“Erikson’s (e.g., 1968) writings suggest that the formation of a coherent sense of identity in postindustrial societies would likely benefit from a sense of agency, self-direction, or free exercise of choice. Although the term agency has been defined in a number of ways, it is used here to refer to a sense of **responsibility for one’s life course**, the belief that **one is in control of one’s decisions and is responsible for their outcomes**, and the **confidence that one will be able to overcome obstacles that impede one’s progress along one’s chosen life course**. In support of this definition, a composite measure of agency, consisting of **self-esteem, purpose in life, ego strength, and internal locus of control**, was found to be positively related to identity achievement and negatively related to identity diffusion… Agency is positively related to exploration, flexible commitment, and deliberate choice making… and negatively related to avoidance and aimlessness.…

**What unites all four of these changes is the representation of thought and action in a world of contingencies and possibilities**. These teens had learned to think of the world as similar to a chess board in play. They learned to perceive the array of strategic options and to estimate probable consequences associated with these options. I**n other terms, they had developed what I would call an operating language for initiative, with tools for anticipating, planning, adapting to others, monitoring progress, and adjusting behavior over time to achieve a goal**. For most of the groups Heath studied, this language was learned in group contexts, reflecting the injunction… that the development of agency in these contexts often involves collective participation**.**

What Heath's work does, then, is begin to open the black box to internal transformations within participants, providing a window on what they are actually learning… New participants appeared to undergo a paradigm shift in their way of thinking, reflecting qualitative developmental change. They appeared to have developed skills for implementing plans, for directing and regulating their activities over time. They ingested a new mode of action. Along with it, they reported feeling more self-efficacious, more confident in their ability to affect the world. Such a paradigm shift could provide an explanation of why youth in adventure programs show sustained and increased effects after the program is over; they acquire an operating language that is generative…

The conditions that make structured youth activities a fertile context for the development of initiative, I believe, also make them a rich context for the development of an array of other positive qualities, from altruism to identity. **Children and adolescents come alive in these activities, they become active agents in ways that rarely happen in other parts of their lives.** This makes youth activities an invaluable laboratory for the study of processes of positive development, one that deserves much more scientific attention. Of course, positive development occurs across contexts--in school, with families, and with peers--but I hypothesize that this is a context in which there is often a higher density of growth experiences…

Knowledge of the interplay between contexts and persons leads to the applied question of how leaders of structured voluntary activities can best facilitate developmental processes. Leaders face a fundamental problematic of allowing participants' actions to be self-directed, voluntary, and intrinsically motivated, yet also structured and challenging enough that participants are stretched into new domains of complexity. Leaders of Heath and colleagues' successful organizations tenaciously insisted that youths hold responsibility for major decisions of the organization, even when those decisions threatened the existence of the organization. But at the same time, these leaders played a role in defining the situation and modeling the language of agency. They laid out problems in the form of "what if' and "if then" contingencies. They prompted participants to think through alternative scenarios and hypothetical situations, posing open-ended dilemmas that required reflection, analysis, and drawing on past experiences.