



Faculty Publications

2011-09-01

Participational Agency

Stephen C. Yanchar

Brigham Young University - Provo, stephen_yanchar@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>



Part of the [Educational Psychology Commons](#), and the [Educational Technology Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Yanchar SC. Participational Agency. *Review of General Psychology*. 2011;15(3):277-287.
doi:10.1037/a0024872

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Yanchar, Stephen C., "Participational Agency" (2011). *Faculty Publications*. 5853.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5853>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Participational Agency

Stephen C. Yanchar

Brigham Young University

2nd Submission June 22, 2011

Author's Note

Stephen C. Yanchar, Instructional Psychology and Technology, Brigham Young University.

I gratefully acknowledge James E. Faulconer, Russell T. Osguthorpe, Jonathan S. Spackman, and David D. Williams for their valuable commentaries on earlier versions of this article.

Abstract

Participational agency is presented as a conceptual account of human action, volition, and possibility. Rooted in hermeneutic and narrative traditions, this view differs from other theorizing about agency (and most psychological theorizing in general) in that it makes no effort to explain human action by virtue of reified constructs. As an alternative to traditional theorizing in this area, participational agency is defined as *meaningful engagement in the world* and treats the experienced meaningfulness of practical human activity as its central feature. The concept of meaningful engagement is clarified through the presentation of four related themes—situated participation, existential concern, dispositional action, and narrative orientation. Finally, the author offers several implications of this view of agency for theory and research.

Keywords: agency, volition, meaning, tacit, narrative, hermeneutics

Participational Agency

An axiom of traditional psychology—perhaps the most general and far reaching axiom—holds that human action is ordered according to causal forces lying outside of one’s personal control and felt experience. This general axiom, often expressed philosophically in terms of hard determinism—and more specifically in terms of material or efficient causation (Rychlak, 1994)—manifests in various ways across bodies of theorizing (e.g., biological reductionism, psychic determinism, environmental determinism, etc.), but the overarching idea is clear: there is no scientifically permissible volition or agency about which to be theorized (for reviews and analyses of theorizing about agency in psychology, see Baer, Kaufman, & Baumeister, 2008; Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003; Rychlak, 1988; Sappington, 1990; Williams, 1992, 1994). Versions of soft determinism also admit the reality of material or efficient causal forces that determine, or largely determine, human action, but either theorize a relatively small ontological space for some emergent agentic capacity (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Baumeister, 2008) or contend that the human experience of volitional thought and action is itself caused by background material and efficient causes, rendering agency fundamentally illusory (e.g., Hebb, 1974; Wegner, 2008). From the latter of these soft determinist perspectives, persons may feel in control of their sentient activity, but those feelings are themselves the effects of hard deterministic forces on par with those witnessed in the natural sciences.

In contrast to psychology’s historical commitment to these forms of determinism, scholarly labor outside of the disciplinary mainstream has generated a number of perspectives on human action informed by neither hard determinism nor softer varieties hardly distinguishable from it. The most well-developed and visible of these alternatives to traditional deterministic thought include Rogers’s (1961) and May’s (1981) theorizing about an innate capacity for self-

direction in personal growth; Westcott's (1988, 1992) explorations of the experience of human freedom, committed choice, and responsibility; Rychlak's (1994) development of concepts such as oppositionality and affective assessment; Williams's (1992, 2005) conceptualization of agency as being in the world truthfully (1992); and Martin, Sugarman, and Thompson's (2003) notion of emergent self-determinism situated in, and limited by, various levels of biological, social, and psychological context.

Of primary interest to these and other theorists who make use of agentic conceptions (Harré, 1984; Harré & Gillett, 1994; Howard, 1994; Jenkins, 2001; Slife & Fisher, 2000) is the pursuit of meaningful and purposeful understandings of human conduct, although the emphasis these theorists place on that meaningfulness, and the ways they conceptualize it, certainly vary. Despite conceptual differences among the work of these theorists, they have generally recognized that meaning and purpose are not possible within a fully mechanistic natural order—one in which humans are conceptualized as automata and their action is construed as the necessary outcome of some prior set of necessary causes (Williams, 1992). If the deterministic claims of traditional psychology are correct, then human life is characterized by a type of nihilism in which there can be no more meaning or significance to any human action than that attributable to the automatic workings of machinery or mere matter in motion. For those who favor the study of human action as a meaningful phenomenon, such nihilism provides adequate rationale for the pursuit of conceptual alternatives.

These alternative views of agency, while hardly monolithic, demonstrate some of the possibilities that arise when theorists move beyond an abiding commitment to assumptions drawn from a deterministic natural science perspective. It is my intention to extend this body of work by offering a conception of agency that diverges not only from traditional, deterministic

theorizing, but also from alternative accounts principally concerned with a capacity to engage in free and deliberate choice. Williams (1992, 1994, 2005) has persuasively argued that views of agency based on free choice encounter considerable difficulty under careful analysis, as (a) theorized mechanisms responsible for choosing tend to supplant the role of the embodied agent as decision maker and (b) grounds for any particular choice cascade into an infinite regress as those grounds must have been chosen on some other grounds, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Although what I offer takes account of choice and decision making in some sense, it does not conceptualize agency in terms of choosing *per se* and, as I hope to show, covers a broader range of human activity than conceptions concerned primarily with matters of choice.

The view of agency I present is rooted in philosophical hermeneutics, and particularly in the work of Heidegger and several who followed after him, including Merleau-Ponty (1962), Taylor (1985a), Ricoeur (1981, 1984, 1992), and Guignon (2002). What I offer bears some resemblance to other conceptions of agency within psychology informed by phenomenological and hermeneutic thought (Williams, 1992, 1994, 2005; Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003; Slife & Fisher, 2000) and might be thought of, at least in part, as an integration and extension of some of the concepts advanced in this body of work. The writings of Williams (1992, 1994, 2005) are particularly noteworthy in this respect, as my view follows in the wake of his criticisms of many traditional and alternative accounts of agency. Nonetheless, what I offer brings a distinct position to the literature of agency within psychology and raises several unique possibilities for future work in the field. As opposed to theories of agency that pivot on the concept of choice, then, and in contrast to theorizing based on freedom and will (May, 1981; Rogers, 1961), intrinsic rational powers (Held, 2007; Jenkins, 2001; Rychlak, 1994), or an emergent capacity for situated deliberation (Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003), what I offer

is based directly on the very meaningfulness that is central to human life as actually lived. In this sense, I will offer an account—what I refer to as *participational agency*—that treats meaningfulness as the primary consideration and do so, first, by defining this view of agency; second, by presenting four related themes that clarify its basic nature; and third, by suggesting some of its implications for theory and research.

Conceptualizing Participational Agency

At the outset, I advance the axiom that meaningfulness is fundamental to human existence and constitutes a viable conceptual basis for scholarly work within the social sciences, including understandings of agency itself. People are, from this perspective, meaningfully involved in the world first and foremost; and the world in which human life plays out is immanently meaningful. Given this axiom, I assume no hidden, determinant reality or abstract constructs ontologically prior to the meaningful forms of life in which agents participate, and I make no attempt to map out the “inner workings” of agency through an appeal to constructs such as natural forces, internal mechanisms, rational powers, and so on. Though contrary to much of traditional psychological theorizing,¹ the claim that human action is fundamentally meaningful provides an axiom no less plausible than others espoused in disciplinary debates regarding determinism and agency. As William James contended long ago (1897/1956), no such axioms are known to obtain with certainty and thus none should be categorically eliminated from scholarly discussion. When this point is acknowledged, a genuine scientific dialogue about the plausibility and possibilities of various options can ensue and a diversity of potentially fruitful positions can be developed. Bearing in mind this need for scientific openness, then, as well as rather significant philosophical problems ushered in by nihilism, there is no persuasive reason not to take this axiom seriously as at least one starting point for work within the field.

To be sure, the practice of explaining—or attempting to explain—psychological phenomena by way of abstract constructs has been historically appealing, and a good deal of theorizing in the field is of this sort. Most prominent historical accounts of phenomena such as motivation, personality, memory, intelligence, social interaction, learning, and so forth have, in one way or another, focused their explanatory efforts on constructs presumed to offer efficient causal accounts of how or why human action unfolds in certain ways under certain conditions. Much theorizing in the cognitive tradition, for instance, was devoted to phenomena associated with the ubiquitous act of remembering, resulting in accounts that featured the workings of internal constructs such as control processes, mental representations, memory codes, and memory storage. While it seems clear that the scholarly work of rendering theoretical accounts would not be possible without some use of abstract concepts and conceptual language, this appeal to reification and “the metaphysic of things” (Williams, 1990, p. 144)—or more specifically, the practice of postulating constructs with thinglike properties and treating them as the basic reality governing human phenomena—has historically exerted a powerful influence across the discipline (Williams, 1990; Slife & Williams, 1995).

It is interesting to note, in this respect, that some well-known figures have eschewed this traditional disciplinary practice. B.F. Skinner’s dismissal of mental constructs such as those found within psychodynamic, humanistic, and cognitive theorizing, for example, stands as a significant outlier to this historical pattern (Skinner, 1987; although it has been argued that his work evidenced its own form of reification, see Dennett, 1978; Williams, 1990). Scholars who advocate various postmodern, phenomenological, or hermeneutic viewpoints diverge widely from Skinner’s thinking on most issues, but would agree on at least this point (e.g., Fuller, 1990; Gergen, 2009; Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003; Polkinghorne, 2000; Slife, 2004;

Williams, 1990, 1994; Westerman & Steen, 2007). In various ways, according to these scholars, such reifications beg the question in that they simply presuppose, and provide a name for, putative explanations of the actual phenomena they are invoked to explain; or stated a bit differently, they provide a technical language and specific constructs assumed to perform the explanatory work required (Williams, 1990, 1992). With such constructs created, the task of explaining a given phenomenon is then assumed to be largely complete. This familiar practice, critics have contended, may appear to provide genuine insight regarding how and why human action unfolds in particular ways, but ultimately fails in that such reifications only point back to the lived experience they were constructed to explain in the first place, rather than onward to actual causal processes or mechanisms. These reified constructs are, in this sense, ontologically empty, or, as others have suggested, they provide only the “illusion of having explained something” (Quine, 1953, p. 48) and offer a type of understanding best thought of as an “explanatory fiction” (Thomas, 1999, p. 56).²

The practice of reification leads to collateral theoretical problems as well. Most importantly, as psychologists theorize in terms of reified constructs by which human phenomena are thought to be explained, they are unable to place fully-embodied, meaningful human action at the center of the account. If human action is theorized to be the result of internal or external causes apart from one’s meaningful engagement and lived experience—for example, if human action is explained in terms of unconscious forces, biological processes, causal variables and so on—then no ontological space is reserved for genuine agency. Put more succinctly, if human action is theorized to be caused by reified constructs, then it is not theorized to be caused by humans per se as embodied, holistic agents meaningfully involved in the world.

It is in this sense, then, that I treat *meaningfulness* as the conceptual starting point of this approach and, in doing so, obviate the need to explain human agency—agency—if by *explanation* one refers to the postulation of reified constructs assumed to function as the causal “inner workings” of agentic action. Given this starting point, I offer the concept of participational agency, defined concisely and straightforwardly as *meaningful engagement in the world*. To be an agent, from this perspective, is to meaningfully participate in fundamentally meaningful forms of life—a definition that, ipso facto, differentiates humans from objects of all sorts and distinguishes this approach from others based on root metaphors drawn from the natural sciences, technology, or other non-human phenomena. Because the term *meaning* has a number of denotations and connotations, however, my specific use of this term with regard to human agency is a significant conceptual issue. I therefore attempt to elucidate the very idea of meaningful engagement as I intend it by offering four themes³ that clarify its basic nature: situated participation, existential concern, dispositional action, and narrative orientation.

Theme 1: Situated Participation

An initial step in clarifying the concept of participational agency involves setting forth its principal ontological commitment—what I refer to here as *situated participation*. This theoretical position, or something like it, has previously been advocated by hermeneutically-oriented thinkers in different fields, expressed in terms such as “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 78), “involved subjectivity” (Westerman & Steen, 2007, p. 327; see also Merleau-Ponty, 1962), and “engaged agency” (Taylor, 2006, p. 203). The general theme I wish to advance in this regard is unique—at least with respect to much of psychological theorizing—in that it makes no appeal to ontological dualisms (e.g., mind/body, person/world, and sensation/perception), avoids

language that treats psychological phenomena as thinglike in nature (Williams, 1990), and rejects the very idea of attempting to explain meaningful human action via reified constructs.

In the words of Westerman (2006), this ontological commitment treats agents as “involved in practical activities from the outset” (p. 207) rather than as disengaged observers “fundamentally separate from the world” (p. 196). From this perspective, the nature of human agency is *participational* in that the most basic description of an agent is that of participator, fundamentally situated within a lived world of everyday activities. The action of such a participator is the action of a whole person, involved in personally and culturally significant practices, rather than the result of a complex interaction of endogenous and exogenous variables. Given this ontological commitment, the agent as participator is not viewed as an isolated locus of consciousness or cognition housed within a flesh and blood exterior, receiving and in some way processing sense impressions of an external world; rather the agent is a holistic, fully-embodied being present in the midst of living, always already engaged in a variety of significant activities with other people, tools, objects, and so forth (see also Slife, 1995; Westerman & Steen, 2007). Using a more philosophical language, it might be said that human beings are *agents-in-the-world*, or that human conduct is *actional* and characterized by *in-the-world-ness*; people are fundamentally enmeshed in, and never separable from, a world of lived significance (Guignon, 2006). Whatever endogenous variables theorists may study in psychological research, then, are second-level abstractions derived from this actional, in-the-world existence.

Given this theoretical commitment, ordinary activities are considered in their verb form—as situated, embodied participation—rather than in a reified, thinglike form (see also Williams, 1990). For example, it would be obvious from this perspective that agents engage in meaningful acts of remembering, but it is not necessary to invoke a thing-like construct, such as

some type of memory, as an internal mechanism that putatively produces (and explains) the embodied activity in question. Participational agents simply engage in the meaningful, fully-embodied act of remembering, and psychological theorizing need not attempt to explain that meaningful act as if it were an efficient causal process. In this and a multitude of other cases, the human phenomena under consideration are framed in terms of what people are doing and how they are meaningfully involved with others in the world (Westerman, 2006)—all treated in a verb-like sense. While situated participation offers an obvious departure from the conventions of traditional social science, theorizing in some areas, such as situated learning (Bredo, 1994; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995)—as in various forms of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and pragmatism—has addressed some human phenomena in this participational way.

It is important to add, however, that situated participation entails a dimension even less common in theories of agency, but which, I suggest, is relevant to any account of meaningful human action. The additional dimension to which I refer has been discussed elsewhere in terms such as “tacit knowing” (Polanyi, 1962, p. 264), “prior familiarity” (Westerman & Steen, 2007, p. 335), or “fore-having” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 191), all of which suggest that a good deal of human involvement in the world is performed as part of regular routines, perhaps habitually in some sense or in unexamined and taken-for-granted ways. The tacit knowing referred to in these various conceptualizations is highly related to the holistic and participational action I have already advocated, in that much of an agents’ situated participation in the world will occur without focused awareness and deliberation. In this respect, agents’ actions are (typically) smoothly integrated with their surroundings as they participate in cultural practices without constant, deliberate decision making. Participational agents, then, can be involved in the world in

at least two general ways: *tacitly*, as when performing familiar or routine tasks that require little if any focused attention (e.g., unlocking a door or walking through a familiar building), and *deliberatively*, as when solving problems, making decisions, dealing with unfamiliar situations, and so forth.

For the sake of clarity, I would add that situated participation should not be misconstrued as a form of behaviorism, given its rejection of explanation via internal constructs, or as a form of psychodynamic theorizing, given its acceptance of (tacit) human activity that takes place outside of focused awareness and deliberation. While behaviorist criticisms of internal constructs and mechanisms may be persuasive in some sense, it does not follow from these criticisms that human action is necessarily determined according to external factors as behaviorists would contend (e.g., conditioned stimuli or reinforcement contingencies). Human action as situated participation may be considered meaningful and open to possibility without invoking internal constructs; indeed, an appeal to internal constructs, as I contended above, often leads to forms of soft or intrapsychic determinism that obviate genuine agency. Similarly, the Freudian observation that some aspects of human activity are not readily subject to conscious awareness and deliberation does not necessarily implicate the reality of some internal realm such as the unconscious. Much of human action may be tacit even with the rejection of unconscious forces taken to be explanatory. If one forsakes the project of attempting to explain via reified constructs, then no such constructs are needed and theorizing may begin with a commitment to human action as fundamentally meaningful participation in the world.

Theme 2: Existential Concern

While situated participation offers an alternative position regarding human involvement in the world, the second theme I present—*existential concern*—is intended to explicate *how*

humans are involved in the world, or more specifically, *how* situated participation is fundamentally meaningful. Existential concern—as I use the term⁴—refers to the significance people place on the ongoing affairs and projects of their lives. Life itself, and the myriad details of everyday living, *matter* in that they make a difference to people. It might be said in this sense that people are *concerned* about the larger existential questions of life in addition to the details and decisions of their day to day activities, and are often concerned about them deeply. Life’s larger questions and issues, though often not carefully considered in the banality of everyday living, provide a background of significance for human action—for example, people are at least implicitly concerned with the prospect of their own inexistence and care whether they live or die; and people take account of the fact that they will eventually perish in ways that reveal something about what it means to be a human, a family member, a friend, a community member, and so on. As a clarification of participational agency, then, and as a deepening of the concept of situated participation, I conceptualize *meaningfulness* as the notion that the circumstances and projects of living entail a kind of fundamental significance; they are encountered as mattering (for philosophical treatments of concern and mattering, see Heidegger, 1962; Taylor 1985a).

I wish to emphasize, however, that this meaningfulness is characteristic of everyday tacit activity as well as acts of contemplation and careful deliberation. Relatively minor tasks and routines, which tend to consume a good deal of time, are significant aspects of agentic life even if they are not the object of focused attention; for instance, activities such as putting on a seat belt, personal grooming, or even eating can often be seen as having considerable significance, despite their largely mundane nature. The meaningfulness of tacit activity is clarified, however, when its flow is disrupted through various forms of “breakdown” (Guignon, 2002, p. 329) such as equipment failure, faulty assumptions, unmet expectations, critical feedback, and so forth (for

more on breakdown, see Dreyfus, 1991; Guignon, 2002; Koschmann, Kuutti, & Hickman, 1998). Under conditions of breakdown, one's tacit activity and practical ways of knowing are disrupted, creating a need for reflection, theorizing, deliberate action, and so on. Although breakdowns are rarely welcome developments as they occur, they do, over time, play a useful role in expanding one's working knowledge, practical wisdom, and ability to solve problems. Moreover, breakdown illustrates the significance of tacit activity in everyday life, as it is often not until tacit activities are disrupted that their salience becomes fully recognized. For example, the ability to communicate through ordinary speech acts is taken for granted until, through illness or injury, this ability is impeded and life is considerably altered. Tacit activity, in this sense, constitutes a major portion of one's meaningful engagement in the world.⁵

Likewise, acts of randomness or caprice do not elude the overarching sense of meaningful engagement that I have equated with agency. To the extent that one is acting for the sake of being random or capricious, that act is meaningful in precisely that sense (Williams, 1992); the purpose for which it is being performed, and the sense in which it can be distinguished from non-random acts, is made possible by its meaning within the broader context of one's patterns of conduct. Simple activities that seem to make no real difference may also be seen as part of one's meaningful engagement. That is, even a fairly trivial choice or activity will be situated within a meaningful episode and will thus be meaningful in the sense that the trivial task plays a role in, or matters in some way, to the activity in question. For instance, the task of selecting one of several nearly identical pencils to write a note may be trivial, but that activity understood within a broader context will be quite significant, as in an instance where the note conveys important information to be remembered. In this situation, picking up and using a pencil

is a meaningful act; if the pencils differ in some significant way, then selecting the most appropriate pencil would also be a meaningful act.

As I have suggested, conceptualizing agency as meaningful engagement distinguishes human action from other phenomena, entities, and objects. While it is common in psychological theorizing to draw analogies between humans and machines (Leary, 1990), participational agency resists such parallels on the grounds that human action cannot be made sense of *as meaningful* if the analog of that action is not itself meaningfully engaged in the sense I have described. From this perspective, it is not clear how a model of human action that preserves meaningfulness can be patterned after a phenomenon that is essentially non-meaningful (e.g., mechanical) in nature, such as a serial or parallel processing computer, or how meaningful engagement can be plausibly based on the interaction of natural objects and forces such as physical matter, laws of physics, chemical reactions, and so forth. Such phenomena, which are not themselves meaningfully engaged in the world, offer insufficient conceptual resources for rendering a meaning-centered account. Stated differently, if human action is to be studied as intrinsically meaningful, then beginning at some other ontological starting point—one that does not treat meaningfulness as the basic, irreducible feature of human existence—raises serious issues regarding how justice can be done to the experienced meaningfulness of human existence, or more abstractly, how meaningful action can derive from non-meaning in the first place.

A final point regarding existential concern has to do with the idea of meaning per se and the practice of reification I have sought to avoid. From the perspective of traditional psychological theorizing, meanings would be treated as thinglike contents housed within a private internal realm such as mind. This construal, however, is directly opposed to what I intend. In keeping with a commitment to situated participation, I conceptualize meaningfulness

(or meaningful engagement) as a concrete, embodied way of being in the world. If no subjective mind or internal realm of experience is assumed to exist, then there is no coherent sense in which thinglike meanings can be theorized to internally reside. In this respect, humans' ways of being involved in the world are fundamentally meaningful and such meaningfulness is part of the "in-the-world-ness" of everyday participation. From the standpoint of participational agency, it might be said that humans do not create or possess meanings as propositions or constructs, but that they do participate meaningfully in the world.

Theme 3: Dispositional Action

While I offer existential concern as a clarification of situated participation and the sense in which humans might be termed *agents*, I offer *dispositional action* as a clarification of existential concern, and more specifically, as an indication that one's participation in the world is not typically marked by concern in some abstract sense, but by concrete matters of personal significance revealed in the everyday contexts of life. In other words, dispositional action has to do with the details of people's existential concern and how they are specifically engaged in the world. As a clarification of existential concern, dispositional action encompasses the valuational, assumptive, and purposive ways in which agents actually participate in the affairs of living—that is, what agents specifically value and commit to, their purposive engagement in certain activities, their goals, how they treat others, and what they find most worthy of their time and attention. The particular way in which one is meaningfully engaged in the world, then, might be thought of as a disposition, or to avoid the connotation of having acontextual, thing-like properties, it might be construed as *dispositional action*. For example, an individual may spend a large amount of time working for charitable causes, emphasizing career advancement, engaging in leisure activities, or something else; but in any event, the general sense in which one's life is

characterized by existential concern will reach its concrete expression in specific situations as dispositional action toward one's resources, opportunities, problems, and relationships.

Dispositional action, as I intend it, should not be thought of as brute, environmentally-determined behavior or as the product of internal processes and rational powers; rather, as I have suggested, it is engaged participation marked fundamentally by a sense of what matters most, ends worth pursuing, how to treat others, and so on, always within concrete situations. And it is in this sense that a participational agent's dispositional action might be thought of as a form of moral participation. But in using the phrase *moral participation*, I do not wish to emphasize matters of high significance only, such as acts of great heroism or generosity. Rather, by moral participation I refer to everyday activity that is meaningful not only by virtue of the existential concern and dispositional action that are central to it, but also in terms of its role in, and implications for, the lives of others. Moral participation thus encompasses relatively minor acts that seem, at least on the surface, to have little bearing on the larger issues of life, such as a warm greeting, helping someone with a small problem, or not taking offense. In this sense, moral participation is a fairly inclusive concept, along the lines of what Williams and Gantt (2002, p. 11) suggested when they argued that:

...any activity in which a person might engage, whether it be solitary reflection or public speaking, writing prose or poetry, apathetic indifference or selfless service, is a moral activity in that it fundamentally *makes a meaningful difference* in the lived experience of real human beings, the actor as well as others. (italics in the original)

The idea of "meaningful difference" as a demarcation of moral action is crucial to what these authors propose. In like manner, the kinds of differences one makes are central to dispositional action as moral participation; these are differences that matter to those involved in a

given situation. Again, however, I hasten to emphasize that moral participation, as an inclusive concept, entails all the ways of being involved with others that make a difference—ways that are tacit or deliberate, and differences that are large or small. Thus, the term *moral* participation—in Williams and Gantt’s usage, as well as my own—refers to the sense in which questions or concerns about human conduct and the difference it makes in a given situation are, at bottom, moral questions or concerns, and that such a difference may or may not be helpful, appropriate, ethical, socially responsible, and so forth. Moral participation, in this sense, means that conduct which makes a difference in a concrete situation always has a moral valence: good or bad, better or worse, helpful or hurtful, or some more complex combination.

As a theme related to human agency, dispositional action takes account of deliberate choice and decision making without an appeal to reification. With most other agency theorists, I acknowledge that to be an agent is, at least in part, to engage in acts of choice. For example, people do make important decisions regarding their expenditure of resources (e.g., time, energy, money), even if a good deal of everyday activity is not thoroughly deliberated over. While choice per se may not offer satisfactory grounds for defining agency, the meaningful act of choosing is nonetheless relevant to participational agency, and to the themes I have associated with it. Based on what I have already argued, then, choosing is encompassed within the broader concept of meaningful engagement and flows out of one’s way of being involved the world. Like other meaningful activities, choosing need not be cast in terms of reified constructs; for example, one need not assume the existence of internal cognitive or rational grounds on which to base decisions, nor mechanistic processes and constructs assumed to govern, or explain, people’s manifest choices. As participational agents, people simply engage in meaningful, fully-embodied acts of choosing as part of their disposition action—that is, the nature of their choosing flows out

of their way of being involved in the world—and psychological theorizing need not reify constructs to render this activity comprehensible. Put simply, a person's specific manner of choosing in a given situation is simply one expression of his or meaningful engagement in the world.

In making these points about moral participation and choosing, I wish to emphasize that dispositional action—both tacit and deliberate—will be meaningful, and have a type of moral valence, always within the bounds of *enabling contexts*. While this may seem a fairly obvious point—one I have already intimated—it raises an important issue with regard to the nature of participational agency. The issue stems from the claim, made by hermeneutically-oriented theorists (e.g., Fuller, 1990; Heidegger, 1962; Slife, 2004), that human action is not only fundamentally participational, but also intrinsically relational. The argument for such relationality holds that meanings are not self-contained propositions—residing within terms, objects, or persons—but rather are participational and exist in relationship. While this argument is too expansive to be developed here,⁶ I can at least advance the claim, following from what I have already argued, that the opportunity for one to be meaningfully engaged in the world presupposes some relation to others in concrete situations—others that provide the occasion for an agent's conduct to matter (to oneself or others) in the first place. If the inevitability of relating to others within situations provides the occasion for dispositional action, then situational details are centrally relevant to the very idea of participational agency, in that they provide the backdrop against which an agents' stance toward the circumstances of life will meaningfully unfold. Background context—rich in relationships and possibilities—thus enables moral participation as a way of understanding participational agency per se.

Theme 4: Narrative Orientation

In a philosophical commentary on human agency, Guignon (2002, p. 329) suggested that human life can be fruitfully thought of as a happening or event that occurs between birth and death, and that this happening takes on the form of a life story (see also Heidegger, 1962; Ricoeur, 1981, 1984, 1992). What I advocate regarding agency resembles this view, in that it recognizes the agents' action and experience—indeed, the agents' life in general—as temporally situated, unfolding along the lines of a life narrative. Moreover, the background context against which agentic action and experience will unfold can be thought of as having a type of narrative structure—that is, it constitutes a broader narrative context in which one's personal life story will transpire. Given these theoretical commitments, narrative orientation is not merely a gloss on some more basic human nature; rather, it is fundamental to engagement in the world as participational agents.⁷ Viewing human experience and action as narratively oriented calls one to see life's meaningfulness as temporally arranged and, in that sense, oriented toward the meanings of the past as well as the possibilities of the future (for more on narrative theorizing in psychology and other fields, see Bal, 2000; Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1981, 1984).

However, from this standpoint, what it means to say “the past” must be carefully considered. If human existence is narrative in orientation, then prior events in one's life surely offer a substantial basis for present action. Attending to important business, returning a favor, apologizing, applying for a job, going to college, and innumerable other activities are all meaningful and possible, at least in part, because of one's prior experiences. As in any story, then, the past provides a meaningful context for the present. But viewing the past as a meaningful context for the present should not be confused with the notion that present activity is

fully and directly determined by prior events (in an efficient causal sense), and that the particulars of the present will, of necessity, follow predictably from the particulars of the past. Some have persuasively argued that much of traditional psychological theorizing—including a significant amount of work by behaviorists, cognitivists, personality theorists, and developmental psychologists—is built upon this temporal determinism (Faulconer & Williams, 1995; Slife, 1993; Slife & Fisher, 2000; Williams, 1995). In essence, this view treats the past as something that exists somewhere else—as if it were “back there” apart from the present—yet somehow still able to exert efficient causal control over present activities. Reinforcement history in behaviorism and fixation in psychoanalysis offer two relatively obvious examples of such temporal determinism.

As should be clear, treating the past as something separate from, and determinative of, the present is an instance of reification and the metaphysic of things. As others have argued with respect to the idea of time itself (Slife & Fisher, 2000; Williams, 1995), the present appears to be a mere byproduct of past events only when the past is reified and endowed with causal force, perhaps analogous to physical force or motion as conceptualized in Newtonian physics. Narrative orientation, as an aspect of participational agency, is based upon an alternative view of time, namely, that the past does not exist separately from the present—as it would, for instance, along a line of time—and it does not, strictly speaking, determine the present in an efficient causal sense (Slife & Fisher, 2000; Williams, 1995). Within a narrative orientation, the concept of the past is treated as it is lived—as meaningfulness associated with one’s prior participation in the world (for philosophical arguments underlying this claim, see Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 1962). From this perspective, the past is meaningful, in that it matters to one’s present activities, but that meaningfulness exists *in the present*. If historical meaningfulness exists in the present,

then it is capable of being reinterpreted in the present and granted a new and different sense of significance. Of course, some historical experiences will be associated with fairly durable meaningfulness, in that they will offer a relatively stable background of meaning for one's present activities; but the meaningfulness of many personal historical experiences will be open to reconstrual in the present, depending on how they are interpreted in the present. For instance, an emotionally painful mistake made in one's youth may come to be viewed as an important lesson learned on life's journey.

In admitting this type of reconstrual, I do not suggest that past events themselves are literally capable of change—for example, changing the actual physical events surrounding the Lincoln assassination—but that the meaningfulness by which they are known and the meaningful contexts they provide in the present are open to revision. Moreover, I do not wish to reify the concept of meaning or meaningfulness as I discuss the meanings of the past. That is, I do not invoke the concept of past “meaning” as a conveyor of information or a thing with semantic properties. Rather, I am suggesting that part of the meaningfulness of an agent's present activity is provided by that agent's prior involvement and the broader cultural history within which it is situated. For example, a person's commitment to a cause such as gun control may be particularly meaningful and worthwhile due to personal experience with a gun-related crime. If one's prior experience can offer a meaningful context in this way—that is, enable an agent to see present possibilities, as is often the case—then that agent's action in the present is not determined by the past; rather the agent acts in light of possibilities enabled by prior meaningful engagement. The philosophical concept of *futurity* is relevant here. As hermeneutic theorists have stated with respect to this concept (e.g., Guignon, 2002; Heidegger, 1962), agents anticipate and orient themselves toward future possibilities in the midst of the present, and present activities are

meaningful, at least in part, because of their relation to an anticipated future. While participational agency involves this kind of looking forward toward one's possibilities, such looking forward is also enabled by meaningful events of the past, and more particularly, by how one has participated in those events. This narrative orientation of human life, then, provides the backdrop against which meaningful engagement will occur and offers the basis for its possibilities.

Some Implications of Participational Agency

The concept of participational agency differs from most theorizing in the field, not only in terms of its rejection of reification, but also in terms of its explicit attempt to offer an ontological basis for continued scholarly work from a human, meaning-oriented perspective. That is, this alternative view of agency is intended to provide a conceptual basis for rigorous, insightful, and practical explorations of meaningful human action without drawing parallels between humans and animals, machines, or objects, and without “explaining” human action via constructs and variables. What I offer, in this respect, might be thought of as an ontological axiom (or set of axioms) that provides a presuppositional background for more focused examinations of particular human phenomena. In this sense, participational agency provides researchers a perspective for taking account of human experiences in ways not possible through traditional psychological theorizing.

For example, assuming that humans are participational agents offers new opportunities for taking account of phenomena related to learning. The traditional view—at its broadest level of conceptualization (including various behaviorist and cognitive models)—assumes a fundamental subject-object dualism, hard determinism, and a focus on environmental impingements or inputs.⁸ From this perspective, the learner is essentially an automaton, shaped

according to the determining factors at play in its present environment, hereditary endowment, and personal history; and learning itself is viewed as gradual and relatively permanent change in the learner's automatic behavior, governed by experience (e.g., reinforcement history, informational inputs, etc.). From this traditional perspective, learning does not entail the meaningful engagement I have advocated. From the perspective of participational agency, on the other hand, learners are viewed not as automata but as participants meaningfully engaged in a world of significance. Learning, from this alternative perspective, might then be construed as transformations (large or small) in one's situated familiarity or capability, achieved, at least in part, through the continued clarification, thematization, revision, and extension of tacit aspects of lived experience. The conceptual basis of such a learning theory has not been carefully developed in psychology, but some movement in this direction has occurred in fields such as anthropology and education (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Robbins & Aydede, 2009; Wilson & Myers, 1999). Bringing a narrative orientation to instruction and the creation of learning environments might also be of major relevance, with the learner viewed as a protagonist on an allegorical journey that involves elements of narrative such as plot, setting, suspense, tension, and emotional engagement. Parrish (2005, 2009) has introduced this idea into the contemporary literature of education, although, again, little analysis of its conceptual underpinnings has been provided. Participational agency offers an ontological basis for continued work along these lines.

It should be clear that the nature and purpose of theory, from the perspective of participational agency, diverges from what is often to be taken for granted in traditional psychological theorizing. Some have rejected the very idea of theory, given its traditional attempt to explain by way of reified constructs endowed with causal efficacy—that is, by way of explanatory fictions. If psychological theory demands such attempts at explanation, then it

would not offer a suitable platform for further development of participational agency and related concepts. As others have suggested, however, theory construction need not take on this explanatory responsibility and seek to produce reified constructs such as internal mechanisms (Westerman & Steen, 2007; Slife, 2004; Williams, 1990). Theorizing in ways that are harmonious with the themes of participational agency, on the other hand, would meet meaningful human activity on its own grounds and offer accounts that thematize and clarify the nature of meaningful participation in terms of agents' everyday practices. Theoretical accounts of this sort would offer descriptions, conceptual understandings, and applicable insight, but they would not attempt to explain via reified constructs. Theorizing in this alternative vein is far from common, but a few exceptions to the traditional view offer some insight to what it might look like. Westerman's work on interpersonal defense in psychotherapy stands out as a noteworthy example in this regard (Westerman, 2005). More generally, Westerman and Steen's (2007) notion of participatory accounts—intended to focus on practical activity without making the subject-object split—offers scholars an opportunity to theorize about participational agency and related issues in ways that do justice to its intrinsic meaningfulness. Other efforts to advance beyond traditional theorizing have also appeared in the literature (Danziger, 1997; Taylor, 1985b; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Williams, 1990), offering conceptualizations of theory (or theoretical language) that are more or less congruous with the themes of participational agency.

Theory construction of this type could be supported by forms of research that are conceptually coherent with the themes of participational agency. The chief requirement of research, from this perspective, is that it be oriented toward the study of meaningful participation as it unfolds in its ordinariness, and thus that it be designed to take account of situated,

concernful, narratively-oriented human action. At first blush, qualitative methods would seem to offer the most appropriate methodological resources for this type of inquiry. Various forms of phenomenology, case study, and narrative inquiry, for instance, may facilitate the study of meaningful engagement by offering thick descriptions, narrative accounts, and in-depth analyses of lived experience. As is typical of qualitative inquiry, the principal contribution of such findings would be deeper understandings of complex human phenomena that offer transferrable insights, in-depth examinations of individual cases, and vicarious experiences. Of course, other forms of qualitative inquiry could also be of service, depending on one's scholarly purposes.

Gaining appropriate access to phenomena associated with participational agency, however, may require more than the application of extant qualitative methods. While many of them have provided compelling ways of studying lived experience from a human standpoint, serious explorations of agency qua meaningful engagement are likely to require modifications of, or innovations beyond, what is currently available in the literature. For instance, researchers interested in studying a topic such as bullying in public schools may not be able to identify a ready-made method that matches their actional, participation-oriented research emphasis. Locating an appropriate method may be difficult in that many qualitative approaches focus on lived experience by placing participants in a detached, reflective mode (e.g., through interviews or focus groups)—a methodological strategy which would, in all likelihood, be insufficient for probing studies of actual participation in context. In the absence of an appropriate ready-made method, researchers interested in studying human phenomena from this perspective may face the task of developing their own conceptually coherent approaches whole cloth or by borrowing from existing techniques—for example, in the case of bullying, drawing from various forms of ethnographic, case study, and hermeneutic inquiry. Ultimately, work along these lines could give

rise to new qualitative approaches tailored to the investigation of participational agency or conceptualizations based upon it (e.g., agentic theories of learning).

The congruence between participational agency and some forms of qualitative inquiry, however, does not rule out the study of meaningful engagement through other investigative approaches. If researchers are to match inquiry strategies with questions, and, moreover, to carefully consider the nature of those questions and the kinds of knowledge claims they are likely to produce, then there is little, if any, rationale for a strong commitment to a method in advance. Indeed, the general concept of fitting method to question has been long been advocated in the social sciences (e.g., Guba, 1990; Koch, 1959; Vygotsky, 1978). At the same time, if the themes of participational agency are taken seriously in the formation of questions and the conduct of research, then not all methods will be equally applicable. For example, some methods afford the study of human phenomena at a fairly high level of abstraction—most commonly in terms of variables, data aggregates, quantitative indices, statistical models, and so on—and are, in this sense, said to offer a “thin description” of human phenomena (Geertz, 1973, p. 7). These methods—including many strategies and techniques commonly employed in mainstream psychological research—offer general results expected to apply to large groups, but make little connection with the lived world of meaningful engagement and purposive strivings of individuals in context. In this sense, much of the subtlety and meaningfulness of what is actually experienced in the midst of everyday living is not accessible through these methods. Indeed, an accumulated body of argumentation has suggested that traditional inquiry of this sort often fails to adequately address meaningful human phenomena (e.g., Danziger, 1990; Harré & Secord, 1972; Michell, 1999). In this respect, such methods are unlikely to shed light on participational phenomena, except in largely indirect ways.

To contend that traditional methods of inquiry do not offer direct or substantial insight into meaningful engagement, however, should not be taken as an outright rejection of certain methodological possibilities. Given that the requirements of future research efforts cannot be known in advance, it is possible that some participationally-oriented questions may be profitably addressed, at least in part, with traditional quantitative methods. It is also possible that methodological innovations, particularly with respect to numerical data types and procedures, could be applied to agency-oriented questions (possibilities of this sort have been discussed in the literature; e.g., Smith, Harré & Van Langenhove, 1995; Yanchar & Westerman, 2006; Westerman & Yanchar, 2011). Initial work in this direction has included historically overlooked innovations, such as work with repertory grids (Smith, 1995); creative reconceptualizations of extant procedures, such as Moghaddam and Harré's (1992) narrative reconstrual of traditional experimentation; frequency counts and ranked data used to describe background contexts and situate specific forms of participation (in conjunction with qualitative techniques; e.g., Yanchar, 2011); and numerical descriptions of activity that indicate patterns of action and discourse within situations (Westerman, 2011). Although the extent to which alternative ways of thinking about numeric data can facilitate inquiry into meaningful engagement remains to be seen, participational agency, as a fundamental ontological commitment, gives reason to pursue such explorations, not reject them.

Conclusion

Defined as meaningful engagement in the world, participational agency differs from other theorizing about agency, and from other psychological theorizing in general, by virtue of its emphasis on situated participation and meaningfulness in context. The emphasis I have placed on meaningful engagement per se may be unusual, but, I contend, that unusualness stems primarily

from the lack of attention paid to agency and meaningful human action per se in most psychological theorizing throughout the history of the field. In fact, the extent to which participational agency's emphasis on meaningfulness seems unusual may very well offer an indication of how infrequently, by contrast, that meaningfulness is seriously addressed in mainstream psychological scholarship. As should be clear, theorizing that characterizes human beings as automata—which most psychological theorizing does in some way—cannot take account of human action as a genuinely meaningful phenomenon. An emphasis on human meaningfulness, on the other hand, seems reasonable when considered in light of people's everyday activity, that is, when considered from a human, rather than a natural science, perspective.

I have suggested that although most accounts of agency focus on mental deliberation such as decision making, choice, or logical position taking in some sense, participational agency conceptualizes agency more holistically—that is, as meaningful, fully embodied participation in the world. *Situated participation*, as an initial theme of participational agency, holds that humans are engaged practically in the world first and foremost—that is, human beings are, most fundamentally, participants meaningfully involved both tacitly and deliberately in the course of everyday activities. This theme contrasts sharply with the traditional view of a knowing subject ontologically detached from an objective world, experiencing reality as representations contained within the private, inner realm of the mind. The second and third themes I presented suggest that situated participation is characterized by general *existential concern* and specific *dispositional action* toward large and small matters of life. The former of these themes refers to the experiential fact that people encounter the world and life's events as mattering—that what transpires makes a difference to them, and that they feel a sense of concern about their

multifaceted existence. The latter of these themes refers to the concrete manner in which concerned agents involve themselves in the matters of life—that is, it concerns their specific valuational, assumptive, purposive, and relational ways of being engaged in specific contexts. The final theme I presented suggests that agency is characterized by a *narrative orientation*. For participational agents, experience takes on the tone of a storyline, and this storyline provides the background context in which the events of life are meaningfully lived out and possibilities are created. Taken together, these four themes constitute agency as meaningful engagement in the world.

In offering this admittedly brief introduction to participational agency, I cannot hope to address the myriad issues, possibilities, and conceptual questions that it evokes, or potentially evokes. Future work in this direction could go a long way toward the development of this approach as a concept of agency, with a particular focus on clarifying its theoretical groundings and practical implications. Further attention to this approach could also involve the critical assessment of its ontological starting point, basic tenets, and overall persuasiveness. Perhaps the greatest challenge to theorizing of this sort, however, is overcoming the discipline's historical practice of treating reified constructs as explanatory and determinative of human action. Theorizing in a way that avoids explanatory fictions is challenging in a field that has long treated reification as a principal scholarly achievement. But with this challenge comes the possibility of creating accounts—of agency and related subject matter—that resist the impulse to theorize humans out of their humanness and that strive to meet human phenomena on their own terms. Participational agency offers one way of taking up this challenge.

References

- Baer, J., Kaufman, J. C., & Baumeister, R. F. (Eds.) (2008). *Are we free? Psychology and free will*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bal, M. (2004). *Narrative theory: Critical concepts in literary and cultural studies*. London: Routledge.
- Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 1(2), 164-180.
- Baumeister, R. F. (2008). Free will in scientific psychology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(1), 14-19.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Danziger, K. (1990). *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Danziger, K. (1997). *Naming the mind: How psychology found its language*. Thousand oaks: Sage.
- Dennet, D. (1978). *Brainstorms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Dreyfus, H. L. (1991). *Being-in-the-world: A commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division 1*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Faulconer, J. E., & Williams, R. N. (1985). Temporality in human action: An alternative to positivism and historicism. *American Psychologist*, 40, 1179-1188.
- Fuller, A. R. (1990). *Insight into value: An exploration of the premises of a phenomenological psychology*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1989). *Truth and method* (2nd rev. ed.). New York: Continuum.
- Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational being*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Guba, E. (1990). *Paradigm dialog*. Newbury park, CA: Sage.
- Guignon, C. (2002). Ontological presuppositions of the determinism-free will debate. In H. Atmanspacher & R. Bishop (Eds.), *Between chance and choice: Interdisciplinary perspectives on determinism* (pp. 321-337). Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic.
- Guignon, C. (2006). Introduction. In C. Guignon (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Heidegger* (2nd ed., pp. 1-41). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Harré, R. (1984). *Personal being: A theory for individual psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harré, R., & Gillett, G. (1994). *The discursive mind*. London: Sage.
- Harré, R., & Secord, P. F. (1972). *The explanation of social behavior*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hebb, D. O. (1974). What psychology is about. *American Psychologist*, 29, 71-79.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Held, B. S. (2007). *Psychology's interpretive turn: The search for truth and agency in theoretical and philosophical psychology*. Washington DC: APA Press.
- Howard, G. S. (1994). Some varieties of free will worth practicing. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 14, 50-61.
- Hutchins, E. (1995). *Cognition in the wild*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- James, W. (1956). The dilemma of determinism. In *The will to believe and other essays in modern philosophy* (pp. 145-183). New York: Dover Publications. (original work published in 1897)
- Jenkins, A H. (2001). Individuality in cultural context: The case for psychological agency.

Theory & Psychology, 11, 347-362.

Koch, S. (1959). Epilogue. In S. Koch (ed.), *Psychology: A study of a science* (vol 3, pp. 729-788). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Koschmann, T., Kuutti, K., & Hickman, L. (1998). The concept of breakdown in Heidegger, Leont'ev, and Dewey and its implications for education. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 5 (1), 25-41.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lamiell, J. T. (1995). Rethinking the role of quantitative methods in psychology. In J. A. Smith, R. Harre, & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking methods in psychology* (pp. 143-161). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Leahey, T. H. (1992). The mythical revolutions of American psychology. *American Psychologist*, 47, 308-318.

Leary, D. (Ed.) (1990). *Metaphors in the history of psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Martin, J., Sugarman, J., & Thompson, J. (2003). *Psychology and the question of agency*. Albany: SUNY Press.

May, R. (1981). *Freedom and destiny*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. London and New York: Routledge.

Michell, J. (1999). *Measurement in psychology: A critical history of a methodological concept*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Moghaddam, F. M., & Harré, R. (1992). Rethinking the laboratory experiment. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 36, 22-38.
- Parrish, P. E. (2005). Embracing the aesthetics of instructional design. *Educational Technology*, 45 (2), 16-25
- Parrish, P. E. (2009). Aesthetic principles for instructional design. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 57, 511-528.
- Polanyi, M. (1962). *Personal knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2000). Psychological inquiry and the pragmatic and hermeneutic traditions. *Theory & Psychology*, 10, 453-479.
- Quine, W. V. O. (1953). *From a logical point of view*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Richardson, F. C., Fowers, B. J., & Guignon, C. B. (1999). *Re-envisioning psychology: Moral dimensions of theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ricoeur, P. (1981). The model of the text: Meaningful action considered as text. In J. B. Thompson (Ed.), *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the human sciences* (pp. 197-221). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Robbins, P., & Aydede, M. (2009). *The Cambridge companion to situated cognition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rychlak, J. F. (1988). *The psychology of rigorous humanism* (2nd ed). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rychlak, J. F. (1991). *Artificial intelligence and human reason: A teleological critique*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rychlak, J. F. (1994). *Logical learning theory: A human teleology and its empirical support*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Sappington, A. A. (1990). Recent psychological approaches to the free will versus determinism issue. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108, 19-29.
- Skinner, B. F. (1987). Whatever happened to psychology as the science of behavior? *American Psychologist*, 42, 780-786.
- Slife, B. D. (1993). *Time and psychological explanation*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Slife, B. D. (1995). Information and time. *Theory & Psychology*, 5, 533-550.
- Slife, B. D. (2004). Taking practice seriously: Toward a relational ontology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 24, 157-178.
- Slife, B. D., & Fisher, A. M. (2000). Modern and postmodern approaches to the free will/determinism dilemma in psychotherapy. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 40, 80-107.
- Slife, B. D., & Williams, R. N. (1995). *What's behind the research? Discovering hidden assumptions in the behavioral sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Smith, J. A. (1995). Repertory grids: An interactive, case study perspective. In J. A. Smith, R. Harré, & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking methods in psychology* (pp. 162-177). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Smith, J. A., Harré, R., & Van Langenhove, L. (Eds.) (1995). *Rethinking methods in psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Taylor, C. (1985a). *Human agency and language: Philosophical papers* (vol 1). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1985b). Social theory as practice. In *Philosophy and the human sciences: Philosophical papers* (vol. 2, pp. 91-115). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. (2006). Engaged agency and background in Heidegger. In C. Guignon (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Heidegger* (2nd ed., pp. 202-221). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, G. (1999). Hollow theory: A reply to Rajagopalan. *Harvard Educational Review*, 69, 51-66.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wegner, D. M. (2008). Self is magic. In J. Baer, J. C. Kaufman, & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *Are we free? Psychology and free will* (pp. 226-247). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Westcott, M. R. (1988). *The psychology of human freedom: A human science perspective and critique*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Westcott, M. R. (1992). The discursive expression of human freedom. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 36, 73-87.
- Westerman, M. A. (2005). What is interpersonal behavior? A post-Cartesian approach to problematic interpersonal patterns and psychotherapy process. *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 16-34.
- Westerman, M. A. (2006). Quantitative research as an interpretive enterprise:

The mostly unacknowledged role of interpretation in research efforts and suggestions for explicitly interpretive, quantitative investigations. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 24, 189-211.

Westerman, M. A. (2011). Conversation analysis and interpretive quantitative research on psychotherapy process and problematic interpersonal behavior. *Theory & Psychology* 21(2), 155-178.

Westerman, M. A., & Steen, E. M. (2007). Going beyond the internal-external dichotomy in clinical psychology: The theory of interpersonal defense as an example of a participatory model. *Theory & Psychology*, 17, 323-351.

Westerman, M. A., & Yanchar, S. C. (Eds.) (2011). Special Issue: Is there really a boundary between quantitative and qualitative research approaches? Examples of quantitative research in an interpretive vein. *Theory & Psychology*, 21.

Williams, R. N. (1987). Can cognitive psychology offer a meaningful account of meaningful human action? *Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 8, 209-222.

Williams, R. N. (1990). The metaphysics of things and discourse about them. In J. E. Faulconer & R. N. Williams (Eds.), *Reconsidering psychology: Perspectives from continental philosophy* (pp. 136-150). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Williams, R. N. (1992). The human context of agency. *American Psychologist*, 47(6), 752-760.

Williams, R. N. (1994). The modern, the post-modern, and the question of truth: Perspectives on the problem of agency. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 14, 25-39.

Williams, R. N. (1995). Temporality and psychological action at a distance. *Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 16, 63-75.

- Williams, R. N. (2005). Agency: Philosophical and spiritual foundations for applied psychology. In A. P. Jackson, L. Fischer, & D. Dant, (Eds.). *Turning Freud upside down: Gospel perspectives on psychotherapy's fundamental problems* (pp. 116-142). Provo, UT: BYU Press.
- Williams, R. N., & Gantt, E. E. (2002) Pursuing psychology as science of the ethical: Contributions of the work of Emmanuel Levinas. In E. E. Gantt & R. N. Williams (Eds.), *Psychology for the other: Levinas, ethics, and the practice of psychology* (pp. 1-31). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University press.
- Wilson, B. G., & Myers, K. M. (1999). Situated cognition in theoretical and practical context. In D. Jonassen & S. Lands (Eds.), *Theoretical foundations of learning environments* (pp. 57-88). Mahwah NJ: Erlbaum.
- Yanchar, S. C. (2011). Using numerical data in explicitly-interpretive, contextual inquiry: A “practical discourse” framework and examples from Engeström’s research on activity systems. *Theory & Psychology*, 21(2), 179-199.
- Yanchar, S. C., & Westerman, M. A. (Eds.)(2006). Special issue: Reconsidering quantitative research approaches: New interpretations and future possibilities. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 24.

¹ In terms of scholarly endeavors, meaningfulness provides the grounds for the interrogation of questions regarding human existence and activity in various academic fields (Westerman, 2006). Viewed broadly, it seems clear that answers to scholarly questions are rich in meaning, even if they fail to acknowledge or do justice to the experienced meaningfulness of everyday human life. The thesis of hard determinism, for example, matters very much to the projects of those who treat it as a key assumption in their theorizing and research; of course, hard determinism is also matter of profound significance to those who oppose it in their scholarly work.

²A vivid example of such reification can be found in much of traditional cognitive theorizing. While meaningful acts such as perceiving and thinking are thought to be explained through an appeal to constructs such as the sensory register and working memory, the rationale for those constructs comes only from the need to explain the phenomena they are invoked to explain. The logic seems to be that for any meaningful human act, there must be a reified psychological mechanism causing it. Cognitive theorizing, then, was historically preoccupied with naming those postulated mechanisms and fitting them into models with other such mechanisms. Accounts of perception, memory, and thought were then created, but they provided no real causal explanation (for more on this point, see Rychlak, 1991; Skinner, 1987; Williams, 1987). Attempting to explain human agency through the postulation of constructs such as “will” and “power” suffers from the same deficiency.

³ My use of themes to clarify participational agency as meaningful engagement is similar to the use of themes in some forms of qualitative research (e.g., Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In using this convention, I wish to avoid the perception that I treat these ideas (e.g., engaged participation, existential concern) as “variables” or “factors” that cause the phenomenon of

human agency in some efficient causal sense. Rather, these themes point to different aspects of the meaning of participational agency as I have conceptualized it, and together offer a fairly thorough sense of what I offer as an account of agency.

⁴ My use of the term *concern* is related, but not identical, to Heidegger's (1962) terms "fürsorge" and "besorgen," translated as "taking care" and "concern" in the Macquarrie and Robinson translation of *Being and Time*. The notion of "existential concern" is also closely related to the Heideggerian concept of care or "sorge." What I offer in this regard is explicitly rooted in hermeneutic theorizing, including the early writings of Heidegger, as well as the work of Taylor (1985a), Guignon (2002), and others, but I do not intend to offer a strict dissemination of any historical thinker's terminology or viewpoint as I present this account of agency.

⁵ Lave and Wenger's (1991) discussion of a window offers a useful analogy regarding the meaningfulness of tacit activity. They describe a window as a cultural tool that offers great utility and is often the focus of attention, though it must be looked past or through in order to be used. That is, one must look beyond this tool in order to use it, and through this process, the tool becomes, in a sense, invisible. A broken window, however, would quickly come to attention—that is, it would no longer be looked past—and would need to be dealt with in some way. Under these circumstances, the functional significance of this common cultural artifact—no longer able to be used—becomes very salient; and the inability to continue with ordinary activities while the problem is being resolved becomes a topic of some concern. By analogy, then, even tacit activities, which entail a kind of practical "invisibility," are involved in meaningful participation as I conceptualize it, and are crucial aspects of participational agency.

⁶ For more on relationality in psychology, readers may wish to consult sources such as Fuller (1990), Gergen (2009), and Slife (2004).

⁷ In arguing for a narrative orientation, I do not mean to suggest that human agents be equated with texts, as in the metaphor discussed by Ricoeur (1981) and others. While narrative theory offers important insights into human experience, I do not wish to take account of human action by drawing metaphors between it and anything else—machines, animals, objects, and so on.

⁸ A number of analyses, produced in the heyday of cognitivism, persuasively argued that this description generally applies to mainstream accounts of learning and cognition (e.g., Leahey, 1992; Rychlak, 1991; Williams, 1987).