Agency as an elixir for design

Martin Porcheron
Bold Insight, UK

Keywords

As a user experience researcher, I spend a considerable proportion of my time working to understand people's 'common sense' approach to technology; that is: what they know, understand, and do. However, we all, as humans, often portray ourselves as not quite aligned with the norm – I have lost track of the number of times I have heard a participant in a research study note that they are not 'a normal user'. Yet, when we as researchers analyse data, we draw parallels between participants, we extract findings, and ultimately offer actionable insights. The ability to repeat this process is in fact a core tenet of user experience research.

Turning to 'Distributed Agency in Homecare Interactions with Virtual Assistants' by Hall and Albert (2024), the strength of an ethnomethodological lens and application of Conversation Analysis (EMCA) to understanding one person's use of a smart speaker is that the *fundamentals of being and doing* are elucidated in the data as clear as day, while macro concerns, such as accounting for one's thoughts to a researcher, become intrinsically sidelined. While EMCA has traditionally existed as an approach confined to the academic toolbox of methodologies, the rapid and mass commercialisation of 'conversational' technologies has seen EMCA find stock outside of its institutional comfort zone. Although I note that, while I think there is a case for future adoption of the approach in industrial research, I expect that examinations of methodological traditions and construction of EMCA are unlikely to find purchase in industry.

Corresponding author:
Martin Porcheron, Bold Insight, Thanet House, Suite 403, 231–232 Strand, London WC2R 1DA, UK.
Email: martin@boldinsight.co.uk

The notion of agency, as defined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and adopted by Hall and Albert, and its study is itself of growing importance: decades of visions of the future predict how every corner of our lives will see increasingly omnipresent technologies in interconnect and self-automate. As the march of time progresses and many of these conceptualisations come to bear (cf. Weiser's (1991) vision for the workplace), making sense of how humans (co)construct and reinforce their agency will become an increasingly pertinent question. Hall and Albert, following in the footsteps of others including Pelikan et al. (2022), enable the hardening of agency from concept to tangible quality. Crucially, this can facilitate the development of new products and services, an EMCA offers an elixir that enables the observer to elucidate the mundane. The challenge then becomes how we craft insights and guidelines for design.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

References

Emirbayer M and Mische A (1998) What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology* 103(4): 962–1023.
Hall L and Albert S (2024) Distributed agency in smart homecare interactions: A conversation analytic case study. *Discourse and Communication* 18(6).
Pelikan H, Broth M and Keevallik L (2022) When a robot comes to life: The interactional achievement of agency as a transient phenomenon. *Social Interaction: Video-Based Studies of Human Sociality* 5(3): 129915
Weiser M (1991) The computer for the 21st century. *Scientific American* 265(3): 94–105.

Author biography

Martin Porcheron is a Senior User Experience Researcher at Bold Insight, a human factors and user experience agency based in London and Chicago. His work focuses on the design and research of user interaction with novel technologies for everyday life and healthcare settings for clients.