



The Semiotic Construction of the Sense of Agency. The Modal Articulation in Narrative Processes

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Abstract

The sense of agency is an ongoing process of semiotic construction of the action starting from the affective, cognitive, intersubjective and cultural matrix of experience. A person narratively constructs the sense of her agentic experience and in doing so does not refer exclusively to the “what”, but also to the “how”. There is always a specific “modus” to experience one’s own action. We present the psychological notion of the Modal Articulation Process (MAP), namely the way through which a person orients and configures in a contextual frame the sense of her actions by means of modal operators of necessity, possibility, impossibility, contingency, but also knowledge, will, capability, constrain and opportunity. The notion of Modal Articulation Process is proposed as a semiotic, dynamic and recursive process that articulates narratively many aspects of the agency: the relational positionings and the way of experiencing them, the constraints and the resources present in the socio-symbolic context, the inherent temporality of every human phenomenon. Although the study of modal operators has an ancient and solid tradition of research in the fields of modal logics, analytical philosophy and narrative semiotic disciplines as well, yet in the field of the psychological sciences - except for a few authoritative isolated cases (Kurt Lewin, Rom Harré, Jaan Valsiner) - there is not a great deal of attention on the relevance of these symbolic devices and their function in constructing the sense of action in a narrative way. Indeed modal articulation processes are at stake both during daily common routines and during exceptional turning point experiences that request a reconfiguration of the sense of one’s own agency (e.g. the experiences of illness demand a new modal re-articulation). Our discussion is aimed at deepening and developing the notion of modal articulation, its functions and its specificities.

Keywords Sense of agency · Modality · Modal articulation process · Semiotic mediation · Sensemaking process · Narrative · Turning points & critical experiences

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Introduction

Human agency is a very cogent and interesting topic in the international debate regarding psychological sciences. In very general terms, agency implies the possibility to intervene in transforming various kinds of relationships between people, objects and their environments.

People develop their actions not only through stimulus-response mechanisms. At the same time, actions are not organized on the basis of pure cause-effect reasoning, or on the basis of calculations of advantage/disadvantage and reward/punishment. In this article, we present the contribution of the narrative approach declined within a dynamic-semiotic perspective, to discuss the sensemaking process of agency.

A person narratively constructs the sense of her experience and in doing so does not refer exclusively to the “what”, but also to the “how”. There is always a specific “*modus*” to experience one’s own action. We present below the psychological notion of the Modal Articulation Process (MAP), namely the way through which a person orients and configures in a contextual frame the sense of her actions by means of modal operators of necessity, possibility, impossibility, contingency, but also knowledge, will, capability, constrain and opportunity.

Consider, for example, the linguistic expression “*I study*”. It expresses an action in a simple and linear way; instead, in the modal expressions “*I must study*”, “*I want to study*”, “*I can study*”, etc., the agentic meaning is loaded in each sentence with a new sense that is referring to the way the subject is experiencing it. In this article, the notion of Modal Articulation Process (MAP) is proposed as a semiotic, dynamic and recursive process that configures narratively many aspects of the agency: the positioning and the way of living the experiences, the social relations, the constraints and the opportunities in the material-socio-symbolic contexts, the temporality of each human phenomenon.

We have to acknowledge that the study of modalities has an ancient and solid tradition of research in the fields of modal logics and analytical philosophy, however in the field of psychological sciences - except for a few authoritative isolated cases (Kurt Lewin, Rom Harrè, Jaan Valsiner, etc. - see in following) - there is not a great deal of attention on the importance of these symbolic devices and their function in constructing the sense of action.

The process of modal articulation of the sense of agency is connected to the semiotic construction of action starting from the affective, intersubjective and cultural fields of experience.

In a wide and general perspective, life can be considered as a recursive and continuous succession of dynamic and intransitive cycles, yet what allows to grow-up, to develop, to get transformation is the rupture of previous balances and the occurrence of a turning point (Valsiner 2001, 2014; Zittoun 2006). We believe it is important to point out that the processes of modal articulation are carried out both in everyday routine experiences (and therefore because of their continuity they may have a tendency to be implicit) and in moments of developmental transitions and in critical moments of life (for example, loss of work, experiences of illnesses, etc.). In this second circumstance in order to deal with a less and more intense crisis of the sense of identity and a rupture of one’s own relational network, an effort is required to reconfigure the modal sense of one’s agency in new ways.

Our discussion is aimed at deepening and developing the notion of modal articulation, its functions and its specificities by deepening the following issues:

- 1) A semiotic perspective to decline narrative processes and their agentic aspects
- 2) The threefold set of functions performed by modal articulation: a. *function of connection* (the relationships between affective and cognitive processes); b. *function of mediation* (in the regards of the intersubjective positionings); c. *function of vectorization* (about the construction of the temporality of the experience).
- 3) The general request of reconfiguration of the modal articulation when a change (both in everyday experience and/or in the case of a relevant turning point) is occurring.

The Debate on Human Agency

As Miguel Benasayag states: «Always the problem of human being, in any culture, era or society, was and is the need to know who is acting. From whom or from what are human beings and things moved? Who moves? Who moved? Just think of the Greek tragedy, which fed and founded Western culture: the gods - forces external to men - move human beings like marionettes in their whims, reasons and injustices; men are dragged into destinies that they must understand, make their own, in order to exist, without being themselves engines, subjects or producers of such destinies. Likewise, our time appears strongly marked by techno-economic macroprocesses, demographic...they seem once again to move men from something that is external to human beings» (Benasayag 2016, pp. 24–25 – our English translation from Italian).

Indeed, two extreme positions define a very wide range of perspectives: “determinism vs free will”. The former denies or reduces freedom of human agency through deterministic behaviors (it researches statistical regularities and identifies neurophysiological states and processes, computational functions and models or evolutionary biology explanations). The latter sustains the importance (if not the autonomy) of free will, problem-solving skills, making decisions, choosing to change and taking control of one’s own life. Human being is able to do everything he desires and/or wants. Nothing is impossible, it is just a matter of will.

We find in this debate a wide range of variants. In the Fig. 1, we present a possible schematization starting from localizationist and reductionist biases (Fig. 1). Many efforts to trace out the source of human agency results in forms of localizationist reductionisms, both in the ways of internalism and of externalism. From an internalist reductivism point of view we can have an idealistic position that privileges the human mind as separate from the external world (essentially independent and in any case primary source of thoughts, actions, desires), or a materialistic position that is intent on locating regions of brain, specific brain circuits, biochemical mediators, etc. From an externalist point of view, we can find a strong socio-culturalist version that considers the mind as the primary product of all the cultural, social, symbolic precipitations of a given community in a certain historical moment in a certain region; or we can find a naturalistic version of mind that collocates source of behaviors, actions and individual thoughts in the natural selection processes of the species (social neo-darwinism).

Anyway, it is evident that the debate does not solely concern these rigid dichotomies (Gruber et al. 2015; Sugarman and Sokol 2012). For example, Bandura, leading figure of the socio-cognitive revolution in psychology, moderates these poles: the human being is self-organizing, pro-active, self-regulating, and self-reflecting, thanks to intentional thinking and forethought (Bandura 2006). In the reciprocal interplay of

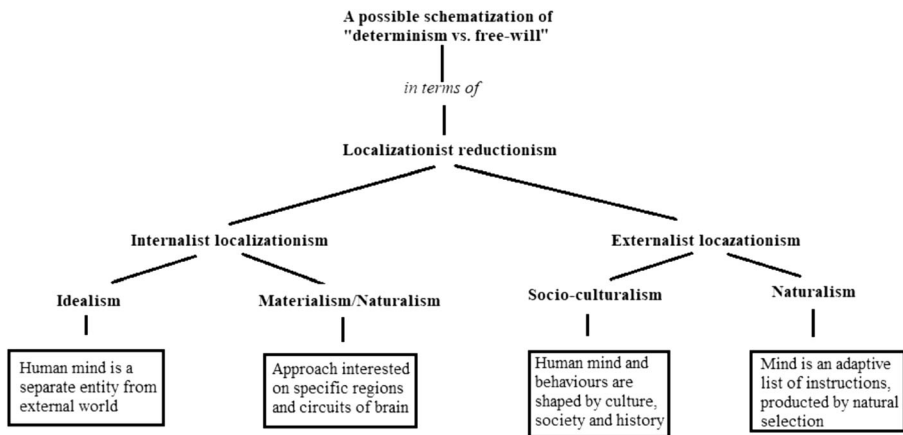


Fig. 1 A rigid classification of approaches on human agency debate. (We want to thank the anonymous reviewer that suggested us to use less absolute terms in order to propose such a classification. Actually, there are many other ideological, philosophical, religious, anthropological and conceptual systems of considering human agency. Just to think some examples, in the religious domains we can consider many different devices able to mean and to orient human agency: the doctrine of Karma and the Wheel of life, the caste system, the idea of the predestination and of a precise divine plan, the doctrine of the original sin and its redemption, etc. So, the classification that we are proposing is just one among others, and it focuses mainly about occidental epistemological paradigms of researches about the human being)

intrapersonal, behavioral, and environment factors, self-efficacy (Bandura 1977), namely belief in one's personal efficacy to achieve specific goals, is considered the most central and pervasive mechanism of human agency.

There are many relevant issues underlying human agency: bodily equipment, development, contextual configuration, experience, cultural and social ground (Maldonato and Dell'Orco 2011, 2012). We must bear in mind that human agency is entangled with embodied, affective, material, social, historical, linguistic, symbolic and cultural processes, therefore human beings should be considered as "natural" sensemakers (Bateson 1979). One's sense of agency is strongly related to sensemaking of one's own experience in life. From this perspective, narrative processes are powerful tools for the recursive construction and reconstruction of the meaning of one's own agentic experience bearing in mind its multiple sources: affective dynamics, the roles other people play, temporality of experience (e.g. present multiple development trajectories, memory re-construction of past events and imagination of future scenarios, etc.) (De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017; Margherita et al. 2017a; Margherita et al. 2017b; Martino and Freda 2016; Tateo 2018; Tanggaard and Tateo 2018, Brescò de Luna 2016).

Human Agency as Narrative Sensemaking Process

People's daily lives are characterized by symbolic and pragmatic capabilities of great complexity (Tomasello 2014) from the ability to imagine hypothetical future scenarios to the ability of coordinative cooperative actions aimed at pursuing goals, beyond the temporal dimension of immediacy of present satisfaction or reaction to stimuli (Valsiner 2001, 2014). Many key aspects of the construction of human agency have been identified, pointing out that the people's actions are not made possible by an abstract

and disembodied rational faculty that processes in computational terms probabilities in favor of or disadvantages of a certain event (Maldonato and Valerio 2018). Agency is organized by some constituent characteristics of human experience: affectivity, language, culture and learning of a symbolic apparatus in social environments, reflexive capacity, the contextuality of psychic processes, dialogic prospectivism, the narrative and temporal organization of identity and agency. Natural needs and instinctual drives are not enough to understand human agency. Indeed, language plays a central role in managing this complexity: it enables us to communicate and share information, but it also provides us with the opportunity to narratively construct one's own identity, one's experiences with others and one's own sense of agency.

We can consider language as a semiotic mediator (Cole and Wertsch 1996; De Luca Picione and Freda 2014; Salvatore 2016; Valsiner 2001; Vygotsky 1987), whose use is capable of enhancing the development of psychic and agentic processes. In this context, the thread of narrative psychology studies (Bamberg 2011; Brockmeier 2009; Bruner 1990; Good 1994; McAdams 2001; Murray 2015; Spence 1982; Schafer 1992; Polkinghorne 1988) has widely demonstrated that narration is a psychological, intersubjective and cultural process that ensures and allows:

- 1) the continuity of experience in spite of incessant diverse solicitations
- 2) the transformation of the same experience by remodeling identity construction and sense of agency (De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017).

Bruner (1990) found that the most important aspects of narration (for example, narrative diachronicity, intentional state entailment, canonicity and breach, normativeness, etc.) are essential for constructing agentic experience (Bruner 1990). According to Martin and Gillespie (2010), human agency must be conceptualized in terms of distancing from immediate experience. Narrative processes are ways of distancing and simultaneously subjectivising one's own experiences. The narrative construction of agentic experiences agrees with what Boesch (2007) defined as the polyvalence of action: each action implies the simultaneous presence of numerous objective and subjective aspects. According to Boesch's symbolic action theory, actions are never isolated behaviors, and require contextual, functional, analogical and ideological coordination. Narrative processes enable us to re-elaborate past experiences and imagine possible future scenarios. Narration is a form of agentic discourse that allows for the most flexible positioning of agents and actions in a story, as well as of the narrators of that story (Brockmeier 2009).

It is interesting to note how the development of the narrative and cultural paradigm has given new vigor to the dialogue between semiotics and psychology. The benefits of this road had already been mentioned in studies carried out by the Soviet psychologist Vygotsky at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Vygotsky (1987), the use of signs (and especially verbal language) transforms and organizes actions towards potential developmental trajectories (Cole and Wertsch 1996; Van der Veer and Valsiner 1994). According to Vygotsky, signs are mediators between individuals and their environment and can be powerful catalysts for potentiality and development (Cole and Wertsch 1996; De Luca Picione and Freda 2014). The development of the semiotic disciplines (de Saussure 2011; Eco 1976; Greimas 1976; Lotman 2009; Peirce 1935, Sebeok 2001; Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017) has provided significant contributions to psychological sciences (cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, clinical psychology, dynamic

psychology, cultural psychology) with the aim of gaining a conceptualization of the mind as recursive dynamics within a semiotic flow rather than an entity (Neuman 2003; Salvatore 2016; Valsiner 2001, 2014). As a system of relationships with a context (Bateson 1979), the mind can be understood as an unlimited trajectory of connection of signs in a temporal flow. Signs are things that represent something else: that implies they do not possess innate and steady meanings but the meaning is constructed by means of their concatenation over time. Furthermore we point out that each semiotic dynamics is never an action of single individual and her inner states. A semiotic cycle always is a socially distributed process and a deeply intersubjective process.

Another crucial point at stake in each semiotic process is about the embodiment: we have to consider signs in terms of bodily states. Considering the affective and embodied matrix of psychological process, we are led to acknowledge also semiotic processes as deeply embodied and affective (Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017; Salvatore 2016; Salvatore and Zittoun 2011).

In this conceptual frame, the notion of *semiotic mediation* therefore occupies a central position: the sense of experience is an ongoing construction process by means of the mediation and the articulation of signs between the subject, the symbolic environments and others. Narrative processes – as one of the formidable forms of semiotic mediation - enable individuals to construct their own identity and sense of agency which can then be developed, modulated, negotiated, spaced, processed and transformed (Esposito et al. 2016; De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017; McAdams 2001). Narration is a process of connection, articulation and integration of fragments of time, experiences and social relations. A person constantly re-configures the narration of her own experience contextually; there is a recursive, open, intransitive cycle in mediating self-other-world (De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017).

The notions of sign and semiotic mediation therefore provide crucial implications in the narrative processes (Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017): through the concatenation of signs in narrative processes it is possible to configure, complexify and develop agentive relationships between subjects and *object* (varying from a real object to a conceptual state of the world) (De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017). A sign, as well as the emergence, escalation and demolishing of dynamic hierarchies of signs (Valsiner 2014; Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017), provides a meaningful form to experience through acts of differentiation, indication, representation, generalization and reification. It enables us to differentiate between before and after, between here and there, between me and non-me (De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017; Salvatore and Venuleo 2017). We are led to consider both thinking and action as semiotic processes. The process of sensemaking of experience is a process of articulation of signs, through which people are able to perform simultaneously two - only apparently antinomical - operations: distancing from the here-and-now of experience and at the same time living in the present time “forgetting” that signs are being used to think, act and connect (Valsiner 2014).

The Modalization of Sense of Agency. The Development of a Semiotic Perspective on the Agency

In the light of such a semiotic perspective, we want to address and focus the role of specific signs in the function of agency constructing: modal operators. *Modal operators* can be

considered as semiotic devices that express categories of modality such as: necessity, possibility, impossibility, will, capability, knowledge, obligation, permission, constraints, opportunities, etc. These symbolic devices are provided mainly – but not exclusively - by the languages and the cultural systems. Modal categories are commonly declined and articulated through narrative processes and contribute to the development of the sense of agency. We define these particular forms of semiotic mediations as Modal Articulation Processes (MAP) (De Luca Picione and Freda 2016; De Luca Picione et al. 2017, 2018a). Their use in our sensemaking process allows us to configure:

- One’s own subjective lived sense of experience.
- A possible (among many other) orientation and organization of experience in a spatial-temporal frame.
- The attribution of sense to the role of other social actors that are invoked in the narration.

Classification approaches, taxonomic constructions, identification of ideal prototypes, and definition of average statistical trends, fail to capture the variability, temporal dynamics and contextual aspects of sensemaking processes (Molenaar 2004; Molenaar and Campbell 2009; Valsiner 2014; Salvatore 2016; Salvatore & Valsiner 2010; Neuman 2003; De Luca Picione 2015). Indeed the semiotic mediation does not only refer to the fixed meaning (namely semantic and referential content) of experience but allows us to construct a sense of the experience (namely an oriented and subjective trajectory enabling and guiding the thinking and the acting) (De Luca Picione and Freda 2014). This theoretical and methodological requirement has been highlighted by many influential contemporary psychologists (Bamberg 2011; Brockmeier 2009; Bruner 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Harré 2011; Hermans 2002; Kaës 2013, 2014; Neuman 2003; Valsiner 2001, 2014; Salvatore 2016; Salvatore & Freda 2011; Ribeiro and Gonçalves 2011). A semiotic-psychological perspective based on solid and clear theoretical and methodological assumptions (Salvatore 2016) is an useful tool for studying the sensemaking process of agency, semiotic process of development, and constructing narratives of critical events, construction of one’s own sense of identity in a multi-perspective and dialogical way (Bakhtin, 1984; Hermans 2002).

We have found in semiotic and psychological literature relevant antecedents about the role of modality in the sensemaking processes. We discussed them elsewhere (De Luca Picione et al. 2018a). Here we want to underline that beyond the fields of analytical philosophy and formal logics, modalities can be an issue of fecund and relevant interest in many human disciplines (e.g. in the field of linguistics, semiotics, cultural psychology, dynamic psychology, etc.).

Let’s consider for example the case of Greimas. He studied intensely narrative processes in a semiotic perspective, providing a solid semiotic theory about modality. He showed that modal categories constitute the emergence of the subjectivity in each intersubjective discourse at level of narrative construction (Greimas 1976). In his theoretical and analytical system, modalities are expressions of emotional and passionate states. He takes in account four modalities: “wanting”, “having-to”, “being-able-to”, and “knowing”. An agentive process is conceptualized by him as a competence to perform a modal oriented-chain: from the wanting-to-do, having-to-do, knowing-how-to-do towards the being-able-to-do.

We find an interesting implicit use of the modality in Kurt Lewin's model of topological psychology (1936). Such a model provides a frame to analyse the human development and social interaction over time. Each psychic scenario of interaction is showed as a region with a specific valence. The valence expressly represents the affective field of the experience and it can be positive or negative. Furthermore each valence is loaded with a certain strengths, whose orientation can be favorable or opposed. The strengths find their sources in psychic tensions – for example, desires, needs, intentions, expectations, etc. Tensions are directed to be resolved defining goals and purposes. In such interesting system, Kurt Lewin uses very often modal periphrasis– as for example, “*it is forced to*”, “*it cannot*”, “*It is obligatory*” – in order to define the psychological processes in terms of strengths, forces and tendencies.

In recent years, in his fruitful enterprise of renewing and refining cultural psychology in a semiotic and dynamic key, Jaan Valsiner (2001) argued that «the four basic stem concepts [I AM, I MUST, I WANT, I WILL] can be combined in many ways, and each can grow a complex structure of meanings around their primary role-binding of predicates. It is in this relationship of the stem concepts that social norms become inserted-either prohibiting or enforcing an action» (Valsiner 2014, p. 21).

Harré's positioning theory (Harré 2011) also addresses the cultural and discursive dimension of social actors through the use of modal categories. The construction of intersubjective positioning is reached by means of definition of *duties* (in terms of prohibitions, imperatives, commitments, promises, etc.) and *rights* (authorizations, permissions, opportunities, etc.). The interdependency and development of social positionings is realized starting from the cultural and social context where the discursive interactions are performed.

In order to reformulate the notion of agency in psychoanalytical terms, Caston (2011) analyzes the function of modal verbal expressions in their relationship with the construction of agency. In fact, he recognizes the important role these verbal expressions of inhibitions, constraints and impulses play in constructing one's own sense of agency.

The physician, psychologist and philosopher von Weizsäcker (1956) explicitly recognized the relevance of the modal categories in the treatment and the relationships with the patients, focusing on their transformative qualities. He identified five categories that he defined “*pathic*” (from the Greek *pathos*, passion) due to their profoundly emotional nature. They also have a fundamental importance in the temporal construction of the agentive experience.

Functions of Modal Articulation Processes (MAP)

Summing up, we consider modal operators as all of the symbolic devices that connect the narrative construction of agency with the sense of necessity, possibility, impossibility, contingency as well as knowledge, ability, will, obligation, permission, etc. We consider modalities as a constant support on which the sense of action is based (Bertrand 2002; Brockmeier 2009; Caston, 2011; Greimas 1976; Valsiner 2001). In our ordinary language (Harré 1959), in our discursive transitions and in our narrations, we find our agentive experience is imbued by modal operators. Generally they are represented by modal verbs - namely that particular categories of verbs that express

duty, power, will, knowledge, etc. - and by all of the adverbial, periphrastic expressions that convey modal meanings (e.g., “probably”, “unexpectedly”, “necessarily”, or “he wants to ...”, “you hope that ...”, “I feel obliged to ...”, “he wishes to achieve his aim ...”, “I doubt when there are too many obstacles ...”). By acquiring a language within a specific cultural ground, people learn to use large modal repertoires composed of verbs, locutions, periphrastics, etc.

We define the way of narratively linking different modal operators as the “Modal Articulation Process” (MAP) (De Luca Picione et al. 2017, 2018a). With this notion, we mean the way of constructing the narrative sense of one’s agentive experience through the interconnection of modal operators in a contextual, dynamic, intersubjective way. Linguistically, a modal operator is seen as a predicate that modifies another following predicate. A modal predicate - introducing a connotative sense - opposes a descriptive predicate (Bertrand 2002).

Everyone uses modal expressions in his/her narratives, speeches, interpretations, explanations and arguments. By using and articulating them in a specific way, people are able to make sense of their actions far beyond a purely descriptive level, thus succeeding in subjectivizing the sense of experience, contextualizing the action and negotiating it intersubjectively. An example can help us to grasp easily the function of modalities in order to configure the sense of the action: if a person states “*I study / I studied / I am going to study, etc.*”, we are confronted with a simplistic description of a statement of fact that is performed by a linear construction of the sentence. On the contrary, if a person constructs her agentive configuration by means of a modal verb – therefore she says: “*I must / I’m obliged to / I will / I have opportunity to / I can / I am able to / etc., study*” -, we are faced with subjective implication in the constructing a link between action and the way of interpreting the action. Modal articulation allows us to perform a more complex sensemaking process beyond a merely semantic referential content and the simple process of describing the action.

Focusing on central and semiotic properties of the MAP, we underline three points as essential in the semiotic construction of the agency:

- the relationships between affective and cognitive processes
- the intersubjective positionings
- the construction of the temporality of the experience.

In this sense, we figure out three specific functions by mediation of modal articulation processes in the narrative sensemaking of agency: connection, mediation and vectorialization (Fig. 2) (De Luca Picione et al. 2018a):

- 1) **The function of connection between affective and cognitive processes.** The neuroscience researches (Damasio 1999) on motivational systems (Panksepp 1998) and affective regulation (Gross and Thompson 2007; Gross and Barrett 2011) identify the matrix of actions in affective processes. Indeed, this seems a very old acquisition in the field of psychoanalysis and cultural psychology. Affective/embodied activation predisposes action and forms the basis of every symbolization process (from basic bodily forms of pleasure/displeasure to more sophisticated forms mediated through culture and language – Valsiner 2014, Valsiner 2001; Salvatore 2016; De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017). Modal

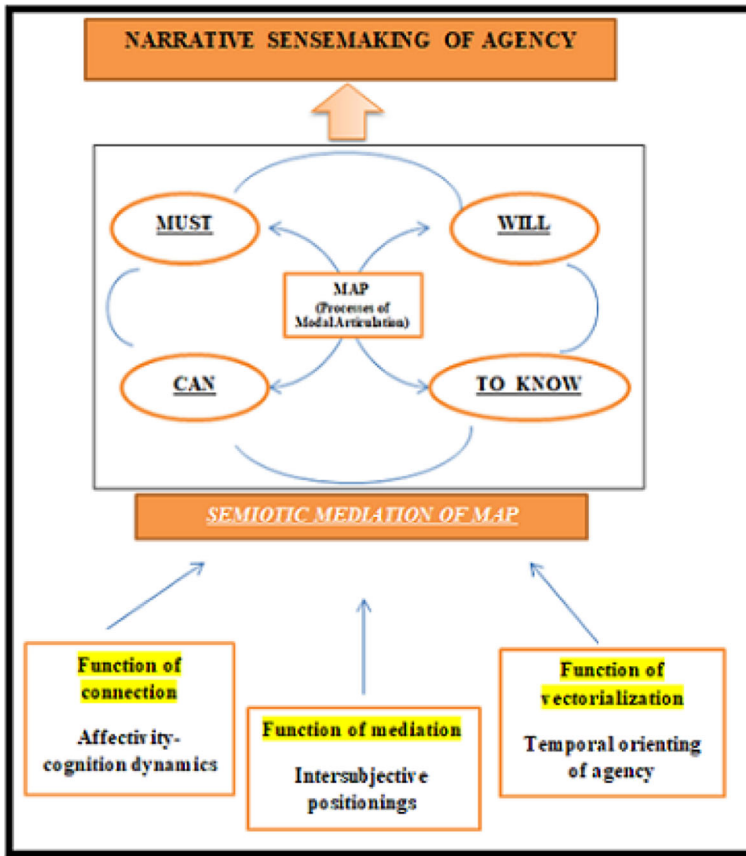


Fig. 2 Modal articulation process and narration

categories of necessity, power, will, knowledge, etc. play an important function in the semiotic mediation process and “affect” the way in which feelings are narratively symbolized. Modal devices are semiotic mediators of affective processes.

- 2) **The function of mediation in intersubjective positionings.** The modalization of experience allows a subject to define her relations with the other social actors (Harré 2011). Let us think how a person is able to assume various social roles and develop her agency in different ways during a same day: as a parent, as a son, as a brother/sister, as an employee, as a volunteer, as a friend, as a partner, as a leading player of a soccer team, etc. Each person acquires a wide cultural modal repertoire characterized by a dynamic and interactive nature, which is flexible and alters the meaning of obligations/permissions, constraints/resources, needs/possibilities according to experience and action. Positionings are culturally connoted and regulated in terms of duties/rights, obligations/permissions, prescriptions/opportunities, etc. They do not only concern the stability, rigidity and fixity of these positionings, but also the lively, flexible and contextual plasticity of modal positionings (Harré 2011).
- 3) **The function of vectorization between agency and temporality.** Modal operators enable the construction of temporal frames within which actions are oriented. Modal operators are useful semiotic devices for constructing the temporal frames

of sense of agency, re-elaborating past experiences, imagining possible worlds, formulating counter-factual hypotheses, promoting or hindering the development of sense of agency, creating new ways of achieving. Human experience works by means of temporal frames that organize and guide actions and social relations. Yet simultaneously the same human experience concurs to change, modify and reconfigure temporal frames. A future event can be possible, unpredictable or necessary, but when it occurs then its modal attribution changes and the sense of experience is transformed. Modal articulation is a powerful way to organize the intricate relation between one's own experience and the time.

Requests for Reconfiguration of Sense of Agency: Ordinary and Critical Discontinuities

Modal articulation processes constitute a dynamic semiotic scaffolding in order to orient the agency. The adopted semiotic frame leads us to consider how the human agency is sustained by a dynamic modal articulation (see Valsiner's notion of dynamic transitory hierarchies of signs– Valsiner 2001, 2014; De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017) that allow to a person of dealing with the heterogeneity, the changeability of the life and the unpredictability of events. Actually, balances and states of equilibrium are never definitive; the exceptions and the gaps from the expectations of future scenarios are the downside of our seeking for stability, customs and continuity.

Consider a very trivial and common episode of daily life: *'it is hard to seek for a parking every morning when I go to work'*. We can imagine there is an articulation of various modal operators that consent to find a good solution among to be in time and to be corrected according the street code. A habitual organization of actions (i.e. to reach the job place) is organized and scaffolded by a flexible modal mediation.

For example:

- Every day I must reach my office → I can choice to get the bus or my car:
- a) Today there is the sun and I desire (I want) to go by bus.
- b) Today there is an important meeting with the boss (Is it *necessary*? Am I *obliged*? *Can* it represent an *opportunity*?, etc.), I cannot risk to be in late, *I'm forced* to choice my car to reach the appointment and furthermore *I have to leave* early.
- c) Today my wife *needs* my car, I must go to work by bus.

In general, we can observe that there are multitudinous normative turning points (varying in extension and intensity) commonly occurring in our life. Many turning points have transitional valence in the human process of development. Consider the very common case of change of job, marriage, transition to university (Gomes et al. 2018; Esposito et al. 2017), getting parent, and so on. Every transition (Zittoun 2006) in one's own continuity of life introduces - in our opinion - a request of reconfiguration of modal articulation, namely a novelty in the semiotic mediation of experience. Habitual ways of narrating are not

anymore enough and adequate, and a novel sense of agency is to be re-articulated in the light of new transformations and new contexts (Natale et al. 2016; Arcidiacono et al. 2016).

The idea of request of reconfiguration the modalization of sense of agency is strictly linked to notion of canonicity breach (Bruner 1990). The sensemaking is dynamized by narrative processes that are called to deal with the discontinuity of one's own sense of agency, inasmuch the system of relations is changed in the context of the experience. It is interesting to note how in moments of transformation, criticality or the interruption of one's experiential continuity, the process of sensemaking of one's own experience may be hindered and it needs significant reconfiguration to support the development and transformation of agency and identity (Martino et al. 2015). These are specific circumstances where the narration of one's life experience shows one's vulnerability or ability to develop new modal articulation processes (Marsico and Tateo 2017).

Anyway modal sensemaking processes are present both in situation of continuity/routine and in case of discontinuity/rupture. In the former case, modal operators are silent and implicit semiotic devices that regulate and maintain the level of stability of transactions between subject and her social/symbolic/material environment. While in the latter, modal operators become salient. They are required to be used in a new and creative way, since an occurred turning point has altered old trajectories of stability and equilibrium. In those circumstances one's own modal articulation can be focused by explicit and reflexive narrative sensemaking processes. By means of re-elaborating one's own modalized experience, a person is able to re-organize her own critical experiences, to think and to reflect, to act and to interact with others, to pursue her goals, to learn, to share and to communicate. Modal articulation processes are sophisticated ways of semiotizing one's own experience and to reach a never-ending dynamic balance.

Furthermore, processes of modal re-articulations can be particularly relevant in stressful events, e.g. mourning, diagnosis of illness, journeys, loss of work, end of an important relationship, traumatic experiences, witnessing an act of violence, etc. Those turning points are particularly significant crisis of people's lives during which subjective experiences are transformed (in terms of affections, perceptions, values, interaction, etc.), intersubjective positionings are changed and temporal horizons are put in jeopardy (De Luca Picione and Freda 2016; De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017; Español et al. 2018; Frank 1998; Martino and Freda 2016; Simão 2001; Troisi 2018). These transformations may require an extensive and deep modal re-articulation process and reconfiguration of the sense of one's agency. That re-elaboration is an essential and delicate process in terms of development for the people involved, for their relational systems and for reconstructing the sense of their agentive experience.

In a previous our research aimed at studying modal narrative sensemaking processes in illness conditions, we have observed the experience may be narratively reorganized too rigidly according to some fixed modal patterns, or unlike it may be too fragmented or confusing due to lack of modal organization (De Luca Picione et al. 2017, 2018a). We have considered that modal articulation processes can be displayed as subjective and singular configurations on a wide continuum. That continuum goes from a very rigid configuration (for example some narrators always use only one and always the same modal category to speak about their actions) to a pulverized and fragmented articulation wherein there is not any form of meaningful articulation. Furthermore, we have found that in some narrations there were not any traces of modalization, while in the other illness stories we find little modal articulation, and in others there was a flourishing development in modal terms of the

experience of illness. Between a pole of rigidity and a pole of fragmentation, in the medium positions of this modal continuum we collocated those specific modal configurations that appeared dynamic, rich, flexible and contextualized. These narrators were able to differentiate both several relational domains of their lives and the temporal frames of their experiences. Note that we are not referring just to the contents of the narrations, but the modal architecture that builds and scaffolds the sense of agency. In this sense, we do not support criteria of normativeness and adequateness for modal articulation processes, since each person realizes subjective semiotic synthesis.

Let's consider for example a narration about the experiences of illness. A breast cancer woman of 44 years told us in a deep interview that since her diagnosis reception she is not able anymore to cope with everyday family: "*since that bad day the doctor said I have a breast cancer, I cannot organize and plan my life. I feel myself as blocked, I cannot see my image in the mirror... I cannot follow my children and my husband in our family habits*". A sudden notice of "bad diagnosis" strongly affects her relationship with her body and her relational networks due to an interrupted, locked, short-circuited sense of one's experience. There is a salient modal form that pervades the illness experience: "*I cannot*".

Therefore, an occurring disease (in its various stages of diagnosis, therapeutic paths, prognosis, communication of one's illness with family and friends etc.) can represent a very traumatic experience (Savarese et al. 2018; De Luca Picione et al. 2017) which creates a break in the continuity of sensemaking processes that to date have supported identity, one's relationship with one's own body and self-image, sense of agency and social relationships with others. Reconstructing a new developmental trajectory is an actual psychological challenge that involves many resources, requires long re-elaboration and limit recognition.

If we consider more generally the case of chronic illness, we see various issues are implied in terms of a modal re-elaboration of experience:

- the task of re-constructing a sense of health and maintaining one's own wellbeing despite one's permanent illness condition;
- the issue of fostering and enhancing patient autonomy in the management of her health care;
- the development of physician/patient/family relationships that are likely to last for many years (Dicé et al. 2018a, b).

A chronic illness deeply affects a patient's agency, by narrowing the temporal horizon of future scenarios only focused on actual care, needs and constrictions and eliminating any other possibilities. Patient and her family developmental processes very often are blocked and only focused on the daily care of the patient. In that case, the sensemaking processes of the patient's agency and her caregivers are often interrupted and that may hinder possibility of development (when the sense of "*cannot*" prevails over any other form of agency) or they are fixed at a level of full obedience by the sense of "*must*", namely, when the relationship with the disease is totally mediated by medical necessity and healthcare needs) (De Luca Picione et al. 2018b).

Coming back to a more general point of view on the issue of human agency, in the psychological literature we find many psychological constructs (for example *Locus of control*, *Empowerment*, *Self-efficacy*, *Coping*, etc.) about the issue of how people face their own experiences (daily, normative or critical).. They have an implicit (often it is

not implicit but self-evident!) modal construction that generally refers to the centrality and cardinality of the modal categories of power (“*I can*”, “*I’m able to...*”) and will (“*I want to...*”, “*I desire*”), namely they risk to exclusively deal with an individual’s capability of coping with unpleasant events, re-attributing meanings in positive terms to consolidate the perception of effectiveness, control, confidence and optimism in achieving goals through one’s own actions.

According to our understanding, human action and its reconfiguration is not guided solely by will (by its strength, weakness or absence), but also by the configuration of experience within a complex modal dialogue requiring affective, cognitive, cultural and social resources, by re-considering will and ability, sense of necessity and contingency, impossibilities and possibilities, resources and constraints, obligations and permits, prohibitions and opportunities. The MAP construct brings in salience the richness and variability of the articulation processes and the modal regulation of the agentic experience.

Final Considerations

One of the focuses of our article has been to point out that MAP construct has the potential to take into account the current issues concerning the subjective and singular ways of narrative sensemaking of the agency as well as its contextual, social and cultural dimensions.

Summing up the three functions of modal articulation processes (connection, mediation, vectorialization), we can write in a formula:

$$\text{SM of Ag} = fm\diamond(\text{Sx, Oth, C-Obj})$$

The sensemaking (SM) of Agency (Ag) is a semiotic dynamic process that is transformed in the time according a function of modal articulation (*fm*) that configures the relation between subjectivity (Sx), otherness (Oth) and a temporary contextual object of pertinence (C-Obj).

Some relevant implications can be put in salience. The MAP notion concerns combinations of various modal operators rather than a single one. For this reason, we address the specific aspect of ‘articulation’, namely a progressive concatenation of various modal forms. In principle, this combination is an open and recursive system capable of responding to contextual and intersubjective variations. In this regard, such a construct is not aimed at determining the taxonomic evaluation criteria of the modal articulation processes in reference to exact/wrong, good/bad, adaptive/disadvantageous, normal/devious categories.

It is also relevant to recall that the epistemological and theoretical ground of this construct is not located in the field of modal logics in the strict sense (Linsky 1971). Modal logics are based on a formal and objectivizing approach. In these disciplines you find very strict meaning of modal categories: deontic modalities are about obligations and permissions; temporal modalities deal with the value of truthiness of a preposition in the time; epistemic modalities treats the certainty of a preposition; alethic modalities concerns the possibility of the truth of a sentence. In terms of logics, scholars are engaged in individuating correct reasoning, in detecting and in eliminating errors and antinomies.

On the contrary, MAP concerns the affective, intersubjective and temporal ways of using modal categories in the symbolization, construction and development of agency in people’s

daily lives rather than the rigorous formalization of modalities. We can consider that the process of modal articulation is a way to deal with the inherent ambivalence of human beings (Valsiner 2014). The development of the notion of MAP is aimed at studying and comprehending the semiotic mediation process that a person is capable of organizing in the direction, development and transformation of the sense of one's own action. At the moment, this is the opportunity but also the limit of the state of this construct. In the future trajectories of our research, we intend to develop clearer criteria of use and analyses of MAP in the narrations. The scope of MAP is potentially very wide and many domains of experience could be dealt, but we acknowledge that many efforts are needed to implement it.

We think three central aspect deserve to be deepened. Firstly, MAP theoretically implies that human agency is about the knotting of many levels: subjective affect/cognition relations, intersubjective fields and temporal frames. The process of human agency is detached from the level of pure reaction and of instinctual behaviors. Therefore modal articulation processes are not always linked to the past events according a cause-effect relation, but it is oriented towards the future as well. That relevant propriety deserves to be further deepened and specified better both in reference to the habits and critical circumstances. Secondly, MAP allow us to decline both a general level and an idiographic level: a psychological general model of sensemaking of agency can enable us to follow and to analyze singular, contextual and local processes of sensemaking. Therefore the challenge is put in a productive dialogue a theoretical and abstract level with methodologically clear guidelines of analysis. Thirdly, MAP invite us to consider the level of flexibility vs rigidity of psychological processes. The MAP pertains the way according which the sensemaking process is able to regulate dynamically past experiences, present contextual constraints/resources, desired future scenarios. Anyway the flexibility is not only a quantitative matter (i.e., how many times do modal operators change in a narration? How many modal occurrences are there? Etc.), but it is qualitative as well: a) there can be some modalities that have a major implication compared with others; b) a modality could temporary put in stand-by under specific conditions; c) some modalities may be just implicit in a narration while other explicit modalities may be overestimated. Future developments of MAP cannot but take into account all these challenging and stimulating issues.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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