Towards the Spoken World Theory: The contribution of Rom Harré to advancing social theory

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Abstract
Rom Harré was a philosopher of science who is especially known for his contributions to psychology. But a lot of his writings can also be regarded as exercises in social theorizing and in tackling issues of the social ontology. This paper will argue that he introduced three innovations in the thinking about social ontology: (i) the primacy of conversations and speech acts as the 'substance' of the social world; (ii) the distinction between different epistemological realms when dealing with the social ontology and (iii) the introduction of a new way to think about the levels of the social reality. Moreover, it will be argued that throughout the many concepts and models Harré used to explain and understand the social reality, lays a remarkable unity and consistency in how he pictures and theorizes the society and social phenomena. Using the conceptual scheme developed by Maddi, a Harré inspired general social theory is presented that can also be read as an attempt to provide a synthesis/summary of his social theory, complemented with some insights developed by other scholars. It is proposed to label this theory as the Spoken World Theory. One of the distinct features of that theory is that it demonstrates that social and...
psychological phenomena are so entangled that it makes no sense to separate them and study them from a single social science’s disciplinary perspective.

**KEYWORDS**
entanglement, Harré, Positioning Theory, Social Theory, Spoken World Theory

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Rom Harré (*1927–†2019) leaves us with a prolific oeuvre that covers wide areas of the social sciences and of philosophy of the sciences. From the psychology of music to the philosophy of scientific experiments, from causality to emotions, from greenspeak to terrorism and so on, the topics he dealt with are wide ranging and his observations deep. Harré was a truly eclectic scholar. But, beyond the diversity in the topics that he tackled, there is also a strong sense of unity and consistency in his writings and his thinking. Harré is perhaps best known for his attempt to develop a systematic programme for psychology. The key element of that programme is that psychology is to be considered as a hybrid science that has to rely both on biological neuropsychological insights and on hermeneutic understandings of discourse (R. Harré, 2010; R. Harré & Moghaddam, 2012). The development of the discursive side of the science of psychology is what Harré contributed enormously to by stressing that a lot of so-called psychological phenomena have to be located not inside individual persons but in the conversational space between persons (R. Harré, 1984). As such, his contribution to psychology is also about the understanding of the social realm and can hence also be regarded as an exercise in social theorizing that is based upon the introduction of an appropriate ontology for studying both mental and social phenomena and that involves the development of a conceptual apparatus to be used in the study of social phenomena from a non-positivist way. Inspired by Wittgenstein, Ryle, Austin, Goffman, Searle and several others, Harré developed a revolutionary take on the ontology of the social and psychological realm combined with a clear view upon the epistemological and methodological consequences of that ontology. This article aims to emphasize the unity of Harré’s thinking about the social realm by presenting a summary of the often-implicit social theory that he developed. First, an overview will be given of the innovative ways in which Harré has dealt with the ontology of the social realm. Next, a proposal to present and systematize social theories will be introduced, and finally that meta-theoretical model will be applied as a framework to present a Harré inspired understanding of the fabric of society. The main upshot of the exercise is that Harré’s work supports the idea that the disciplinary boundaries between psychology and sociology make no sense.

## 2 | THREE INNOVATIONS IN THINKING ABOUT THE ONTOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL WORLD

The Harréan conceptual universe is quite large and full of neologisms and concepts that are given a specific and sometimes even an idiosyncratic meaning. Here is a sample of such
3 | THE SUBSTANCE OF THE SOCIAL WORLD AND THE POWERS OF SPEECH ACTS

The first major game changer in picturing the social realm that Harré introduced is the insight that “the fundamental human reality is a conversation, effectively without beginning or end, to which, from time to time, individuals may take contributions” (R. Harré, 1984, p. 20). With ‘fundamental’ Harré refers to two powers of conversations. The first power is that conversations are the ‘glue’ that holds together a society. The second power is that conversations may lead to the emergence of sociological and psychological phenomena (Harré, 1986c).

An example of the first power is for instance the possibility to open a door. People can open doors by physical force, but they can also use a speech act to open a door by asking someone to do that for him/her. It seems trivial that human beings can do things such as opening a door without having to touch it and thus without direct physical contact between themselves and the door. But this implies that people can by using speech-acts do things at a distance. This is not trivial from a philosophy of science point of view as it changes the explanatory perspective from causality to meaning and norms. Furthermore, the possibility to affect the world via speech-acts has major consequences for how society functions, as it makes it possible for persons to mobilize other persons for realizing their goals. Consequently, this gives people living in a complex society a lot of extra capacities other than their individual capacities. Finally, the possibility to mobilize other people for one’s own purposes changes dramatically how to look to cognitive capacities. Traditionally, cognitive capacities are seen as a personal repertoire that can be used to do things. But many of the things people do, could not be done as a single individual. This puts serious reservations to a psychology that focusses entirely on the cognitive capacities of individual brains. Hence the necessity of a ‘second cognitive revolution’ aimed at “extricating cognition from a supposed foundation in individual minds” (Christensen, 2019, p. 3).

Harré is for sure not the only one to advocate such a social constructionist view, but he is probably the first to link this to the ontological claim that conversations are the primary reality of the social realm instead of persons or structures. This is a radical thought as it opposes the much taken-for-granted idea that people and/or structures are the basis of any social ontology. To fully grasp the radicalism of this ontological statement, some clarifications are needed. First, it should be clear that for Harré, a ‘conversation’ refers to all kinds of interactions between people. Non-verbal communication for instance, also counts as conversation and so does the use of symbols. Such a broad notion of conversation allows to picture for example, a university, as a
collection of all past and ongoing conversations between students, staff, visitors, board members etc. Part of those conversations constitute the actual functioning of the university. The traditional way to look at these is to say that, for instance, the university rules and schedules will allow certain types of conversations. When a don is ‘lecturing’, he or she is having a lecturing conversation with some students. But there are also conversations that enable the don’s lecturing (e.g., the university authorities ‘talk’ via notes to the dons and students about where and when a class is organized). And such organizational trivia, have been decided upon at a certain moment, for example in a board meeting. That procedure is itself also a conversation. In sum, the university only exists and functions by many past and ongoing conversations, and the notion of ‘conversation’ needs in that respect to be seen very broadly: a no-smoking sign in a lecture room can be regarded as a conversation between the rector (who once decided that there is a no-smoking policy) and the staff and visitors who fall under the authority of the Rector. Understanding what a university is and how it functions therefore needs to take into account the conversational nature of it. Actually, for Harré, the university is in a way nothing more than a series of conversations.

The second clarification needed is that within conversations, a number of different discursive acts occur (Van Langenhove, 2010b). For instance, people can use pronouns to localize themselves and others etc. But Harré’s attention especially goes to one specific discursive act: the speech act as described by Austin (1962). Speech acts are, according to Harré, the real powers in the social world. In R. Harré, 1990, p. 352), he formulates it clearly: “the potent ‘things’ in the human world are not people but the things they say”. The powers of speech acts are enormous: they can let people do things; they can change social reality and–again a radical thought of Harré–they can create social reality, including persons. But the powers of speech acts are not absolute, they only manifestate themselves under certain conditions. For example, everyone can utter the speech-act ‘I declare war’, but that speech-act only has the power to actually trigger a war if the declarer has the right to do so (meaning that he or she can speak on behalf of a state) and if the conversational context is the right one. If these two conditions are not fulfilled, then the speech-act will remain powerless.

A final clarification deals with the power of speech-acts to create social realm entities such as persons, institutions, social artefacts and social fields. Together, these social constructs are to be regarded as a “secondary” social reality. For Harré they are all products of speech-acts that are uttered in the primarily conversational reality. “Conversation is to be thought of as creating a social world just as causality generates a physical one” (R. Harré, 1984, p. 65). This is again a radical view. It entails that for instance persons are the products of conversation. From an ontogenetic perspective this is indeed what happens: newborns (actually already before birth) are treated by people as if they are persons by talking to them in baby-language, by ascribing intentions to the baby, by voicing what people think (s)he is experiencing and so on. Without this process of personification, babies cannot grow up to beings with a proper personality (De Waele & Harré, 1976; R. Harré & Erneling, 2012). Harré even goes further: as babies become persons, they are able to speak to themselves and he therefor postulates that even the mind is to be seen as a product of speech-acts used in inner conversations. Says Harré: “(...) the mind is not some set of preconditions for conversational competence, it is a conversation. The shape and structure of minds as private conversations must therefore be influenced by the shape and structure of public conversations” (Harré, 1986c, pp. 179–180).

The dual powers of speech-act also led Harré to introduce the metaphor that speech-acts are the equivalent of what matter is in the natural word, namely the ‘substance’ of the social world. This has consequences for what he calls the ‘referential grid’ in use. Within the physical
sciences, the referential grid in use has long been the perceived material world consisting out of material objects that are located in space and evolve in time, interrelated by influences propagated from one to another. Harré claims that the referential grid for the social world is different from that of the grid for the natural sciences. The so-called Newtonian-Euclidean ontological referential grid of the natural world is largely in concordance with how people experience the everyday world: as a world made up of material objects that always are located in space and evolve in time. Space and time form thus an ontological grid in which the substances (atoms and molecules) can be situated. It was in the framework of that grid that Hume situated his concept of causality that led Newton to develop his mechanical conception of the world. A world that metaphorically can be compared with a billiard table on which the balls interact through mechanical force in a perfectly predictable way. Today, it is clear that this grid only works at a certain level of magnitude. In the quantum world, time and space are no longer independent of each other and the mechanical causality has disappeared. So, the Newtonian/Euclidian grid does not hold for the quantum world, neither does it for the social world. But what replaces that grid? Harré proposed to link speech-acts to persons as the producers of such speech-acts and to conversations as the context in which they manifestate their power. When someone utters a speech-act, it is therefore not that important to know exactly where and when that is done, but rather to know who is addressing whom and in which conversational context. Crucial for understanding the meaning of an utterance is knowing who is speaking and what rights (s)he has to say certain things to the person addressed. It led Harré to say that in contrast to the time/space grid of the natural world in which matter can be situated, a different grid is needed to situate social phenomena: the persons/conversations grid in which speech-acts have to be localized (R. Harré, 1988).

The idea that conversations are the substance of the social world is still controversial, but seems to be supported by several scholars. Wan (2011, p. 151) refers to the ‘relational realist’ school that claims that “conversations constitute the central stuff of social life” (Tilly & Goodin, 2006, p. 11). Luhman has also proposed a similar social ontology when he wrote that society is communication. “there are no other elements: there is no further substance but communications. the society is not built out of human bodies and minds. It is simply a network of communication” (Luhman, 1990, p. 100).

4 | ONTOLOGY AND THE THREE REALMS OF EXPERIENCE

The second innovation in Harré’s ontological thinking is the development of a realist position that links the ontology of the natural world to the epistemological capacities of human beings. In (Harré 1986a, 1986b) he pictures the natural world consisting of three realms of phenomena: (i) objects of actual experience which make up Realm 1; (ii) objects of possible experience which make up Realm 2 and (iii) objects beyond all possible experience which make up Realm 3. Realm 1 and 2 together form the ‘umwelt’ of people2 that the world is made available to people by their perceptual, cognitive and manipulative capacities. For instance, people can hear the sound of music on a radio, but they cannot directly experience the radio-waves that surround them. As such, the radio is a technical device that allows people to capture a part of the world that is otherwise not directly experienceable. Realm 3 is on the edge of the human umwelt: science can enlarge the umwelt, but there always remains a nouminal reality beyond, independent of us. Harré is equivocal about the ontological status of beings in Realm 3: all one can know of them are their “affordances”: the events and practices they permit, from which their
dispositions can be inferred. Where these objects are manipulable, this is “good ground for a ‘revisable’ ontological claim on their behalf” (Harré, 1986a, p. 312).

Unfortunately, Harré did not pursue the same analysis for the social world, but it makes sense to repeat the exercise for how people epistemologically perceive the social realm. Van Langenhove (2007) presented a similar typology for what concerns the social world that can complement Harré’s take (Harré, 1994). This typology differentiates between three specific epistemological realms to look at the social world: the Social Realm 1 of the actual experience; the Social Realm 2 of the possible experience and the Social Realm 3 of not directly experienceable social phenomena. The Social Realm 1 can best be thought of as the directly experienced everyday conversations of people together with the material substances of the perceivable social entities (other people, all kinds of social artefacts from houses, books, spoons, traffic signs, and so on). But next to that direct experience, people can also experience conversations in which they did not take part. This can be pictured as the Social Realm 2 that consists out of what people tell other people about conversations they had with others or what has been recorded. Such Realm 2 conversations can occur in actual face-to-face interactions (actually, it is an essential part of gossiping...) or with technical intermediates such as books, recordings, movies, forwarded emails etc. All of this makes up the enlarged social Umwelt of people that is constituted of all the conversations one did not participate in but was told about something in another conversation. For many centuries the only possible way to enlarge a person’s social Umwelt has been the stories that other people tell through their conversations or about conversations they have heard about. Only relatively recent in the history of mankind did there emerge another possibility of enlarging the Social Umwelt: through the written accounts of conversations or through the possibilities of audio- and video registrations. Just like the Realm 2 of how the natural world enlarges through technological developments such as microscopes or telescopes, one can picture the possibilities of enlargement of the social Realm 2 as dependent of technological developments (writing, printing, recording) as well.

The enlarged social realm can be situated in the present as well as in both the future (think a promise) or in the past (think telling a story about something that happened). Words and sentences can be used to speak about the past. In doing so, one hardly ever will give a detailed minute account of a past event, but we will produce a rhetorical re-construction of it. This brings one to the Social Realm 3 as the re-constructed Social Realm 1 and 2 do. The rhetorical redescriptions mentioned above can be understood as discursive constructions of stories about events and institutions that make them intelligible as societal icons. As argued in H. R. Harré (1975), institutions for example are not to be seen as independent existents of which images (‘icons’) are conceived. Rather, they are icons which are used in explanations of certain problematic situations. So, social icons can be thought of as non-verbal images that act as vehicle for thoughts or as a bearer of concepts (H. R. Harré, 1975). Social icons are used in Social Realms 1 and 2 to make social interactions intelligible. Icons can be ascribed powers to act. They can also be used as explanatory devices. It is important to stress that these social icons are not to be seen as representations of a secondary social reality rather a reality that should have its own independent existence.

5 LOCALIZING SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENA

Harré’s third ontological innovation is his attempt to present an alternative to the layered concept of the social realm. A mainstream way to look at the social realm is to make a
distinction between the so-called levels of analysis. So, one speaks about the micro-level, the meso-level and the macro-level. Where psychology more or less coincides with the study of the micro-level, social psychology covers the meso-level, and the macro-level is the providence for sociology and other disciplines such as economy. This three-level-approach is by many taken for granted, probably as it echoes the layered conception of the newton world where one can start with elementary particles, go to atoms, molecules, and end with living organisms. In terms of corresponding disciplines, this adds up to quantum physics, physics, chemistry and biology. But the level approach seems to pose problems, as illustrated by the scholarly debate on the differences between the ‘psychological social psychology’ and the ‘sociological social psychology’ (House, 1977). The social sciences cannot be regarded as mirroring the layers of the natural world. Actually, one can claim that according to Harré the social world is ontologically flat. In his view, a web of conversations is the social reality.

Harré’s alternative for a layered conception of the social world is to situate psychological or social phenomena on two conceptual axes: the first axe situates the phenomena as either public (accessible to others) or private (not accessible to others). The second axis distinguishes whether the phenomena are either individual or collective. These two distinctions are inspired by the work of Lev Vygotsky and presented in detail in R. Harré (1984) where he also adds other dimensions. But the two dimensions allow to consider four distinct realms of social and psychological phenomena (see Figure 1):

1. The public/collective quadrant where one can locate all social phenomena that exist independently of a single person and that can be appropriated by any person. Here one can situate for instance social representations, general knowledge and beliefs as well as moral orders
2. The private/collective quadrant that contains elements from the public/collective quadrant that are appropriated by individual persons such as learned skills and opinions as well as a personal identity
3. The Public/individual quadrant that is filled with contributions from individual persons to the public sphere when people publicly act or talk. Both speaking and acting are to be regarded as performances that include both an expressive and a problem-solving part
4. Finally, there is the private/individual quadrant the consists out of the cognitive phenomena that a person does not share with others such as inner talks and thoughts as well as intentions to act or talk

Combining these two axes gives a conceptual space to locate everything that is psychological or social in four distinct quadrants which can be labeled as the societal space, the personal space, the space of what persons contribute to society and the space of what society contributes to the functioning of persons. Conversations account for the transfer from one space to another. Harré labeled them appropriation and publicizing. This conceptual space is a powerful alternative to the classic distinction between what happens ‘inside’ a person that is considered to be the providence of psychology and what happens ‘outside’ the person referring to the subject of sociology or other social sciences. It makes Harré claim that taking up the Vygotsky scheme “abolishes the distinction between psychology and sociology” (R. Harré, 1987, p. 189). This might be a bold claim, but the least one can say is that Harré advances the thinking about the relevance of disciplinary divides and he brought a sophisticated terminology to the social ontology. Elder-Vaas (rightly noted that “one of the problems of the social sciences is a lack of
ontological rigor. Concepts are frequently pressed into service with loose contextual definitions, with no attempt to establish what their real referents are.” (Elder-Vass, 2007, p. 228). Ontological rigor is exactly what Harré contributed.

6 | INTERMEZZO: SOCIAL THEORIZING REVISITED

There are only a few sources available that synthesize Harré’s take on the social and psychological realm. Harré himself presented a kind of synthesis of his positions vis-à-vis the critical contributions to Bhaskar (1990) in a comment (R. Harré, 1990) that was titled “Exploring the Human Umwelt”. And just before his death, he also commented upon the contributions collected in Christensen (2019). More overviews of social theory aspects of Harré’s work can be found in Scott and Stam (1996) and (Van Langenhove, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2019). But none of these publications has yet presented a comprehensive synthesis of Harré’s social theory. This article aims to overcome that lacuna and demonstrate that Harré has developed over the years an innovative and consistent social theory that is linked to a general theory of psychology. In the previous section, attention was drawn to the very specific way Harré looked at the social ontology. As mentioned above, Harré sees the disciplinary divides between psychology and sociology or any other social sciences as obsolete. In the remaining part of this article, attention will turn to the social theory that is based upon that ontology.

A social theory can be seen as an analytical framework used to understand or explain social phenomena (Swedberg, 2014). This includes ideas on how change and development of societies occur, on power and social structure, on the nature of social life, on the relationship between self and society, on the structure of social institutions, as well as on themes such as genders, races and classes. A social theory mostly does not focus upon specific topics has the ambition to tackle the whole fabric of society from a single perspective. There are many ways to present a social theory, but from a formal point of view one can distinguish between the narrative approach, the axiomatic approach and the comparative model approach.
The first option seems to be the most common one in use. Most scholars that have been engaged in developing social theories use their own logic to present and develop their theories. And, in contrast to methodological rules for gathering data, there are no strict guidelines about how to develop and present a social theory. Past practices of social theorists suggest that developing a social theory is mostly done by solitary scholars who write according to their ‘inspiration’ and their digesting of the results of some theoretical or empirical works. There are no strict sets of rules on what should minimally be covered by a social theory. This is the way Rom Harré worked, be it that he mostly worked together with one or more co-authors.

The second way to present a theory is to offer the reader an axiomatic presentation of the theory. This is how Smedslund for instance has developed his own psycho-logic theory (see Lindstad et al., 2020). Harré had a lot of sympathy for Smedslund’s lifework, and occasionally he used a quasi-axiomatic method, for instance in the ‘anticipatory summeries’ written for each of the chapters of R. Harré and Secord (1972).

The third way to present a theory is by making use of a general format to present the characteristics of that theory. This has the advantage that one can then compare different theories more systematically with each other. The obvious disadvantage of this approach is that the format the comparative framework adopts might force a certain interpretation upon the theories presented or the adopted format fits better to one theory than to another. To my knowledge there exists no ideal comparative scheme for social theories, but the scheme developed by Maddi (1976) for presenting personality theories can be used as a starting point. The structure of his explanatory scheme draws upon the logic of biological development: a genotype is actualized as a phenotype during phylogenesis. When applying the model to societies, Maddi’s scheme allows to distinguish between the core (analogue to a genotype) and the periphery (analogue to a phenotype) of a society. Within the core one can further distinguish between core characteristics (the things common to all societies) and core tendencies (driving forces) of any society. Finally, he postulates that the interplay between both the core tendencies and the core characteristics results in an observable periphery that is subject to change. In the section below, the Maddi-scheme is used to bring together some aspects of Harré’s thinking about the nature of societies. This makes sense as the underlying biological metaphor used by Maddi resonates with Harré’s thinking as illustrated in Jensen and Harré (1981), where Harré explicitly made use of the evolutionary analogy in social explanations.

7 | HARRÉ’S THEORIZING OF THE FABRIC OF SOCIETY

In Van Langenhove (2020) an attempt is made to use the Smedslund axiomatic method to present part of Harré’s work. In this section a Maddi inspired summary is presented of what can be regarded as a social theory that is implicit in Harré’s work. It builds upon the ontological issues and concepts presented in section one and adds a model to it that connects concepts and postulates links between observables and unobservables. Harré, being a defender of realist philosophy of science, sees a theory as describing unobservable processes that are responsible for what we can observe, which is the essence of a theory (R. Harré, 1997, p. 17). First a summary in axiomatic terms will be presented, then some aspects will be discussed in detail and finally some general conclusions will be drawn.

Adopting a biology inspired approach to reformulate some of Harré’s work is not to disregard other ways of synthesizing. Neither does it imply that Harré’s view on the social realm is somehow implying a biological determinist take on the social reality. Harré himself wrote
that “borrowing from the biological to the social sphere requires a great deal of care and in the end, perhaps, must be undertaken with serious reservations” (R. Harré, 1981, p. 175). With those caveats in mind, here is the summary of how the backbone of Harré’s social theory could look like.

1. The core tendencies of any society are to influence the agency of persons (as reflected in their actions and speech-acts) by means of two processes: (i) enable and develop individual agency and (ii) contain and limit that individual agency. These two core tendencies bridge the individual and society by situating the sources of personal agency in society and by bringing parts of the stock of knowledge and capacities to the level of individuals
   a. As for core tendency one, enabling the agency of people, a distinction can be made between the appropriation of knowledge, skills and tools from the public/collective realm and between the mobilization of tools and skills that are used or mastered by others
   b. Core tendency two, containing the agency of people, occurs through moral orders that limit what is permissible for people to do in a given situation

2. It belongs to the core characteristics of a society that it consists out of a primary, a secondary and a tertiary social reality
   a. The primary social realm is the web of conversations between people
   b. The secondary social realm consists of the social products that emerge out of the primary social reality. These products, created by speech acts, include direct observable entities such as social artefacts and persons and those from unobservable fields including the knowledge fields and moral orders that envelop people
   c. The tertiary social realm consists out of constant re-writing of the past and present by using words to reproduce events and represent them as societial icons

3. The interplay between core characteristics and tendencies leads to a specific peripherical manifestation of a society, and to a never-ending balancing between societal change and continuity. At a daily level, the periphery results in the ongoing flux of conversations to be categorized in episodes and praxis. Together, they vary depending on the civilizational culture and the historic timeframe of the society, but all societies can be seen as consisting out of two ‘orders’:
   a. a practical order that relates to the solution to problems posed by daily life, and
   b. an expressive order that involves dramatic display of individuals’ entitlement to respect and is structurally based in hierarchies of respect and contempt

4. And finally, societal change occurs through human agency and/or to events or changes in the eco-system

Thus far for an axiomatic formulation of some basic elements of the social theory can be detected in the Oeuvre of Rom Harré. The following section presents a more detailed discussion of the main aspects of the core tendencies and characteries of society. A full treatment of the whole theory is within the scope of this article not possible.

8 | THE CORE TENDENCIES OF SOCIETIES

On several occasions Harré has spoken out against social structures, not necessarily to deny that they exist but to claim they play no causal and to be nothing more than discursive speeches. “Social reality is exhausted by what people do” (R. Harré, 2002, p. 116). This opens the door for a
very person-centered view of the social world. Says Harré: “People are the effective agents who are creating the social world, creating social structures in accordance with the rules and conventions that have come to them historically, and, for the most part, are immanent in social practices” (R. Harré, 2002, p. 112). Such an emphasis on human agency brings with it a view of society that is an enabling and a containing factor for agency. As he put it bluntly: “In a word, people are agents in so far as they can be” (R. Harré, 2019). In that quote, ‘can’ is to be interpreted in two ways: as referring to making something possible and as referring to allowing something. This implies that the core tendencies of a society are thus related to how human agency is managed by society. Basically, one can distinguish between two societal responses: people have to show agency in everything they do, and a society is only functioning to the extent that people do things be it within certain boundaries.

8.1  Mobilizing agency

Society can be regarded as a mechanism to make people do things and allow them to cope with everyday situations. This is in line with how De Waele and Harré (1976) have pictured human personality as a mechanism to cope with situations by intentionally doing things based upon a set of acquired skills.

Harré’s emphasis on the agency of people does not imply a sort of methodological individualism or deny the reality of society, as he wrote at one point: “I see no reason for denying the existence of macro-properties” (R. Harré, 1981, p. 155). He therefore looks at agency from the perspective of the capacities of people to do certain things. Most of the things people do are due to their biological capability and therefore but are not genetically transmitted. For instance, human beings have the biological capacity (the larynx, the brain...) to speak a language, but they need a cultural environment to learn a language. Similarly, people have in principle the capacity to write and read, but these are skills that need to be learned and certain knowledge (for instance an alphabet) needs to be appropriated. Without a society that offers these elements, the potentiality at individual level is not fulfilled. One basic function of a society is therefore to both enable and stimulate the possibilities of human agency. This means that on the one hand, a person needs to appropriate skills and tools that are available in the public/collective realm. But on the other hand, the things people can do also might also be realized by the mobilization of tools and skills that are used or mastered by others. So, what persons actually do is only partly related to the individual capacities they have. One can, for instance, only play the piano when one has learned to play piano, including reading sheet music. The knowledge to do that resides in the public-collective share and can be appropriated by individuals by reading But, playing the piano can be done without knowing how to fabricate such an instrument. Divisions of labour, together with mechanisms to make it possible that the piano-maker can provide a piano to the piano-player, make playing the piano possible. One such a mechanism is buying a piano, an act that involves money, which is mobilizing a deontic speech act.

Everyday life can be regarded as a continuous series of tasks that need to be fulfilled. Brushing our teeth, sorting out taxes, writing a chapter for a book, painting the house, jogging, visiting one’s parents, they are all tasks. Some of them are practical and others are cognitive. Metaphorically, people can be said to have access to a whole set of ‘tools’ that they can use to perform such tasks. The totality of these tools can be regarded as what people can possibly do. From an evolutionary point of view, the use of tools has dramatically expanded the range of what is possible. The human species is now capable of (i) using the human body as a tool,
(ii) fabricating mechanical tools and (iii) mobilizing other people as tools. For Harré even the brain can be regarded as a tool that is used by agentive persons (Harré, 2012b).

The possibilities to act are thus not limited to individual people but also depend on the mobilization of what one could call ‘the extended brain’ of that person. While it is often stressed that people have remarkable powerful brains that allow language, advanced motorical skills and creative thinking, but this is however only part of the picture. People can also maximize their possibilities by using the brains of other people. Therefore, rather than relying on individual cognitive capacity, collaboration whether it is forced or based on free-will is what people are good at, which can only be realized in a societal context. So, if one wants to fully understand what people do, one has to realize that the capacities of people are not confined to their own brains or their individual cognitive capacities. The true capacity of one single person is related to capacities of literally thousands of other brains. In other words, the possibilities of a certain person to act in a certain way depends on many other people that live or have lived in the society that persons belongs to.

8.2 | Containing agency

Agency does not mean that people can do anything, anywhere at any time. It is not because one has mastered the skills to play a piano one can use those skills at any time everywhere. Society is a mechanism to contain agency. As R. Harré (2011) put it: “the scope of what people actually do is very much narrower than what they can do”. The way to study this is to look at the beliefs that people have about rights and duties to act in certain ways. As noted by R. Harré (2015): “what we can do is broader than what we may or may not do, which is broader than what we actually do”. In other words, “may” is a tighter concept than “can” in the realm of human action (Harré, 2012a, 2012b, p. 1). Between the domain of what is possible and the domain of what actually happens lays according to R. Harré (2011) the domain of the permissible and the impermissible. This calls for a new type of scientific understanding that combines psychological factors with a sociological approach. Next to the above-mentioned broadening of possibilities by mobilizing ‘extended brains’, society also narrows down the range of possibilities by limiting access to knowledge and by moral or normative prescriptions. Or as noted by Lewis (2000), “social structures do not merely facilitate human activity; they also constrain it” (p. 251). Both the facilitating and constraining conditions form together the umwelt of people. For Harré it is in the latter perspective that Positioning Theory has its place, as it tackles the question of what the processes are by which the domain of the permissible is extracted from the domain of the possible.

The origins of Positioning Theory go back to two texts published in the Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour (Davies & Harré, 1990; R. Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991) and to an edited volume in 1999 (R. Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). In R. Harré and Van Langenhove (1999, p. 2), Positioning Theory is defined as “an explanatory scheme to understand and study discourse and its relation to different psychic and social phenomena” (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” (p. 12). In that same article, the authors introduce a metaphor to explain what they hope the power of the theory is: if the species-wide and history-long conversations 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 form above” (p. 13). One central aspect of Positioning Theory is that it stresses the understanding of what people do and what they don’t, and it requires to look at what is permissible to do according to the local moral order that is followed and to the positions that people take in that order. ‘Positions’ are clusters of beliefs that people have with respect to the rights and duties to act in certain ways. ‘Positioning’ refers to the processes of assigning, appropriating or rejecting positions. Every position both opens and closes possible actions.

But positions have to be related to two other perspectives: the storylines that develop within interactions and the speech-acts that are uttered by the persons. Positioning theory claims that every social situation can be understood by analyzing the mutual determinable triangle of positions, storylines and speech-acts. What people possibly can do is a function of three determinants: the capacities of people to do certain things, the restrictions imposed upon people to do certain things and the intentions that people have to do certain things.

At any given moment people live their lives in a multitude of overlapping moral orders. Some of those moral orders are of a very general nature. Others can be very specific and active only in specific spaces and/or for limited timeslots. In both cases (general or specific) moral orders can be latent or active. Latent moral orders are not “in use” in a certain episode. Van Langenhove (2017) has identified five different types of moral orders: general cultural orders, legal moral orders, institutional moral orders, conversational moral orders and personal moral orders. Together, the above five varieties of moral orders constitute the invisible moral space in which human agency is deployed.

Humanity has gone through a very slow evolutionary process that has created incredible capacities to act. As part of that biological process, the emergence of language was the kick-off for a cultural evolution that has gone much faster than biological evolution. That cultural evolution has also created a complex social environment that makes every person in a society be able to profit from the endeavors and specializations of many other persons. As a result, people live in a sea of possibilities that overpasses their individual capacities. This luxury of possibilities is made possible by two connections between persons: the moral orders and the knowledge fields. The challenge is to understand the dynamics of transforming the possible into realities. What people can possibly do is a space of potentialities defined by the limitations of the personal capabilities and the restrictions imposed by a moral order. The agency of persons lays in the possibility to create new capacities (through training, inventing…) and the possibility to overrule any moral order with the belief that one has to do certain things (Van Langenhove, 2020).

8.3  |  The core characteristics of society

The primary social reality can be experienced directly only through talks. The ‘social’ and the ‘psychological’ cannot be seen as such. As J. R. Searle (1995, p. 4) noted, “the complex structure of social reality is, so to speak, weightless and invisible”. It can only be talked about, and it is in the talks that the social reality is constituted. Of course, the material substances associated with social phenomena can be seen we can see the buildings of a university, but we never can ‘see’ the university as a functioning social entity without being involved in some sort of conversation.

Within the scope of this article, the other elements of the theory cannot be explored in depth. However, for the core characteristics readers can be referred to Van Langenhove (2019) where the manifestation of society into three realities is presented in some detail. As for the periphery of society, the differences between the expressive and practical orders of society are
explained in detail in R. Harré (1979). Still, a couple of clarifications need to be made in order to at least introduce the notion of core characteristics. While the core tendencies point to why societies exist, the core characteristics are a way to represent how society is manifested in the natural world and to clearly identify what the social realm entails.

First, people live in a material world where the social realm manifests itself in five ways: two of them are not directly observable fields that envelop them (knowledge fields and moral fields) and the other three are direct observable phenomena (conversations, social artefacts and other people) that surround them. One of the fields is constituted by knowledge that is available in society and can be appropriated by people to cope with the ever-ongoing flux of situations that they encounter. This knowledge consists out of many different aspects, as can be illustrated by the example of the mondain act of using a water closet. In many societies most people will know how to use such a device. But only a few people know how exactly a W.C. functions. Actually, the physics behind the mechanism of flushing is rather complex as explained by Sloman and Fernbach (2017). If one is confronted with a broken toilet, fixing it requires mobilizing knowledge to repair it if one does not personally possess it. If one cannot repair it oneself, then knowledge needs to be mobilized on how to contact a plumber and so on. Besides the technical aspects of the water closet, there is also a whole area of etiquette that people have to learn. Closing the door if one uses the toilet is, for instance, a widely distributed habit in many societies. Here, there is more than knowing this that is involved, as not following that rule is often reprimanded or judged as unappropriated. That’s why such fields are called moral orders. Both moral orders and knowledge fields are not directly observable. Only their influence on people can be observed and their origins to speech acts can be traced. For instance, traffic rules can be regarded as a ‘moral order’ that is induced by the corpus of laws and rules that deal with organizing traffic in society. In that sense, traffic rules can be seen as a field that regulates traffic.

This primary social realm is where speech-acts are uttered: some of them have the power to mobilize other persons while others possess the power to create social entities. All social artefacts, persons and conversations have a material substance that allows people to perceive them through their senses. As material things, they can all be situated in space and time. This observable social realm has been studied by many different social science disciplines according to a division of labour. The conversations are the providence of linguistic and communication studies. Artefacts are studied by disciplines such as cultural studies (art), economy (money and factories), sociology (institutions), law (the judicial system). Persons are the subject of psychology.

9 | DISCUSSION

In the above presented sketch of a social theory, society operates as a mechanism to develop personal agency and to contain that personal agency by providing people with capabilities that they could never deploy as single agents and by subjecting them to forces of social control that limits what people do in order to maintain and change if necessary. As a result, the umwelt of a specific person is made up of the totality of fields, artefacts, persons and conversations. People need to live in a society to survive. In cognitive terms this implies that all people punch above their own cognitive weight because society provides so much brainpower to which people can rely on to do things. People do not function as solitary beings with individual cognitive capacities but as social beings that are entangled. The social and psychological realms should
therefore not be treated as two logically independent elements but as an entangled socio-psychological reality. Metaphorically, one could wonder if this mirrors the transition from the Newtonian universe where space and time are two independent dimensions to the Einsteinian universe of spacetime.

The whole Maddi-exercise above can be read as the outline of a coherent Harréan ontology of the social world that grasps the linkages between psychological and social phenomena. Furthermore, this ontology extends Harré’s Positioning Theory into a full-fledged social theory that captures what society is and what place agency stands both in the maintaining and changing of a society. Taking the above presented alternative ontology of the social realm seriously has several important consequences:

1. It puts speech acts and conversations at the heart of the social realm
2. In doing so, it eliminates the layered conception of the social realm
3. It also hints at an alternative to the causal mechanisms in the sense that it puts forward intentionality as the primary force that makes things happen
4. It allows to examine the social realm in a not reified way by emphasizing the social construction of the social realm

This constitutes a vast research programme in which psychological problems are firmly linked to sociological and historical problems. Taken together, this framework opens the road for three specific research avenues to approach any aspect of the social realm: (i) the study of ongoing discursive processes between people, (ii) the study of the creation of social entities and fields through discourse, and (iii) the study of the re-construction of any aspect of the social world in conversations. Moreover, it aims to provide a basis for unifying social and psychological perspectives on the study of people and societies. Taken together, the ontological work of Harré demonstrates that his severe critics of traditional methods in psychology were directly rooted in his critique of how social sciences in general have imitated the ontological views of the natural sciences. As such Harré’s work demonstrates what Wan (2011) claimed, namely that “a well-articulated social ontology, that is open to revision, is also conducive to the improvement of the methodology of social sciences.” (Wan, 2011, p. 173).

The theory also has the potential to be further developed in such ways that it offers a better a finer vocabulary then now available for analyzing any aspect of society. Here is an example of what is possible. Suppose one is interested in finding out how people cope with a specific problem-solving situation and what the societal accepted solutions to the problem are. One could start with a mapping of the (i) the stock of knowledge and skills available that can be appropriated, and (ii) see who and under what conditions there are people available that can be mobilized since they already have the required knowledge or skills. Next, one can distinguish between solutions to the problem that involve specific artefacts and those that involve others upon which can be relied on with their obtained expertise. Combining the two dimensions gives a cartesian product with four fields on how society interacts with individual situations. Suppose that the problem is that one needs to hang a frame on the wall without having a hammer at their disposal. The four distinct possibilities to act are the following ones:

1. One can ask someone else to hammer the nail in the wall (mobilizing the people field)
2. One can buy or borrow from someone a hammer to achieve the action (mobilizing the artefacts field)
3. One can learn from someone how to use hammers including how to get them (appropriating user knowledge).

4. One can build a hammer with appropriate knowledge and tools to fabricate a hammer (appropriating production knowledge).

It should be possible to develop in more details such lexicons and grammars to refine the way social scientists as well as people in general talk about the world. In this way, Harré's work on the social fabric of society can be seen as one major attempt to expand the language used to describe society. This means that one should not only have access to adequate concepts when explaining things, but also not to accept at face-value the way certain concepts are used. Take for instance the concept of motivation that is used by many psychologists as part of their explanations why a person did something. But as shown by Azjen and Fishbein, the best predictor of a certain type of behaviour is the intention to perform the behavior. Motives might as well be linguistic device to account for one's behaviour. The sentence “I was not motivated that's why I failed for the exam” does not imply that motivation is a cognitive ‘trait’ but might be a way to justify and excuse for a certain behaviour (Harré, 2004). In a personal communication Harré once told the author that developing the right vocabulary to speak about phenomena is for the social sciences probably the equivalent for what designing technological measurement tools are for the natural sciences.

This brings me to the last point: if there is sufficient ground to claim that across the writings of Harré and others, there is a coherent Harréan social theory, then how to label it? This is important, as theories needs an iconical representation in order to be referred to. This might be the name of an author or a descriptive label. Sometimes both approaches are used simultaneously as for instance, in the case of Azjen & Fishbein theory of reasoned action or Giddens' structurion theory. What could then be an appropriate label for Harré's social theory? Harré originally labeled his own work in the social sciences as ‘ethogenics’, but at a certain point he stopped doing that because he judged it to be a too deterministic approach. His work in the field of psychology has been on the one hand referred to as part of the ‘second cognitive revolution’ and on the other hand part of it has been labeled by himself as ‘positioning theory’. But his broader ontological view on the social realm has not been labeled yet. Given Harré’s claim that the ‘substances’ of the social world are speech-acts in conversations and that speech-acts are regarded as necessary conditions for the emergence of artefacts, persons and fields, one could perhaps refer to it as the Spoken World Theory as it stresses that the essence of both the social and the psychological realm is conversations. Moreover, this label points to the affinity of Harré’s work with hermeneutics. As Jacques Attali (1977) once said: “Le savoir occidental tente, depuis vingt-cinq siecles, de voir le monde. Il n'a pas compris que le monde ne se regarde pas, il s'entend. Il ne se lit pas, il s'ecoute”. Maybe this is exactly what Harré has accomplished: pointing us to a much-needed paradigm-shift on social sciences, from looking to social reality towards listening to it.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

1 The example of how to open a door is further elaborated in more detail in Van Langenhove (2020). The example of how to open a door is often used in linguistics to explain the phenomenon of in-direct influence upon the world.

2 The concept of ‘Umwelt’ stems from biology and refers to how animals perceive their environment. Dogs, for instance can hear things humans cannot.

3 The Harré take on personal agency is well summarized in Martin (2019).

4 The author of this article had a conversation on this topic with Rom Harré in Oxford on 29 August 2019. On that occasion the author had a chance to present to Harré his idea of labeling his conceptual and ontological world as ‘the Spoken World Theory’. Harré agreed with that but hastened to say that one should also stress that the social world is not alone discourse but also a series of practices. He refered to his work with Jean-Pierre Llored (R. Harré & Llored, 2019). It was the last conversation the author had with Rom Harré before he passed away.

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