

Interviews

The new psychology: discursive practices, not internal forces – an interview with Rom Harré

By Kirsten Dierolf

In February 2007, Kirsten Dierolf had the opportunity to visit Prof. Rom Harré at Georgetown University to sit in on some of his classes and produce an interview. Mark McKergow and Kirsten Dierolf had been interested in discursive psychology and the Wittgensteinian connection for a while – this interview was the first live contact which led to many interesting developments like Wittgenstein scholar Danièle Moyal-Sharrock's and Rom Harré's visits to SOL conferences and a more informed understanding about where SF fits in the overall landscape of philosophy.

*Rom Harré and Fathali M. Moghaddam have just published a new textbook, *Psychology for the Third Millennium* (Sage Publications 2012, reviewed elsewhere in this issue) in which many of the ideas in this interview are delineated in much more detail: a fascinating and very relevant read.*

This is Professor Rom Harré, distinguished research professor at Georgetown University in Washington DC. He wrote “Wittgenstein and Psychology”, in which he explains why and how the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein is relevant for an understanding of what psychology can explain and do. The people who would be reading this are mainly people who work in organisations: business consultants, organisational psychologists, or managers. They are doing things like team training, conflict resolution, designing performance improvement tools or coaching. How do you think these kinds of people could benefit from knowing anything about Wittgenstein?

Well, one of Wittgenstein's main points is that every activity we are engaged in is controlled to some extent by the language that we use in order to engage in it. This language is always rather specific to the situations in which we are. We frequently misunderstand it – we try to theorise about it and get away from the practical activities in which it is involved. So one of the things that we learn from Wittgenstein is to be very, very, very careful about the language that we are using. As long as we are using it, it's okay. Start thinking about it as you might in a business school or in a training programme and you are almost certain to fall into all kinds of traps. Wittgenstein will help you to escape those.

Many of the current models of Human Resource and business consulting feature things like internal states, motivation and value systems. I think these are a bit like the traps you were just talking about. What is the take of discursive psychology on this?

Wittgenstein and the people who think like him, and there are many others – I mean he's just a kind of leading figure – find the whole idea of explaining what people do by reference to internal states or something like it really quite implausible. It goes back to Vygotsky, the great Russian psychologist, who asks us to look into the relationships between people, the ways that those developed, as ways in which cognitive skills grow. You are always in conversations and interrelations with someone else. So instead of looking inside the human being for the origins and explanations for the way we think, according to Vygotsky and people like myself, we look outside to say: "who are you interacting with, who were your parents, what was the culture in which you grew up?" That's where we'll find the process.

Quite a lot of the time the processes are never completed by an individual. We have done research at this university into the way memory is created collectively. Even when you're remembering all by yourself, you nevertheless are remembering as if you were in a collective, a group of people of some

sort. So that's the kind of thing: making decisions is more the work of the committee than an individual person, even when that person is all by themselves. The way that they are thinking and decision-making is the way that they have learned to think in the context of other people when they were making decisions collectively, how your family make decisions, how your family remembered. The family becomes an absolutely central unit in all of this.

Would that also be true for organisations and (for lack of a better word) your socialisation into organisations?

Sure, an organisation is rather like a family. Well, a good organisation is – one in which the relationships between people are constructive. Exactly the same thing is going on. There is a collective activity and then someone can go away into his or her corner and think for themselves, but the way they are thinking is essentially something that they have derived from the system in which they are involved. So instead of following the cognitive science route, looking inside to neuropsychology or something like that, our thought is: “look outside”.

So you could say something like “the action is in the interaction” rather than in the person, in the employee.

Exactly! Thinking, denoting, reasoning, deciding are all primarily interactions rather than personal actions. They may look like personal actions but when you do a thorough study of how they operate you find they are ultimately basically interactions.

So instead of looking at the “motivation level in the team” – which doesn't exist really – what could a business consultant who is maybe trying to help a team on an issue like “motivation” do instead?

We simply don't believe in motivation as some kind of hidden internal force. According to our point of view, a motive is something that you tell someone when you want to account for what you're doing. It is a serious mistake in psychology to read it as some kind of force inside the individual driving him to do something. Your motive is whatever happens to suit you to tell a person. Goodness knows why anybody does something but we can certainly find that they are constructing a world in which what they're doing makes sense or is justified. That's their motive. So this goes back to sociologists like C. Wright Mills, the person who first made very clear the idea that motivation is something that is said. Wittgenstein also in various places has the same sorts of ideas: there is no engine inside driving, no little forces inside. There are conventions of discourse.

So in the conventions of discourse, when a client of mine tells me: "I have a problem with the motivation in my team" I would have to translate this into the function – what is he trying to do by telling me this?

Well, he's trying to tell you that the way that the team is explaining what they're doing is not according to his likes, what it should be. You see, the whole idea is that why people do things is primarily because they committed themselves to doing them. So it's looking at action as going forward rather than being driven forward. So if you're talking about team motivation, what you have to do is to give the team a discursive practice which is all the time drawing them forward. So my motivation is to get this thing done rather than the idea of some kind of force pushing me. So it is all a matter of getting people to commit themselves to doing stuff. And then of course the social order drives or forces – well it doesn't drive people – calls out or requires them to fulfill those kinds of things. Intentionality is exactly the same thing. Intentions are not forces that are conjured up in myself to make me do things. They are telling people about what I have committed

myself to doing. So when I say: “I intend to go to downtown” I am not telling you about some hidden psychological force. I am making a promise. So if I don’t go downtown you can accuse me of misleading you, not of being mistaken about my internal forces. There are no internal forces.

Thank you. I think that’s very enlightening. Let’s change the topic a bit: what are you currently working on? What is fascinating for you at the moment?

I have been doing a lot of work in recent years on the role of emotion displays and how emotion words are related to them, the idea being that everybody has a number of simple bodily reactions and then in any particular culture those become associated with a vocabulary. And that vocabulary differs from culture to culture. So as you develop, the simple reactions become reframed, restructured etc., insofar as they appear in the public world of other people. Being angry, being fearful and so on, these aren’t significant until they occur in public displays. And those public displays are themselves within the framework of vocabulary that you learn. In Spanish for example you have two words: *celos* and *envidia* meaning jealousy and envy. They are not related to each other in the same way as jealousy and envy in English. So if you ask how these interpersonal relations like being envious or being jealous work out in Spain, they work out differently. We have done a study here between Georgetown and Madrid on the subject of people feeling that things are not fair – quite different in Spain from in the US. And in people of the same age and social background the sense of outrage about being badly treated is quite different. That emotion is not at all the same. In the US it’s to do with equity. In Spain it is to do with honour. The whole structure of the emotions is different. That’s the kind of thing that I have been doing quite a lot of recently.

This is absolutely fascinating. I can see a lot of applications that this might have in the future.

Oh yes indeed! Yes, yes!

Maybe one future-oriented question. Where do you think the philosophy of psychology is going to be in 10 or 15 years?

I think as time goes by what we have seen is the disappearance of the last traces of behaviourism. What has continually been on the rise in the last 10 or 15 years is the sort of stuff that I'm talking about: discursive psychology, focusing on language use in everyday life. Studying that is the topic of psychology. At the same time neuropsychology is also developing very rapidly. And we need to have some sort of notion of how those two things are related. Now I have just published a textbook for students, to see how those things are related. The idea being that we are doing all these things linguistically and symbolically, so we need some tools to do them with. It's like if you want to play tennis: tennis is a cultural artifact, but you have to have a racket and a court to do it with. The same way that if you are performing all of these things we are talking about, you have to have a brain, vocal cords and so on. So you can think of the neuropsychologist as studying the tools and the discursive psychologists studying the tasks. The one is telling us how the tools work and the other what the tasks are. It's one thing to study spades. It's another thing to study digging. But you need spades to dig.

Would there then be a kind of overarching science?

I like to call it the hybrid, because the methodologies in these two kinds of psychologies are rather different. But they certainly need each other. So instead of thinking that there will be a single psychology, trying to reduce it to neuropsychology or linguistic studies, what we really have to bear in mind is that there should be some sort of hybrid. We're never going to

get the single psychological science. It's like chemistry and physics. They are a hybrid. Chemistry has its own way of doing things, as does physics. But anything that happens in chemistry depends on physical processes.

Would they then have to agree on a common philosophy of science?

Yes, definitely a common philosophy of science. We are interested in meanings and how they are realised. But there is no common methodology because in neuropsychology you're doing experimental studies and in discursive psychology you're doing analytical studies. One of the programmatic ideas here is to stop psychologists wasting their time on psychological experiments and get to work on studying and analysing real-life episodes in which people do things and bring things about. And then the neuropsychologists can be doing their experimental programme on their side of the story. So it's really a hybrid methodologically as well as a hybrid technically.

And from a philosophy of science perspective do they deem the same things as valid and not valid for example with regards to an experiment?

Neuropsychological experiments rely upon causal relations. Analyses of discursive practices rely on meaning relations. So there are laws of nature in neurophysiology, how the chemicals in the brain behave for example, and there are rules of life, cultural rules in discursive science. So one thing is about causes and laws and the other thing is about meanings and rules. Both have an element of generality but there are no norms in neuropsychology; the rules of life are normative in psychology and discursive psychology. What we are studying are the norms of life – how people think they are supposed to behave.

Thank you, I think I understand that better now. Thank you very much for talking to us. I think everybody will find this really fascinating. I'm very pleased to have had this opportunity.

This interview can be viewed online at

<http://www.solutionsacademy.com/Videos/RomHarre/Rom%20Harre.html>