

AGENCY CAPTURE

How Systems Convert Human Participation Into Dependence

A Human Agency Preservation Infrastructure Thesis Paper

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Core thesis: Support becomes capture when a system no longer restores agency, but instead makes the person, group, or institution dependent on the system for meaning, authority, action, identity, or belonging.

Abstract

This paper develops the concept of agency capture as a core failure mode for Human Agency Preservation Infrastructure (HAPI). Agency capture occurs when a system appears to support people while quietly taking over the functions that make agency real: clarity, authority, refusal, revision, memory, accountability, and action. Unlike direct coercion, capture often feels helpful at first. It reduces uncertainty, supplies identity, simplifies decisions, provides belonging, or automates difficult work. But over time, the person becomes less able to understand, choose, refuse, act, remember, or remain accountable without the capturing system. The paper distinguishes support from capture, maps the stages of agency capture, identifies common capture domains, and proposes HAPI design principles for systems that restore agency rather than own it.

Keywords: agency capture, dependency, human agency, governance, institutional control, AI governance, HAPI, agency preservation, false gates, agency restoration.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
 2. Definition of Agency Capture
 3. Support Versus Capture
 4. The Capture Progression
 5. Capture Mechanisms
 6. Institutional and Spiritual Capture
 7. AI and Automation Capture
 8. Capture as False Governance
 9. Detection Criteria
 10. Prevention and Restoration
 11. HAPI Design Principles
 12. Conclusion
- Appendix A: Agency Capture Checklist
- Appendix B: Key Propositions

1. Introduction

HAPI begins with a simple claim: systems should preserve and restore human agency. But not every system that helps a person preserves agency. Some systems reduce burden in a way that strengthens participation. Others reduce burden by replacing participation. This second pattern is agency capture.

Agency capture is especially dangerous because it often begins as support. A person receives direction, relief, belonging, expertise, structure, or automation. The system appears helpful. It may even be helpful at first. But if the system becomes the only path through which the person can understand, choose, refuse, act, remember, belong, or be recognized as valid, the support relation has changed into a capture relation.

A support system restores the person's ability to act. A capture system makes the person less able to act without the system.

This distinction matters for families, churches, schools, workplaces, healthcare systems, governments, AI platforms, coaching systems, and agentic AI infrastructures. HAPI must be able to distinguish agency-restoring support from agency-capturing dependence.

2. Definition of Agency Capture

Agency capture is the process by which a system takes over the conditions of meaningful human participation while presenting itself as support, guidance, protection, efficiency, discipline, belonging, or governance.

A captured person may still appear active. They may still speak, approve, comply, work, vote, choose, or participate. But their participation is bounded by a system that controls the meaning of their choices, the cost of refusal, the available memory, the recognized authority, or the conditions of belonging.

Agency capture is not the same as ordinary dependence. Human beings naturally depend on others. Children depend on parents. Patients depend on doctors. Students depend on teachers. Workers depend on organizations. Communities depend on shared norms. Healthy dependence becomes capture only when support stops developing agency and begins replacing it.

Dependence is not always capture. Dependence becomes capture when the support relation no longer moves toward restored agency.

3. Support Versus Capture

The HAPI distinction between support and capture is central. Support increases the person’s ability to participate. Capture reduces the person’s ability to participate outside the system.

Dimension	Agency-Preserving Support	Agency Capture
Clarity	Helps the person understand reality more clearly.	Controls what the person is allowed to understand.
Authority	Restores rightful authority to the person or role.	Makes authority dependent on the system’s recognition.
Refusal	Allows meaningful refusal without identity destruction.	Makes refusal costly, dangerous, shameful, or impossible.
Memory	Preserves accessible records for learning and accountability.	Controls memory, context, records, or narrative.
Action	Helps the person act with greater competence.	Acts for the person until the person cannot act independently.
Belonging	Strengthens community without owning identity.	Makes belonging conditional on compliance.
Maturity	Becomes lighter as capacity grows.	Becomes heavier as dependence grows.

The decisive test is not whether a system helps. The decisive test is whether the help restores agency or transfers agency into the system.

4. The Capture Progression

Agency capture often follows a predictable progression. The system begins by relieving pressure, then becomes the preferred interpreter of reality, then becomes the manager of action, then becomes the condition for legitimacy or belonging.

1. Relief: The system reduces uncertainty, workload, loneliness, fear, or complexity.
2. Reliance: The person begins depending on the system for interpretation, decision support, or belonging.
3. Substitution: The system starts making judgments the person previously made directly.
4. Permission: The person feels unable or unauthorized to act without system approval.
5. Identity binding: The person’s sense of worth, legitimacy, or spiritual/social standing becomes tied to the system.
6. Refusal penalty: Disagreement, questioning, or leaving becomes socially, emotionally, economically, or spiritually costly.
7. Agency collapse: The person retains presence but loses meaningful independent participation.

Capture is complete when the person can no longer distinguish support from permission to exist, belong, act, or be valid.

5. Capture Mechanisms

Systems capture agency through mechanisms that weaken one or more agency conditions. These mechanisms can appear in religious, corporate, medical, educational, digital, and AI systems.

5.1 Clarity Capture

The system controls interpretation. It becomes the only trusted lens through which the person understands events, identity, risk, truth, or belonging. Outside information is framed as dangerous, disloyal, inferior, or invalid.

5.2 Authority Capture

The system makes human authority dependent on institutional recognition. The person may have responsibility, but their right to act, question, or decide is filtered through the system.

5.3 Refusal Capture

The system preserves the appearance of choice while making refusal too costly. Refusal may lead to exclusion, shame, job loss, family pressure, spiritual fear, loss of access, or reputational harm.

5.4 Memory Capture

The system owns the record. If the person cannot access receipts, reasons, prior decisions, evidence, or context, they cannot fully contest or learn. Memory capture allows the system to rewrite reality after the fact.

5.5 Action Capture

The system performs so many functions for the person that the person's own capacity atrophies. The person becomes efficient inside the system but less capable outside it.

5.6 Belonging Capture

The system ties identity, community, family access, spiritual status, professional legitimacy, or social recognition to compliance. Belonging becomes a control surface.

6. Institutional and Spiritual Capture

Institutions require boundaries. A community without boundaries cannot preserve trust, responsibility, or shared purpose. HAPI does not claim that all authority is capture. The question is whether authority restores agency or owns it.

Institutional capture occurs when a system claims authority over more of the person than it rightly governs. A workplace may govern work performance, but it becomes capture when it consumes identity, time, conscience, family life, and personal worth. A religious community may teach, correct, and shepherd, but it becomes capture when it positions itself as the necessary mediator of a person's access to God, conscience, family belonging, or spiritual legitimacy.

A true gate governs its rightful boundary. A false gate claims authority over boundaries that belong to conscience, truth, God, or the person's own agency.

Spiritual capture is especially destabilizing because it can bind social belonging, family access, eternal meaning, guilt, repentance, identity, and fear into one governance structure. When spiritual authority preserves conscience and restores relationship, it can be agency-restoring. When it uses fear, shame, isolation, or exclusive recognition to control participation, it becomes agency-capturing.

7. AI and Automation Capture

AI systems introduce a new capture risk. They can reduce cognitive load, organize work, summarize complexity, and extend human capacity. But they can also become the layer through which people think, choose, remember, decide, communicate, and act.

AI capture does not require malicious intent. It can emerge from convenience. The system drafts the message, selects the options, summarizes the evidence, recommends the decision, remembers the history, and executes the action. Over time, the human may remain present but lose direct contact with the reasoning and memory behind action.

AI Support	AI Capture Risk
Summarizes information so the human can decide.	Filters information so the human only sees the system's frame.
Drafts reversible options.	Commits actions before meaningful review.
Preserves receipts and reasoning.	Hides or abstracts away the action history.
Improves human capacity.	Replaces human judgment while preserving approval theater.
Makes refusal easy.	Makes the recommended path frictionless and alternatives difficult.

AI should amplify human agency, not become the operating system through which human agency is absorbed.

8. Capture as False Governance

Governance becomes false when it preserves the appearance of control while removing meaningful agency. Agency capture is one of the main ways false governance forms.

A captured system can have policies, committees, dashboards, approvals, audits, and human-in-the-loop processes. But if humans cannot understand, refuse, revise, contest, remember, or remain accountable with real authority, governance is theatrical.

This is why HAPI treats governance as the product of agency preservation. Governance is not real because a process exists. Governance is real when the people responsible for consequence retain the authority, clarity, refusal, memory, and capacity needed to participate meaningfully.

If the system owns the person's agency, then governance becomes the system governing itself through human symbols.

9. Detection Criteria

HAPI can detect agency capture by asking whether support is making the person more capable, more clear, more accountable, and more able to refuse, or whether it is making the person dependent, compliant, and unable to act outside the system.

Capture Question	Agency-Preserving Answer	Capture Warning
Can the person refuse?	Yes, without identity destruction or disproportionate penalty.	Refusal causes exclusion, shame, severe loss, or spiritual/social invalidation.
Can the person understand?	Yes, reasons and evidence are accessible.	The system controls interpretation and discourages outside understanding.
Can the person act without the system?	Increasingly yes as capacity grows.	Decreasingly yes as reliance grows.
Can the person contest?	Yes, with visible process and evidence.	Contest is framed as rebellion, incompetence, risk, or disloyalty.
Does support become lighter?	Yes, as the person matures.	No, the system becomes more necessary over time.
Who owns memory?	The person or accountable community can access records.	The system owns the record and the narrative.

10. Prevention and Restoration

Agency capture is prevented by designing support systems that intentionally return capacity to the person. The system should not simply ask, "Did this help?" It should ask, "Did this help in a way that makes the person more able to participate?"

Restoration requires more than removing the capturing system. A captured person may need rebuilt clarity, confidence, authority, memory, skills, community, and safe refusal. Abrupt removal of a support system can create collapse if capacity has already been weakened.

8. Name the capture: identify which agency functions were absorbed.
9. Restore clarity: separate reality from the system's controlled narrative.
10. Restore refusal: make no, pause, and contest safe again.
11. Restore memory: recover records, reasons, timelines, and evidence.
12. Restore authority: return rightful decision power to the person or role.
13. Restore capacity: rebuild skills, confidence, habits, and community support.
14. Reduce dependence: make the support relation lighter over time.

11. HAPI Design Principles

HAPI systems should be designed to support agency without absorbing it. Any HAPI tool, audit, or institution should be tested against the capture risk.

- No support without a path toward restored capacity.
- No approval process without meaningful refusal.

- No authority without contestability.
- No automation without visible memory and receipts.
- No governance process that makes humans symbolic participants.
- No belonging structure that uses identity destruction as routine enforcement.
- No AI delegation that hides reasoning, scope, authority, or consequence.
- No support system that becomes heavier as the person matures.
- No gate that claims authority over boundaries it does not rightly own.
- No restoration model that treats dependency as success.

The purpose of HAPI is not to make people dependent on agency infrastructure. The purpose is to restore agency so infrastructure can become lighter, clearer, and more accountable over time.

12. Conclusion

Agency capture explains why some systems can feel helpful, protective, efficient, spiritual, therapeutic, or intelligent while still weakening the person. Capture is not always hostile. It can emerge from sincere authority, overprotective support, convenience, institutional survival, or automation that optimizes action faster than humans can participate.

HAPI must therefore distinguish between support that restores agency and support that captures agency. This distinction protects the heart of the mission. Human Agency Preservation Infrastructure should not become another dependency layer. It should become a framework for auditing, restoring, and preserving the conditions that allow people to understand, refuse, revise, act, remember, and remain accountable.

A true support system gives agency back. A capture system keeps agency for itself.

Appendix A: Agency Capture Checklist

A system may be capturing agency if several of the following are true:

- The person feels unable to act without permission from the system.
- The system frames outside information as dangerous or invalid by default.
- Refusal is formally allowed but socially, spiritually, economically, or emotionally punished.
- The system controls the record of what happened and why.
- The person is held accountable for outcomes they could not meaningfully affect.
- The support relationship becomes heavier instead of lighter as time passes.
- Belonging, identity, or legitimacy are made conditional on compliance.
- The system substitutes its judgment for the person's conscience or rightful authority.
- The person becomes less capable outside the system.
- The system treats dependency as proof of success.

Appendix B: Key Propositions

15. Agency capture occurs when support takes over the functions that make agency real.
16. Support becomes capture when it no longer moves toward restored agency.
17. Capture can occur without obvious coercion because convenience, belonging, fear, and relief can all create dependence.
18. A person can remain present in a system while losing meaningful participation.
19. Refusal is one of the clearest tests of whether agency remains real.
20. Memory capture prevents contestability and accountability.
21. AI systems can capture agency by becoming the layer through which humans think, decide, remember, and act.
22. Institutional authority becomes false when it claims boundaries that belong to conscience, truth, God, or rightful human agency.
23. Governance becomes theater when captured humans are used as symbols of participation.
24. HAPI must restore agency without creating dependence on HAPI itself.