

## A PLACE FOR SPACE?

Bo Allesøe Christensen  
Aalborg University, Denmark

**Abstract.** I will focus on the concept of space presented and used by Boulanger (2017) in his article combining a Moscovician social representation theory (SRT) with Hermans' dialogical self theory (DST). I argue that the notion of space used is somewhat incongruent with Boulanger's (2017) argumentation due to its (the concept of space used) natural scientific bias, and would need to be reworked by relating it to a notion of place instead. I am first going to present Boulanger's (2017) notion of space in relation to Moscovici then stating some worries about it, and lastly, conceive the concept of dynamic space as related to a dynamic place as well. While space connotes a geometric shape, like a form of space, hence the natural scientific bias, as well as something separate and unalterable from the living beings and stuff occupying this space, the notion of place emphasizes the dynamic interplay of subjects and space. So, while I agree with the presented criticism of Moscovici, and the use of DST, I would also emphasize relating space and place as providing us with a more nuanced way of addressing dynamic spatiality by understanding every moment of positioning as a normative matter involving the spatial aspect of objectivity, subjectivity and intersubjectivity. In general terms, subjects, by placing themselves or by being placed in a space, at the same time re-configure the whole space in which this placing is done. The last notion is more prone to be congruent with the dynamic notion of space needed to conceive the relation between subject and *alter*, than a separate and unalterable space.

**Keywords:** space, place, intersubjectivity

Boulanger (2017) begins by making a forceful critique of Moscovici, claiming that the latter presupposes a static conception of space in the way anchoring happens, thereby leaving no room for actually engaging with the *alter* but only with what is *conceived* as the *alter*. The reason is, according to Boulanger (2017) that Moscovici defines the process of anchoring as “situating an object in society in line with usual categories and social spaces (e.g., institutions)—with respect to certain structural zones within the relationship between the individual and the environment” (p. 10). Emphasis is here put on the word *usual*, which makes the relationship between the individual and the environment a matter of stability and continuity. Any conceptualization of how we understand things and the difference between them, then, is already being delineated by our anchoring (i.e., our structured meaning making processes), creating in the process impermeability between our internal and external world. Our conception of difference,

**AUTHORS' NOTE.** Comments concerning this paper can be directed to the author at [boallesoe@hum.aau.dk](mailto:boallesoe@hum.aau.dk)

of alterity, is, so to speak, familiar; there is a place for it in our conceptual structures. Due to the static conception of space, of the relationship between us and the environment, alterity is not really a part of our engagement with the world. We are, in a slightly altered phrase taken from John McDowell, living in a frictionless spinning in our own conceptual void, where what we are not, the world around us—alterity—fails to make a real difference. Alterity is only what we already are able to make of it, which Boulanger (2017) illustrates through the social representation of the psychoanalyst in Moscovici’s famous study, to whom the French population has a relation about and not with. So in a nice phrase “if anchoring makes the invisible (unfamiliar, inaccessible) visible (familiar, accessible), then the static aspect of the anchors also makes the alter inaccessible” (p. 14). The alter is not allowed to speak, since the static space is objectifying and depersonalizing the alter allowing us to subsume “this” under already given categories (with “not subsumable” being yet another category). Understood this way, we never really engage in a dialogue with alterity, but only a monologue making the alter conform to us. So, when anchoring involves the object’s meaning (i.e. the meaning of alterity) but this is solely determined by the representers, “how can the alter be signified, that is, rendered expressive and used for the (unfamiliar) resource it has to offer”? (p. 14). I take this to be the central question in the article, the answer depending on delineating a suitable notion of dynamic space, which Boulanger (2017) sketches combining the more dialogical oriented theory of Hermans with certain indications of a more dynamic approach also found in Moscovici.

To summarize: the problem, then, is: first, that social representations are static implying that the representers and the represented are already situated in a static space with a reification of both as a result; second, this keeps us from identifying exceptions as *real* differences, where the representers are able to situate themselves in a more openly manner, and the represented is rendered more expressive. So we need to emphasize the dynamic aspect of SRT “by highlighting the contextual and personal dimensions of the Self” (p. 16). This, I will claim later, creates a need to distinguish between the more abstract notion of space, and a more localized notion of place, as a sense of how space is used.

Boulanger’s (2017) solution, which we will turn to now, actually retains the *same* notion of space, as I will claim, but seeks to add a dynamic component into it. This despite Boulanger actually uses the important distinction between an abstract and a more localized sense of space. The solution depends on a *decentralized* movement, reframing some of the principles governing Moscovici’s work within an external theory, *in casu* Hermans, and a *centralized* movement by taking as a point of departure the dynamic aspect within Moscovici’s theory itself. For Boulanger (2017), “[t]his makes manifest an open theoretical space, a *bridging framework*, conceiving the relation between self and *alter* in the midst of internal and external worlds by means of a dynamic positioning interplay” (p. 17). The interplay consists of an intermingling of

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personal and social positions, internalized in the Self as a complex relation between external and internal positions. This then paves the way for “conceiving the Self as a space in which tension exists between the *movements* of globalization and localization in the “society of the mind” (p. 20). Through these tensions, then, the Self is moving at the boundaries of different zones in dynamic interactions, actively engaging the *alter* in a dialogue (always with the possibility of ossifying into a monologue) made possible by a more dynamic conception of space. Reinterpreting Moscovici’s notion of anchoring would therefore mean conceiving it as “an open space for dialogue that sustains the reciprocal expressivity of the *representer* and the *alter* (the *represented*) through their movement of positioning within the internal and external worlds” (p. 24).

### Is This a Real Dynamic Space?

Now, as already indicated above I agree with Boulanger (2017) that Moscovici predominantly understands the process of social representations as involving a static conception of space, and Hermann’s DST could be one way of overcoming this. I will, however, voice one fundamental reservation, namely that Boulanger (2017) doesn’t change the conception of space but rather just installs a dynamic concept within it. In other words, the dynamic interplay between a decentralized and a centralized movement works within the same kind of *overall* space as conceived by Moscovici. This is a problem, because Boulanger (2017) would need the concept of place, in contrast to space, to develop the substantial and dynamic meaning connected with a *real* encounter with alterity.

I have already alluded to the lack of distinction between space and place, which I will return to below. This distinction is central in what has been termed the spatial turn in the humanities (see Warf and Arias 2009) with Tuan (1977) as an important precursor. Overall the distinction can be characterised as understanding space as something abstract, without any substantial meaning (and not without meaning *per se*). In contradistinction place is understood as involving peoples’ awareness and comprehension of, or attraction to a certain localisation of space. A place can be seen as a concrete space carrying a substantial meaning. I will bring out three relevant points from this distinction. First, this turn means understanding place as the condition through which relations between self, *alter* and objects appear *and* are understood as being dependent on each other. Second, space can be described as a “container” in which positions of self, *alter* and objects are related in an objectified and disengaged way. Indications of this in Boulanger’s (2017) article are describing the different positions through quantity, texture and dividing space into zones and a relation between global and local, with dynamic movement conceived as a relation between these spaces, as well as the two-dimensionality of the figures on pp. 23, 25, & 27 (replacing these with a three-dimensional picture, within which positions are pictured, would not make a difference). Third, positioning should instead be understood as *taking place*, connecting

the character of an event with concretely occupying and comprehending a location. The complex relation between something happening to one, another or the world, with the intentional taking of a stance towards it, should furthermore be understood as normative<sup>1</sup>. It comes, as Harré claims, with duties and rights, making someone or something taking place a site of contestation. In the following sections I will elucidate these points by using Malpas' (1999) and Harré's positioning theory, and after that return to Boulanger's (2017) argument for a reinterpretation using space/place.

### Space and Place

Defining precisely what is meant by space and place is notoriously difficult, and it doesn't make it easier that both are related to each other. However, as Malpas points out one particular semantic feature of place seems to be its connection with a sense of openness coming from the Latin *platea*, meaning broad way, and serving as the etymological backdrop for concepts like Italian *Piazza* or the German *Platz*. A place for living or dwelling is, in this sense "a place that provides a space in which dwelling can occur—it 'gives space' to the possibility of dwelling—and yet a place to dwell must be more than just a 'space' alone" (Malpas, 1999, p. 22). This *more than just space alone* denotes, in my understanding, the actual possibility of self and *alter* (and objects) to engage, by considering how this takes place. Imagine the difference between the two spaces, a small elevator with three persons and a dog versus two people walking on Victoria Square in Montreal, and what kinds of events these spaces allow. In both cases, we can accurately describe the features of the space, its three-dimensional extensions, how many objects there are, etc., but the total amount of variations of how these spaces are used, the relations of the positions and objects taken—coordinating the shifting of positions in the elevator without touching each other or getting bitten by the dog—will surpass our imagination. Furthermore, the three-dimensional description will say nothing of what actually *takes place* in the elevator or on Victoria Square.

So, in a first approximation space has something to do with territory, it is mappable and explorable, while place is more like occupation, it is lived and enlivened as well as dwelled in and on. At the same time, it is obviously that without space no place would exist, but place cannot be reduced to be a matter of space only. Realizing that I actually did whatever it is I did, as in the example in the footnote, this objectifying (spatial) attitude towards myself, is part of the possibility of repressing the memory or regretting what was done as taking place.

However, our philosophical history has for a long time emphasized space at the expense of place, modelling this space on three-dimensional extension, with place

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this is understanding self-conception as involving a form of self-alienation: arriving at a concept of oneself at times involves abstracting from one's dealings with the world and others thereby taking a stance towards oneself as something "other than oneself." This is expressed, for example in the thought "Did I really do that?"

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*reduced* to the part of space a given body takes up. As Malpas (ibid, p. 26) explains, this was a result of a gradual development of thinking of space and place in terms of the concept of a void, the greek *kenon*, following in the wake of the movement of the self-understanding of human beings from, in Latin, *subjecta* to a more objectified *subjectum*. The former denoting being subject to something, a whole in which one understands one's place as meaningful, the latter denoting a sense of I over and against the "world," with the possibility of a void in between. It is the possibility of this void that brings with it the idea of a homogenous and undifferentiated realm of pure extension, a grand-sized container, when everything is abstracted from space. Placing things back in space, then, leaves us the possibility of describing both the position of a given thing, its place, through the coordinates of the three dimensions, as well as, with Newton and Leibniz, the movement of things through the use of the differential calculus. Place receives a secondary value being a derivative of spatiality, as in the words of Descartes cited from Malpas (1999), "[t]he difference between the terms 'place' and 'space' is that the former designates more explicitly the position, as opposed to the size or shape, while it is the size or shape that we are concentrating on when we talk of space" (p. 28).

The lack of discussion of place in Boulanger's (2017) article is simply, I take it, due to the fact, that within an understanding, or presupposition of space as extension, there is no need for a concept of place beyond the notion of a simple location of position, and with the movement of positions as the dynamic component. But what about the anchoring and the contextualization, are these not notions indicating the importance of place? On the one hand yes, they are emphasizing place as essentially involving subjective and psychological phenomena. But on the other hand these also denote something more like a responding to, or reacting towards the spatial location, a kind of orientation towards the world, thereby conjoining the idea of objective space with a psychological set of qualities, cognitive or emotional, in a dynamic interplay. This last point is alluded to in Boulanger's (2017) article through the excellent descriptions of the interplay between internal and external spatial worlds, but *not* by touching on how these concretely are to be connected at all, namely though something *taking place*. To put it another way, operating with a distinction between internal and external worlds are still too abstract, and needs to be complemented with localization, or place, as the condition on which the specific relation between the "zones" of internal and external can be instantiated. But what are the consequences of this for Boulanger's (2017) use of the notion of space? Before we address this, I will just underscore that what has just been said is congruent with the intention and description by Boulanger (2017) in his article. The above is not a critique of the overall argument of the article, but merely suggesting the need to consider a shift of focus from space towards incorporating place as an equally important theoretical and analytical focus.

### Positioning as Taking Place

Now, if my “diagnosis” above is correct, that the implicit understanding of space in Boulanger’s article is a conjoining of space as extension with a set of psychological qualities, we need to understand the complex relationship between space/place less as a geometrical three-dimensional and objective grid, and more like a normative grid instead. And this, I will claim, is part of the impetus for Harré and Langenhove’s argument for positioning theory. As Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010, p. 11) claim both positioning theory and dialogical self theory are interested in the role of language and communities, as well as the dynamics of positioning. Different accentuations exist between the two approaches, but nothing severe enough to make this comment’s inclusion of positioning theory obsolete.

In Harré and Langenhove (1999), positioning is conceived as a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role thereby trying to capture a new social ontology for the social sciences. This involves rethinking the usual ‘substances’ of the social world, hence involving changing the concept of space as well. Allow me to quote a bit: “People tend to be treated as complex, causally interacting ‘things’ [...]. As thing-like substances each of them can be located in the Newtonian-Euclidian space/time grid of the natural world, just like natural entities and phenomena.” (ibid., p. 14) Harré and Langenhove’s point is that social phenomena of course always can be described through the use of a space/time grid, but that this might not be the most relevant way used to study these phenomena, especially when we consider how dialogues in a social context develop into dialogues within the Self. What replaces this grid then? Well, for Harré and Langenhove this involves understanding “persons as the locations of social acts. As a ‘space’, a set of possible and actual locations, the array of persons is not necessarily Euclidian” (ibid., p. 15). As is probably well-known, this serves as the background for unfolding positioning as a theory through the positioning triangle—comprising of position/act-action/storyline, a point we will not dwell on here. What will be emphasized here (in continuation of Harré and Langenhove’s approach) is, first, that persons are conceived as *locations*. How people *place* and are *placed* in relation to each other, or with a little fantasy in relation to oneself (think about standing in front of a mirror), is an important part of how the dialogue between people and within oneself takes place. Positions are, among other things, connected with certain ways of acting and expressing oneself, what is OK to say and do and what is not, and what one expects in the turn-taking of the conversation. This normativity is also manifested through the concrete location of people. To repeat what I said above, taking place has both the character of an event, the specific situation, as well as reflecting the concrete stance(s). Think of a discussion between two professors, one with arms crossed, the other gesticulating with both hands. Both professorial stances (involving and expressing cognitive and emotional dimensions) are enacted through the discourses connected to being a professor as well as the specific acts taking place in the particular situation.

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Furthermore, the specific location, in front of students or in the common room, is highly important for understanding how the specific dialogue and concurrent expressive actions unfold.

Second, a position is a complex between possible and actual locations. This corresponds to the openness connected with place as claimed above. The discussion just mentioned is obviously limited by the actual physical situation, one wall there, one door here, etc., each with their particular size. This would be part of the Newtonian grid, counting the elements involved, and again there would be a point in describing this in a geometrical manner. But in the actual situation, the location of the door and whether it is closed, open, locked or unlocked is more important than the size of it. Furthermore, there is also the complex of possible and actual gesticulations, of actions to do, of things to say. One of the professors might try to threaten the other, knowing very well that this would be a wrong thing to do. Within what he might do rightfully, a lot of possibilities are present as well, involving both imagination and anticipation. So, what is taking place is also related to the complex of what could happen and what do, in fact, happen. The overall point is, then, that when something takes place, it is related primarily to a dynamically unfolding normative space through persons as locations of acts and not an independent Newtonian grid. Through this normative space, the external and internal dialogues are related (persons as locations) and unfolds dynamically both through discourses and actual embodiments and interactions with the physical environment. Alterity, we might say then, involves a discrepancy between persons and their locations, internally as a sense of being misplaced, involving the alienation mentioned above, and externally as the discrepancy between what a person does and how this person is positioned. Instead of understanding this alterity as depersonalized and objectified, as was the critique of Moscovici above, alterity here expresses the possibility of learning of one's own positioning through the positioning of others. Alterity as conforming to the representer is therefore not, as within the static version of SRT, the primary relation, though positioning as this can occur as forced positioning or even malignant positioning (see Harré & Langenhove 1999, pp. 27-28).

The essence of the above is that if we appreciate that space is necessarily connected to the dynamics of place, and there is nothing peculiar about this, we might also be able to conceive the connections between place and the dialogue, between the multivoiced self and alter in a non-reductive manner. Place points towards space as not made up of separate entities/persons connecting, but understanding space as already permeated with normativity, hence the possibility of resistance, identity as well as intersubjectivity. And understanding Hermans and Harré as supplying each other (in developing Moscovici), combining the complexities of the dialogical self with conceiving these positionings as normative in nature. In the last section I will return to Boulanger's (2017) paper and try to interpret this in light of the above.

### Consequences

My discussion above can be seen as unfolding the decentralized trajectory Boulanger performs himself by using Hermans, but here using Harré instead. As I understand the centralized movement, it centralizes the decentralized movement by reconnecting with the original point of departure. This I will try to do briefly as a last thing here. To reiterate, the above is not so much a critique as considering the notion of place as a way of overcoming the, I claim, objectified Newton-like space which is still presupposed in Boulanger's (2017) article despite the effort of presenting a view incorporating a dynamic view on space.

As Boulanger notes in the conclusion while DST helps extending SRT, thereby making many of the representational spaces in the school-family relationship visible, some zones are still invisible. Why, asks Boulanger (2017), is the parking lot at the kindergarten not seen as an anchor for the stakeholders? And he answers that it seems that a static logic is still partly presupposed with positions and anchors associated to an entity conception of space, thereby making the parking lot absent “from the researchers’ map identifying the repertory of the subjects’ Self” (p. 29). This worry is exactly what the above considerations tried to address, seeing the parking lot just as an adjacent (and irrelevant) space to the kindergarten, within the map of the geographical region of the city where the kindergarten is located, and not as a place where interactions and communications with and about kids also take place. On a spatial view, the kindergarten and the parking lot are two adjacent and self-enclosed spaces. If we see them as places, the parking lot is instead *a different but related location* to the kindergarten, in both cases where actions and relations to people with kids can take place. It is different from the kindergarten, where people as locations of acts and discourses primarily is unfolded through the parents’ relations to children, their own included (of locating them, finishing playing, saying goodbye, putting on and finding clothes, using the restroom, etc.) as well as in engaging kindergarten teachers (how was the day, did anything happen, how was the weather, etc.), and speaking with other parents (establishing playdates, asking about common problems, etc.). All this is done with different kinds of normative involvements, with the kindergarten as the place—a picking-up-and-getting-information-about-kids-in-kindergarten kind of space. The parking lot, however, is much more like a departure space, getting the kids in the car and driving home. It is a transitory place with basically no other obligation in interaction than waving to and looking out for other parents and kids. You are expected to leave, not hanging around. However, it is related in the sense that information can be exchanged here as well. Mostly between parents addressing the kindergarten –in this sense it is a place for speaking of the kindergarten and not speaking to the kindergarten like above— or when the birthday party for one of the kids commences. In a spatial view the positioning of the parent, or the kids, are two nodes moving from the space of the kindergarten to a not-kindergarten related parking lot space. In a “patial” view, the positioning of the



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parents and kids are different but also related, the normative relations between parent and kid in the kindergarten and on the parking lot overlap in the sense that what is expected from a parent in relation to a child and vice versa is the same. But it is different also. The positioning of the child is moving from the kindergarten towards a more private sphere, with other kinds of expectations and perhaps obligations. Some duties in the home are different than in the kindergarten. The positioning of the parent is also different, how the relationship between parent and child is expressed speaking to one of the kindergarten teachers is different from the expression of the same through talking to one of the other parents in the parking lot. Here what is said, is mediated by the relationship between two parents, having a more private relation than between the parent and the kindergarten teacher. So, I conjecture that the reason why the parking lot isn't an anchor, is because it is considered a different kind of space than the kindergarten without considering how both are related places as well. Let this be the final example of the possibility of moving from considering space as objectified and depersonalized, to understanding space as different kinds of normativity taking place.

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CHRISTENSEN

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