Position exchange: The social development of agency

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A B S T R A C T

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Human agency can be defined in terms of acting independently of the immediate situation. Humans have a considerable independence from immediate situational demands because, on the one hand, they are able to distanciate from ongoing activity and reflect upon it, while on the other hand, they are able to identify with other people in different situations. It is argued that this form of agency arises through intersubjectivity because intersubjectivity enables the actor to take a perspective outside of the immediate situation and thus extricating the actor from the immediate situation. The paper contributes to the question of how intersubjectivity, as the basis of agency, develops. Explanations from phenomenology, child development and mirror neuron research are critically reviewed and the novel idea of position exchange is advanced. The paper concludes by examining some of the implications of position exchange for our understanding of the development of agency focusing upon mirror neurons, role play and autism.

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Human agency can be defined as the degree to which an agent can act independently of the immediate situation. This sociocultural definition, which stems from Dewey and Mead, emphasises not only the power to act, but the degree to which an action is motivated by concerns originating outside of the immediate situation. The immediate situation is the here-and-now perceptual and experiential situation which arises as a function of the agent's immediate impulses combined with situational affordances, demands and constraints. The organism without agency is compelled to act by stimuli in the immediate situation. But, the organism with a degree of agency stands apart from the immediate situation and can be motivated by concerns beyond the situation, such as a distant goal, an abstract

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principle, or concern for someone else. This narrow definition shares much with the developmental concept of psychological distancing, as theorised by Piaget in terms of decentration and Vygotsky in terms of semiotic mediation.

Köhler's (1925/1999) classic research on problem solving amongst apes reveals the extent to which apes are 'trapped' within the immediate perceptual situation. Köhler, when introducing bananas into the apes' cages, noted how the gaze of the apes was transfixed by the desirable stimuli. In the language of behaviourism, the apes were under stimulus control. This observation prompted Köhler to suspend the bananas up high and out of reach. Initially the apes lunged up in vain. Only with practice did the apes learn to swipe down the desirable cache using a stick. Köhler presents such problem solving as instances of insight and agency. However, he also emphasises that this agency is limited:

> Even sticks that have already been used often both by Tschego and Koko [two apes] seem to lose all their functional or instrumental value, if they are at some distance from the critical point. More precisely: if the experimenter takes care that the stick is not visible to the animal when gazing directly at the objective – and that, vice-versa, a direct look at the stick excludes the whole region of the objective from the field of vision – then, generally speaking, recourse to this instrument is either prevented or, at least, greatly retarded, even when it has already been frequently used. (Köhler, 1925/1999, p. 38)

Problems, such as obtaining the bananas, could be solved by the apes, provided that all the parts of the solution were presented within the perceptual field simultaneously. If the ape had to turn around to see the stick, then in turning away from the bananas, the stimuli of the bananas faded and thus the relevance of the stick seemed to disappear. Köhler's apes were, to a large extent, trapped within their immediate perceptual field.

It is too simplistic to say that apes, and other non-human animals, are slave to the immediate situation while humans are independent. Köhler and others have reported instances when apes do seem able to break away from stimulus control, in some cases even running off to find a tool which can be used to solve the given problem. Equally, studies of addiction and habit clearly demonstrate that humans are often enslaved by situational stimuli. Situations for humans are often social. Classic research in social psychology demonstrates the surprising extent to which human behaviour can be determined by immediate social demands, such as authority (Milgram, 1969), conformity (Asch, 1951) and role expectation (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). Yet, despite often being enslaved by the situation, human's relation to the situation, when compared to non-human primates, is peculiar.

Consider the subjects in Milgram's (1969) experiments on obedience to authority who believed that their actions were causing distress. The fact that the majority continued to obey the authority demonstrates the power of the situation, and in this sense we could say subjects lacked agency. Yet, close analysis of the transcripts and observations reveals that the subjects, despite carrying out the behaviour, resisted it, disagreed with it, and spoke out against it. Subjects made appeals on behalf of the seemingly distressed victim and they demanded that the experimenter take responsibility. In other words, while the subjects' behaviour was perhaps trapped by the situation, the subjects' thoughts were not. Their thoughts were filled with questions about their behaviour, reflecting upon it from external points of view, such as the perspective of the victim and experimenter, but also from ethical and religious points of view. And the subjects' thoughts were also with the victim, feeling for and identifying with the victim's apparent distress. While subjects' behaviour was bound by the situation, their thoughts were moving between the perspectives of the victim, the experimenter, and more general potential audiences. For the purpose of this paper, these movements of thought beyond the immediate situation are assumed to be the basis of agency. That is to say, human agency is conceptualised as a form of psychological distancing (Sigel, 2002). Building on this conceptualisation, the paper will advance a theory of how human agency develops.

The aim of the present paper is to theorise how the ability to transcend the immediate here-and-now situation develops. First, the paper will distinguish two processes of extrication from the immediate situation, namely, distanciation and identification. Second, it will argue that central to these two processes is intersubjectivity. Specifically, perspective taking enables people to reflect upon their own situation and participate in the situations of others. Third, the paper will review theories about how intersubjectivity develops. The key issue is the correspondence problem, namely, how 1st and 3rd