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On the Theory and Methodology of Role:
A contribution towards an Interactive
Paradigm

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fulfilment of the requirements for
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Abstract

This thesis (i) presents a critique of structural and socialisation perspectives in role theory, (ii) argues for a philosophical and theoretical position of transindividualism in the explanation of behaviour, (iii) examines the compatibility of current psychological and sociological theories with such a position, (iv) reviews discontinuities between theory methodology and interpretation in studies of role, (v) develops a comprehensive theoretical model for the analysis of individual and social system interactions via the mediating concept of role, (vi) presents a methodology appropriate to the examination of the general model in respect to a small scale social system, (vii) reports the results of the empirical investigation, and (viii) summarises and discusses the relevance of these findings to the proposed theoretical and methodological issues. It is concluded that both theory and methodology, having been supported by the empirical investigation of a small scale social system, might usefully be further applied to larger and more complex social systems.

Preface and Acknowledgements

This thesis is the result of a combination of theoretical interests in the contributions made by philosophy, sociology and psychology to the understanding of human behaviour. It is also an outcome of the belief that explanations of behaviour must, of necessity, incorporate insights from each of these areas rather than rely on the myopic and frequently deterministic assumption of the separate disciplines. However, attempts to integrate the perspectives of various disciplines inevitably involve the problem of opposing assumptions. This problem is well illustrated by the current debate over role theory, the efficacy of which is often the focal point of misgivings concerning the naive (but grandiose) claims of all disciplines save the author's own. As a consequence, the major purpose of this thesis is to provide a general theoretical model which offers a tentative integration of the various perspectives. The intention is to outline and evaluate an interactive paradigm for the analysis of individual-social system relations.

This is in itself an abstract and rather grand pursuit. The potential grandeur of the activity of theory construction is however, limited by another of the author's convictions: that the development of theory should be closely tied to such tests of the propositions as are available. Moreover, such tests should be, in the final resort, conducted in naturalistic, rather than experimental, settings as explanations confined to experimental conditions are unlikely to be acceptable if they fail to account for phenomena in the real world of social interaction. Thus, theory is seen to be an abstract guide which can be used to give form and meaning to otherwise miscellaneous data. At the same time, theory is seen to be justifiable only inasmuch as it is able to give form and meaning to empirical observations.

If a theory organises observations so as to produce contradictions and obvious absurdities then the theory itself must be questioned. This thesis argues that role theory is currently at the point of reformulation because of the contradictions and absurdities currently proposed in attempts to explain the empirical data provided by investigators into role.

The second purpose of this thesis is therefore to examine and clarify certain of the methodological problems associated with current investigations into role. These problems stem from two main confusions:

firstly, the theoretical confusion between levels of analysis which differ in their assumptions and in the kinds of relationships they propose, and secondly, the methodological confusion involved in the employment of statistical techniques based on assumptions at odds with the theoretical premisses. The methodological procedures employed in the current thesis are, therefore, justified by appeal to the requirements of the theory and by the limitations imposed by the research case.

The theoretical model itself cannot, however, be tested directly. The methodology is applied to a set of intermediary hypotheses which relate the theory in directional form to the data. This is not to say that the theory can be substantiated simply through the verification of the hypotheses. Indeed, many of the hypotheses fail to gain confirmation. The results of the analysis can however still be usefully and parsimoniously interpreted according to the proposed model.

The relations between the theoretical model and the empirical research are in this case, as in any other, intricate. In the first place the theoretical model both informs the formulation of hypotheses related to a particular context and determines the appropriateness of particular methodologies. However, the results of the analysis prepared on the basis of the theory may contradict the particular hypotheses and yet not contradict the theoretical model. Such an apparent paradox is explained by the fact that theoretical models are necessarily abstract, hypotheses and methodology necessarily concrete. Yet this paradoxical balance between the abstract and the concrete, the imaginative and the prosaic, is crucial to the progress of research.

Any such progress as has been made in the current research owes a considerable debt to the following friends:

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