Chapter 4
Rom Harré on Personal Agency

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In *Personal Being* (1984), Rom Harré produced an account of human agency exercised by persons, understood as powerful particulars acting within discursive, sociocultural contexts. Harré's account of personal agency was influenced by the earlier work of Mead (1934), Lev Vygotsky (1962), and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953). In its turn, Harré's work was enormously influential on many of my generation of theoretical psychologists, enabling us to theorize persons as embodied and socio-culturally constituted actors with self-consciousness, personal identity, and personal agency—agents who could not be reduced to either biophysical or sociocultural determinants or to some combination of inter- and extra-personal causes, forces, and mechanisms. In this essay, I briefly revisit Harré's conception of personal agency as presented in *Personal Being* and elaborated in subsequent works such as *The Discursive Mind* (Harré and Gillet 1994) and *The Singular Self* (Harré 1998).

In the summer of 1985, I read Rom Harré's *Personal Being* for the first time. This, and subsequent readings, changed my life. Prior to reading Harré, I had pursued rather standard research in applied psychology, especially in educational psychology and psychotherapy. By 1985, I had come to believe the work I had been doing for the preceding 15 years suffered one obvious error and one obvious problem. The error was to assume there was some general answer to questions such as "What is effective teaching" and "How does psychotherapy work," an answer that applied across all, or at least most, instructional and therapeutic contexts and individual learners and clients. The problem was that most psychological theory and practice assumed the decisions and actions of individual people were both determined (especially when participating as subjects in psychological research) and free (especially when selecting and applying psychological coping strategies in their everyday lives). How could this be possible?

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The more I thought about such matters, I came to the conclusion that psychology lacked an adequate theory of human agency—a theory that might explain why different individuals reacted differently to similar contexts, why the same individuals acted differently at different times, and how human beings could be both determined and free in their experiences, choices, and actions. It was in the midst of such ruminations that I first read *Personal Being,* the book that moved me away from traditional empirical research in applied psychology to a future career in the theory and history of psychology. In Rom Harré's *Personal Being,* I found much of the theory of human agency I thought psychology was missing. Although my subsequent work on selfhood, agency, and personhood has moved away from certain aspects of Harré's treatment of these topics, I have continued to find fruitful his central ideas concerning persons and selves, the social structure of cognition and emotion, personal development, identity projects, and personal being as consciousness, agency, and identity or autobiography.

In this brief tribute, I interpret Harré's theory of personal agency, as articulated in *Personal Being* and selected subsequent works, before considering some ways in which Harré's account of personal agency might be developed further to interpret and explain the acquisition of agency as a core capacity of persons. In doing so, I draw on more recent work in theoretical, social, and developmental psychology that makes extensive use of the ideas of George Herbert Mead.

Harré's Theory of Personal Agency

In Harré's view, "to be an agent is to conceive of oneself as (hold a theory that one is) a being in possession of an ultimate power of decision and action" (Harré 1984, p. 29). To be an ultimate source of one's decisions and actions invokes a conception of agency as "*above* subpersonal powerful particulars, such as desires and intentions" (p. 29). This is an agent capable of choosing between equally enticing and powerful options, overcoming attractions and distractions, and creating novel principles and ways to control desires and impediments. Importantly,

> … what is transcendental to experience is none other than the social conditions under which persons are created from mere organic beings by their acquiring a theory appropriate to their society. To be self-conscious and to act freely are not, I believe, mysterious capacities, but particular ways of thinking about what one is experiencing, planning, executing and so on. (p. 29)

In the final chapter of *Personal Being,* Harré remarks:

> In a way the first nine chapters draw out in detail the original insight of G. H. Mead, that the self owes its form and perhaps its very existence to the circumambient social order. (p. 256)

In Chap. 7 of *Personal Being*, "Personal Being as Practical Unity: Agency," Harré states the theme of this chapter as follows:

> The self as agent is not a mysterious thing but a belief which endows the believer with certain powers of action in accordance with the interpersonal models available in the society. (p. 180)

In this chapter, Harré contrasts "agents" with "patients." A patient remains quiescent and unchanging in the absence of an external stimulus. In contrast, an agent can act without external stimulation. Persons are agents whose action tendencies and their release are within their own power. However, Harré, like Mead, insists that persons are the kinds of agents who

> at some stages of their careers … are patients; then by acquiring tendencies and powers whose realization requires the removal of a restraint, such as a countervailing and inhibiting force, they become agents. (p. 189)

The personal tendencies and powers to which Harré refers include self-consciousness, identity, reasoning, and self-command, none of which can be reduced to complex forms of internal determination alone because the ultimate source of such capabilities are features of interpersonal interactions and discourses out of which they emerge. Our conception of ourselves as agents is a kind of theory that we have extracted from our history of such interactivities.

> By being forced to listen to the exhortations of others, I learnt to exhort myself, and by watching others push each other into action, I learn to bestir myself. It is my grasp of the theory that I am a unified being that enables me to understand that I am the recipient both of exhortations and kicks and shoves, and that I can exhort and shove others and, finally, putting all this together, that I can so treat myself. (p. 193)

> In the light of all I have argued, we need seek no further for an explanation of the transcendental unity of ourselves as perceivers and agents. It is a model of ourselves created by drawing on our public role as a source. (p. 194)

In *The Discursive Mind* (1994), Harré and Grant Gillett emphasize that personal agency, which is enabled by participating in and drawing from interpersonal interactions within sociocultural and moral contexts, cannot be reduced to "extrapersonal explanations of a social rather than internal type" (p. 142). This is so because "Social causation disposes the person to certain reactions and ways of acting but does not determine that they will act thus and so" (p. 142). More generally,

> People operate with the meanings available to them in discourse and fashion a psychological life by organizing their behavior in the light of these meanings and integrating them over time. The result of the integrative project is a personality or character that is, to the extent permitted by the discursive skills of the subject/agent, coherent and creative. The ideal is a psychological life with the character of an artistic project and not merely a stream of experiences and responses to stimulation. (p. 143)

In sum, the person agent emerges over the life course. By participating in the discursive practices that define an individual's life world, the developing person comes to experience and act according to the meanings, rules, and reasons available within that life world. Her publicly displayed and collectively realized social being is gradually transformed in ways that allow her to be privately displayed to herself

and individually realized. Thus equipped, the emerging person agent is able to publicly express her uniquely personal transformation of conventional meanings and rules, and to act them out or publish them in the public, social arena for the scrutiny and reception of others. The creative contribution of the person agent may be considered as the extent to which what began as an immersion in public, collective practices and then was transformed into private, personal understandings and projects, now might be picked up by others and perhaps accepted into the constantly changing, shared discourses of particular societies and cultures (see Harré's "quadripartite space" in Harré 1984, pp. 45 & 113).

Extending Harré's Theory of Personal Agency

The kind of strongly influential, yet not strongly deterministic, social constructionism that Harré adopts reflects Mead's (1934), Vygotsky's (1962) and their followers' (e.g., Rogoff 1991) use of words like "internalization" and "appropriation" to describe how developing persons somehow interiorize publicly available social conversations and actions on the basis of which they gradually are able to develop uniquely personal capabilities such as moral and rational agency. Influenced by Wittgenstein (1953), Harré's interpretation of Vygotsky and Mead tends to emphasize discourse, rule following, meaning, and reasons.

Motivated in large part by the writings of George Herbert Mead, Alex Gillespie and I (Gillespie 2012; Martin and Gillespie 2010) have attempted to theorize more precisely the processes by which such interiorization might occur. With a greater emphasis on Mead's conceptions of *perspectives* (understood as orientations to act in particular situations) and *sociality*, our work extends Harré's developmental theory of personal agency by emphasizing interpersonal interactivity that involves moving between social positions contained within conventional routines and practices. Initially aided by the actions and directions of caregivers, young children are helped to position themselves within simple interactive routines such as giving and receiving objects. As Mead (1934) notes, these repetitive position exchanges constitute many childhood games, such as hide-and-seek, tag, follow the leader, and dodge ball. What Mead recognized in such exchanges is that taking the social position of the other by moving between and actually experiencing the different sides of such exchanges enables the developing child to remember what it is like to be in one position when in the other. This occupation of interactive, oscillating positions allows her to experience herself in the role and perspective of the other, and to integrate and experience both perspectives simultaneously—what Mead referred to as sociality. Mead understands perspectives as orientations to act within particular situations. It is the experience of sociality that eventually allows developing persons to differentiate and integrate perspectives associated with various social, interpersonal positionings, and to experience the emergence of self-consciousness and deliberative personal agency.

The child's repeated experiences of different social positions by moving physically and psychologically between them allows her to react to herself not only as others react to her, but as she herself comes to react to herself through her participation in interpersonal exchanges of social positions (Martin 2006). In this way, both our perspectives and our selves are differentiated and emerge within our ongoing interactivity with others. There is no need to assume a preexisting reflective "internalizer" because what occurs is not initially a matter of internalization. Instead, it is a process of participation in sociocultural practices through interactivity with others. Not only our ability to take perspectives, but our self-consciousness and deliberative agency follow upon our interactive social positioning. We do indeed develop theories of ourselves that unify our experiences, just as Harré has claimed. However, these theories are much more embodied in social interaction than the typical treatment of "theory" in analytic philosophy recognizes. They arise within our interactivity with others in the sociocultural and biophysical world through processes of position exchange, perspective taking, and integration, processes that are simultaneously social and psychological.

At more advanced levels of development, the self-reactivity and self-understanding that emerge within Mead's developmental, social interactional account may be seen as both determined and uniquely determining. As a developmental consequence of their sociality and interpersonal reactivity, self-conscious individuals are able to occupy simultaneously both a first-person perspective on their immediate activities and a third-person perspective on the sequence of events and experiences that led up to this activity (Mead's "I" and "me" respectively). The simultaneous occupation of both these spatial, temporal perspectives can enable self-conscious agents, who have become adept at reconstructing and reenacting the conditions and interactions that have determined their past actions and experiences, to exhibit some significant degree of self-regulated, deliberative coordination of their actions in the emerging present. Due to its emergent aspects, this self-determination is not reducible to its prior determinants, and acts as an indispensable contributor to future actions and events.

Positioning Theory and Position Exchange Theory

Alongside the development of his theory of personal agency, Harré has advanced a method for conducting psychological inquiry into "the processes by which encounters between social beings can be understood" (Harré 2015, p. 265), a method built around "the root idea" that "the way people, institutions, and even nations act is to some extent determined by shared and sometimes contested beliefs about how rights and duties to perform certain sorts of acts are distributed among the interested parties" (Harré 2015, p. 265). Harré defines positions as "beliefs about rights and duties which are ascribed in any [social] episode to the actors" (p. 271). Throughout his descriptions and illustrations of the application of his *Positioning Theory* (e.g., Davies and Harré 1990; Harré et al. 2009; Moghaddam

et al. 2008), Harré maintains that "human action cannot be studied without attention to the meanings of what people do, the norms they live by, and the culture they inhabit" (Harré 2015, p. 275) because,

> Above all, personal agency must be retained in any psychological account of human beings —because persons are embedded in moral systems or orders, so we have to take account of the rights and duties that are set for us in the beliefs and practices of our local culture which we take up or resist and maybe reject in our daily activities. (Harré 2015, p. 265).

Building on Gillespie and my *Position Exchange Theory* (Gillespie 2012; Martin and Gillespie 2012), in recent years I have developed and employed a method for conducting social, psychological biographical research that seeks to uncover the kinds of positions and position exchanges that have been particularly influential and important in the lives of persons. This method, *Life Positioning Analysis (LPA)* (Martin 2013, 2015), also relies on Meadian conceptions of *perspectives* and *sociality*. LPA recognizes that agency is not only a theory; it is a kind of understanding and capability forged through social interactivity involving position and perspective exchange and integration. Whereas Harré's *Positioning Theory* defines positions in terms of collective, shared "beliefs about rights and duties" (Harré 2015, p. 275), *LPA,* like *Position Exchange Theory*, considers positions to be person-occupied sociocultural and interpersonal sites, postures, and orientations that comprise routine episodes of interactivity between two or more persons.

For example, in a life positioning analysis of the life situations of Native American athlete Jim Thorpe (Martin 2013), it becomes clear how Thorpe's positioning outside the mainstream of American society restricted and limited his development of personal agency. Although highly respected for his athletic abilities and achievements, Jim was given few opportunities to participate in formal leadership roles. His coaches and employers tended to reserve and dispense such positions to socially privileged insiders who were not Indians. As a consequence, "Lacking the interactive, experiential bases for full participation in the vocational, economic, and sociocultural practices of the dominant American culture, Jim … was unable to insert himself interpersonally and intersubjectively into his own life and the lives of others" (Martin 2015, p. 253). Or, consider examples drawn from the lives of psychologists like Carl Rogers and B. F. Skinner, both of whom pursued work and life projects that can be traced in part to their social, relational positioning and interacting as children and adolescents. Whereas Rogers' creative agency was directed toward improving interpersonal relations with others, especially concerning the self-expression he himself struggled with in social interaction and exchange, Skinner's creative agency was targeted at devising inventive, often mechanical means for alleviating life problems and challenges. Key position exchanges for Rogers involved movements between positions of listener and speaker; key position exchanges for Skinner oscillated between controllee and controller (Martin 2017). Of course, Meadian sociality, position exchange, and perspective integration do not explain all of our personal agency and its development. But, they do help to anchor the beliefs, meanings, and theories of personal agents in specifically detailed processes of social psychological interactivity and exchange.

On the Shoulders of Giants

Just as Rom Harré stood on the shoulders of George Herbert Mead, Lev Vygotsky, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, many of us currently active in theoretical, philosophical, social, and developmental psychology have been extremely fortunate to benefit from interactions and exchanges with Rom Harré and his many books, chapters, articles, and presentations. Clearly Rom must be considered one of the most influential theoretical and philosophical psychologists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He stands among the most prolific social scientists of his generation, despite turning to social science and social psychology in the middle of his illustrious career. His impact on psychology more generally continues to grow, as many of those he has influenced directly and indirectly continue to work with, develop further, and disseminate his brand of social psychological theory and inquiry—an integrated approach to understanding us human beings as unique agents in the creation of the meanings, traditions, practices, and rational, moral orders within which we exist and live as persons.

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