

Introduction: The relation between Social Representation Theory and Positioning Theory

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This special issue of *Papers on Social Representation* is devoted to Positioning Theory (PT). For some readers, this might look odd: what does PT have to do with social representation theory (SRT)? This introduction will answer that question by first introducing PT, secondly by explaining how both theories relate to each other as they each focus upon one dimension of social situation: respectively the moral order in play and knowledge available. Most of the papers gathered here have been presented at the second PT conference that was held on 9-12th July, 2017, at Linacre College, Oxford University, UK.

POSITIONING THEORY

Positioning Theory, as developed by Rom Harré and collaborators, is an attempt to contribute to realizing a Kuhnian paradigm shift in (Social) Psychology from the Old Paradigm that is influenced by logical positivism, to a New Paradigm inspired by hermeneutics as a model of inquiry (Harré & Secord, 1974). The Old Paradigm is committed to finding the causes of behaviour and has resulted in a social psychology based upon the manipulation of dependent and independent variables and abstracted from real-life episodes. In contrast, the New Paradigm sees the task of psychology “to find convenient representations of bodies of

knowledge that are required for the accomplishments of the intentions, plans, and projects of human agents” (Harré, 2012, p. 192).

The origins of PT go back to two foundational texts published in the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1992) in which the concept of Positioning was introduced. But it was only in an edited volume that appeared in 1999 (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999) that a reference to Positioning *Theory* is made in the introductory chapter of that volume. PT is there defined as “an explanatory schema to understand and study discourse and its relation to different psychic and social phenomena” (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 2). Furthermore, it is claimed that “a powerful use of positioning theory as an analytical tool is that not only persons and their identities, both individual and social, but also societal issues on a cultural level can be tackled with the same conceptual apparatus” (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 12). And finally, the authors introduced the following metaphor to illustrate the potential power of the theory: if the species-wide and history-long conversation between people can be regarded as a labyrinth network, then “positioning theory offers a possibility to shift from the perspective of maze traders, those who are within the labyrinth, to a perspective of maze viewers, those who can see the labyrinth from above” (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 13).

PT starts from the claim that social psychology should not only be concerned with what people actually do (behaviour), and what they can do (capacities), but also with what people are allowed to do. As such PT tries to bring in a normative or moral dimension into psychology, one that looks at why some actions are judged to be improper or, on the contrary, are seen as appropriate. At the core of PT is the notion that all human acts should be understood in relation to the storylines in which they occur, as well as in relation to the positions that the acting person has at that moment. Such positions can be regarded as a cluster of rights and duties about what one should or should not do. According to PT there is constant interplay between positions, actions and story-lines. The focus of PT is thus on how persons, or person-like entities exercising agency such as corporations or states, navigate between what they can do and what they are allowed to do. This space of appropriate behaviour in a given situation is according to PT a local moral order. For Harré, a moral order is an organized “*system of rights, obligations and duties obtaining in society, together with the criteria by which people and their activities are valued*” (Harré, 1987, p. 219). In Harré’s view, a moral order has two dimensions: the first represents the rights people have in a given situation, the second, the locations in space and time that a person can (legitimately) occupy.

If a person occupies the moral and physical places he or she is allowed to occupy, then that person acts in a socially conforming way. Any act that puts one in an ‘improper’ place is a socially deviant act. He pictures society as comprising different moral orders, some of them rather stable, others more modest in size and only occasionally convened (Harré, 1984, p. 246). Moral orders are thus a set of rules and habits that shape what people can and will do in a certain situation.

Since the original publications that introduced positioning theory, a vast literature has developed in which PT is used as a theoretical framework to study such diverse fields and topics as conflict resolution, educational practices, identity formation, patient doctor relations etc. Today, PT has certainly taken up a place in social psychology and it has impacted other social sciences disciplines as well. To illustrate the latter: the *Encyclopaedia of Communication Theories* (2008) mentions PT as one of the theories in its timeline of theories of communication and devoted a lemma to it. Similarly, the *Sage Encyclopaedia of Political Behaviour* (2017) also has a lemma on PT. However, many of the growing corpus of empirical studies only use a rather watered-down version of the theory and do not do full justice to two of the central elements of the theory, namely that (i) positions are to be regarded as linked to rights and duties and thus have a moral dimension and (ii) that taking a position also involves dealing with knowledge. The first aspect has been further developed in Harré (2012) and Van Langenhove (2017). The second aspect needs still to be further explored and this is where Social Representation Theory (SRT) comes in.

THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY FOR POSITIONING THEORY

SRT is a theory that has its origins in the work of Moscovici (1961). The concept of social representations can be defined as “systems of knowledge, or forms of common sense, that human subjects draw upon in order to make sense of the world around them and to act towards it in meaningful ways” (Sammut, et al., 2015, p. 8). Part of that world consists of the people that interact with a given person. That person has a stock of knowledge about the people with whom (s)he interacts, including beliefs about what is appropriate for those people to do in that situation as well as what is appropriate for him- or herself to do. This knowledge thus includes social representations of the moral orders in play. Being a socially competent person thus implies having knowledge about what is appropriate to do in any given situation. Acting in a socially deviant way can therefore be either related to a lack of

knowledge or to one's intention to deliberately act in such a way. From an analytical point of view one identifies different sets of resources that can be appropriated from moral and knowledge fields and that can be pictured as organized into cognitive schemas that recognize four major components of social competence (Van Langenhove, 2019):

- a) knowledge on how to present (position) one-self in social situations;
- b) knowledge to recognize situations;
- c) recognition of the possibility of a judgment of the appropriateness of a performance; and
- d) knowledge about rules or conventions that apply in a given situation.

Whether an act is labeled as socially confirming or as socially deviant depends on both the meaning assigned to that act in reference to a certain moral order, and on the knowledge the assessor has about justifications or excuses for that act (Semin & Manstead, 1983).

PT and SRT are thus looking at two sides of the same coin and combining them holds the promise of offering a powerful conceptual toolbox to advance our thinking on how people use knowledge and moral judgements to cope with the flow of everyday situations.

THE CONTENT OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue brings together a diverse set of scholarly articles that make use of PT to study different aspects of the social realm. Acknowledging that SRT is a theory that has its origins in the work of Moscovici (1961), the concept of social representations can be defined as “systems of knowledge, or forms of common sense, that human subjects draw upon in order to make sense of the world around them and to act towards it in meaningful ways” (Sammut, et. al, 2015. ,p. 8), this special issue brings together a diverse set of scholarly articles that make use of PT to study different aspects of the social realm. The articles are not necessarily addressing SRT as such, but they illustrate firstly that there is always a link between systems of knowledge that human subjects draw upon in order to make sense of the world around them and to act towards it in meaningful ways. Secondly they illustrate the moral orders within which people take up or are assigned positions. Van Langenhove (2017) identified five moral orders within which positioning episodes take place: cultural, legal, institutional, conversational and personal, with each of these moral orders being discursive in

nature and in various strengths of operation or relevance at any time. Thirdly, the articles illustrate the importance of and the knowledge that people have or do not have about the situations in which they find themselves.

This special issue further demonstrates that positioning theory is being applied in similar areas to those where SRT is being applied. This application is evident both within diverse disciplines but also in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts. From its origins with Foucauldian influenced feminists who were concerned with “altering the positions of women in society” (Boxer, 2003, n.p.), to the development of a positioning theory that emerged out of social psychology (e.g. Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999), positioning theory has been widely adapted and applied in a multiplicity of academic fields.

This interdisciplinarity is evident in the paper by Melanie James, Deborah Wise and Luk Van Langenhove, who take a cross-disciplinary approach to examine if social presence was achieved through the use of a telepresence robot by one of the authors, in her capacity as a keynote speaker at an international research symposium. Using an analytic framework based on Hassenzahl’s (2014) ideas of “experience design” and positioning theory (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999), the authors found that while social presence was achieved through the capabilities of the telepresence robot, the amount of symbolic capital possessed by the user and the user’s social competencies were of equal importance.

Also taking a cross-disciplinary approach, Pasi Hirvonen presents positioning theory as a way of approaching small group dynamics and interaction, by considering both the interaction order of small groups and the social structures that surround them. Arguing that positioning theory offers an opportunity to approach small group interaction that considers both the interpersonal dynamics and the social structures shaping these dynamics, he brings together current research in the field as well as methodological alternatives for future research.

To date positioning theory has been absent in International Relations (IR) research. Francis Baert and Luk van Langenhove seek to address this shortcoming by introducing positioning theory in foreign policy analysis, to examine the assumed positions, storylines and speech acts used by actors in international relations. Drawing specifically on the work of Rom Harré, they suggest such an approach opens up a space for interdisciplinary scholarship between psychology and international relations, under the rubric of social constructivism.

Positioning theory has especially been taken up in the field of education (e.g. Redman, 2004; Acevedo, Aho, Cela, Chao, Garcia-Gonzales, MacLeod, Moutray & Olague, 2015; Dixon,

2006; Wagner & Herbel-Eisenmann, 2009). Janette Allen and Robert Roe contribute to this scholarly endeavour in their papers exploring the positioning of teachers in Australian schools. Allen draws on teachers' stories and their 'tellings', to show how teachers' 'truths' regarding their rights and duties within school policy frameworks, and the local school culture, became apparent. Robert Roe's cross-disciplinary longitudinal study of a school in the 1990s, adopts a dramaturgical representation approach to examine teacher's autobiographical accounts of how they were socialised into adopting new technologies, rendered as a drama-text. Roe concludes that dramaturgical representations and the re-design of the conventional positioning triad as a positioning pyramid, opens a new dimension in positioning analysis.

Other positioning theorists have also advocated for a re-design of the positioning triangle. Notably, Slocum-Bradley (2009) drew on the work of Bamberg (1997, 2000, 2003, 2004), to argue for a positioning diamond of four mutually determining facets to take into account the "cultural conventions that are immanent in discourse" (p. 97). In their study of the social interactions, including multimodal interactions, of children in an afterschool engineering club, Mary McVee, Kate Haq, Nichole Barrett, Katarina Silvestri, Suny Cortland and Lynn Shanahan propose an updated graphic representation that foregrounds Slocum-Bradley's (2009) positioning theory diamond, and which takes into account both speech and multimodal exchanges.

In Deborah Wise's paper, James' Positioning Framework (2014) is evaluated. The framework aimed to address how 'strategic positioning' was conceptualised in public relations theory and practice. Wise concludes that the Framework requires further iteration to incorporate how the key aspects of power and legitimacy operate within the field as her research strongly suggested these were central to positioning efforts.

Marta Lenartowicz focuses on the structural-enactive aspect of discursive positioning to explore the capacity of positioning theory to contribute to a higher-level theoretical conciliation of the 'agency vs. structure' dichotomy in social science. Lenartowicz connects the work of Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove, with Austin's pragmatology, Searle's social ontology and Luhmann's theory of social systems, Lenartowicz to argue that discursive positioning is a social act that creates and sustains social forms.

Recent work applying positioning theory has also included close attention to political activity and the grounds under which positioning acts can occur, including interest in the historical backgrounds of people and how this impacts on their psychological processes. In a

case study of Timorese migrant workers in the UK, Ann Wigglesworth and Lionel Boxer analyse the diverse ways in which migrant workers position themselves and others in their host communities. They argue that a range of positioning occurs and that while most workers stay only to contribute to the needs of their families at home, other workers have started to see UK as a more permanent opportunity for a better future.

Finally, as guest editors of this special issue, we are delighted that we have contributing authors from a number of countries and from different disciplinary backgrounds. For readers, we hope that we have provided a snapshot of how positioning theory is being applied and that most importantly have provided a catalyst for the further application of this most interesting theory to the complexity of issues in social representation and related areas. We hope this special issue can contribute to the further deepening of the relations between SRT and PT. Special thanks must also go to Dr Melanie James and Dr Christine Redman for their considerable contribution in putting this special issue together. Melanie and Christine were both co-convenors of the Positioning Theory Conference held at Oxford University in 2017 and it was their commitment to furthering knowledge about positioning theory that made this special issue possible.

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