people to do what they do will often, to some degree, implicate a theory of agency.

Theories of Agency

To have a "theory of agency" is to attribute, assume, ascribe, or assign some degree of agency or lack of agency to a thing or person (Larson, 2023). People often attribute agency to themselves, other persons, other non-human organisms, like animals, and even non-living entities (see e.g., Barret, 2004; Douglas et al., 2016; Douglas, 2017; Rosset, 2009). The negative formulation of agency, that one may have no agency, is itself a theory of agency. Having a theory of agency is in part the perception of the degree to which volitional thinking, feeling, and behaving are possible. The theory may be explicit and formalized as a product of careful and critical reflection. This is the case for philosophers and psychologists, like William James, a founder of American psychology, who condensed his theory of agency into this frank assertion: "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will" (James, 1870/2021, p. 147). Noted behavioral psychologist, B.F. Skinner (1971) also developed a very conscious and well-developed theory of agency, which he famously summed up with his dismissal of free will as a "fiction," arguing that once science identifies the causes of behavior, then it will be possible to dispense with the notion of a free will altogether. Just as these careful formulators of theories of agency can differ widely in their perspective on the possibility of human agency, so too can counselors and psychotherapists, who have surely been exposed to one or more of these formalized theories of agency in their education and training. A therapist trained in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), for example, would likely assume a different degree of agency in human behavior than a therapist trained in existential psychotherapy.

It is also possible that one's theory of agency may be implicit rather than explicit, being simply and unreflectively taken for granted according to one's culture, upbringing, or worldview. This is likely the case with most people who have not had extensive exposure to or training in theory, philosophy, or psychology. Many therapy clients, for example, are likely to have developed their ideas about the causes of human behavior and the possibility of human agency non-deliberatively in their familial and cultural contexts. These ideas, like those of therapists and counselors, may vary widely across persons and cultures, and though not typically stated explicitly, can be implicated by statements they make in therapy about themselves and others. One client might reveal an aspect of their theory of agency, for example, by saying,

> I really think what is going on with me has to be genetic. My mother struggles with this same thing, and so did her mother. I must have inherited this thing, and now I don't know if I can do anything about it.

Another client could imply a different theory of agency when they state,

> I told my son that he may not be responsible for what happens to him, but he is responsible for his reaction to what happens to him. He makes that choice himself, and nothing and no one can make it for him. So, he has to stop blaming me and his mother for his troubles. I admit we were not perfect parents, but he can't use us as an excuse for his bad choices.

Within these statements, one can find key assumptions about agency, some of which accord with the more formal assumptions of psychology and science. In the first statement, for example, there is resonance with the assumptions of naturalism (Gantt & Williams, 2019), material causal determinism (Bogardus, 2023), and evolutionary psychology (Gantt et al., 2012). The second statement reflects assumptions of Cartesian dualism (Fancer, 1990), atomism (Reber & Slife, 2021), and individualism (Wilkens & Sanford, 2009), among others. These clients are likely unfamiliar with any of these terms. Still, because the cultures of which they are a part often interface with science, the assumptions of their theories of agency belie the scientific features of their culture.

Theories of agency, then, are not merely individual. They are also cultural. In the case of therapists and

counselors, this means that their theories of agency are explicitly informed by their professional culture (e.g., science) as well as by their personal culture(s). In the case of clients, their theories of agency might be indirectly informed by elements of that same professional culture as the therapist's, but it is more likely that their theories stem mostly from their personal culture(s) and are likely implicitly adopted and not critically examined. Either way, when therapist and client meet, not only are cultures of race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, and sexual orientation at play, but so too are cultures of agency.

Agency and Cultural Competency

Counselors and psychotherapists are expected to be mindful and respectful of different cultures and values. The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) lists as the second core professional value of counseling, "honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts". For its part, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017) Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct, under Principle E: Respect for People's Rights and Dignity, states that:

> Psychologists are aware of and respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status.

One way psychotherapists and counselors are trained to honor and respect cultural values and differences is to avoid imposing their values onto clients. Section A.4: Avoiding Harm and Imposing Values, of the ACA's (2014) Code of Ethics explains that:

> Counselors are aware of—and avoid imposing—their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Counselors respect the diversity of clients, trainees, and research participants and seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor's values are inconsistent with the client's goals or are discriminatory in nature.

The APA Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct (2017) similarly asserts that therapists actively "eliminate the effect on their work of biases based on [cul-tural] factors, and they do not knowingly participate in or condone activities of others based upon such prejudices" (p. 4)

Therapists are generally well-trained in the awareness of their *personal* cultural values concerning things like race, sex, age, and religion, and they work to avoid imposing their personal cultural values onto their clients (Hays, 2016). Therapists and counselors are less likely to have received education and training in how to avoid imposing *professional* cultural values onto their clients, like those having to do with the naturalism, materialism, determinism, and atomism of psychological theories and scientific research (Reber, 2020). Given that therapists' theories of agency are at least partly informed by their professional culture and considering the likely lack of training they have received in recognizing and avoiding potential professional value impositions in their work with clients, therapists and counselors may be at risk of imposing their professional values concerning human agency onto their clients.

Consider, as an example of a potential risk of professional values imposition, the concepts of autonomy and self-determination, two foundational features of an individualistic theory of agency (Reber & Slife, 2021). Autonomy is "the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reason and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces, to be in this way independent" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2003, para. 1). Self-determination means that:

> Individuals should decide for and make judgments about themselves. They should determine their own lives and futures. . . Each individual bears the responsibility of self-determinism because the only true and proper source of identity, purpose, and intention is the individual self. (Sullivan & Palitsky, 2018, as cited in Reber & Slife, 2021, p. 6)

Both autonomy and self-determination are explicit values of ethical counseling and psychotherapy. The ACA Code of Ethics (2014), for example, cites "autonomy, or fostering the right to control the direction of one's life" (p. 3) as one of the profession's key principles of ethical counseling. The APA Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct (2017), similarly asserts that:

> Psychologists respect the dignity and worth of all people, and the rights of individuals to privacy, confiden-

tiality, and *self-determination*. Psychologists are aware that special safeguards may be necessary to protect the rights and welfare of persons or communities whose vulnerabilities impair *autonomous* decision making. (para. 16, emphasis added)

These professional cultural values, which seem wholly evident and reasonable to many psychotherapists and counselors, especially those whose personal cultural values align with individualism, may well be at odds with the values of at least some of their clients. A number of theistic clients, for example, embrace non-autonomous and non-self-determined theories of agency, such as those who assume a strong God locus of control in their lives (Iles-Caven et al., 2020; Silberman, 2005). A counselor working with such a theistic client might seek to help them become more independent and may even work to free the client from their theistic "vulnerabilities [that] impair autonomous decision making" (APA, 2017, Principle E), all perfectly in keeping with their code of ethics. Yet, they are simultaneously opposing the client's theistic cultural values and imposing their own professional values of autonomy and self-determinism onto the client (Slife et al., 2016; Meehl, 1959). This potential imposition of values could also emerge in therapy with non-theistic, collectivist clients who might assume non-autonomous and non-self-determinist familial or communal loci of control (e.g., Fuligni et al., 1999).

This illustrates just one of the many ways that therapists may be at risk of imposing their personal and professional values concerning agency onto their clients, even if they do not realize they are doing so and even if they are acting in compliance with their ethics codes. Given that those very same ethics codes state that ethical therapists will "seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor's values are inconsistent with the client's goals or are discriminatory in nature" (ACA, 2014, Section A.4), training on these issues is needed.

A Conceptual Framework of Agency

This paper takes an initial training/educational step by focusing on increased cultural competency with regard to theories of agency. Specifically, we provide a conceptual framework for organizing some of the common culturally informed theories of agency that will help counselors and therapists understand the chief philosophical assumptions underpinning these conceptions and their implications. The axes of this framework have long histories, developed over centuries of philosophical, scientific, theological, and religious work. They also have long been debated and often juxtaposed as incompatible and intractable positions. Beyond that, they have in some cases contrasted with or even obviated what some psychologists refer to as the folk psychology of free will, meaning the worldview and phenomenological experience of many people across a variety of cultures. In this section of the article, we examine these axes, the concepts constituting each of their poles, and some of the key issues and challenges they create for agency. We also note how several formalized relevant theories of philosophy, psychology, theology, and religion can be located on these axes, as well as common informal folk theories of agency. This conceptual framework can help therapists and counselors examine and ethically manage their personal and professional values concerning agency as they work with clients, especially clients of faith, and encounter their theories of agency. At the same time, because, as we will show, the traditional framing is problematic and results in intractable debate and in some cases the exclusion of agency, we take a critical approach to it and suggest an alternative framing that better captures the formal and informal theories at play in this matter.

Situating Theories of Agency on a Determinism/Indeterminism Axis

The first dimension of the common conceptual framework is represented by an X-axis with determinism on one end and indeterminism on the other. Determinism is the position that all events are the necessary results of antecedent causes governed by natural laws (Sapolsky, 2023). From this perspective, human behavior is no exception to the deterministic rule. It too is assumed to be caused by biological forces or drives and environmental factors. Free will, the idea that individuals can somehow choose to act in some ways independent of natural laws and antecedent events (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023), is, from this perspective, a "fiction," to use Skinner's (1971) term.

Some common examples of determinism in psychology include (1) biological reductionism (the idea that everything is reducible to biology and that biology causes all human action; see Martin et al., 2003), (2), Skinnerian behaviorism (the idea that all human action is the result of one's conditioning history; see Slife & Williams, 1995), and (3) Freudian psychoanalysis (the idea that human action is the result of the interplay among unconscious forces; see Wilkens & Sanford, 2009). There are also deterministic theologies, such as Calvinistic predestination (the idea that God unchangeably ordained everything that comes to pass and thus everything happens according to the will of God; see Bailey, 2004).

As previously stated, many clients and even a number of therapists may not be familiar with these formalized conceptions of determinism or these specialized terms, but they may nevertheless express in lay terms the gist of these ideas. When a client states that they believe their behavior is due to a chemical imbalance or their genes, they implicate the material causal determinism of biological reductionism. When they cite their parent's neglect, punishment, or abuse as the cause of their own parenting struggles and faux pas, they imply Skinnerian behaviorism with an emphasis on Bandura's observational learning theory. If they are confused by seemingly unstoppable and often repulsive sexual urges and desires that seem to just be there in their mind, even when they try to consciously suppress them, they hint at determining causes originating in the unconscious. And, when they assert that God already knows everything they will do and what their eternal fate will be, they implicate theological determinism (Vicens, n.d.).

Indeterminism, though it occupies an anchoring position on the opposite end of the continuum within this traditional frame, is not a stand-alone concept. It is only an antonym, meaning it is wholly defined by determinism, as simply being its opposite. Thus, in direct contrast with determinism, it is the position that events are independent of antecedents and are not governed by natural laws, or any other laws. Everything that happens, then, including human behavior, happens free of any past event or cause. Some quantum physicists (e.g., Hodgson, 2011) have ascribed this kind of indeterminism to the random swerving of particles like electrons, and some have attempted to upscale such quantum phenomena to persons, such that our choices are not based on determinative factors (Holtfort & Horsch, 2023). They are not *caused* by anything at all. They just randomly occur.

In addition to this quantum approach to indeterminacy, we also find hints of it in evolutionary theory (such as in how genetic mutations randomly occur and are randomly advantageous given the particular environments in which they happen to be found). There are very few formalized indeterministic theories within psychology. This is due in large part to the seemingly anti-scientific implications of utter randomness. How could psychologists build predictive theories and hypotheses and achieve any degree of explanation and control if the things they study act capriciously? Everything they seek to study would be "chaotic" as one popular psychological research methods text author put it (Heiman, 2001, p. 2).

Hints of indeterminism can be found among the laity and may be expressed by clients when they state that they have no idea why they feel, think, or act the way they do. Some may use words like, "I found myself doing," or "I never knew I was capable of," or "It was like I was outside of myself watching me do," or "I can't explain why I did that, it just happened." Indeterminism is also found in some theistic cultures where God's purposes are seen as ineffable, inexplicable, capricious, and mysterious, at least with regard to human experience and understanding (Jacobs, 2015). Theistic clients may implicate this form of indeterminism with expressions like, "I cannot for the life of me figure out why God has allowed me to suffer this way," or "I know we are told that God doesn't roll dice, but it sure feels like that to me sometimes," or "There just is no rhyme or reason to this life that I can find. I guess only God knows what it is all about, and he certainly is not telling me."

Situating Agency on a Naturalism/Theism Axis

The second axis within this traditional framing is naturalism vs theism. Naturalism is the assumption that everything can be explained in terms of natural processes, events, and activities. Naturalists exclude supernatural explanations, whether those include God or other non-naturalistic entities and activities. Because naturalism is considered the "central dogma of science" (Leahey, 2013, p. 379) and is a common

assumption of many psychological theories and research methods (Reber, 2020), we find in science and psychology very little mention of things like divine activity and religious and spiritual practices and rituals are often not taken seriously in their original mythic, transcendent, or eschatological contexts (Slife & Reber, 2012). We even find the theistic foundations of relevant philosophies and phenomenologies removed to make the ideas more palatable to naturalistic fields and disciplines (see Slife & Reber, 2009). For many scientific and psychological professionals then, the value of naturalism which they espouse as a professional value, not necessarily as a personal value, operates as a value imposition on theism (Reber, 2020), excluding it or distorting it in much the same way that the value of determinism results in the exclusion or distortion of agency.

Prominent examples of naturalism in science and psychology include: eliminative materialism in neuroscience (thoughts, emotions, ideas, and desires are all just the natural results of electrical and chemical activity in the brain; see Churchland, 1981) and evolutionary psychology (all human phenomena, including religion and agency, can be explained through evolutionary natural laws and processes; see e.g., Chung 2018). In both cases, God's activity, or any other non-naturalistic activity, is not a necessary condition for explanation. Naturalism is commonly expressed among the laity by those adhering to an atheist or agnostic worldview, but it also influences people of faith in a number of ways, including compartmentalizing the divine or supernatural to the spiritual realm, viewing God as being on the periphery of the natural world, and seeing God's activity as being intermittent and inconsistent (see, e.g., Slife et al., 2010). Some lay expressions of a naturalistic worldview would include comments such as: "I don't need a God to forgive me. I just need to forgive myself," "I think religion was developed by people mostly as a source of comfort against death," or "I need to keep praying because it helps me feel better whether there is a God out there listening or not."

Theism is "the worldview that a God (or Gods) is actively and currently engaged with and makes a meaningful difference in the practical world" (Reber & Slife, 2013, p. 6; see also Barbour, 1997; Plantinga, 2011). In other words, God is an active agent in the world. Not

only does he exist, but he exists in relationship with everything else and engages with it. "For the thoroughgoing theist, divine involvement is a present, ongoing, and difference-making activity" (ibid). In contrast to naturalism, then, theism takes the transcendent seriously and the divine as a necessary condition of human being.

Within philosophy and theology, theism has been articulated in a variety of forms ranging from "weak theism" (Slife et al., 2010), such as: deism (God was engaged with the world during creation, but now lets the universe run according to natural laws and without divine intervention); dualism (God is only involved in the spiritual realm of the world, and does not engage with the natural realm); to "strong theism," as in the case of supernaturalism (God directly causes everything that happens solely according to his will); and process theism (God allows himself to be fully involved in and affected by temporal processes; see Reber, 2020). Clients often express different forms of weak and strong theism too, but again less formally, as exemplified in, statements like: "God allows trials to happen," or "The devil is giving me sinful thoughts," or "Why won't God make my depression go away?" or the oft-quoted "All things denote there is a God" (The Book of Mormon, 1981, Alma 30:44).

The Problem With the X-Axis

Before laying out these axes on a graph and locating professional and personal theories of agency in the figure, it is necessary to point out one significant problem with the X-axis. Because it has been framed by scientists, including psychologists, in terms of determinism versus the opposite of determinism (indeterminism), it is unable to account or allow for any meaningful understanding of agency, including one that connects to people's experience and is legitimately possible. As such, the framework of determinism/indeterminism is what philosophers refer to as an incompatibilist position on agency, meaning that free will is incompatible with determinism and also with indeterminism (Pereboom, 2001). As such, this axis excludes the worldview of many clients and cultures in which genuine and meaningful choice and action are not only possible but are necessary conditions of human being.

However, this exclusion is not always obvious. In psychology, where it is recognized that the subjects

of psychological research, human beings, by and large believe in and experience some form of agency, there has been a shift to a seemingly compatibilist perspective. Compatibilism attempts to allow for agency in a determinism/indeterminism framework. The way psychologists have attempted to achieve this compatibilism is by shifting the focus of study away from the longstanding debate about whether free will could exist in a deterministic or indeterministic universe to a focus on "belief in free will" (Feldman et al., 2018), which psychologists note is commonly found in people across many cultures and can be empirically studied.

By appearing to shift focus away from the possibility of free will to people's belief in free will, psychological research has yielded some productive findings, including showing that belief in free will correlates with a number of health and wellness indicators, such as higher self-efficacy, lower helplessness, greater proactivity, stronger identity, hope, and improved academic and work performance (Baumeister et al., 2009; Kondratowicz-Nowak & Zawadzka, 2018). This would seem to suggest that therapists could help clients achieve mental health and wellness goals by strengthening their belief in their capacity to act agentically in the world, regardless of whether such agency is real or not. The problem is that this shift to studying belief in free will does not really "move beyond the discussion of whether free will exists," as Feldman et al, assert (2018, p. 304). This is so because, for Feldman and colleagues, and many other researchers (e.g., Brembs, 2001), the belief in free will is believed to have had functional value in our very distant past in the environment of evolutionary adaptation, where, under the governance of natural laws and processes the belief in free will was selected, or at least the kinds of brains that hold to such a belief were selected. Thus, in psychologists' conceptualization of the origin of the belief in free will both conditions of determinism, lawfulness and antecedence, are fully assumed and taken for granted as being the case. Consequently, the question of the existence of free will is not circumvented or displaced. It is answered, and it is answered definitively in the negative. Belief in free will cannot be a belief that is genuinely chosen. It is only the product of a fully determined evolutionary adaptation.

In another vein of seemingly compatibilist theorizing, but this time on the indeterminism side, some evolutionary neuroscientists do note, owing to quantum physics, that human beings and other organisms can manifest unpredictable behavioral variation or what might be popularly labeled as "choice" (Brembs, 2011). But, this "choice" is only a byproduct of indeterminate randomness that takes place within an otherwise determined system, like the chance swerving of an electron. Unpredictable behavioral variation, then, is no more agentic than the belief in free will. It too is firmly ensconced within the incompatibilist dichotomy, just on the indeterminist side.

Interestingly, a similar, but less sophisticated attempt at a compatibilist conception of indeterminism is found in certain popular or folk conceptions of agency, specifically in the popular conception of agency as human independence (Caruso, 2012). From these perspectives, the universe is determined, and thus science can be used to study every part of it, including even some aspects of human being, but not the human will. The will of a person is somehow autonomous and self-determined, radically free and independent of natural laws and the past. Yet, it can somehow still interact with the parts of the person that are not free, owing to some kind of ghost in the machine Cartesian dualism, or to some miraculous achievement of divinity. Some religious cultures operating from this seemingly compatibilist perspective, assume that a God or gods bestowed free will upon human beings, and as a result, in this one aspect, they can make actual choices and can also be held morally responsible for those choices, even as other aspects of persons, such as autonomic processes, and the physical and temporal world around them are determined.

This form of compatibilism makes finding the line between where the determined aspects of a person end and their autonomous will begins extremely difficult, if not impossible. It also cannot account for how something indetermined can interact with something that is completely determined. Softening terms like cause with fuzzy words like "influence" and "predisposition" do not resolve this concern (Williams, 1992). They only blur and obfuscate the fundamental issue of the incompatibility of an indetermined will operating somehow within a determined everything else. This incompatibilist framing of agency, as one psychologist puts it, would be equivalent to walking "off the edge

of a cliff and "will[ing]" yourself not to fall" (Heiman, 2001, p. 2).

Some examples of theories born out of this paradox include Sartrean radical freedom (man is radically free to define his own existence and purpose, independent of anything else, for "man is…which he wills himself to be"; see Sarte, 1946/2007, p. 22); libertarianism (a political philosophy that takes moral autonomy and "individual liberty to be the primary…value"; see Boaz, 2009, para. 1); and expressive individualism (only you can decide what is true and good for you, so human flourishing is being able to "express our uniqueness against constraints and conventions,"; see Wilkens & Sanford, 2009, p. 28). Some lay-person expressions of this radical independence of the will include: "I am not responsible for what has happened to me, but I am responsible for my response to it," "Happiness is a choice," "If you really wanted to lose weight, you would make the choice to control your eating," and "God never allows us to be tempted more than we can bear."

Given the failure of these compatibilist attempts to allow and account for some version of free will within a determinism/indeterminism framing, we inevitably return to B.F. Skinner's assertion that free will is a "fiction." And, he would be right, if we frame things in this way; because framed in this way the game is completely rigged. Regardless of which side of the dichotomy compatibilist offerings like belief in free will or radical independence come from, the dichotomy of incompatibilism remains firmly in place, albeit dressed in compatibilism's clothing, and the potential for the imposition of an agency-denying value onto clients remains.

Redefining the X-Axis

In order to avoid the inescapable incompatibilism of the determinism/indeterminism framing that lies at the root of the centuries-long debate over the possibility of free will, a number of philosophers and some psychologists have argued for a reframing of these concepts, using terms like embodied agency (Wong, 2018), situated agency (Bevir, 2017), or contextual agency (Slife & Christensen, 2013). These terms all recognize human beings as "being-in-the world," meaning we are not somehow able to extract ourselves or some part of ourselves (e.g., the will) out of the world in an independent fashion, but the world

also does not determine us. Instead, we and the world are bound up with each other and we are constantly co-constituting and constraining each other. Consider how predictable regularities in the world around us (e.g., wind) have allowed for the development of technologies by us (e.g., sails) that have in turn opened up previously limited possibilities for the world and our ways of being in it (e.g., travel across the oceans, mining treasures out of the world, and colonizing newly discovered continents for trade, etc.). Wind is a necessary condition for the possibility of sails and sails enhance the possibility of wind's effectiveness in new ways, and on and on the mutuality goes. The world constrains us and we constrain the world in an ever-changing and developing relationship. But, constraints are not causes. They are affordances. Affordance is a term connoting both the possibility-limiting and possibility-opening features of our physical, social, moral, and spiritual being-in-the-world (Dings, 2018).

As an example of a physical constraint, consider the body. Like the wind, but in a much more intimate and connected way, bodies are part of our being-in-the-world. However our bodies may have come into existence and consciousness, we find ourselves embodied, and these physical forms that we embody no doubt afford us certain possibilities. They also make some of these possibilities "specially-favored" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). When you watch a football team getting into position on the line of scrimmage, the possibility-opening and possibility-limiting features of bodily constraints become obvious. The offensive linemen who are typically over 6 foot 5 inches and often weigh more than 300 pounds have the bodily affordance of the specially-favored possibility of pushing other bodies around, which is a not so specially-favored possibility for an under 6 foot and less than 200 pound running back. Thus, it is typically the larger men on the field who are found blocking defensive linemen as they attempt to run past them toward the ball carrier, whose embodiment is better suited to dodging those same defensive players.

Having these bodily constraints does not mean that offensive linemen can never run with the ball or receive a pass, or that running backs cannot ever block big oncoming defensive linemen. It means that such things are not specially-favored given the players' different embodiments and the strength of those bodily

constraints. And, not only do their bodies constrain these possibilities, but also the rules, traditions, and history of the game, as well as the referees, the coaches, and the other players on the field constrain these possibilities as well. The football players are inescapably being-in-the-world, in this case, the football part of the world, and in that part of the world, a multitude of affordances are at play that open and close possibilities and bestow special favor on some possibilities over others. In any other part of the world, the players would still be in a context of constraints, albeit a somewhat different context of constraints. Constraints, then, are inevitable to our being and they are part of agency, but they are not determining or indetermining us. So, yes, if we walk off a cliff, we will fall, but agency is not found in willing ourselves not to fall. It is in all of the possibilities afforded to us by our bodies and cliffs and past experiences and observations of others on cliffs and our goals present with us in the moment, and so much more.

To see this distinction of constraints from the incompatibilism of determinism/indeterminism more closely, imagine that you are sitting in a room with the door closed and a friend calls to you from outside the room to come out of the room and see her. In that moment, the door is a "specially-favored mode of resolution" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013) given your embodiment, the reality of the room, the goal of exiting, and so many other contextual constraints. There is nothing you can do about what is specially-favored or not. You cannot pretend that the door is not built and used for exiting rooms. You also cannot deny that it is the easiest and most direct way to exit the room given how rooms are designed and have been used for centuries. You also cannot help that when your friend calls to you to come out of the room you become immediately aware of the door as a means of exit. All of that constitutes what phenomenologists name the "facticity" of life (Heidegger, 1962, p. 82). Much of it predates you and is outside of your control and often will lead to an action that seems almost reflexive as you open the door and go through it. In fact, even before you were called by your friend, the door was pregnant with all of that meaning, history, and possibility. You cannot even look at a door, regardless of whether you plan to use it at that moment or not, and not, more or less consciously,

see it in at least some of these ways. Your friend's call just made the door and its meanings salient.

But does the door determine you? Does it cause you to use it? Obviously not. In fact, knowing the freedom-loving culture many of you are a part of, we have no doubt that you began to strongly resist such a notion the moment we brought it up. You may be looking around whatever room you are in right now and thinking about the window now as a means of exit, just to prove that you are not determined by the door. And, that makes great sense, and is also somewhat predictable, given the context of your culture and the value it places on freedom. No, the door is not a cause. The door is a constraint, and as we have stated already, it is specially-favored. As such, it constrains and affords possibilities more than other constraints within the context of the room, but it is not the only possibility.

Now imagine if there was a fire behind the door or if it was locked from the outside. Then the window would become instantaneously, in that moment of discovery, specially-favored over the door. This means that the context of doors and windows and rooms and fires and locks as well as our embodiment and consciousness and intentions are all inescapably connected and ever pregnant with meaning and possibility, the affordances of which change as part of a living and changing context, what the social psychologist, Kurt Lewin referred to as "the field" (Lewin, 1951). And given that changeability, affordances become more or less favored. This does not mean that random chaos reigns, as psychologists fear. On the contrary, in most cases, knowing what we do about contexts like rooms and leaving them, we can predict with high confidence that people will exit rooms most of the time through the door. But high probability does not mean that people exiting rooms are determined. They can use the window or possibly even the HVAC ventilation to exit, or they can just stay in the room and not exit it at all, even if just to prove a point.

In all of this, we are constrained by our bodies, doors, architectural design, history, habit, and tradition, and so much more, but we are not caused. We take up the world and its meanings, as Williams and Gantt (2021) put it, picking things up and putting them down, tinkering with them and engaging them in terms of what is meaningful and matters, not as

causes, but as affordances of the context we find ourselves in. In this engagement, given the strength of some constraints, like doors, there is predictability and even high probability, things that science cares about and depends upon a great deal. Yet, there is still the possibility of doing otherwise, which is why, good Dr. Heiman (2001), sometimes when we step off of a cliff we in fact do not fall. Sometimes we are lifted by circling air currents catching the wings of a hang glider strapped to our chest that we have constructed to harness the wind and that now affords us the possibility of lift, an alternative to the specially-favored mode of falling that is otherwise most probable.

It is important to note that not all constraints are equally strong and not all constraints in relation to our thoughts, feelings, and actions are specially-favored. A door is a specially-favored constraint for exiting a room, but if the door is a French door, meaning there is a left and right side to it, the left or right sides of the door might not be specially-favored. People might just use whatever side of the door is closest to them. If psychologists were to examine people's room-exiting behavior, they would get very high predictability that people would exit using the door, but their using the left or right side of the door to exit would be much less predictable. This is because, as Charles Taylor (1985), describes it, people tend not to make strong evaluations about such things as the side of the door they use to exit a room. Similarly, when my wife asks me where I want to go out to eat, I really don't care because I like all kinds of food and I can be easily satisfied by any number of options. But I also don't care because I know that she does care. She makes strong evaluations about eateries, whereas I make weak evaluations. As such, the constraints are stronger for her and some restaurants are specially-favored and predictably chosen by her. For me, on the other hand, the constraints are weak, so no places to eat are much favored, and thus, left to my own devices, my decision about where to eat would be much less predictable. Given that constraints can be stronger or weaker, bestowing different levels of special favor, and resulting in more or less predictability, the anchors of strong and weak constraints are used for the X-axis.

It is also critically important to note that constraints entail much more than just the physical world. We also exist in morally and socially constrained contexts.

Fatherhood, for example, is a factical feature of being-in-the-world. It is a relationship that one can take up and engage in different ways. Some of these ways are specially favored morally and have greater probability (e.g., raising the child), but there are always other possibilities (e.g., abandoning the child). Nevertheless, the reality of the relationship is a strong constraint that can never be undone. Even a relationship of absence is a relationship of fatherhood (Reber & Slife, 2021). Fatherhood, then, is not morally or relationally determined, but it is inescapably afforded, and with that affordance come possibilities, some with special favor.

For people of faith, spiritual constraints are similarly bound up with the contexts of their lives. Their relationship with divinity, like one's embodiment, or fatherhood, is a constraint in their world, and it affords possibilities. Worshiping a God, following a divine commandment, or keeping a covenant is like using the door. Such activities are highly probable and specially-favored ways to live a spiritual life, but they are not caused. Such things can be picked up, put down, and engaged with in a number of ways, though their special favor does indicate greater predictability.

In the Latter-day Saint faith tradition, one finds an example of a spiritual constraint in 1 Nephi 4. In this chapter, Nephi comes across Captain Laban who is drunk and nearly passed out and Nephi writes in verse 10 that "it came to pass that I was *constrained* by the spirit to kill Laban…" (1 Nephi, 4:10). Nephi, having lived by the ten commandments his whole life, had the specially-favored constraint of not killing clearly in front of him, much like the door. Never in his life had he killed a person, he says. But, the context changed. The spirit provided a before unseen and not previously considered affordance, and like when there is a fire behind the door or it is locked from the outside, and the window or ventilation takes on new possibility and meaning, the special favor of an alternative means of resolving the concern with getting the brass plates became salient, not as a cause of Nephi's action, but as a possibility.

Examples of constraint theories within philosophy and psychology would include: contextual agency (where human action happens in "relationship to a physical, social, cultural, and moral context," that specially favors possibilities but does not cause human

action; see Reber & Slife, 2021, p. 22); moral agency (agency does not consist of doing what we want, it consists of doing what we should— in "living truthfully"; see Williams, 2005, p. 118); embodiment (our body is the "site and source of our intentional engagement with…the world", while our desires and actions cannot be reduced to just the body, see Williams et al., 2022, p. 99); and situated cognition (cognition cannot be separated from human activity and perception because "agent, activity, and world [are] mutually constitutive"; see Brown et al., 1981; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Though terms like affordance, facticity, and constraint are rarely used in everyday speech, many people implicate these things in how they live and understand their lives. When people state, "I cannot undo my past, but I can learn from it and perhaps do things differently" they employ a language of constraint rather than one of causes. When a recovering addict states, "I am an alcoholic. I admit that. But I am finding ways to anticipate and defuse my typical triggers," they acknowledge the facticity of their circumstance, but also the alternative possibilities within their context to what has been specially-favored in the past. Constraints are also illuminated when someone says, "When I am offended I am quick to anger, but I have learned to be slow to acting on that anger. I used to just fly off the handle,

but now I practice deep breathing, mindfulness, and even forgiveness. Sometimes, the anger transforms into empathy or even compassion for the offender. I show them understanding and kindness and they tend to respond in a similar way." These statements exemplify how their different possibilities of engagement with the world given the constraints of their embodiment and context can promote changes in themselves and in others.

Ethically Managing Theories of Agency

With the conceptual framing now in place, it is possible to locate professional and personal theories of agency within the framework and to examine points of potential conflict and values imposition that could emerge in psychotherapy and counseling. Figure 1 graphically represents the X-axis with the poles of strong and weak constraint and the Y-axis anchored by naturalism and theism. The graph also suggests locations for some of the common professional and personal theories of agency that may be at play between client and therapist. The indicated locations are contestable as to their precision, but they need not be exact to illustrate how varied these theories of agency can be and how likely they are to contrast or even

Figure 1
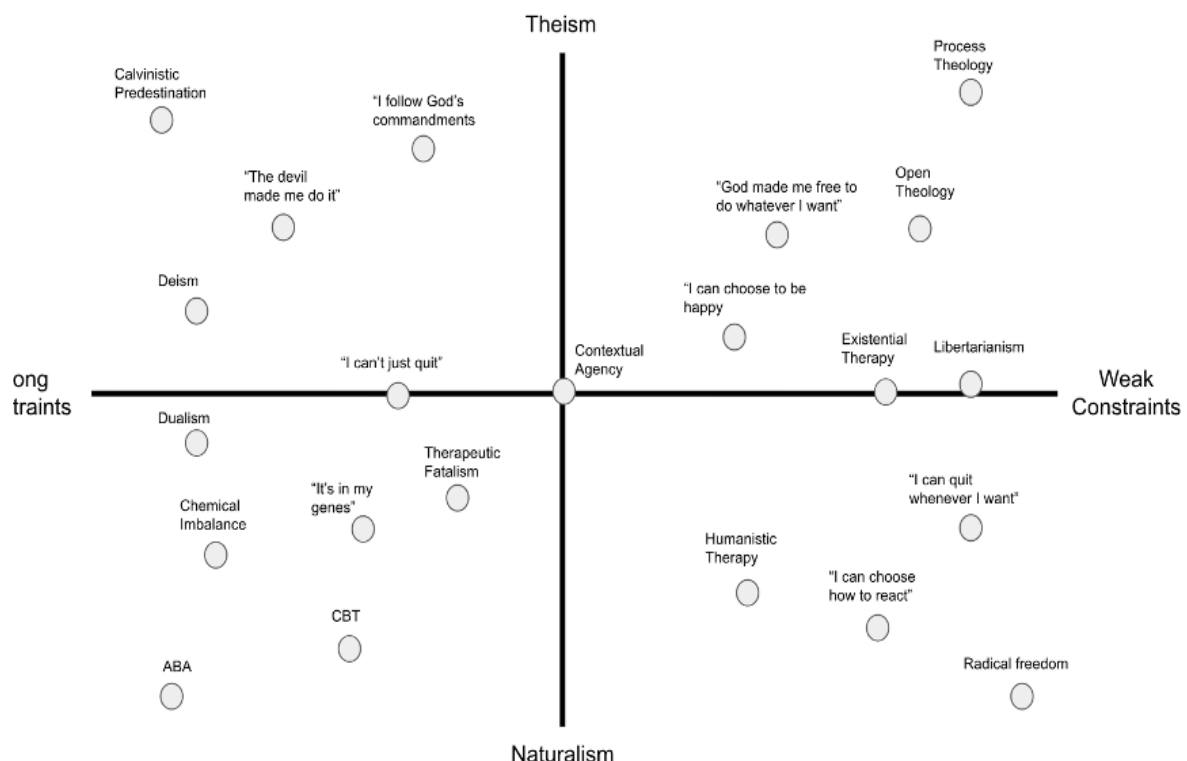
conflict with each other. A therapist operating from a naturalistic and strong-constraint therapeutic approach like Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, for example, and a client who informally adopts a theistic weak-constraint libertarian conception of agency could easily bump heads in their therapy sessions and might ultimately be at cross purposes when it comes to conceptions of the client's mental health and wellness. Similarly, a client who endorses the strong-constraint theism of predestation would likely clash strongly with the weak-constraint naturalism inherent in many forms of existential and humanistic therapy orientations, resulting perhaps in frustration on the part of the client and/or the therapist in achieving therapeutic outcomes.

Anticipating and Recognizing Conflicts

What might such conflicts look like in actual practice and how can and should therapists manage such conflicts in a way that resists imposing their personal and/or professional values concerning agency onto their clients? With regard to the first part of this question, conflicts between therapist and client on things like diagnosis, desired outcomes, and differences in what is seen as helpful and wished for by clients and therapists are very common and ought to be expected (Colli & Lingiardi, 2009; Eubanks et al., 2018; Safran et al., 1990). In cases of child therapy, for example, researchers have found that parents, the therapist, and the child disagree on the problems needing to be addressed in therapy 75% of the time (Hawley & Weisz, 2003). We assert that in many of these disagreements and conflicts, differing theories of agency are implicated and the risk of values imposition is high. Given this likelihood, it is important that therapists recognize when their theory of agency differs from and even conflicts with the client's theory of agency.

Consider, as a somewhat common theory of agency, therapeutic fatalism (Maercker et al., 2019). Therapeutic fatalism is the idea that a person's destiny is determined or predestined and, as a result, the person has no control or meaningful influence over what happens to them. In terms of the conceptual framework we have described above, such a theory endorses strong constraints and, depending on the client, their fatalistic theory of agency could be on the theistic or naturalistic side of the Y-axis. For therapists of all

stripes, this theory of agency can be quite challenging. Indeed, one therapist indicates a strong preference for working with children instead of adults because adult clients so often endorse this perspective. The therapist states:

> Working with adults, I am much more challenged to see the use of free will. I see more rigidity in their own beliefs in determinism: "This is what happened to me there is nothing I can do about it," or "This is the way I was born, it's been like this my whole life, and there is nothing I can do about it." (Cody, 2012, p. 33)

Another therapist struggling with a client who endorses fatalism went to reddit to find support and advice from colleagues, sharing this post:

> This client is an adult and has a past history of substance use. They're now sober but feel that we were born almost pre-determined to act and do certain things. Example: they were destined to be an alcoholic. By that logic, nothing you do matters because you don't have any say in your own life. I feel stuck when I talk to them because of this idea. It feels so pessimistic and makes everything seem pointless if so. (Retinolandevermore, 2022)

To illustrate the varied manifestations of conflict that can emerge when therapists' theories of agency differ from the client's, we have examined the dozens of comments posted by therapists and counselors in response to this post. Each of the responses implicates each therapist's theory of agency and also their perspective on how to navigate the difference or even the conflict between their theory and that of the client. We found that a number of comments suggested that the therapist should hold their own ideas back and lean into the client's belief, even though it might differ from the therapist's perspective. Others encouraged the therapist to reframe the client's belief away from fatalism toward something more agentic. Still, others thought the therapist should confront the client's belief directly and point out its logical inconsistency with going to therapy. On this point, one therapist even suggested that the therapist say to the client, "I doubt you'd be paying me $XXX/hr if you ACTU-ALLY believed you have no ability to shape your life" (Southern-Lab-2399, 2023).

Several therapists commented that it is not appropriate for therapists to engage clients on philosophical ideas and beliefs, so they should ignore the client's be-

lief and focus only on modifying their behaviors. Several strongly suggest that the client's belief must betray a deeper issue like an unwillingness to take moral responsibility for their actions. On this point, a number of these therapists go so far as to presume a religious background in the client's life that likely led to guilt and shame that the client now seeks to avoid by placing the locus of control on their genes or neurochemistry. Some comments on the post doubled-down on determinism, but endorsed keeping the therapist's deterministic perspective hidden. Here is one example:

> I actually don't believe in free will, which I don't typically disclose to clients because it can easily be misunderstood. Knowing that we live within the laws of physics, that there's no "you", or even a part of you, that isn't completely caused by factors that we don't ourselves author, can lead some to despair. (Bonsaitreehugger, 2023)

Finally, some therapists note the futility of trying to work with fatalistic clients at all, specifically those who endorse a Calvinistic predestination that denies free will:

> But a Calvinistic anthropology precludes all this as it denies this basic capacity. The will is depraved and in bondage and, here's the key point, there is nothing the client or the therapist can do about it. This is the conclusion that, as best I can tell, undermines the entire therapeutic enterprise. (Beck, 2013)

Compatibilist responses were also abundant, including several comments directing the therapist to encourage the client to develop a belief in free will, as in this example:

> Here's the gist of what I say: The happiest people with the best lives believe they are masters of their own fate. This is factually true. And even if free will is an illusion...Believing in free will can't help but shape your life. The mechanistic forces of the universe seem to bring better outcomes to those who believe in it. (Southern-Lab-2399, 2023)

Therapists trying to reconcile determinism with agency through some form of compatibilism like the one above is commonplace, if not logically coherent. As one therapist describes it, "The longer I am in the field, the more I believe in determinism. And yet I also have seen the power of psychotherapy and the power of people's ability to change" (Beck, 2013). Another puts their compatibilistic conception this way:

> I believe that we are all driven by all of the things that Freud said we are driven by—sort of—but we are evolved human beings with brains and I think we all have the power and free will to behave like we want to behave and not be beholden to whatever is going on inside, deep inside the conscious mind. (Beck, 2013)

What was not acknowledged in any of the comments on the post or in broader statements by mental health professionals on the topic of fatalism was the importance of respect for and care in dealing with the client's culture and the importance of working with the client in such a way that the therapist's values are not imposed on the client, including professional and personal values with regard to the client's agency. Maercker et al. (2019) make clear, fatalism is a common feature of many cultures. As a result, like any aspect of culture, it must be managed in a sensitive and humble manner. The lack of such sensitivity, as demonstrated by the comments above, becomes obvious if we imagine reading these kinds of responses to a post written by a male therapist struggling with a female client who expresses the perspective that the dominant patriarchy in her society makes her efforts to change and thrive in a flourishing and authentically feminine way seem fated to fail. Such responses would all clearly smack of cultural insensitivity and incompetency.

The suggestion that a male therapist ought to try to hold his maleness back, for example, and then lean in to the woman's perspective, relating to it as if it were true, would signal concerns with unacknowledged privilege made salient by the obvious limits on empathy and understanding. The assertion that the therapist should reframe the client's viewpoint away from her conception of patriarchal oppression toward something more egalitarian would be dismissive and insensitive. The notion that the therapist should confront the client's perspective and argue against it or treat it as merely her belief, not the reality of her circumstance, would discount her experience and that of many other women. The advice that he should just ignore her perspective because such things are philosophical and beyond the purview of the therapist's scope of expertise and that he should focus instead on behavioral change would leave her feeling unheard and invalidated. The idea that the therapist should hide his agreement with the client that women are indeed oppressed by the patriarchy because admitting that might discourage her

would be disingenuous and deceptive. Finally, to suggest that the therapist can only throw his hands up in the air because the client's perspective, if she holds to it, means there is nothing the therapist or client can do about her circumstance, would likely result in discouragement for both parties and possibly the termination of therapy or referring the client to someone else. Similar concerns with a lack of cultural competence and responsivity would emerge if a client's perspective having to do with race, age, disability, or other factors and cultural features were to be treated in such culturally insensitive ways. Why would agency be any different?

We assert that it is not, and that cultural insensitivity and incompetency with regard to clients' theories of agency promote conflict and confusion, just as would be the case with insensitivity to any other aspect of culture. If left unaddressed, or addressed in insensitive and biased ways, this cultural incompetency will confuse clients and inhibit therapeutic effectiveness. One client, who has been treated with CBT for years, expresses this confusion and concern with the effectiveness of his therapy:

> As a guy who sees a therapist weekly and a psychiatrist monthly, the concept of changing my thoughts through CBT confuses me. How am I supposed to change something that is already predetermined? Wouldn't the act of going to a therapist and challenging negative thought patterns be predetermined by my biology and environment in which case I did nothing on my own to do that anyways? I feel like I'm missing something simple here and maybe I am over complicating it. I've been practicing CBT and mindfulness for a few years now and really struggle with controlling my thoughts. (Boomshakalaka85, 2019)

On the other side of the coin, a client expresses frustration with therapists' focus on independence that has marked his therapy experience, noting:

> The concept of free will, in its purest form, refers to the human ability to choose, regardless of one's circumstances. The thinking goes: If I will myself hard enough, I can always make good choices. For ages, psychotherapists worked to instill this idea in their patients . . . On the surface, free will appears superior. However, it's nothing more than a Trojan horse. Because, shame, the feeling that you're wholly awful, is founded on the idea of pure freedom. . . Agency will always have a place in therapy, especially when the patient understands that good decisions are mostly products of their environ-

ments. . . However, determinism is also a prominent and permanent fixture. Even though the universe may not be completely robotic, our genes and environments make certain thoughts, feelings, and choices more and less likely. And that knowledge can help us unlock our stifling, emotional shackles. (Garber, 2021)

One can see in these expressions of confusion and frustration that navigating therapy between the traditional poles of determinism and indeterminism results in confusing attempts at some sort of pretended compatibilism and inevitably lands all viewpoints squarely in an incompatibilism that negates the meaningful and lived agency experienced by many people and embraced by many cultures. For this reason, therapists need training not only in recognizing and responding sensitively to the common theories of agency that are likely to come into play in their therapy, like therapeutic fatalism, but also in the application of conceptual frameworks that do not negate agency.

Seeking Training in Conceptual Frameworks That Allow for Agency

As an initial step into training, we have already offered a revision to the incompatibilist dichotomy of determinism and indeterminism by situating strong and weak constraints as the anchors on a continuum of agency. This revision takes into account the facticity of our being-in-the-world, which includes genes, environments, neurochemistry, rewards, punishments, and so much more, as affordances of more or less specially-favored, but not caused, possibilities. It also reframes and encompasses the many formalized psychological theories and folk theories relevant to agency, without negating the possibility of agency. In this section, we briefly exemplify some of the contours of a possible next step in training that can be taken, which is to apply this conceptual framework to the therapist's professionally informed theory of agency and examine its implications.

As a first example, we consider how this conceptual frame provides therapists trained in applied behavioral analysis (ABA) an alternative to the Skinnerian deterministic worldview that is incompatible with the theories of free will embraced by many clients and perhaps even personally by the therapists. Reframed as a strong-constraint naturalism, ABA would maintain the assumption that behaviors consistently followed

by reinforcement are more likely to be repeated, but that would not be the case because those behaviors are determined by rewarding consequences, but rather because rewards are an affordance that makes the possibility of those behaviors specially-favored. Not only does this reframing reduce if not eliminate conflict with theories of agency, but it actually fits the findings and logic of the probabilistic hypothesis testing that ABA relies upon more accurately than a deterministic account. Specifically, from the perspective of this conceptual frame, variation in behavioral responses, that occurs in even the most controlled human-participant behaviorist research, can be expected and explainable. Thus, instead of referring to that variation as measurement error or lack of experimental control, it is the very demonstration of the inevitability of possibility afforded by constraints.

Training in the conceptual framework offered in this paper might also be useful to counselors and therapists working with theories of agency on the other side of the constraint spectrum, such as in many forms of humanistic and existential therapy. Here too, the implications of an alternative conceptual framing of agency, applied to a prominent psychological theory, can be examined as to framing's sensitivity to cultures of agency. Self-actualization, for example, would be understood within a context of weak constraint naturalism, rather than some form of compatibilist soft-determinism or indeterminism (Slife & Williams, 1995). Within this framing, a construct like unconditional positive regard is introduced into therapy, not as a cause or influence, or as the clearing away of all such things. It is instead, a constraint, a weak constraint, that opens up possibilities not previously salient for a client whose agency has been historically constrained by conditional positive regard from loved ones. That conditional positive regard would have specially favored a being-in-the-world that conforms to the expectations of others, what humanistic psychologists call the "social self." But now, with that constraint weakened in the presence of the therapist's contrasting unconditional positive regard, the possibility of the client listening to and acting in congruence with their organismic valuing process opens up, not as a matter of indeterminism, but as a consequence of the change in the strength and special favor of the constraints within the context.

Finally, the application of this alternative conceptual frame to a strong-constraint theism, like predestination, which is prominent in some religious cultures, reframes the will and activities of God in the world away from being causes that determine one's fate to constraints that limit and open up possibilities for human beings. If those constraints are viewed as being very strong, as in Calvinist predestation, then the possibility of affecting God or changing God's mind is not specially-favored, which makes other possibilities more probable, like engaging in prayers of submission, gratitude, and praise over prayers of petition. If those constraints are viewed as being more weak, as in open theology in which God's mind can be changed and God allows himself to be affected and even surprised by persons (Pinnock et al., 1994), then prayers of petition and asking for divine accommodation and adaptation are specially-favored and more likely to be practiced. And, here again, there is predictability that can be examined and assessed within this reframing that allows for agency, even when using scientific methods of study.

We recognize that conducting such scientific research is not an interest of many counselors and therapists, but having a sense of what might be probable and predictable in a client's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, given their culture and the theory of agency they practice, certainly would be. Working together with clients to explore together what is afforded and favored by their theory of agency, what could be afforded and favored by the work of therapy, and even what possibilities could be afforded by the therapist's potentially contrasting theory of agency would be of importance and value to therapists and counselors. It would demonstrate cultural sensitivity and responsivity. For these reasons, we strongly recommend that practitioners seek further training beyond what is provided here to become more educated and skilled in understanding their own and their clients' theories of agency and in responding sensitively and humbly to the cultures that inform them, including religious cultures.

Opening a Dialogue on Agency

As counselors and therapists seek out training and education in conceptual frameworks that respect and value different theories of agency and the cultures that

engender them, they will be better prepared for and more comfortable with opening up a dialogue about agency with their clients. Research supports engaging clients in exploratory conversations about their identity, values, and worldviews as a key practice of cultural responsivity and humility. La Roche and Maxie (2003) encourage clinicians to:

> explore the meanings of cultural differences and similarities rather than to assume that patients will bring a particular experience or perspective to therapy because of their gender, ethnicity, or race. These discussions may actually make the difference in whether patients remain in therapy or prematurely terminate. (p. 185)

Including agency in such exploratory conversations, ideally at the start of therapy, would enable therapists and counselors to identify potential professional and personal contrasts or conflicts with their clients' theories of agency. As therapists open up a dialogue and discuss the client's goals and priorities for therapy, their previous experiences with therapy, and their presenting issues, clients will often hint at features of their theory of agency. If, for example, a client states that they would like to change something about themselves, some conception of agency is implicated. Hearing that, the therapist can follow up with an inquiry about what change means for the client. Or, if the client indicates a desire for more self-control over their emotions, the therapist can ask for more detail about how the client understands self-control. The client's responses will allow for deeper inquiry and fuller disclosure of the client's assumptions about what they see as possible or not.

As the conversation deepens, a client might respond to the therapist's questions about change or control with the comment that they would like to be able to respond differently than they have in the past to triggers that lead to emotional outbursts. With this statement, and using the conceptual framework described in this article as a guide, the therapist can begin to see that the client might view the constraints of their emotions as not being as strong as a determined cause. To test such an idea, the therapist might reflect or restate the client's comment with something like "So you think it might be possible for you to learn new ways of responding to stressors" and then follow up with a more pointed question, like "Does that mean you do not see stressors as directly causing your emotions?"

The discussion could continue with the therapist inquiring further and noting in their mind where on the constraints dimension, the client's theory of agency likely falls, as well as the degree to which that location contrasts with their own theory on that dimension.

Once the counselor or therapist feels they have a good understanding of the client's theory of agency, they can describe it back to the client for confirmation or correction. Then, they can note where the client's theory of agency overlaps and/or does not overlap with their own theory. A therapist trained in various forms of cognitive therapy might state something like, "From the perspective of my approach to therapy, I would agree with you that stressors do not cause emotions. This is because as a cognitive psychology practitioner, I believe there is a step between a stressor and an emotional response known as cognitive appraisal, and it is at this step where I assume we have some say over whether a stressor leads to an emotional expression like an outburst or not. It is here, I would say, that we have some form of agency. I say we have some say over our response and some form of agency, because cognitive appraisal is not independent of things like our past history of dealing with this stressor, our bodies' readiness to shift into a fight, flight, or freeze mode, and other bodily and environmental constraints that make some cognitive appraisals and possible ways of emotionally responding to stress more favored or likely."

The therapist can then check in with the client on how the client views the therapist's approach and theory of agency in relation to their own, demonstrating sensitivity to cultural differences and similarities as they go, and working together to find an approach to agency that will work for therapist and client going forward. Depending on the client's religious and spiritual perspective, the same kind of dialogue would need to be opened on the Y-axis of theism and naturalism, and the same demonstration of cultural sensitivity and responsivity in navigating therapy ethically would need to be present (see Reber, 2020).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide a conceptual framework for agency that does not obviate the possibility of agency at the outset but allows for and accurately captures most of the formal and informal

theories of agency that professional and personal cultures inculcate. Therapists and counselors who are trained in theories of agency and who utilize a framework for organizing them such as the one described in this article will be in a more prepared and better-skilled position to open up a dialogue with their clients about their theories of agency and will be able to respond to and navigate those theories in relation to their own theory of agency more effectively and more ethically. As with the navigation of any cultural differences, this can be challenging and mistakes will likely be made, but the benefits of having such a discussion and exploring cultural differences and similarities between the therapist's and the client's theories of agency will far outweigh any costs.

Therapists and counselors cannot know and anticipate every theory of agency that clients might bring into therapy, but they can seek training and education in a conceptual framework that will capture and illuminate the chief assumptions of common cultural conceptions of agency, including the assumptions of their own professional culture. As with other features of culture, developing cultural competency, sensitivity, and responsivity in regard to theories of agency is an ethical obligation for therapists and counselors. This is especially obvious when working with clients of faith, many of whom consider agency to be a fundamental and even divinely ordained feature of human being-in-the-world. Ultimately, understanding one's own and one's clients' theories of agency is itself an important affordance, one that we believe should be specially favored in the pursuit of effective psychotherapy and counseling.

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