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## **Position Exchange Theory: A Socio-Material Basis for Discursive and Psychological Positioning**

### **Abstract**

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.

**Keywords:** Position Exchange Theory, dialogicality, movement, play, games, life trajectories

## **Position Exchange Theory: A Socio-Material Basis for Discursive and Psychological Positioning**

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; Harré & Langenhove, 1999) 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 interpersonal 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.

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, p. 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 travelled 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 (Edwards, 2000). Children who grow up in farming communities play at farming, children who grow up in office-saturated, modern cities play at 'going to work,' and children who grow up in hunting societies play at hunting. Also, children tend to play at things which they are not allowed to do. For example, children who begin to care for younger siblings tend to stop playing with dolls. Synthesizing cross-cultural

evidence, Edwards (2000) suggests that play is the child's way of exploring the social world which is beyond reach.

Reviewing experimental evidence, Lillard (2001) came to a similar conclusion, proposing that children create a parallel world in much the same way that philosophers create fictional 'what-if' worlds. What children are not able to explore directly, they explore through play and role-play. Children cannot be mothers, fathers, or teachers. Yet these are important social positions for children, which they seek to explore and understand. Play is the externalized, wholly embodied exploration of the perspective of these significant others.

It is important, from the standpoint of PET, that children tend to role-play positions which are interdependent to the position of being a child (e.g., mothering, fathering, changing, feeding, teaching, disciplining, etc.). Role-playing these social positions is a form of position exchange, literally moving the child outside of themselves so that they approach and regulate themselves from the outside. This is exemplified with doll play.

Dolls were popular in Ancient Egypt and have been found in a wide range of cultures (Fraser, 1973). There is evidence that doll play even occurs among chimpanzees (Kahlenberg & Wrangham, 2010). What is interesting is that most dolls are babies (not parents, farmers, teachers etc.). Why would a baby or toddler want to play with a baby doll? Because, we suggest, it positions them as the carer – not just in a psychological sense, but in quite a material sense because they sit outside of the doll and have to engage in the practices of caring. Söderbergh (1980) describes the play of a boy (age 3.4): the doll wants water, the doll is offered a tap, this is rejected by the doll, the boy in the position of mother, offers a cup, it is accepted, then the doll wants pudding, the boy, in the position of the mother, makes it, and the doll eats it. The boy alternates animating the doll and the mother; and in enacting the mother, he is outside of the doll, and creating a situation which cultivates a mothering perspective. Of course the child is not taking the 'actual' perspective of the mother, rather, the child is creating a social situation which scaffolds thinking through the mother's actions.

There has, as far as we know, only been one experimental test of PET with children, though, the research did not use the PET theoretical framework. Furumi (2011) examined the effect of 'role play' on children's (N = 46, age 8-11) ability to play a perspective-taking game. The game entailed a rabbit giving instructions to the child to select items on a shelf, but, some of the items visible to the child were not visible to the rabbit (see Dumontheil, Apperly, & Blakemore, 2010). For example, if the rabbit said select the smallest die from a number of dice, when the smallest die visible to the child was occluded to the rabbit, then the child would ignore the smallest die, and find the smallest die which was visible to the rabbit. Furumi's (2011) innovation was to have a role-play group perform the rabbit's role of providing instructions, before being tested. This role-play group made significantly fewer errors, perhaps indicating that the experience of being in the position of the rabbit allowed the children to integrate into

their activity the perspectives of both instructing and following, which is exactly what PET would predict. Cultivating the 'instructor-within-self' enables the children, in this task, to better orient to the perspective of the rabbit-director, and the social-material basis for this dialogicality is moving between the positions of instructor and follower.

## 5. Games

Position exchange theory developed out of Mead's (1934) analysis of children's play and games (Gillespie, 2005; Martin, 2006). According to Mead, play is self-centered and relatively non-institutionalized with few rules. In contrast, games have rules and social positions and require a coordination of perspectives. Behavior within a game can be understood fully, only as a response to the actual or perceived future behavior of other players within the game. One plays a game in relation to the generalized other, that is, all the attitudes or perspectives which constitute the game. Mead (1934, 1938) often illustrated this point with reference to baseball:

But, in a game where a number of individuals are involved, then the child taking one role must be ready to take the role of everyone else. If he gets in a ball nine he must have the responses of each position involved in his own position. He must know what everyone else is going to do in order to carry out his own play. He has to take all of these roles [...] such as the one who is going to throw the ball, the one who is going to catch it, and so on. [...] In the game, then, there is a set of responses of such others so organized that the attitude of one calls out the appropriate attitudes of the other. (Mead, 1934, p. 151)

Games, by definition, have multiple social positions, including generic positions (such as team mates, winners, losers, etc.) and game-specific positions (such as being 'out,' 'in,' 'chasers,' 'hidiers,' 'hitters,' 'catchers,' 'strikers,' 'defenders,' etc.) (see Opie & Opie, 1969). A defining feature of games is that players move between social positions (e.g., moving back and forth between 'hitting' and 'catching' or 'hiding' and 'seeking'). Descriptive studies of children's games draw attention to this reversal role structure, and how ubiquitous exchanging positions is within children's games (Ratner & Bruner, 1978). According to PET, this exchange is the developmental motor through which children cultivate the perspectives of others (Martin & Gillespie, 2010).

Professional sports also provide examples of the importance of position exchange. 'Total football,' pioneered by the Dutch team Ajax in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Winner, 2001), entails players moving fluidly between different positions as particular game circumstances warrant. By learning quickly and efficiently to switch positions of defenders, mid-fielders, and attackers, members of teams using total football are able to anticipate each others' movements (because they have direct experience playing the positions of these others) in ways that allow them to coordinate sophisticated offensive and defensive maneuvers with great speed and finesse. With successful results demonstrating the merits of total football, variations of it have become standard

features of the playing strategies of many leading club and national sides throughout the world, including the multi-champion Barcelona Football Club and the most recent World Cup winning Spanish squad. Equally, in 'Australian Rules Football,' the Geelong Cats have met with considerable success with strategically exchanging positions during practice and game play.

Position exchange is also evident in diverse team sports, where there is widespread recognition of 'utility players,' who are practiced in playing several positions. Also, getting team players to exchange positions during training is a common strategy to help players to anticipate and coordinate with the movements of team-mates across these various positions. This style of coaching and the practice of total football have been so successful in sport that they have even been proposed for leadership training in organizations (Hawkins, 2011).

The rationale for total football is based on allowing players to take up opportunities which take them out of their assigned positions without disrupting team formation. However, in terms of PET, it might bring additional benefits, namely, enhancing players' understanding of their own team mates and opponents in the field. Players practicing a variety of social positions will have an embodied understanding of players in other social positions, sensing their movements and opportunities, which in turn enhances the pace, precision, and coordination of attacking and defending maneuvers.

## **6. Education**

Educational psychologists have long advocated pedagogical strategies such as 'peer teaching' (McNall, 1975), 'cooperative learning' (Johnson & Johnson, 1975) and 'reciprocal teaching' (Palincsar, 1986) as ways of enhancing student achievement, social belonging, and self-esteem. In each case, the core component consists of students moving between social positions. For example, making presentations and asking questions tend to belong to the position of teacher, while receiving presentations and responding to questions typically are done by students. Exchanging such positions and roles is a defining feature of peer teaching, cooperative learning, and reciprocal teaching. To illustrate, in the jigsaw method used in cooperative learning, students are divided into small groups, and each group is given a different task that must be completed successfully to enable the whole class to solve a larger problem. When each group has completed its task, representatives teach the entire class, eventually allowing the members of the class to consider and debate possible solutions to the class's bigger problem.

Both peer and reciprocal teaching require the alteration of teacher and student positions, with the former typically involving older children as peer-teachers, and the latter using a more symmetrical pattern of position exchange. Relevant literature has established the benefits of being taught, but what the peer education literature shows is that being in the role of teacher is also beneficial (Sawyer, Pinciaro, & Bedwell, 1997).



Such findings are easily explained by PET. Peers becoming peer educators 'step-out' of their student social position, gaining externality on themselves, such that they become able to psychologically distance from their own student behavior, simultaneously cultivating the 'teacher-within' which enhances their own powers of self-direction.

Historically, the work of John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and others in establishing and running the famous Laboratory School at the University of Chicago during the early twentieth century provides many examples of the use of position exchange in education. Dewey and Mead (Tanner, 1997) envisioned a school that was built up around the perspectives of children. Assuming that children are interested in their social world, the starting point was that children would be involved in running the school. For example, they would take turns in planning meals, shopping, and cooking. They would also participate in cleaning, repairing, and maintaining the school. The school was conceptualized as "an embryonic community life, active with the types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society" (Dewey, 1899, p. 43-44). Through being placed in and having to practice these positions, the children would be "educated for leadership as well as obedience" and "have the power of self-direction and power of directing others" (Dewey, 1909, p. 54). The idea was that by physically moving through the range of social positions in this embryonic society, the children would internalize society and become citizens in a full sense.

The centrality of position exchange for education is also clear in Mead's (2001, especially chapter 13) writings. "The self that is growing up has as much reality and as little as the roles the child plays" (p. 87). This is a self "seen from the standpoints of those about him whose attitudes he takes," and "is made up of social responses to others regarded primarily through their eyes as he takes their parts." In this way, "a child comes to regard himself as a playmate who must share his toys with other children if he is to keep them as playmates" (Mead, 2001, p. 88). Mead (2001, p. 116) links such rudimentary, socially-emergent moral agency to a more general prescription for moral education: "it is only as the school becomes organized as a social whole, and as the child recognizes his conduct as a reflection or formulation of that society, will it be possible to have any moral training in our schools." Thus, consistent with PET, education in service of student self and moral development requires active participation in the positions and perspectives that define and coordinate the relations of members of society to each other within the society as a whole.

Peer and reciprocal education within the classroom cultivate the generalized other (the perspectives of groups within society or of society as a whole) within the classroom, but position exchange does not stop there. Student exchanges and work experience take students out of the classroom, providing experiences and cultivating perspectives from diverse geographical and institutional contexts. Also, teachers sometimes become students, and doing so can help them orient to their own students (Lowe, 1987). In each case, the same dynamic is evident: people moving into the socio-institutional position of the other, cultivates the perspective of the other, which becomes the 'other-within-self.'

## **7. Problem Solving**

Adult problem solving also benefits from position exchange, specifically, it seems to facilitate distancing and more abstract problem solving. In seemingly intractable dialogues, a common strategy is to get group members to sit outside the group and observe the dynamics, thus encouraging them to distance from the position of their own group (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). The literature on group problem solving has tended to reveal the relative ineffectiveness of groups (Barron, 2003), but the groups studied have tended to have no internal structure or social positions. When Osborn (1953) originally suggested that groups could be creative, he advocated creating roles such as creator and critic, and then having participants exchange those roles. So far, there have only been a few studies testing such exchanges, but the results are strongly supportive.

Shirouzu, Miyake, and Masukawa (2002) conducted an experiment to examine whether working in pairs could stimulate reflection. They gave thirty pairs and thirty individuals sheets of origami paper and asked them to shade  $\frac{2}{3}$  of  $\frac{3}{4}$  (or  $\frac{3}{4}$  of  $\frac{2}{3}$ ). The solution is to shade half of the sheet. The pairs had just one sheet of paper and were asked to collaborate. This inadvertently created two social positions: one folding the paper and the other observing. They found that the pairs were much more effective than individuals and tended to use more abstract reasoning. The proposed mechanism is that the dyads were alternating between involved (paper folding) and distanced (observing) social positions.

Position exchange also enables the solution of perspective taking problems. For example, Fumikazu and Koyasu (2012) examined the effect of 'role-play' on university students' performance in a communication task (the same task as described above, adapted from Dumontheil, Apperly, & Blakemore, 2010). Students who had experience role-playing the instructor before performing the task not only made fewer errors when performing the task, but they were also faster. Fumikazu and Koyasu suggest that experience with role-play activates mindreading. PET offers a stronger suggestion. Exchanging social positions, we argue, is not about 'activating' a mental capacity (i.e., mindreading or theory of mind); rather, it is constitutive of how those abilities develop in both children and adults. Another experimental test of PET, using a different task and procedure, found similarly supportive results (Gillespie & Richardson, 2011).

## **8. Life Trajectories**

Exchanging social positions can also occur over long timespans: the young become old, children become parents, students become teachers, employees become employers, unmarried become married, and so on. Of course, sometimes the married become divorced, the employed become unemployed, and the able become unable. People cannot be defined by their social position, because people move between social

positions (Gillespie, Howarth, & Cornish, 2012). Tourists are, in a sense, not tourists because they are not tourists most of the time (Gillespie, 2006). Equally, when people (previously children) become parents, they do not forget being non-parents; rather they see themselves through the lens of how they, before having children, saw other people with children (Smith, 1999).

Ideographic studies of people's life trajectories, as they move between social positions, show that people do not forget ideas and actions associated with previous social positions, rather, there is an accumulation and layering of identities. A study of the diaries of one English woman during World War II showed how an initial skepticism to the war effort was associated with the diarist being physically and socially outside the war effort. When she was required, by law, to contribute to the war effort a new set of behaviors, social relations, and attitudes was cultivated in which there was enthusiasm for the war effort. But this enthusiasm did not replace her initial skepticism, rather, there was a 'layering' of commitments originating in different contexts (Gillespie, Cornish, Aveling, & Zittoun, 2008). The layering up of experiences and perspectives is also evident in studies of doctors who became patients with a serious illness. When these doctors return to work they report more empathy for patients' feelings of uncertainty and stigma (Edelstein & Baider, 1982; Klitzman, 2007). Also, Raggatt (THIS SPECIAL ISSUE) presents a case study mapping out the personal chronotope of Charles, showing how movements in Charles' biography are reflected in his psychological I-positions. What is interesting in Raggatt's analysis is how experiences of, for example, humiliation, can create a counter-reaction producing political activism and fantasies of domination.

Martin (2011) has presented a systematic approach, which he calls 'life positioning analysis,' that identifies different positions exchanged over the life course and considers the degree of integration of experiences and perspectives originating in these different positions. He illustrates the method with an analysis of the great Native American athlete, Jim Thorpe. Jim's life, in both its glorious flowering and its tragic finale, displayed a general absence of the integration of different perspectives typically associated with highly functional forms of inter-subjective and intra-subjective well-being. For example, his college coach and many others' attitudes toward Jim and other Indian athletes were shaped by racist attitudes. Interactions were asymmetrical. This asymmetry likely contributed greatly to Jim's inability to integrate perspectives that in his experience had proven to be anything but complementary, from specific perspectives related to performing and coaching in athletic competitions, to more general perspectives concerning expectations and forms of social, occupational, and domestic life. Jim's roles and perspectives throughout his lifetime were mostly limited to those of "the performer," rather than to those of "the director." Lacking the interactive, experiential bases for full participation in the vocational, economic, and sociocultural practices of the dominant American culture, Jim, despite occasional public appearances and engagements, was unable to insert himself interpersonally and intersubjectively into his own life and the lives of others. A chronic alcoholic, Jim's life deteriorated

(cancer and heart disease), and he died alone in a small trailer in Omita, California, of coronary sclerosis on March 28, 1953, two years after the Hollywood film version of his life, "Jim Thorpe – All American," was completed.

## 9. Concluding Discussion

Dialogicality is often studied within a single context, in terms of how people orient to each other, make assumptions about relationships, and position one another (Davies & Harre, 1990). Within either therapy contexts or interviews we can observe the different facets of the dialogical self (Hermans, 2001). PET is completely consonant with these insights and associated empirical studies. The contribution is to provide a social-material basis for discursive and psychological positioning.

PET is not limited to any particular point in human ontogenesis. It is a developmental principle fostering decentration and self-regulation across the human lifespan (Martin & Gillespie, 2010). The unique strengths of PET lie in its emphasis on concrete social positions, and its explicit articulation of a clear developmental trajectory that moves from specific physical and social interactivity to more abstracted (although still socially-supported) discursive and psychological dialogicality.

In relation to Dialogical Self Theory, Hermans (2001, p. 361) writes: "The growing complexity of the world goes hand in hand with the growing complexity of the self." But is this relation linear? Maybe people develop increasingly subtle ways of ignoring the complexity of the social world and sticking steadfast to a narrow set of beliefs. Introducing PET allows us to propose a more specific formulation: it is the increasing proliferation of social positions *combined* with the movement of people between social positions, or social situations, which is a driver of increasingly heterogeneous dialogical selves.

Returning to Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), PET contributes a conceptualization of how people come to participate in multiple discourses and subject positions. Discourses tend to be anchored in the social world, either by geography or practices (Wittgenstein, 1953), and just like people learn a new language by moving to a new country, so, people are socialized into new discourses by moving about the social world and taking up new social positions within domains of practice and discourse. While at the level of the self this may indeed be a centrifugal force, leading to contradictory actions and allegiances, it can also be conceptualized as a bonding force at the level of society. Through exchanging social positions, people are exchanging experiences and orientations. The individual body moving through that social heterogeneity internalizes it, reflecting it within, and thus enabling the individual to be a competent social actor, coordinating with others, and navigating the pluralism of society.

Many theories in developmental psychology and social psychology emphasize 'interaction' between 'self' and 'other.' Baerveldt (THIS SPECIAL ISSUE) is correct in pointing out that this distinction is over-sharp and often oppositional. However, position exchange is distinctive in proposing a profound violation of the distinction between self and other. In so far as self and other exchange social positions, and each has, so to speak, been in the other's shoes, then the line between self and other becomes perforated and problematized. It is not simply 'interaction' between self and other that weaves the human mind on the one hand and the coordination of society on the other, rather, it is self becoming other (and other becoming self) through people moving between social positions in society. This movement of bodies between common experiences provides enough mutual participation to enable communication, but, of course, self never actually becomes other, the bounds of flesh cannot be overcome, a difference remains, and thus our attempts at communication are unending.

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