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**Explaining with Intentional Omissions**

Determining the human activity that social processes consist in is a central task for the philosophy of the social sciences. This paper asks: which conception of agency arising from contemporary action theory is the most suitable for social science explanation? It is argued that a movement-centered, Davidsonian picture of agency is not suitable for explaining certain social processes such as strikes and boycotts because, instead of intentional bodily movements, they are explained by the intentional omissions of agents. I propose that instead of intentional bodily movements, social processes are better explained by phenomena in which an agent is taking an active relation both to her mental or bodily processes as well as to what is happening around her. Thus, to fully explain social processes, a comprehensive theory of agency that can account for intentional actions and intentional omissions and a conception of agency that includes both materialist and volitionalist aspects is needed.

keywords:

intentional omissions, action, movement, effort, omission, activity, social process

**Explaining with Intentional Omissions**

1. **Introduction**

Although there is no consensus on the definition of intentional action in the philosophy of action, it has traditionally been taken to be an intentional bodily movement of an agent. Davidson originally defined intentional action as a bodily movement that is intentional under some description (1980, p. 50) and, following the same tradition, the concept of agency has been used to denote the sum of the intentional movements of agents (e.g., Dretske, 1988).

Movement-centered views of agency, however, are not the only views of agency in philosophy of action. Ford distinguishes movement-centered conception of agency, *corporealism*, from *volitionalism*, according to which agency is a power to perform a mental act instead of a movement, and *materialism*, according to which agency is a power to transact with something or someone (2013, pp. 600-601). In contemporary action theory, movement-centered views of agency have been contested by, among others, by Clarke (2014), according to whom, intentional omissions of agents that do not necessarily include movements should equally belong to the scope of agency. Intentional omissions challenge corporealism, because in them, the agent interacts with the world through intentionally *not* performing an action.

In the philosophy of the social sciences, the kind of human activities that social processes consist in has been of interest. In the foundational texts of analytical sociology, it has been assumed that social processes can be brought down to the level of intentional actions of agents following Davidson’s theory of action. In *The Oxford Handbook of* *Analytic Sociology*, Hedström and Bearman point out that actors, their actions, and their relations to one another explain social change – and explanations of social change should be formulated in these terms (2009, pp. 5-6). In analytical sociology, philosophy of action has thus been used to conceptualize the building blocks of social processes. Davidson’s theory of action formed the basis of Hedström’s desire-belief-opportunity (DBO) model (2005)[[1]](#footnote-2) — even though in practice, the relationship between analytical sociology and the DBO model is more ambiguous.

According to Hedström, “through their actions, actors make society ‘tick’, and without their actions, social processes would come to a halt” (2005, p. 5). Pierre Demeulenaere says that “what is important in social scientific mechanisms is reference to the active level, which is to the way in which social change is produced” (2011, pp. 23-24). But how precisely should we think of social activity? Precisely what kind of activities create social change?

In the following, I aim to find out whether a movement-centered view of human agency is suitable for social scientific explanation as a full description of human agentive phenomena. I apply the views arising from the current literature on intentional omissions to philosophy of social science: What precisely do social processes consist in if not actions?

I argue that movement-centered views of agency are not suitable for social science explanation firstly because social processes in the social sciences are seen as consisting of both the intentional omissions of agents as well as their intentional actions and secondly because action theory has distanced from movement-centered views of agency, partly due to the novel attention on intentional omissions. Further, I argue that philosophers of social science should understand agency as the capacity to influence one’s behavior, be it positive or negative, and through this influence on behavior, the general capacity to influence society. I point toward embracing a combination of volitionalist and materialist conceptions of agency in social science explanation, because social processes are better explained by phenomena in which an agent takes an active relation both to her mental or bodily processes as well as actively interacting with what is happening around her.

First, I draw from the philosophy of intentional omissions in arguing that many social processes consist in intentional omissions instead of intentional actions. However, I do not mean to contest the most prominent definitions of intentional action, nor do I mean to claim that intentional omissions *are* actions. My purpose here is only to question whether social processes can be explained by only appealing to intentional movements because, in the social sciences, social processes are commonly explained with intentional omissions and because contemporary action theory has started to take other agentive phenomena – mental actions and intentional omissions – equally seriously as belonging to the scope of intentional agency.

In action theory, whether the causal theory of action can incorporate intentional omissions has been discussed (Sartorio, 2009; Clarke, 2010; Shepherd, 2014). Less attention, however, has been focused on what intentional omissions mean for philosophy of social science. In what follows, I set out to form a coherent account of an action-theoretical notion of human activity that would be more useful for social scientific explanation than one that treats societal activity as intentional bodily movement. I follow Hedström’s (2005, p. 35) three criteria of such theory of action that can provide the foundation for explanatory sociological theories: it should be (1) psychologically and sociologically plausible, (2) as simple as possible, and (3) able to explain action in meaningful intentional terms. I assume that such a notion will be particularly useful when applying action theory to social scientific explanation. First, however, I will clarify the notion of intentional omission and show that, in practice, social scientists often explain phenomena with intentional omissions, not only with intentional actions.

**2. What are intentional omissions?**

Intentional omissions have lately attracted more serious attention in philosophy of action. Here, I will make some necessary distinctions to clarify the notion of intentional omission based on the current literature in action theory.

By omission[[2]](#footnote-3), I mean an agent not performing a certain action. Any omission can be intentional or unintentional. Even though the number of actions that each agent omits every second is infinite, only a few of them are *intentional* omissions. For instance, while writing this passage, I am not opening the door to the balcony, answering the ringing phone, or going to the gym. Among these omissions, only my not answering the ringing phone is an *intentional omission*, if it is intended on my part that I do not answer the ringing phone, and the options of opening the door to the balcony or going to the gym do not even cross my mind.

Fischer distinguishes a narrow conception of omission from a wide conception of omission (1997, p. 46). According to the wide conception of omission,

“whenever a person does not do something, X, he fails in the relevant sense to do it, and he omits to do it. Thus, we are all now failing to stop the Earth’s rotation (and omitting to stop the Earth’s rotation). Omission to do X (according to the wide conception) need not require explicit deliberation about X, and it need not require the ability to do X.” (Fischer 1997, p. 46.)

Following this wide conception of omission, *intentional* omissions are a more finite class of omissions that are voluntary, under the guidance of the agent, and something the agent is at some point aware of *not* *doing*. Similar phenomena have been called in the philosophical literature non-doings, refrainings, forbearings, negative actions, and negative acts. Following Sartorio (2009, Clarke (2010; 2014), and Shepherd (2014) however, I call them here intentional omissions.

Importantly for the social science explanation, intentional omissions are more than mere mental events. In an intentional omission, an agent not only intends to not perform the action in question, but the action is also successfully left undone by the agent. The agent can intend to not vote, not take part in decision making, not go to work. All these omitted actions would be happenings in a social world, not only in the agent’s mind.

Intentional omissions are also not necessarily instances of an agent staying still. I can, for instance, intentionally omit to answer a question and continue talking about something else. This is because intentional omissions are defined by what is *not* done, not by what is done instead or simultaneously by the agent. While an agent intentionally does not perform an action, she can nevertheless commit to several intentional actions at the same time. An agent can raise a hand to vote, talk to a person sitting next to her, and intentionally not go to the bathroom – all at the same time.

Neither are intentional omissions merely a matter of a lack of positive motivation to do something. In an intentional omission, an agent does not just lack the beliefs, desires, and opportunities to perform some action; it is precisely the *omission* of the agent that is intentional in intentionally omitting.

I assume in the following that intentional omissions are not actions. Even though there is disagreement about the nature of intentional action, at least in the so-called standard story of action, intentional action is seen as consisting of an intentional bodily movement. However, a certain intentional bodily movement is precisely what is lacking in an intentional omission. The Davidsonian theory of action has been seen as insufficient to incorporate intentional omissions (e.g., Sartorio, 2009). At the same time the literature on *asymmetries* between actions and omissions has been growing both when it comes to responsibility and when it comes to causality (e.g., Buckareff, 2018; Clarke, 2011, 2012a, and 2012b; Ginet, 2004; Moore, 2010; Sartorio, 2005; 2016; Shepherd, 2014). It is largely accepted that there is more to agency than intentional bodily action, and that intentional omissions along with mental actions need to be better accounted for by a full theory of agency[[3]](#footnote-4). However, what intentional omissions mean for social science explanation has not been studied.

**3. Intentional omissions in the social sciences**

Even though in philosophy of action, the notion of intentional action has traditionally been limited to intentional bodily movement, this has not constrained the social scientists in studying human social behavior beyond intentional bodily movement. In discussions of strikes, boycotts, conscientious objections, and passive resistance, an agent’s intentional non-performance of an action is often described as intentional activity. The social scientists commonly explain social processes with intentional omissions.

By explanation, I mean an answer to a ‘why’ question (e.g., Hedström, 2005, p. 2). The main factors of social mechanisms, according to Hedström, are action-relevant entities and activities, and the way in which they are linked to one another (2005, p. 14). A realistic action theory is useful here, according to Hedström, because an “explanatory theory must refer to the actual mechanisms at work, not to those that could have been at work in a fictional world invented by the theorist.” (2005, p. 3.)

One example of explaining with intentional omissions can be found from the social science of vaccine refusals. When an agent decides not to get vaccinated, what happens is essentially an intentional omission; the agent intends to not take a vaccine and succeeds in following this intention. In the social science of vaccine refusals, the reasoning behind this behavior is studied. In health sociology, for instance, the background motivations of vaccine refusal are studied. If it is found that people intentionally omit to vaccinate instead of not knowing about the vaccine recommendation, the explanation of the phenomena in question includes intentional omissions and informs the suitable interventions: addressing the reasoning behind intentional omissions not to vaccinate instead of information campaigns.

It would be difficult to explain vaccine refusal as a social process without referring to intentional omissions. Equally, a boycott necessarily entails agents *intentionally not buying* a given company’s products. A strike entails agents *intentionally not working*. A strike can involve actions as well, for instance when an agent informs the officials about the protest, but the necessary condition of a strike is that the agents are intentionally omitting to work. Conscientious objection can include an overt expression of objection, but what is necessary for conscientious objection to succeed is an agent’s intentional omission – not bearing arms.

Not only are social processes occasionally explained through appealing to intentional omissions, not doing something can even be seen as actively interfering in states of affairs in the social sciences. Social movements can arise out of human activities that are essentially intentional omissions. The most famous examples of such omissions are perhaps Mahatma Gandhi’s hunger strike and Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her bus seat.

Why does this discussion benefit from action theoretical notions? How does philosophy of social sciences benefit from a more nuanced picture of agency stemming from the inclusion of intentional omissions? When precisely is action theory of use in social science explanation?

Intentional omissions are liable to numerous confusions in philosophy and the social sciences, partly because they are difficult to distinguish from unintentional omissions from the perspective of an outside observer. It cannot always be known merely from something not being done whether it was intentional on the part of the agent.

Because intentional omissions cannot be directly observed, it may seem that they are not relevant to social science explanation. Yet, in social science explanation, unobservables are often postulated. It is possible that in the social sciences, instances where citizens do not vote or participate are treated as instances of passivity even if they are covert manifestations of agency. In public discussions, omissions of agents are associated with apathy, distrust, disinterest, or ignorance. However, it is an empirical question what happens in each case in which agents are not performing some socially relevant action.

Here, a coherent theory of agency can be useful in social science explanation. Some intentional omissions are very complex phenomena in a society prone to confusion, and in need of understanding in the social sciences. Action theory can provide a neutral vocabulary to study intentional omissions, because in the absence of a non-normative action language of intentional omissions, and other agentive phenomena for that matter, there is a risk of using normative notions that include normative commitments. The descriptive language regarding the phenomena in question paves the way for more objective empirical inquiry. In the case of vaccine refusal, for instance, it has been argued that normative action language may lead to a lack understanding of the phenomena in question, problematic interventions, and limited scope of the ethical questions involved (Kärki, 2022). Instead of normatively loaded notions such as free riding, action theoretical concepts allow for neutral ways to talk about social mechanisms.

So far, it has been argued that social scientists commonly explain phenomena with intentional omissions, and that action theorists commonly include intentional omissions in their views of agency. But if social activity consists of something more than intentional movements, how should we understand social activities in a way that would better fit social scientific explanation? Does social activity require that an agent acts physically, mentally, or both? Which view of agency should a philosopher of social science commit to?

In the following, I set out to uncover what common notion of social activity could coherently incorporate both intentional omissions and intentional actions. The candidates discussed are potential solutions to the problem at hand, that is, finding a common notion of social activity that is both useful for social scientific explanation and does justice to both manifestations of agency — actions and intentional omissions. All these candidates attempt to, or can be used to attempt to, connect intentional omissions and intentional actions under the same notion of social activity.

First, I deal with the Davidsonian notion of agency because it is used in the philosophy of the social sciences and because it is an example of an eliminativist solution to bringing intentional omissions and intentional actions under the same notion of social activity – by eliminating intentional omissions. This view is representative of a movement-centered view of agency.

Then, I deal with the notion of social activity as effort because it is one of the ways in which intentional omissions and intentional actions have been brought under the same notion of activity in the philosophy of action. Mossel’s theory of effort (2009) is selected because it was one of the early attempts to develop a theory of agency that includes intentional omissions, even though Mossel calls them negative actions. This view is representative of volitionalist conceptions of agency and section 5 tests such views of agency in social science explanation.

Thirdly, I have selected Frankfurt’s theory of agency (1988) because it is a specimen of a hierarchical view in which intentional omissions and intentional actions can be brought together under the same notion of social activity - by emphasizing the role that the agent takes to her own inner states and to what is happening around her. This view is representative of a materialist conception of agency and section 6 tests such conceptions of agency for social science explanation through Frankfurt’s theory of agency.

**4. Agency as intentional movement**

How should philosophers of social science incorporate intentional omissions into their notion of social activity so that it is both psychologically plausible and useful for social science explanation? In the following sections, I ask whether a movement-centered view of agency, the notion of effort, or hierarchical views of agency can provide such notions of social activity. First, I will focus on the movement-centered notion of agency stemming from the work of Donald Davidson.

The movement-centered view of agency was already present in the foundational texts of action theory. The question, “what does it mean to act intentionally?” was taken as a question of “what does it mean *to move* intentionally?”. For instance, Wittgenstein originally framed the problem of action theory by asking: “[W]hen ‘I raise my arm,’ my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?” (1953, § 621). Perhaps following this framing of the central question in philosophy of action, philosophers of action historically concentrated on analyzing the intentional *doings* of agents.

Nowadays, in the so-called standard story of action, intentional actions are assumed to be intentional bodily movements of agents (Ford 2013, p. 599; Hornsby, 1999, p. 3). Davidson’s work is seen as representative of the standard story, and according to Davidson, “our primitive actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else, mere movements of the body – these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature” (1980, p. 59). This view is an example of a movement-centered notion of agency. Such a notion of agency focuses on analysing cases in which an agent intentionally moves as representative of agentive phenomena. But is it suitable for the philosophy of social science, so that it is both useful for social science explanation and psychologically plausible?

According to this notion of agency,

(1) social activity consists in *one or more agents moving intentionally, that is, acting.*

In this view, demarcating between social activity and passivity is a matter of finding out whether an agent’s behavior includes intentional movement.

Is this notion of social activity useful to social science explanation? I think not. Intentional omissions are, by definition, ruled out of this scope of social activity, because they do not necessarily include bodily movements. An agent who is standing still is necessarily considered socially inactive. If the social scientist were to follow such a movement-centered notion of agency, social processes in which agents stay still would not be acknowledged as such. We can imagine a military unit standing still and not firing shots at the crowd, disobeying their orders. Their behavior would not be considered as a social activity because no intentional physical movement among the officers occurs. Equally, during a vote, raising one’s hand in support of a given matter would be considered social activity, whereas not raising one’s hand in order to contest that same vote would not.

Intentional omissions are eliminated in this view of agency. According to Davidson, there is nothing in our agency that is essentially negative. Instead, negative manifestations of agency are explained as alternative descriptions of otherwise positive activities. Later, Davidson did acknowledge the existence of negative actions when replying to Bruce Vermazen’s essay on negative actions (see Davidson 1985, pp. 217-218). But even here, he says that there is usually some actual movement that exists when something is not done, and what is negative, is the characterization of the act and not the act itself. An agent can intend to avoid causing a draft by closing a door, for instance (Davidson 1985, pp. 219). Here too he says that “even if negative acts exist, being negative is not a characteristic of the act but of the characterization of the act” (1985, p. 219).

However, Davidson’s later view also has trouble incorporating genuine intentional omissions. The example of avoiding causing a draught by closing a door is not an example of an intentional omission. Instead, it is an intentional action that may also have a negative description. Another similar example, sometimes used in medical ethics, is the case of pulling the plug on a ventilator as intentionally omitting to ventilate a patient. This also a standard case of an intentional *action* because the agent intentionally moves – that is, pulls the plug.

Davidson’s eliminativist views can also be criticized for not being psychologically plausible. People commonly form intentions to perform actions as well as intentions to not perform them (for experimental results of reasoning with intentional omissions, see Khemlani, Bello, Briggs, Harner and Wasylyshyn, 2021). This realism is mirrored in social science explanation. If social activity is conceived as consisting only of intentional bodily movements of agents, many intentional omissions are treated as inactivity by definition. This can be a problem for social science explanation, if no difference between intended omissions and unintended omissions can be made. For instance, in political science it matters a great deal whether citizens are passive or whether they intentionally omit to vote. If intentional omissions are accepted as part of our social agency, the view that treats social processes as consisting only of intentional actions is too narrow. Furthermore, a finer-grained notion of agency is needed to distinguish between social activity and inactivity.

**5. Agency as effort**

According to an alternative view of agency, being active is a matter of an agent taking an active relation to her own body. From the agent’s perspective, taking such an active relation[[4]](#footnote-5) can be perceived, for instance, as a kind of effort.

In such a view,

(2) social activity consists in *one or more agents moving or* *not moving with effort*.

Defining social activity through the notion of effort instead of intentional movement grants that social processes can consist both in intentional actions and in intentional omissions as long as they are effortful. Under this notion of agency, a contra-voter not raising her hand is considered socially active if there is effort involved in her not raising her hand. An agent effortlessly omitting to raise her hand, on the other hand, is not considered socially active.

Benjamin Mossel (2009), among others, has defended the view that an agent is active when her doing or not doing a certain thing is effortful. According to Mossel, “a person is active, if and only if, she makes an effort, no matter how small, which consists in sustaining and controlling the bodily and mental events required for what she intends to do” (2009, p. 309). In Mossel’s view, staying still can be considered equally active intentional bodily activity, if it is effortful. A weightlifter holding a weight above her head is holding still while being active, since there is bodily and mental effort involved in the process.

In this conception of agency, an agent is active in making an effort to sustain or control the mental and bodily events that are required to carry out her intentions. Through effort, the agent is taking an active relation to her own body. This view of social activity acknowledges that both the weightlifter and the contra-voter are taking an active stance toward their bodies even in the absence of intentional movement.

But what does it mean to expend effort on one’s body in an intentional omission? One way for an agent to do so is to prevent an urge to perform some action from being effective. When refraining from smoking, for instance, an agent can expend effort in relation to her own bodily urge to smoke by internally preventing it from being effective[[5]](#footnote-6).

Perhaps following this intuition, intentional omissions in the action theoretical literature have sometimes been treated as instances of preventing something from happening. Myles Brand (1971) originally defined refraining from doing something as physically preventing movements from occurring. So, for example, in straining a muscle to keep his hand still, a policeman refrains from shooting a fleeing youth (Brand 1971, p. 45).

The problem with views that define intentional omissions through this kind of physical effort is that, as Mossel (2009, p. 322) has pointed out, an agent does not usually have to struggle with her own body parts in order to guide them unless she is suffering from a rare neurological illness. When intentionally not performing some action, we can mentally prevent ourselves from performing actions as well. Physically preventing oneself from performing an action is a different process than mentally inhibiting an urge to act. Preventing an urge might also be mental and physical at the same time.

Assuming that effort to not do something can be mental as well as physical (or a combination of such processes), does the notion of effort provide us with a suitable notion of social agency that is both useful for social science explanation and psychologically plausible?

I think not. The problem is that defining social activity through the notion of effort is that it excludes merely deliberate intentional omissions that nevertheless do not require effort from the agent. Such intentional omissions are still considered social activities in the social sciences. For the social sciences, what matters is that the behavior is intentional, not whether it requires effort from the agent. An agent can omit to perform a movement intentionally yet effortlessly. For instance, a conscientious objector intentionally not bearing arms does not have to suppress murderous urges to be socially active. An agent refusing to vote might not struggle with mental or physical urges to vote, but the not voting can nevertheless be intentional on her part. Some intentional omissions require very little, if any, effort – especially when they become habitual.

Not all intentional omissions seem to be instances of effortful omission; people intend not to vote without any inner conflict necessarily present. For the notion of agency to be both psychologically plausible and suitable for social science explanation, such cases must also be included. Agency in social science explanation should cover more than effortful struggles with our bodies or minds. Agency as effort would not help us distinguish effortless yet intentional behavior from mere passivity. If, however, we wish to develop a notion of being active that includes all deliberate intentional omissions, agency as effort is too narrow.

Also, in Mossel’s view (2009, p. 316), the effort involved is itself a positive action that is distinguished from the negative action itself. Even though active omissions necessarily require effort, effort cannot be part of the omission itself; otherwise it would be a positive action (Mossel 2009, p. 307). So, for instance, an alcoholic’s effort not to drink is causally prior to the actual negative action of refraining from drinking (Mossel 2009, p. 317). The problem with this view is that it is not easy to distinguish effort from the intentional omission itself. Instead, the intentional omission is often intentional precisely because the agent is exerting effort to not do something. The effort may also be simultaneous with the omission. Instead, intentional omissions are distinguished from unintentional ones through their mental components, such as intending or deciding. These mental components are precisely what make the omission intentional. So, in the end, Mossell’s view of negative actions may ultimately widen the scope of positive action to include mental efforts instead of providing us with a notion of agency that includes both intentional actions and intentional omissions.

To conclude, struggles with urges are not all there is to intentional omissions, nor are they what the social sciences deal with when they address social activities. To be intentional, however, intentional omissions must include some mental activity. This activity does not necessarily have to be mental or physical effort; it can also be an instance of intending, deciding, planning, or at least recognizing the possibility of an action left undone. What is needed is that the agent’s mental action is connected to the action not done. She plans to not perform an action *φ,* for instance.

To recognize this, it can be argued that,

(3) social activity consists in *one or more agents engaging in some mental activity related to doing or not doing something*.

This definition, however, is too wide, because it does not distinguish mere *planning* to act or omit from actually *executing* intentions to act or omit. Intentional omissions are not just mental exercises, but in them, the mental activity is connected to not doing a certain thing. As Mossell points out (2009, p. 311), negative actions must make an external difference, at least potentially. They do not necessarily have to make an external difference, however, because, for instance, an agent can intentionally omit to close a window when someone else ends up closing it instead. Volitionalist conceptions of agency that center on the role of mental states in agentive phenomena have trouble with acknowledging the worldly elements of agency, which are central to social science explanation. Purely mental intentional omissions, such as refraining from thinking about John, can be accounted for by mental activities. However, the intentional omissions that are of interest here, those that are the building blocks of social processes, are not only about the agent’s relation to her own mental states. They are crucially about the agent’s relation to what is happening around her. In the next section, this aspect, which is considered in materialist conceptions of agency, is analysed more closely.

**5. Agency as making a difference**

In the previous section, it was found that volitionalist conceptions of agency that center on the agent’s relation to her own mental states are not enough to account for agency when intentionally omitting in a way that is useful for social science explanation because they do not include how the relevant mental states are connected to the agent’s doing or not doing certain things, and, through her actions or omissions, how she contributes to happenings around her. Which conception of agency could incorporate the relation between the agent and what is happening around her? Next, I will test how Frankfurt’s two-layered notion of agency can account for the agent’s relation to her own bodily and mental events as well as to the events happening around her – the latter being central to social science explanation. First, however, I will untangle interfering, allowing, and preventing in the case of intentional omissions. Perhaps this old puzzle in the philosophy of intentional omissions can help us understand what goes on when an agent is both allowing something to happen and interfering with what is happening.

Somewhat confusingly, even though intentional omissions in philosophy of action have been treated as instances of *preventing* an action, they have also been also treated as instances of *allowing* something to happen. How is it possible to prevent and allow something at the same time? An agent can, for instance, simultaneously prevent an urge to save a drowning child and allow the child to drown. This is because there is a difference regarding internal and external happenings: the agent relates to her mental states in a way that prevents them from being effective and relates to external states in way that allows them to happen.

With regard to social activities, it is difficult to think of *all* intentional omissions as true instances of the agent allowing something to happen. At least some intentional omissions, for instance refraining to make a Nazi salute, can have an *interfering* effect as well as an intention to interfere in social processes. The same goes for actions. By allowing ourselves to do something, we may at the same time interfere with external happenings. Preventing bodily urges can also be described as interfering; for instance, a prisoner’s hunger strike can be described as preventing bodily urges to eat from being effective as well as interfering with what is happening in the surrounding society. Interfering or allowing activities is central to social scientific explanation in which agents can, for instance, obstruct or allow social change to happen. When an agent allows or prevents something to happen, she can intentionally take an active relation – not only to what is happening in her body, but also to what is happening around her.

The importance of this puzzle here is that instances of allowing something else to happen by not performing an action reveal a central element of at least some social activities. When a manifestation of agency is described as *allowing* something to happen or *interfering* in some happenings, what is revealed is the relationship between the agent and what is happening around her, not only her relation to her own bodily and mental happenings. The puzzle shows that forming an allowing or interfering relation to an agent’s body or to what is happening around the agent are different elements of the same happening. This is also a central part of social science explanation. Through our actions and intentional omissions, we are not just in a certain relation to our bodies but to events surrounding us as well.

Thus, it can be argued that

(4) social activity consists in *one or more agents taking an active relation to what is happening around them.*

This definition of social activity allows us to talk about agency in a way that includes socially relevant behavior – that which makes a difference in the world around the agent. Such materialist views of agency are of interest in sociology (see e.g. Hitlin & Elder, 2007). But is this view of agency incompatible with the previous ones? For instance, describing an agent allowing herself to starve and interfering with social processes through hunger strike – are these different descriptions on different levels? And if they are, does it mean that all social activities are essentially reducible to a description that accounts only for the agent’s relation to her own bodily and mental processes?

In Frankfurt’s theory of action, this problem is tackled by two layers of activity. According to Frankfurt, in one sense, an agent is active when “it is by his own will that he does what he does, even if his will is not itself within the scope of his voluntary control” (1988, p. 54). Frankfurt’s theory of activities allows for intentional omissions, because for him actions are activities, but the scope of activities is wider than that of actions (1988, p. 58). Intentional omissions can be activities if it is by the agent’s own will that she does not do what she does not do.

Autonomous activities, however, are those in which the agent is in an active relation to what is happening around her by being in an active relation to her desires to act and to omit from acting. On this view, agents take an active relation to what is going on around them by being active in relation to their desires to act or omit. Utilizing Frankfurt’s two-fold theory of agency it can be argued that,

(5) social activity consists in *one or more agents taking an* *active relation toward their desires to act or to omit to act*.

On the one hand, an agent is active in relation to her desires when she *identifies* with them. On the other hand, an agent is active in relation to what is happening around her when her behavior is explained by her first-order desires and when her first-order desires are explained by her second-order desires. (1988, p. 54).

Consequently, an agent is passive when she is in the position of a bystander in relation to her own behavior (Frankfurt 1988, p. 54). In passive movements, the agent does not identify with her own desires, or her first-order desires do not explain her behavior. An agent is passive in relation to her movements, or first-order desires, when they are caused by another agent, impersonal forces, or processes internal to the body, such as an epileptic attack (Frankfurt 1988, p. 54). In Frankfurt’s view, mental processes can be active or passive too. Some thoughts are such that we are only passive bystanders to them, but mental activities can be active, for instance when an agent deliberately turns her mind to certain directions or systematically thinks about a problem (1988, p. 59).

As with actions, if we follow this Frankfurtian notion of human activities, the agent can be in an active relation to the world through her intentional omissions when they are the consequence of her identifying with her desires. An agent intentionally not eating meat can be active with respect to her surroundings if she is in an active relation with her desire not to eat meat and that desire explains her not eating meat.

A Frankfurtian approach to distinguishing between activity and passivity is to ask whether the agent is doing something or if something is happening to her. An agent can be active both when it comes to actions and when it comes to intentional omissions; in refraining from smoking, an agent is taking an active relation to her first-order desire to smoke, for instance, and that desire explains her not smoking. In unintentional omissions, however, an agent is a passive bystander to her own behavior.

The benefit of this two-layered view of activity is that it grants that doing something can be passive whereas not doing something can be active. So, for our purposes, Frankfurt’s theory of agency is useful because it includes intentional omissions as well as intentional actions. But is it suitable for social science explanation?

For Frankfurt, being active is not a matter of effort or movement, but of the agent’s identification with her own desires, as well as the effectiveness of those desires. But the problem with using this notion of activity in social science explanation is that it better recognizes the difference between autonomous actions and total passivity instead of the difference between *intentional* behavior and passivity. Frankfurt’s view suggests that being active in the social sense is a consequence of an inner activity of a certain kind. In some cases, it is plausible to think that an agent is active in relation to her surroundings when she, for instance, resists commercialization by fighting her own urges to buy things.

However, identification with desires is too demanding a condition for all social activities. We would say the agent who votes is being socially active even if she lacks a second-order desire to act on her desire to vote, for instance. Agents can interfere in the social world even in the absence of autonomous action. If this more restrictive view of agency were to be used in social science explanation, much intentional behavior that is socially relevant would be ruled out of the scope of social activities. Only those behaviors that are thoroughly deliberated and happen in accordance with the agent’s higher-order desires would count as social activities.

This notwithstanding, Frankfurt’s view provides one way to include agents being active in relation to their surroundings as well as to their bodily events, and it treats intentional omissions as activities as well as actions. Not all societal activities consist of completely autonomous behavior, however.

**6. Which view of agency should the philosopher of social science rely on?**

So far, it has been found that, following different conceptions of agency, the answer to the question of what it means to be socially active, also has different meanings. According to the candidates I have considered, social activity might refer to at least the following,

(1) an agent moving intentionally, i.e., acting;

(2) an agent moving or not moving with effort;

(3) an agent engaging in mental activity that is related to her doing or not doing something;

(4) an agent taking an active relation to what is happening around her; and

(5) an agent taking an active relation to her own desires to act or to omit certain actions.

Notion (1) is representative of a corporealist conception of agency.

Notions (2) and (3) describe the agent’s relation to her own bodily or mental processes. In the philosophy of action, such notions of agency have been of predominant interest, and they are often seen as more basic than other descriptions of agency. They also represent volitionalist conceptions of agency.

In the social sciences, notions of agency such as (4), which concern the agent’s relation to her surroundings, are usually of interest. In the social sciences, materialist conceptions of agency are of interest because the focus is not only on individuals but also on their relation to the social world. The social scientist studies cases in which agents are not only engaging in relations to their own mental or physical happenings, but to the events and processes around them. What matters in this context are manifestations of agency that can affect social outcomes, and, as has been argued, not only do intentional movements affect social outcomes, but both intentional actions and intentional omissions seem to have an ability to produce social outcomes.

The puzzle of how these different notions come together is addressed in action theory (see Ford, 2013; 2018), but solving it is especially pressing when social processes are dissected into action theoretical notions. Hedström’s desire-belief-opportunity model has been criticized for omitting central aspects of agency, namely how agents use tools (Kaidesoja, 2012). Another problem with utilizing Davidson’s theory of action, even the revised version, is that it is committed to the first notion of activity, which excludes intentional omissions. Thus far, I have argued that the human activities that social sciences address are not always reducible to intentional movements. The advantage of utilizing a more comprehensive theory of agency is that it does not rule out central manifestations of agency for social science explanation.

What should such a comprehensive theory of agency look like? I propose that a combinatory view of activity, which involves an agent taking an active stance towards her mental or bodily processes as well as towards what is happening around her, is needed in social scientific explanation. Philosophers of social science should understand agency as the capacity to influence one’s behavior, be it positive or negative, and through this influence on behavior, the general capacity to influence society. This means embracing a combination of volitionalism and materialism, because social processes are better explained by phenomena in which an agent takes an active relation both to her mental or bodily processes as well as interacts with what is happening around her. This also means that instead of a mere philosophy of *action*, philosophers of social science should rely on a theory of agency that includes both agents’ intentional omissions as well their intentional actions.

The relevance of a suitably fine-grained theory of social activities in social sciences is that it recognizes both the overt manifestations of agency, actions, as well as the hidden manifestations of social agency, intentional omissions. If only overt, obvious action is recognized as part of social agency, a major part of the more covert expressions of agency is excluded from social science explanation. Albert Hirschman originally pointed out that social science has had a bias towards voice, that is, direct, straightforward, and obviously political action (1970, pp. 16-17). But if the more hidden, anonymous, private, and roundabout mechanisms (Hirschman 1970, p. 16) are to be fully accounted for by the social scientist, it seems that a theory that takes into account intentional omissions is a better alternative than a mere theory of intentional bodily movement.

Modern action theory, however, does not only address intentional movements. It can provide means to address agentive phenomena beyond intentional movements. Frankfurt’s view (5) is an example of bringing together how agents are active in relation to their own bodies as well as to things happening around them, but, as was argued in the previous section, Frankfurt’s view is too demanding for some societal activities. It was also found that mere mental events are not sufficient for societal processes – human activity in society somehow makes a difference beyond the agent’s own mind. Social activities seem to require not only the agent’s inner activity, such as inhibiting an action, but also her relation to what is happening around her. In the context of conscientious objection, for instance, the agent refrains from bearing arms in addition to merely intending to do so. Social processes are thus not a matter of mere instances of intending, decisions, or choices. Instead, the activities that social processes consist in include the agent’s inner activities in relation to what is happening around her.

A theory that focuses exclusively on intentional movements does not account for all manifestations of human agency in society. Social processes seem to consist in intentional omissions, when, for instance, an agent does not fire shots into the crowd, refuses to give up her bus seat, or suffers through a hunger strike. If it is accepted that intentional omissions belong to our social and political agency, although they do not fulfill the criteria of intentional bodily movements, social scientists will need a more comprehensive theory of agency that is yet to be fully developed.

**7. Conclusion**

It has been argued that pure corporealism is not a useful notion of agency for social science explanation because it does not include intentional omissions. Pure materialism, however, would benefit from including internal elements in case the need is to find a *psychologically plausible* theory of agency. However, it was also found that pure volitionalism is not a sufficient candidate for a conception of agency that is useful for social science explanation because it does not include external elements – the agent’s relation to worldly happenings around her.

Why does this matter? How we explain intentional omissions and how we incorporate them into a theory of agency matters, especially when they are dealt with in social science explanation. This is because whether they are noticed, or explained away in social science, may affect whether they are recognized in society. Including intentional omissions in a coherent way to a theory of agency makes it possible to model them in social sciences, and to study them both at the individual as well as the collective level.

Furthermore, a comprehensive theory of agency can be useful in integrating cognitive mechanisms with social mechanisms[[6]](#footnote-7). Manifestations of agency are examples of a meeting point between the cognitive and the social. If action theory is used in this kind of integration, the question of which conception of agency is employed is not redundant. Whereas the volitionalist conception of agency is interested in cognitive mechanisms, the materialist conception of agency is interested in social mechanisms. Successful integration of these different conceptions of agency may inform us about how to deal with integrative work between the different fields that study these different mechanisms.

This paper has contributed to this integration by showing that some views of agency (volitionalist and movement-centered) are not useful for social science explanation. First of all, the movement-centered view of agency that has historically held a prominent role in action theory, and that has informed Hedström’s DBO-model, has been ruled out as a psychologically plausible view of agency that is useful for social science explanation — mainly because it has trouble incorporating intentional omissions. Secondly, even though notions of agency that center on effort have had a prominent role in philosophy of action, volitionalist views of agency have been ruled out because mere mental activity is not sufficient for social science explanation of agency. It has, however, been found that both materialist and volitionalist features are needed for a view of agency that is both psychologically plausible and useful for social science explanation.

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1. Philosophy of action has been utilized in sociological theory building by Jon Elster, Raymond Boudon, and James Coleman. According to Hedström, they were all committed to precise, abstract, realistic, and action-based explanations (2005, p. 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Omissions can be defined normatively, referring to an agent not doing something they *should* have done. Elsewhere I have argued (Kärki, 2018; Kärki, 2019; Kärki, 2022) for the usefulness of an essentially non-normative action language of omissions when action theory is applied to the social sciences, because it allows for talking about *what is going on* when an agent does not do something before jumping to conclusions about the normative status of what unfolds. This is also largely in line with the use of omission and action in the philosophy of action. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For a comprehensive discussion of intentional omissions, see Clarke, 2014. On mental action, see Levy, 2013, 2016; Mele, 2003; O’Brien and Soteriou, 2009; Proust, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This active relation can mean, at least, a causal relation or a controlling relation. My own view is that because manifestations of agency are of different kinds (see Kärki (2018) for varieties of intentional omissions), what relation the agent takes to what happens depends on the manifestation of agency in question. The different manifestations of agency are, at least, intentional actions, intentional omissions, and mental actions. In light of contemporary action theory, it does not seem that the agent takes a similar causal relation to her behavior in all manifestations of agency. According to Sartorio (2009, p. 526), precisely because of the existence of intentional omissions, the causal theory of action should not be seen as a general theory of the causality that is involved in all manifestations of agency. Also, according to Clarke (2022), all manifestations of agency should not be forced under the same causal theory of action because agency is genuinely a diverse phenomenon. According to Lusson, intention to omit should be seen as fluently controlling the correct omission (2021). Thus, even though intention may cause bodily movements when it comes to intentional *actions*, agency functions differently in the case of intentional omissions, controlling the behavior so that the agent does not perform the action in question. One obvious difference between intentional actions and intentional omissions when it comes to this active relation is that in intentional omissions, unlike in intentional actions, motor control is not present because the fine control of precise movements is not needed. On the regulative control of intentional omissions, see Lusson (2021), on motor control see Mylopoulos (2021), and on mental control, see Jennings (2022). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing up this question. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. It seems that preventing urges can happen through actions as well as omissions. An agent can, for instance, feel an urge to stay still because of fear, but manage to prevent this urge from being effective by intentionally moving. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Here I take cognitive mechanisms to be mechanisms that are about processing information. Social mechanisms are assumed to be such mechanisms that are about social activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)