

The Origins of Action

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Editors

The Origins of Action

Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives

With 22 Figures



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Preface

The Proliferation of Action Theories and Their Applications

Jaan Valsiner and Louis Oppenheimer

Our contemporary psychology becomes satiated by references to "action" and "activity." Over the recent decade numerous theoretical perspectives have appeared, all of which operate with the notion of "action" (Ajzen, 1985; Eckensberger & Silbereisen, 1980; Keller & Reuss, 1984; Lantermann, 1980), each of which define it (see Oppenheimer, Chapter 1 of this volume). Likewise, the empirical literature in child psychology is filled with "action-theoretic" notions--facilitated by the ease of seeing children acting within their environments at a pace that surpasses that of even the most hyperactive adult! Of course, the empirical discourse in contemporary psychology is highly limited by its empiricistic emphasis, which dissociates empirical work from theoretically elaborate reasoning. At times, one can find in the literature an "anything goes" attitude--as long as the "umbrella" (theoretical) notion under which the given empirical study looks consensually respectable, the theoretical needs of "research" are satisfied, and psychologists can continue to accumulate "data" in their pursuit of "normal science."

The latter attitude to theory, of course, is but a convenient illusion. For any serious hope for progress in any discipline, the conceptual sphere must be explicitly developed further together with the empirical efforts. This sentiment led us to organize a symposium at the conference of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1987. The presentations at that symposium gave us the idea of editing a book on the origins of action. We began by encouraging the participants of the symposium to update and extend their presentations and invited a number of other colleagues to participate in the volume.

As a result, the present volume includes both theoretical and empirical contributions. Among the theoretical contributions, Oppenheimer (Chapter 1) overviews the history and state of affairs with the "action" concept. The historical roots of, and different approaches to "action theory" described by him suggest the possibility of theory and research from quite different perspectives. In Chapter 2, Oppenheimer attempts to embed his contemporary action theory within a psychobiological context and to link both to the theory of self. A

different approach to the study of action is illustrated by Rolf Oerter (Chapter 3). He offers an elaborate analysis of self-object relationships which, according to him, should be considered the major explanatory principle for actions.

Two chapters included in the volume could be labelled quasi-empirical. Brian Cox and his colleagues (Chapter 4) discuss the relevance of an action-oriented approach for the study of the ontogenesis of memory. In this chapter, a general emphasis on strategy-based action is linked with a re-analysis of some empirical memory data from the perspective of variability as a resource of development. In a similar vein, Jeanette, A. Lawrence and Simone, E. Volet (Chapter 5) elaborate on the role of goal orientation in human action with the help of empirical data from their study of students' goals.

Finally, the present volume includes four chapters on the topic of psychological study of interest. Interest is a psychological phenomenon that has been rarely studied, although its relevance in human lives is obvious. In the framework of contemporary cognitive psychology, the studies of interest are growing. Hence, one must look carefully on the development of interest. Based on Piaget's (1981) definition of interests as the relation between a need and the objects thought to satisfy those needs, Roderik van der Wilk (Chapter 6) proposes an action-theoretical model of interest. Benedykt Fink (Chapter 7) tries to make sense of interests from a different frame of reference--that of "person-object relationships." He proposes a structural transformation perspective on interest development. K. Ann Renninger and Thomas G. Leckrone (Chapter 8) try to analyze linkages of temperament and interest in young children in empirically novel ways. Finally, van der Wilk and Oppenheimer (Chapter 9) give an overview of a series of studies on interests that have been conducted in the Netherlands.

All together, the contributions to the volume cover a large area of intellectual endeavors, ranging from the depths of person-object or self-other relationships to particular pretend play of 3- to 4-year-old children, as well as to specific patterns of interests among adolescents. Certainly, many other applications of action theories are not represented in this volume--which would have been impossible, given the vast development of the field. It is our hope, however, that the contributions to the present volume will expose the reader to both the benefits and the pitfalls of the action-theoretic view of developing psychological phenomena.

In addition, the chapters in this volume present contemporary reflections on human actions by authors not only from different countries or states but from different continents. American, Australian, and European authors contributed to this book (the order of continents being alphabetical). The flavor of the different theoretical traditions and empirical emphases in (developmental) psychology is abundantly evident in the contributions. As such, the present volume may also serve as a source for cross-fertilization in the development of theory and research in the study of action. The ideas presented in this volume may appeal to students

of developing psychological phenomena to integrate the different approaches and theoretical models in order to advance our knowledge and insights in a fundamental way--that is, to answer the question "why people act as they do?"

Nicholas Humphrey's (1983, p. 6) quotation of Hobbes, in his book *Consciousness regained: Chapters in the development of mind* summarizes the purpose of the present volume and the goal of action theory:

But there is another saying not of late understood, by which they might learn truly to read one another, if they would take the pains; and that is *Nosce teipsum, Read thyself* . . . [which is meant] to teach us, that for the similitude of the thoughts, and Passions of one man, to the thoughts, and Passions of another, whosoever looketh into himself, and considereth what he doth, when he does *think, opine, reason, hope, feare, &c.*, and upon what grounds; he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts, and Passions of all other men, upon the like occasions. . . . And though by mens actions wee do discover their designe sometimes; yet to do it without comparing them with our own, and distinguishing all circumstances, by which the case may come to be altered, is to decypher without a key.

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