‘I can because you can': the inter-subjective nature of self-agency

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The author uses the observation of a single baby over two years to trace the development of agency and the subsequent emergence of a subjective sense of self-agency in the child. Drawing on both Jungian and developmental literature, including Knox, Stern, Gergely and Watson and Fonagy et al., the paper offers a detailed description of the importance of the other in the achievement of a robust sense of self-agency in the infant.

Keywords: agency; self-agency; inter-subjective; development; Jean Knox; unconscious

Introduction

This paper was originally written as a requirement of my Jungian Training in analytical psychotherapy at the West Midlands Institute of Psychotherapy. The training included a two-year infant observation. The aim of observation in the training is to provide an opportunity to witness the formation of mind, as well as to strengthen one's capacity to bear painful, infantile feelings. I think it also helps to illuminate the infant within the adult in the consulting room, and offers a model for how growth and change happen through relationships.

In this paper I will trace the development of the infant's sense of agency, drawing on the work of Jungian analyst Jean Knox, who expands on a model proposed by Fonagy et al., together with the thinking of Daniel Stern, Sue Gerhardt and other developmental, biological and neuro-scientific research findings.

By focussing closely on the development of self-agency, I am necessarily neglecting other models and curtailing discussion of my countertransference. What captures a writer's interest is inevitably personal, but as in the infant-mother pair, the baby has a lot of say in the matter. From the start I was struck by the sheer 'willpower' of the infant I observed, whom I shall call Daisy. Words like intention, purpose and determination occur in my notes very early in the observation.

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By two years of age, Daisy had a strong sense of her own capabilities. She ran around the house like a small bulldozer, and I often thought of her as ‘unstoppable’. She was going up and down stairs carefully and competently, feeding herself and wiping her own nose. She was using language effectively to get a response from others, and life seemed to be a constant experiment, founded on a strong sense of her own agency.

**Defining agency**

At its most basic, the term ‘agency’ refers to the capacity to act and have an effect on the environment. This is an inherent quality of every living creature, but is different from a *sense* of agency. Judith Rustin writes:

> This subjective experience – a sense of agency – occurs in the “moments of meeting” between infant and caregiver, when the infant state is acknowledged by the caregiving surround in a way that “fits”. In other words, agency is inherent, but a sense of agency is interactively determined. (Rustin, 1997, p. 46)

Daisy had inherent agency – an ability to act – from day one and, in fact, in utero. She could wave her arms, kick her legs, turn her head, suck, gaze and cry, all of which produced effects on the environment including her parents and her older sister. But for Daisy's *sense* of agency to develop, her actions would need to be ‘met’ by her environment.

Daniel Stern uses the term ‘self-agency’, defining it as part of an organised sense of a ‘core self’ in relation to others that emerges at two to three months of age. He describes it as:

> ... Authorship of one’s own actions and non-authorship of the actions of others; having volition, having control over self-generated action (your arm moves when you want it to) and expecting consequences of one’s actions (when you shut your eyes it gets dark); (Stern, 1985, p. 71)

Jean Knox has carried out a wide ranging review of how the term ‘self-agency’ is used in multiple disciplines, concluding:

> Self-agency means the *experience* that we can influence our physical and relational environment, that our own actions and interventions have an effect on and produce a response from those around us, and it is this *experience of action and consequence* that lies at the heart of definitions of agency across disciplines. (Knox, 2011, p. 7, *my emphasis*)

Knox largely follows the model of development proposed by Fonagy:

1. **Physical Agency 0–6 months**: Awareness that actions produce changes in the physical environment (perfect contingency)
2. **Social Agency 3–9 months**: Actions produce behavioural and emotional mirroring (imperfect contingency) responses in other people – action at a distance

### Observations

- Mum
  - Daisy:
    - head:
    - say “huh”
    - jerks
    - horizon: lifting

Daisy's interactional style and way she says “huh” this tiny moment only moments were inherent. I noticed:

- baby, sit:
- Daisy: roofing
(3) Teleological Agency 9–24 months: Sense of purpose – actions seen as goal directed. Capacity to choose action to bring about desired outcome. Intention not yet recognised as separate from action.

(4) Intentional Agency two years: Recognition of intentions as distinct from action. Actions are seen as caused by prior intentions and desires. Actions can change mental states.

(5) Representational Agency 3–4 years: Actions seen as caused by intentions, which are also recognised as mental processes. Mind is represented to itself, so intentions are not just means to an end, but mental states in themselves.

(6) Autobiographical Self: Organisation of memories as personally experienced – linked to self-representations and awareness of personal history. (Fonagy et al., 2002, pp. 204–207)

In this paper I will show how Daisy's self-agency grew through these levels, sometimes ahead of the timings suggested. Rather than seeing them as sequential or age-specific, I imagine these levels of agency structured like Russian dolls, each one forming the core of the next, with the foundations for the later developments laid from the beginning.

'I can move' discovering physical agency

Bodily action, whether carried out or simulated, is the first step in our discovery of our agency. (Knox, 2011, p. 41)

Observation at four days:

Mum is kneeling on the floor, holding Daisy cradled in her right arm. Mum strokes Daisy's tummy with her left hand and says “Come and say hello.” She tilts Daisy's head up so that she can see me. “This is Carrie who's come to see you.” I smile, and say “hello Daisy”. Daisy is blinking and I don't know if she can see me or not, but she jerks her head forwards towards the sound of my voice. Mum settles her back more horizontally in her arm, and Daisy immediately turns her head into Mum's breast, lifting her chin and rooting. Mum says: “Oh you're hungry are you”.

Daisy's initial head movement seems jerky, involuntary, in sharp contrast to the way she later purposefully seeks out the breast. I was struck by how clearly this tiny baby indicated what she wanted, and how well her rooting movements were understood by Mum. This was a 'moment of meeting', of Daisy's inherent agency and capacity to act with an attuned mother. In these early weeks, I noticed that it was always Daisy who initiated feeding. Mum fitted in with her baby, shifting her own position to make it easier for Daisy to find the breast.

Daisy therefore had an often-repeated bodily experience that her squeaks and rooting movements of the head would deliver a feed. It seems likely that such
repeated experience registers at what this model describes as the unconscious level of motor action, which forms the foundation for her sense of agency.

Her motor control and physical agency developed in tandem. I saw this in the way Daisy used her ‘baby gym’ play-mat. Before four weeks, she struck the dangling toys randomly, in contrast with the smoother, more purposeful movement of her hand towards her mouth. A few weeks later, Daisy was deliberately bringing her heels down repeatedly on the scrunchy part of the mat. She would reach for a particular ‘wind chime’ toy and even managed to rotate herself a little to see in the mirror.

I found myself attributing purpose or intentionality to Daisy’s movements. Mum also attributed intention to Daisy’s actions. In my very first observation she asked: ‘Now are you feeding or is this just for comfort?’ Mum’s acknowledgement of Daisy’s agency is an essential factor in Daisy’s development of her own sense of agency.

**Observation at 11 days:**

Mum says “Hello, take a seat, we’re mid-feed.”

Daisy is sucking sleepily, her eyes are closed, her left fist is clenched and resting on Mum’s breast. She sucks and then stops - each time Daisy pauses for a few seconds, Mum nudges her breast slightly with her free hand, and Daisy gives a few sucks. It seems very peaceful and they seem totally absorbed.

In these first few weeks, there was a strong sense of togetherness between Mum and baby, reflected in Mum’s language: ‘we’re mid-feed’. Winnicott termed this exclusive absorption in the baby ‘primary maternal preoccupation’, a term which captures the slow, dreamy feeling of my observations at this time. I felt strongly that I did not want to interrupt them, that something precious was happening between them. I found myself holding my breath.

A key aspect of this intimacy is the ‘turn taking’ observable in the above vignette. Daisy’s pause in sucking elicits a responsive nudge from Mum. That this ‘conversation’ was controlled by Daisy was acknowledged by Mum with comments like ‘have you had enough already?’ and ‘you can’t make your mind up, can you?’ Knox considers this burst-pause feeding pattern to be the earliest form of turn-taking behaviour, which ‘plays a fundamental role in the development of self-agency’ (Knox, 2011, p. 10) because it provides Daisy with an experience of her action meeting a consistent response: ‘I can suck and get milk; I can stop sucking and get a nudge’.

Infant research shows that babies have what Gergely and Watson (1996) describe as a ‘sophisticated ability to detect and analyse response-event contingency relations’ (p. 1205). This means that infants are good at noticing when an experience is the same. Just as they show, by gazing, a preference for
vertical symmetry, they also attend more closely to combinations of events or sensations that *always* follow each other.

Even before she was two weeks old, Daisy seemed able to detect contingency, linking together the bodily sensation of being held close to Mum's body at a specific angle, the rounded shape of the breast close to her cheek with the action of rooting and nuzzling, and the satisfaction of a feed.

She did not always get it right. I saw her rooting at Mum's neck and at the rounded shape of her own clenched fist beside her cheek on Mum's shoulder, becoming distressed when no milk ensued, that is, when the 'expected' outcome did not happen. I think of this as her physical agency being frustrated. At the level of motor action, a pattern has been disrupted. I imagine this could lead to a refinement of the pattern, as she learns to distinguish between her own fist and Mum's breast, for example.

Fonagy et al. (2002) took up Watson's (1994, 1995) idea that the infant's ability to detect contingency serves as a mechanism for self-detection. The 100% perfect contingency of the infant's own bodily movements makes them stand out against the variable and non-contingent background of the environment. For example, the experience, 'when I lift my foot, with all the proprioceptive feedback of my leg muscles working, a foot *always* comes into view'. Being able to discern those events over which it has perfect control, the infant learns that it 'can initiate action and exert causal influence on its environment' (Fonagy et al., 2002, p. 208).

As well as learning control of her own body, Daisy was evidently 'in control' of the feeding process, providing her with a strong basis for her sense of agency.

**Observation at 25 days:**

Daisy is suffering with hiccups mid-feed. Mum sits Daisy up on her knees facing her. Daisy continues to hiccup and groan uncomfortably. Mum tilts her head to the same angle as Daisy and looks at her, frowning. "I don't think you want any more milk, just now, do you?" Suddenly, Daisy's insides make a great commotion and it's obvious she's filled her nappy. Daisy makes a wobbly side to side movement with her head.

Mum raises her eyebrows and shakes her head, saying "Uh oh, nappy time!"

This observation shows Mum 'marking' Daisy's state, using an exaggerated expression to mirror her baby's experience. Gergely and Watson (1996) have explored in detail how marking works: 'by reflecting in a marked, exaggerated form the infant's emotion-expressive displays, the caretaker provides a kind of natural biofeedback sensitisation training to the infant'. (p. 1205). They conclude that this helps the infant to group together, represent, self-regulate and eventually communicate internal states — with obvious implications for the infant's sense of agency.

Bodily imitation has also been linked with the operation of mirror-neurons (e.g., Meltzoff, 2005). These neurons work in such a way that the same areas of
the brain are activated in someone observing an action, as in the person carrying out the action. It is thought that they form the basis of the ability to understand other people's intentions and predict their actions — the physiological shifts in ourselves tell us what is going on for the other person.

Observing, I found myself pulling the same faces, feeling the bodily tension and discomfort of Daisy's hiccups, and feeling a strong sense of relief at the nappy filling. I have 'picked up' these states from the infant. I can think of this as empathy, as projective identification or as the activity of mirror neurons — either way, the experience is one of mutual regulation. Daisy is letting Mum know how she feels, and by marking her affect, Mum is both discovering (at a physiological level) what Daisy feels, and letting Daisy know what Daisy feels.

**Observation at five weeks:**

Daisy is sleeping in her bouncy chair on the kitchen floor while Mum prepares dinner. Suddenly Daisy tenses her whole body. She draws her knees up towards her belly, her fists clench and her face is screwed up and red. She starts to make throaty grumbling noises. Mum turns towards her and responds with a low, "uh oh." Daisy opens first one eye, then both. Her knees pull up tighter to her body, and her arms begin to make rapid, jerky movements. She turns her head rapidly from side to side, blinking, her eyes scanning. Daisy’s cry becomes higher and more whimpering. Mum turns round more and more frequently with little “oh, oh” noises. Finally she turns off the cooker and turns round to Daisy. Crouching down she puts one hand on Daisy's tummy and tilts her head to match Daisy's head position. "Oh, shhh. Poor you." Daisy stops crying.

Despite her attempts to soothe, in a turn-taking way, from a distance, Mum's voice alone did not comfort the baby. I think the attempt at soothing via a turn-taking vocalisation did not 'work', because for Daisy, Mum's voice was 'disembodied' from the other components of the usual soothing pattern, such as Mum's touch and face.

'Perfect contingency' is clearly required in these early weeks. In fact, Daisy actively sought out sameness. For example, after a period of animation, Daisy would turn her head and gaze at the window, or the strong vertical lines in the corner of a room, becoming still and calm when doing so. It seems that these clear, consistently located, non-moving structural forms are providing what Stern calls 'islands of consistency' (Stern, 1985, p. 72) in Daisy's experience.

**Observation at eight weeks:**

Mum is kneeling in front of Daisy in her chair, and there is a big interaction between them. Daisy is laughing and gurgling. Mum copies her head movements and sounds, holding one of Daisy's hands. After a couple of minutes, Daisy turns away, her face
goes still and she brings her free hand up to her mouth. She goes quiet. Mum says she's noticed that Daisy will be fine and happy and then suddenly 'zone out'.

Mum and Daisy (and the observer) were enjoying this animated interaction, until it was halted by Daisy. I feel it was significant that Mum took her cue from Daisy's stillness and did not try to re-engage her immediately, but attributed it to her baby's need for a quiet time. The observation continued:

Daisy starts to whinge. She looks earnestly at Mum, her hands opening and closing under her chin, her tongue poking out. Her face is pink and crumpled, and I think she is going to cry. Mum says 'I thought you'd be hungry.' She lifts Daisy out of the chair and settles on the sofa with her for a feed. Daisy makes a small 'uh huh uh huh' cry and her whole upper body seems to tremble, her head shakes rapidly and her arms are stretched out and trembling with excitement.

I wondered if Daisy's 'chill time' was a kind of transitional shift, prompted by an internal sensation (overstimulation or hunger?). It is as if Daisy turns her attention inwards, registers what she is experiencing inside, and then re-engages with Mum with a clear and direct communication of her need. Mum is anticipating her needs and responding to her signals. By eight weeks, Daisy's inherent physical agency is already starting to take on a distinctly social hue.

'I can move you' finding a sense of social agency

The period roughly from two to six months is perhaps the most exclusively social period of life. (Stern, 1985, p. 72)

Stern describes this period as a 'honeymoon of intense sociability', in which the baby's smile offers the clearest expression of her new-found social agency. Watching Daisy's smiling interactions with Mum, Dad and Sister, I inevitably found myself smiling too, and enjoying it. When Daisy looked at me over Mum's shoulder and gave me her wide grin, it was impossible not to return it.

Following Fonagy, Knox describes the social level of self-agency as our sense that we can have an impact on other people's behaviour. This level is to be expected at three–nine months. I wonder if Daisy's skilful deployment of smiling from just eight weeks old is due to the optimal way in which her physical agency was met by her environment.

However, there were times when the honeymoon felt as if it were over. Mum was feeling the burden of being at home, with little support, and Daisy had numerous minor colds, rashes and snuffles. Mum said, 'She sleeps well except when she is ill or teething, and she is always ill or teething.' At 13 weeks, I commented how much Daisy had grown and Mum grimaced, saying 'Yup, monster baby!' She was a monster baby, saving up 'monster poohs' for nappy time and grabbing at everything. She fed ruthlessly, vigorously and impatiently.
I became aware of more maternal ambivalence as Mum became more exhausted. For the first time, I felt it was difficult for Mum being observed. Mum spoke about going back to work, continuing her academic studies and ‘needing a routine’, but at the same time she had a resigned acceptance that Daisy had her own mind and agenda.

At 14 weeks, Daisy was tried with milk from a cup. At 18 weeks, she was eating baby rice mixed with breast milk and by 20 weeks her cot had been moved out of her parents’ room and into her own room. I wondered if her development was being pushed, as Mum’s agenda was re-entering the picture, whereas earlier Mum had accommodated herself completely to the baby. I felt uneasy about it, but Daisy herself seemed to rise to each challenge:

**Observation at three and a half months:**

Mum has been trying to get Daisy to drink from a bottle or a cup. She tells me some people say a cup is better “because it separates the food from the comfort.”

Mum presents a “wonky” cup (designed so that babies can see into it without tipping it up too far) with a little warmed breast milk. Daisy reaches out and grabs it immediately with both hands, pulling it towards her. Mum is holding the cup to prevent her spilling it. Daisy hesitates … makes the little “uh huh huh” sounds associated with feeding … her whole body seem to quiver. (Can she smell the milk?) Mum holds the cup to Daisy’s mouth and tips it very slowly. Daisy makes a spluttering noise and I wonder if she might choke. Mum repeats this several times, dropping a little milk into Daisy’s mouth – Daisy licks her lips and makes sucking noises – she is drinking from the cup! I am amazed. Mum says “Oh you are getting the hang of it” and looks pleased.

In this vignette, my initial anxiety eased as Mum’s happy approval and Daisy’s smiles demonstrated the pleasure of the achievement. When Daisy decided she had had enough, by turning away, Mum did not insist, but reinforced her approval with more smiles. In this way, Daisy is already learning that the expression of her agency (to drink, or stop drinking) brings Mum’s approval.

Sue Gerhardt describes how a baby’s social capacities develop during the first two years of life, along with the orbitofrontal cortex of the brain, which controls social responses and emotional behaviours. This part of the brain only develops post-natally and in relationship with other people. Gerhardt (2000) refers to Schore’s (1994) findings that positive looks and smiling actually ‘grow’ the brain. When Daisy sees pleasure in Mum’s face, her own nervous system responds with pleasurable arousal, triggering the release of beta-endorphins and dopamine, which stimulate the growth of neurons and deliver a feel-good factor. Daisy’s sense of agency is reinforced by this pleasurable reward – it feels good that she can make Mum smile.
Observation at four and a half months:

Mum is cooking. Daisy is in her bouncy chair on the kitchen floor, looking at a dangling toy hanging over the chair. She bashes it with her right hand then tries to reach it with both hands. She can't quite get hold of it. Her mouth turns down and she looks over at Mum. Daisy sticks her bottom lip out and her left hand, fingers curled, comes up to her chin. She makes a low, growly complaining sound. Mum half-turns and says (at a similar pitch) "Aw, I know it's not fair. You'll be alright for a minute," before turning back to the cooker.

Watching, I felt that Daisy was frustrated and I was tempted to intervene and put the toy within reach. When Mum does not recognise the problem, Daisy's frustration increases:

Daisy flings both arms up and gives a sharp cry. Her legs stretch out too — her heels bashing down on the end of the chair. Mum ignores her, and Daisy starts to cry. Her face goes red, she pulls the corners of her mouth down, her eyes screw up — her curled up hands are on each side of her head. Her cries are sustained, she sounds miserable. After a few moments she pauses (for breath? to listen?) and pushes her left fist into her mouth. Mum does not respond. Daisy starts crying again, getting louder. Mum says "Okay, okay, I'm done here... poor you." Daisy's cries stop as soon as she is picked up.

Moments later, on the changing table, Daisy gives Mum a great big grin, which Mum mimics, laughing. Daisy laughs. There follows a lovely 'conversation' — Daisy gives a big 'Ahh!' exclamation, which Mum imitates, with wide eyes and a smile. Daisy repeats it, and Mum imitates again with a laugh. Daisy laughs too.

I felt that Daisy was displaying quite advanced relational skills, and using her social self-agency in the way she was able to 'make up' with Mum quickly after a falling out. This pattern, already established before five months, would endure and remain an essential tool in Daisy's sense of her own agency.

Daisy's feeding routines changed rapidly through this time, and I often reflected on Mum's comment that drinking from a cup 'separates the food from the comfort'. Before five months, Mum started to place Daisy in a 'bumbo' chair in order to feed her with a spoon, and the relational quality of this kind of experience was necessarily very different from breastfeeding.

Observation at five and a half months:

Daisy is in the bumbo chair on the worktop, watching Mum intently as she mixes some baby rice with expressed breast milk. Daisy's arms reach out towards Mum, her legs kick and she gives a surprisingly loud 'uh huh huh' cry... Mum begins to spoon baby rice into Daisy's mouth. Daisy eats eagerly, opening her mouth for the spoon and licking her lips, sticking her tongue out between spoonfuls. Her right hand holds onto Mum's thumb. Daisy looks at Mum's face between spoonfuls, while Mum is looking at
the rice and refilling the spoon. When Mum brings the spoon to her lips, Daisy looks away sideways. There is very little eye contact. Daisy slips sideways in the chair, and Mum briefly puts down the cup to straighten her. As soon as Mum puts her hands on her, Daisy gives a big, rice-covered grin and reaches her hands up to Mum’s face. Mum pulls back a little saying ‘you can eat a bit more rice first.’

I had the feeling that Daisy was enjoying the food, rather than the feed. She seemed to be avoiding eye contact with Mum (whereas in breast feeding she sought it out) as a way of self-regulating. The strong signal of what she wanted (to be picked up) was read by Mum, but not acted upon.

When Knox speaks of social agency as ‘action at a distance’, I think of distance in time as well as in space. Daisy’s growing capacity to wait must have been born out of repeated experience that a response would come before too long. Knox draws attention to the research of Beebe et al. (2010) who identified that the most securely attached infants are those who have experienced a ‘midrange experience of interactive contingency’ – that is, whose experience of the caregiver is neither intrusively over-stimulating nor dismissively withdrawn. Knox points out:

It is precisely this midrange experience of interactive contingency that is optimal for the infant’s experience of agency – the experience of making an impact on mother, eliciting a response that reaffirms the infant’s agency but does not overwhelm it.

(Knox, 2011, p. 48)

Daisy’s Mum responded intuitively within this midrange. For example, if Daisy wanted a toy that was out of reach, Mum would place it just within reach, so that Daisy would still have to stretch for it – reinforcing both her physical and social sense of agency. Moments of delay and misunderstanding, against a background of generally responsive attunement, gave Daisy the opportunity to learn to self-regulate.

**Observation at seven months:**

Daisy is sitting on the floor in the playroom adjoining the kitchen, where Mum is cooking. She starts to cry. Daisy brings her hands down onto her knees and leans forward, as if she is trying to move towards Mum, but she can’t. After a minute or so, her crying becomes louder, and the gaps between cries get shorter. Mum sighs and turns round to look at her. Daisy’s crying stops and a teary smile breaks out on her face. Mum says ‘Poor you – just hang on while I get dinner ready.’ Mum turns away and Daisy’s face crumples again. I expect her to cry immediately, but she suddenly turns her head and looks into the furthest corner of the room, over her right shoulder, away from Mum.

Daisy stare into the corner for about 10 seconds, then turns back and reaches forward for a muslin cloth. She pulls it towards her mouth, scrunching it
under her chin. Daisy sticks her tongue out and pushes a corner of the cloth into her mouth. She waves the cloth about and seems intrigued by the way it stretches and crumples.

Jean Knox writes, 'The experience of agency depends not only on the impact on the other, but also on the capacity to self-regulate one’s own emotional and bodily states' (Knox, 2011 p. 77). It felt to me as if Daisy was starting to self-regulate her emotional state by looking at the straight lines in the corner of the room and by distracting herself with the muslin cloth (often used by Mum as a distraction, and associated with breastfeeding).

I find myself wondering here what differentiates self-regulation from self-defence. In another observation, the need of an infant to fix on static objects may have seemed to be a defensive move. Perhaps it is a matter of the level of self-agency that has been achieved. Daisy could use ‘defensive’ techniques for self-regulating but she did not have to rely on them exclusively in the absence of a regulating mother.

Because Mum acknowledged her baby’s state, with language (‘poor you’) and a ‘marking’ facial expression, Daisy could take her own self-soothing actions, based on the many times Mum had done this for her. It strikes me that this may be the first step in separating thought from action – the seeds of mentalisation are already being sown.

‘I can choose’ self-agency with a purpose

Agency is the capacity of an intentional being or social group to make choices, to perform actions that have intended consequences, to effect results or to control situations. (Palmer, 2007, p. 1048, quoted in Knox, 2011, p. 7)

From the age of about nine months, Daisy began to manipulate objects and experiment with the things around her, in a new way, with an intensity of focus I described in my notes as ‘thoughtfulness’. At around three months, her attention had expanded beyond internal, physiological ‘events’ to focus on social interactions; it now extended outwards again, in time and space. Experimentation and choice began to emerge.

At the teleological level, the focus is on the impact of the subject’s action, in terms of bringing about a desired goal; consequence (not cause) takes centre stage because the infant’s focus is on a range of possible outcomes. The infant explores choice and preference, in terms of choosing from a range of possible actions, in order to bring about a desired effect, but still at a behavioural level. (Knox, 2011, p. 33)

For some time, Daisy had clearly understood when Mum was preparing food. She became excited and animated, sticking her tongue out, banging the table in front of her. Now, Daisy started to decide whether she would prefer Weetabix or toast; mashed vegetables or rice crackers.
Observation at eight and a half months:

Daisy is seated in her high chair at the table. Mum offers a spoonful of Weetabix mixed with warm milk. Daisy turns determinedly aside - twisting her whole body around from the waist, closing her eyes, pursing her lips. When Mum manages to get a spoonful of cereal into Daisy’s mouth, Daisy’s mouth turns down immediately and she pokes her tongue out.

Mum sighs and pushes the plate with toast fingers across the table. Daisy’s eyes are wide and she makes an excited “Eeya” squeak, leans forward in the chair and stretches her hands towards the plate. She does not grasp the toast immediately, but looks at Mum intently. Her hands hover over the plate and toast, fingers spread wide - there is a strong sense of anticipation, quite tantalising. For a few seconds there is a lot of eye contact between Daisy and Mum, then Daisy turns her attention to the toast. She takes hold of the toast quite daintily and slowly. Looking at Mum, Daisy brings the toast finger up to her mouth, pushes it into her mouth and starts to suck and chew noisily.

Daisy is making clear choices about her breakfast, and resisting being ‘fed’. This new sense of self-agency is still intensely relational – she ‘checks out’ with Mum if it is OK to have the toast, although I feel very certain she desires it (not least because of my own feeling of being tantalised).

Observation at 10 months:

At the breakfast table, Daisy reaches out for the bowl of Weetabix with her right hand, saying “DA!” very loudly. It is a very definite command. I comment that Daisy really knows what she wants and Mum agrees, adding “We all know what she wants!”

Daisy also started to play with objects in a more absorbed way. At nine months, she spent 10 minutes absorbed in pushing beads round a wire frame. She was constantly putting things together, pulling them apart, taking toys out of the toy box one by one and putting them back one by one.

By 10 months she was starting to ‘bum shuffle’, and by 11 months she was crawling quickly and expertly, able to go up the kitchen step, but not down. She was pulling herself up onto her feet at one year, and toddling by 14 months. This mobility brought with it the usual problems of safety on stairs and with other items that were suddenly reachable.

I noticed that I often felt more anxious about the dangers of Daisy’s explorations than Mum, who seemed to have confidence in her daughter’s sense of what she could and couldn’t manage. For example, I felt an urge to ‘help’ by lifting Daisy down the kitchen step, while Mum let her figure it out for herself. I can see that Mum’s approach enabled Daisy to discover more of her self-agency at this level of goal-oriented motor-understanding.
Such learning comes with a high risk of failure and shame, and shame has an adverse impact on the development of self-agency, especially at this teleological level, where action and intention are not separated. At this time, the child whose actions meet a strongly disapproving, shaming response learns that the desires or goals associated with those actions – the expression of her self-agency – are also unacceptable.

Fortunately, Daisy’s Mum was adept at not shaming Daisy. If Daisy slipped, fell or made a mess with her food, Mum would raise her eyebrows and say ‘Uh oh!’ in a fairly neutral, non-disapproving tone, without mockery or anger. By the time Daisy was 13 months old, she was using this ‘uh oh’ phrase herself (when she tipped her cornflakes off the edge of the table, for example). This gave her a way of dealing with the kind of experiences that could easily have resulted in shame.

‘I can imagine’ self-agency in words and symbols

The next quantum leap in the sense of self occurs when the infant discovers that he or she has a mind, and that other people have minds as well. (Stern, 1985, p. 124)

Throughout the second year of my observation, I saw this ‘quantum leap’ unfold in Daisy. I often had a strong sense of her ‘knowing her own mind’, which increased as her language developed.

Observation at 18 months:

Daisy drops a toy car down between the chair and TV unit. Squatting on her heels, Daisy struggles to retrieve it. After a few moments, she turns to me and says, “Uck”. I pull a puzzled face. Daisy turns to Sister who is watching TV, then tries again, pushing her hand down between the chair and the TV unit. She can reach the car, but can’t get it back up through the narrow gap. Daisy pushes the edge of the chair and reaches down into the gap again, now crying.

Mum comes in and Daisy twists round, looking up at her, reaching her free hand up and saying “Uck.” Mum says “What’s stuck?” kneels on the floor and peers under the chair to see. Daisy mimics Mum, putting her head almost on the floor. Mum says “Oh, you’ve dropped the car under the chair?” Daisy reaches under the chair and grabs the car – it’s very easy to retrieve that way. She pushes the car down on purpose into the gap — then squats down to retrieve it again.

In this vignette, it is as if Daisy knows that Mum knows something she doesn’t. She is able to communicate the problem to Mum, who can look at it from another angle. Mum tells her she has understood the situation, and shows her, simply by looking under the chair, how to solve it. Daisy ‘reads’ what is in Mum’s mind, just as Mum reads what is in Daisy’s. Inevitably, there were also misunderstandings.
Observation at 20 months:

Daisy bashes Mum’s legs saying, “Up, up” and Mum picks her up. Daisy immediately leans over towards the tap, saying “water!” Mum fills a cup and offers it to Daisy, who shakes her head vigorously, turning away. Mum puts the cup down, and Daisy protests, reaching towards the tap and saying “water!” Mum objects: “you didn’t want your water!” Daisy’s legs kick strongly and she arches her back, protesting loudly – bringing her hands up aggressively towards Mum’s face. Mum jerks her head back out of the way and says “No, Daisy!” Daisy reaches towards the sink again with both hands, almost throwing herself out of Mum’s arms, saying “water!” Mum says: “Oh, you want to wash your hands?” Daisy calms down immediately.

In thinking about such misunderstandings, and Daisy’s outburst, I found myself wondering whether a toddler with such a strong sense of self-agency might have more of a struggle to let go of her omnipotence. Overall, however, I think Daisy’s sense of self-agency made it more possible for her to manage frustration and thus cope with challenges to her omnipotence, not least through her use of symbolic play.

At this time, Daisy had started to attend nursery one day a week. Mum also started child-minding when Daisy was around 20 months old. Daisy began playing with dolls more often. She designated one doll as ‘baby’ and lay on top of it, squashing it. On another occasion, she took two dolls to the edge of the kitchen step, dropped them off the step and bashed them on the floor, before bringing them back to the sitting room where Mum was. Mum asked her if she had ‘had a nice walk with the babies?’ Daisy nodded, and dumped them back on Mum’s lap.

I observed Daisy biting Mum twice, both times mid-cuddle. Mum’s response was a sharp ‘no!’ and a stern, disapproving face. She would put Daisy down, and turn away from her. As an observer I felt very anxious, I expected a tantrum – but in fact Daisy found a way to make up with Mum:

Observation at 21 months:

Daisy buries her head in Mum’s lap, wrapping her arms around her. Suddenly Mum jerks her arm away and says loudly, “Ow! No, Daisy, that hurts!” Daisy has bitten her forearm. Daisy laughs, and Mum turns her face away saying “No it’s not funny.” Mum’s face is cold, and she looks right away from Daisy. Daisy studies Mum’s face, kneels back on her heels. Then she says “Babeppy,” and puts her face down onto Mum’s knee where there is a hole in her jeans and bare skin showing. Daisy blows a raspberry and Mum laughs, saying “Raspberry! You’re blowing raspberries now? Hmm what’s OK then.”

Intentional self-agency is described as the recognition that actions can change mental states, and is dated at two years. I would question the timings of the
model on this, as Daisy shows here that she can act in ways that change other people’s mental states, as well as her own.

**Conclusion**

By the time she was two years old, Daisy’s well-developed sense of self-agency, while contributing to a powerful infantile omnipotence, also equipped her to self-regulate, to choose from a range of actions and initiate reconciliation after a falling out.

This impressive and precocious sense of self-agency developed through the physical, social, teleological and intentional levels, inter-subjectively: Daisy could move because her experienced Mum enabled her movement. She could self-regulate because she had been well regulated. She could ‘make it better’ because Mum had ‘made it better’ time and time again.

Crucially, all those around Daisy began attributing meaning to her sounds and movements from the beginning. This started pre-birth, with Mum confident that the baby ‘would come when she wanted to’. Describing Daisy’s birth, which was a home water birth, Mum said, of the midwives, ‘They were great; they just let me get on with it’. I often reflected on that phrase, as it seemed to encapsulate her own mothering style: supportive but not intrusive, acknowledging and promoting her daughter’s self-agency. This might be why Daisy was ahead of the age-ranges suggested in Fonagy’s model.

My final observation showed Daisy’s self-agency in full swing:

**Observation at 24 months:**

Daisy is playing castles on the sofa with Sister. Daisy clambers with difficulty into the sofa “castle” and stands up – looking proudly around, stretching her arms along the back of the sofa and bouncing a little.

One of the sofa cushions has slipped half-off, and Daisy climbs onto it, sitting as high up as she can get, legs straight out in front of her. With a push from both hands she launches herself down this “slide.” She lands awkwardly but gets straight up onto her feet and claps her hands together, looking at me with a big grin. I smile back. With great effort, Daisy climbs back up onto the sofa and repeats the game, landing squarely on her feet. She looks very pleased with herself, grins at me, and turns to do it again.

This time she lands hard on the floor and bumps her head. She starts to cry. Mum comes in and sees her on the floor, “did you fall off?” Daisy stops crying immediately, and goes to clamber back up on the sofa. Mum asks the girls to put the sofa back together please. Sister shows how strong she is by pushing one of the seat cushions back. Daisy watches, then turns and bashes Mum’s legs with both hands, saying, “Up, up!” Mum picks her up.
Not only does Daisy have the physical agency to master the world around her (climbing on the sofa, fitting herself into it; bouncing) but she also takes pleasure in her own actions. Grinning and clapping, she enjoys being able to slide and being seen to slide, 'Look what I can do!'

A strong sense of agency also aids recovery when omnipotence is dented. When Daisy's third slide goes wrong, Mum comforts her without embarrassing her, offering a neutral explanation 'did you fall off?' that puts her back on her feet. When confronted with something beyond her abilities (lifting the sofa cushions back onto the seat), Daisy demands to be picked up again. Her actions and vocal commands get the response she wants from Mum, restoring her sense of agency, and delivering comfort with a hug.

Here it is possible to see the complex interplay between physical and social factors in Daisy's developing sense of herself as a confident agent, her constant exploration of what she can do for herself, and what she can make others do for her. At two years old, she really is 'queen of her castle'.

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