

The Great Navigator: Agency in Positioning Theories

By: Collin Jensen
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There is a fundamental problem in psychology: unlike other sciences, the underlying objects of typical psychological study are intangible. They are concepts such as beliefs, attitudes, and memories. These concepts, while illusive, seem to effect our behaviours and our interactions with others. Classical psychology has looked to the inner-workings of individuals to define these intangible concepts with the hope of explaining and predicting behaviours. An essential theory that has consequently arisen is that there is, in the individual, a varying amount of agency – a power to choose, among other things, their identity and to pioneer their place in the grand scheme. Discursive psychology proposes, alternatively, that the principles we have typically looked to study exist inaccessibly in the minds of people as concepts, but also in the realm of language as actions in a social context. These acts of languages are analysable as they play out in discourse. However, discursive psychology, coming from a social constructionist perspective, largely ignores the role of the individual as an originator of the beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and other psychological phenomenon. Positioning theory builds off this by suggesting that an individual is defined by their position in a social context's discourse. As Davies and Harré (1990) put it, the conception that we have about ourselves is not established until we place ourselves within a narrative. It might be felt that such a statement bears a sort of dis-empowering undertone to it, and any psychologist would be inclined to ask where agency has suddenly gone.

There is perhaps a certain personal bias that goes with the issue; it may be hard for a scientist as an individual themselves to surrender the classical notion of agency and theirs with it. Furthermore, as discursive methods of analysis come into use in psychology, it is reasonable to expect that they will be met with resistance from the classical, intrapsychic perspectives. It is a mistake, however, to pass off positioning theory as one which denies individual agency just because these concepts do not take centre stage. As we will see, agency is quite an essential factor in positioning theory that is ever-present in its functions.

We will, however, dispense with the *classical conception* of agency as an absolute determinant of thoughts, behaviours and identity. Our primary justification for this is that the conception of agency, as popular psychology bears it, is ultimately an ethnocentric one. Western individualism has led the framing of psychological theory to be agent-centric and focus on intrapsychic processes while largely excluding critical social factors. Psychological experimentation, which predominantly has taken place in western cultures, may support these agency theories, but at the same time, not be ecologically valid if agency is overstressed in individuals in the West. When studies have considered the conception of agency across cultures, there is a notable difference in the value attributed to it (Morris, Menon, & Ames, 2001; Kitayama & Duffy, 2004; Markus and Kitayama, 2003), for one, observed that western cultures tend to promote individual control in socialisation, while Asian cultures focus more on social cooperation.

Fredrik Barth has suggested that different models of self-concepts exist between and within cultures and may be used at different times and for different purposes (Barth, 1997, p. 87). It might be said that a western bias towards agency theories has been generally functional since the West has largely focused on illuminating the psychologies of individuals in their own culture. Yet, as time progresses, the need to understand the psychologies of other cultures grows in importance. Populations become more culturally diverse. Technology and globalisation draw cultures together in a variety of ways, for better or worse. Thus, psychological theories must be able to adapt for such differences if they are to help explain and predict thoughts and behaviours.

Even within western culture the role of agency may be considerably skewed.

Chodorow (1978) describes how men are socialised in the West from childhood to develop a more assertive and independent sense of agency while women are encouraged to adopt a mentality of cooperation and mutuality. It is commonly known and well documented (Gilligan, 1982; Harding, 1991) that prior to the feminist movements within psychology there was an inordinate focus on men in psychological studies. Here again, it is no wonder that agency would seem to explain so much about the participants of such studies since their culture and the culturally-assigned qualities of their gender both reinforce the concept within them. Thus, it is worth considering that agency may have been over-estimated and over-rated even in the context of Western society through prior, latent sexism inherent to our culture and the science it has birthed.

Naturally, this is not to say that humans are without agency or, in this case, that agency does not have a place in the structure of more social psychological theories such as positioning theory. In fact, agency appears to be manifest in a number of ways throughout a discourse.

Burr (2004) proposes that discourses call to us offering certain subject positions. Thus our primary source of agency as individuals is our ability to accept or reject these positions. Should we accept the position or fail to reject it, we will be assigned whatever rights and obligations are associated with it. Take, as an example, a university student who is presented with the subject position of being a “nerd.” In many contexts this position could be quite beneficial. Thus a student might take it on purposefully or passively knowing that it affords them academic opportunities or more speaking rights in course discussions. Alternatively, one might avoid the position of being a “nerd” since it bears with it obligations like being able to answer questions from a professor or aiding other students with their assignments. In this respect, agency is the ability to weigh out the benefits and consequences of accepting a subject position. In most contexts, there are a multitude of subject positions that are available to individuals and furthermore each individual brings into a discourse a long history of personal narrative in which they have occupied a wide variety of positions (Davies & Harré, 1990). In these situations, agency is present in an individual's deciding between positions which to take up and which to assign to others. This amounts to an ongoing

maintenance and negotiation of positions between participants in a discourse.

There is also the power that individuals have to craft positions and alter interpretations through language, which Burr likens to a sculptor who will use a hammer and chisel on their medium for self-expression (Burr, 2003, p. 188). More than this, I would argue that not just positions, but entire discourses can be radically altered with the strategic use of language. If this is so, it is quite a boon for advocates of agency since it shows how agency can go well beyond the individual self. A politician for instance, may want to speak of taxes in a way that furthers a fiscally conservative agenda. In such a discourse the politician might avoid the term “tax cuts” which at best is a rather benign term, instead favouring the more potent “tax relief.” “Tax relief” positions the politician as saviour or healer but additionally implies that taxes are an affliction (Lakoff, Dean & Hazen, 2004) which promotes the notion of fiscal conservatism. Thus, the politician has not only engineered his own position in the discourse, but has changed the discourse entirely.

An individual's power to exert agency over their position and a discourse is, of course, limited by circumstances and social pressures. When an individual is assigned a marginal position by others, their speaking rights become jeopardized (Burr, 2003). Consequently, they will have less power to decide their own position as a discourse unfolds. An example of this would be a physically disabled person in a work environment. On the one hand they may want to be seen as capable and independent, but others may assume patronizing positions that force the disabled co-worker into the “disabled” position without question. Often these circumstances can be resolved through agency: a physically disabled person may raise other positions to the discourse that are available, like being capable and independent, but these may be resisted by others if they see the new positions as outside the normal social structure (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Sabat (2003) details a more extreme version of such exclusion with his definition of “malignant positions.” These are positions that have become so excluded that any participation in the discourse at all by those who occupy them is written off entirely or is interpreted based on expectations of the position. Sabat uses Alzheimer's patients as an example, who struggle to find their words and are treated as incoherent when they do manage. He found that the behaviours of Alzheimer's patients were often framed from the position of their disease and its symptoms, even when the behaviours were quite normal. To give an example, the staff of the facility in question frequently described patients not wanting to associate with other patients displaying disturbing behaviours as being a sign of dementia. Sabat argues though that in such circumstances a patient is merely serving their best interest since to be lumped with other “demented” “patients” would threaten one's individuality (Sabat, 2003, p.91). Ironically, what the clinical staff saw as dementia, we in our discussion might consider shrewd self-efficacy. Even within such oppressive social circumstances, and despite the onset of their disease, the individuals seek to retain a sense of

identity through agentic positional micromanaging.

Discursive psychology at first glance seems to ignore the concept of agency or take it as implied. This could in part be due to the fact that agency has largely been beaten to death by more modernist theories as a sole determinant for psychological phenomena. What social constructionism offers in turn, is not, however, an absolute sociological determinism. Although agency is affected by the power that individuals have in a given context, discursive positions are not something that are simply automatic, nor are they absolutely assigned by society and others, nor are they immutable. While essentially implied, agency serves in the background for each participant in a discourse as a means of identifying and negotiating positions. Individuals frequently have a wide variety of positions they can choose from within a context. Furthermore, having all the discursive tools needed at their disposal, an individual can participate in the act of language and the manipulation of subject positions and discourses and can work to overcome undesirable positions. There is the potential in any discourse then for an individual to alter their own position, to assign and refine the positions of others or to steer the discourse in new directions. I find the implication here quite fascinating, for if positioning theory diminishes an individual's ability to affect change on their selves at all, it certainly empowers them for affecting others all the more.

I will end with a metaphor that struck me as I began to digest the dynamic of agency within positioning theory. I will only apologise that it follows a “water” motif which is all too common in the psychology of identity. Yet, here I find it particularly insightful to agency within positioning theory: It is quite ridiculous to suggest that even the greatest of captains could fix their sail boat absolutely to one location in even the calmest of waters, and yet they will still be able to navigate their vessel effectively through even chaotic seas. Agency in positioning theory is much like the captain; unable to fix identity to one position of choosing without being influenced by the social world around it, but none-the-less able to navigate with varying degrees the sea of discourses.

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