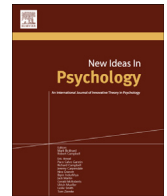




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## Position Exchange Theory: A socio-material basis for discursive and psychological positioning

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## A B S T R A C T

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Dialogicality within discourse and the self has been widely observed and analyzed. But how does this dialogicality develop and change? And how is it related to society? We argue that people moving within their societies, specifically moving between social positions, which are institutionally sanctioned roles with situational demands, provides a social and material basis for dialogicality. Each social position sustains a psychological perspective, and thus people moving into a social position are stepping into the associated psychological perspective in a fundamentally embodied way. As people move between roles and situations in society they accumulate psychological orientations, and this, we argue, is the basis for the dialogical tensions within the self, discursive positioning, and also humans' abilities to orient to one another and empathize. We review literature on play, games, education, problem-solving, and life trajectories to demonstrate that exchanging social positions is an important developmental principle operating across the lifespan.

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Position Exchange Theory (PET) is a recently developed approach to the development of human dialogicality that emphasizes the importance of people moving within physical, social, and institutional spaces. PET, we will argue, augments both Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) and Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 2001). PET is logically and developmentally prior to these theories by conceptualizing how people's embodied movement between social positions, in physical-social-institutional space, makes possible more abstracted movement between discursive and psychological positions. While research on psychological and discursive positioning has provided unequivocal evidence for human dialogicality, PET, we argue, provides an explanation of how dialogicality develops and changes and how it is related to social structure.

## 1. Positioning Theory

Davies and Harré (1990) and Harré and Langenhove, (1991) develop the concept of positioning as an alternative to the static concept of role. They argue that roles are conceptualized as dominating individuals, caricaturing individuals as zombies enacting prescribed behaviors. Roles, they argue, lack subtlety and agency. In contrast, the concept of positioning, anchored in a fine grained analysis of discourse, reveals that people give, receive, resist, and claim subject positions, often all within a short space of time or while they are ostensibly in the same role.

People when talking, intentionally or unintentionally, position themselves and others. For example, giving advice can create positions of expert and novice. Resisting advice is usually resistance to being positioned novice. Positioning can occur both within inter-personal interaction and inter-group interaction (Montiel & De Guzman, 2011). While it is recognized that any culture has relatively established subject positions, the focus is on the ongoing creation and negotiation of positions.

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Davies and Harré (1990) offer positioning as a contribution to the literature on personhood, with empirical research on positioning revealing the discursive production of multifaceted selves. The centrifugal force acting upon the self is participation in diverse contexts and associated discourses which require individuals to adopt various, sometimes contradictory, subject positions. The self is the accumulation of such positions and the narratives created to attempt to bind together the emergent tensions.

PET builds on Positioning Theory. While Positioning Theory emphasizes the effects on the person of being socialized into potentially conflicting discourses, PET emphasizes how this same dynamic enables people to empathize with and understand people in different social contexts. Thus, while movement between social-discursive positions is a centrifugal dynamic within the self, it is simultaneously a binding dynamic at the level of society.

## 2. Dialogical Self Theory

Dialogical Self Theory builds upon Positioning Theory, but it has a more psychological focus. It aims to link the self and society by placing internal psychological processes in the broader context of external social and societal processes. The self is conceptualized as a collection of 'I-positions' from which the self acts, speaks, and reflects. I-positions can be internal or external, and a range of dialogical tensions are thus possible: within the *internal* domain (e.g., 'As an enjoyer of life I disagree with myself as an ambitious worker'); between the *internal and external* (extended) domain (e.g., 'I want to do this but the voice of my mother in myself criticizes me'); and within the *external* domain (e.g., 'The way my parents were interacting with each other has shaped the way I deal with problems in my contact with my husband') (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, pp. 7–8).

Dialogical Self Theory challenges sharp distinctions between self and other, focusing on the 'other-within-self'. Vygotsky's thought is used to conceptualize the development of the 'other-within-self'. External social relations become internal psychological relations; dialogue between people becomes internal dialogue. When theorizing how this internalization occurs, Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010, p. 205) emphasize the importance of role play:

Children's pretense play also can be described in terms of a 'reversal' that takes place when children behave as if they are other people, in this way introducing other people and objects in their spaces of imagination [...] by simulating the other's speech and actions, one learns to understand his thoughts and experiences.

Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, like others (Lillard, 2001; Mead, 1934), recognize that children's play often entails playing other people's roles. Children play at being mothers and fathers, teachers and older pupils, cops and robbers, and so on. Such play cultivates the 'other-within-self'. Position exchange theory, however, develops this insight further. The reversal of social positions, which occurs in children's role-play, is just one instance of a much broader phenomenon of position exchange and coordination operating across the lifespan.

## 3. Position Exchange Theory

Position Exchange Theory is based on three assumptions. The first assumption is that society comprises a multitude of social positions, many of which are interdependent (Durkheim, 1893). Social positions only exist in social situations. They are socio-institutional locations within our social structure from which people speak and act, constituted by rights, responsibilities, and situational demands. Social positions can be transient (e.g., asking for help) or relatively stable (e.g., being a mother), consequential (e.g., being a judge) or relatively inconsequential (e.g., being a polite host), and formal (e.g., an elected official) or informal (e.g., narrating a story). They always have both generic and specific situational aspects. Central to PET is the idea that every social position entails at least one interdependent social position. Speakers have addressees, mothers have children, judges have defendants and prosecutors, narrating a story has an audience, and so on.

The second assumption is that social positions constitute perspectives, that is, psychological and embodied orientations, interests, and even world views. The classic social psychological literature on the power of situations provides ample evidence for this assumption (e.g., Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Social positions, with their roles, responsibilities, rights, and situational constraints shape feelings, thought, and action.

The third assumption is that people move between social positions. This somewhat obvious point is quite radical given that most research at best studies people in context, and at worst neglects the context altogether (Dreier, 2009). But people are not 'trapped' in a single social position or context. A judge, even before arriving to work in the morning, may have traveled through several social positions, such as, being mother, wife, commuter, and a consumer of take away coffee.

Position exchange puts these three assumptions together to propose that people moving between social positions 'layer up' psychological perspectives and discourses, thus becoming dialogical beings. Position exchange, we suggest, is a general developmental principle operating across the lifespan (Martin & Gillespie, 2010). Infants are moved from one context of interaction to the next. Toddlers begin to move themselves from one context to another. Young children explore social positions in play, games, and discourse. Play, games, and education put the child in new social situations with associated exchange opportunities. Whatever resolution we consider, position exchange is at work. Children become adults, parents become grandparents, and employees become employers. But equally, at a micro resolution, within the course of a single day, people alternate between talking/listening, asking/helping, giving/getting, buying/selling, leading/following, winning/losing, teaching/learning, reading/writing, and so on. The remainder of the present article will review evidence for position exchange in five domains: play, games, education, problem-solving, and life transitions.

## 4. Play

Children everywhere play (Bruner, Jolly & Sylva, 1976; Göncü & Gaskins, 2007), but what they play at varies

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