

## Collective Action and Proxy Agency

### ABSTRACT

On November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2007, Dana Perino, the White House spokesperson, announced at a press briefing:

I have a couple of statements by the President -- these are in his words -- ....

The first is a statement about Russia. The President's words: I am deeply concerned about the detention of numerous human rights activists and political leaders who participated in peaceful rallies this weekend. I am particularly troubled by the use of force by law enforcement authorities to stop these peaceful activities and to prevent some journalists and human rights activists from covering them.

We correctly report this as *the administration's announcing* that the president was deeply concerned about the detention of numerous activists and political leaders in Russia who participated in peaceful rallies over the 2007 Thanksgiving weekend. How is it possible for Dana Perino's saying something to count as the administration's saying something? This phenomenon I will call *proxy agency*. In proxy agency, one person or subgroup's doing something *counts as* a larger group's doing something.

Proxy agency is puzzling in itself and because it is prima facie incompatible with an intuitively compelling, deflationary account of collective agency, according to which what it is for a group of people to do something is for its members individually to contribute to bringing about something. On this account, if we push a car, paint a house, or poison the environment, it just comes to our all contributing to the car's being pushed, the house's being painted, or the environment's being poisoned. In this paper, I provide an analysis of the proxy agency which explains how it is possible and shows that it is not a counterexample to this deflationary account of collective agency.

Proxy agency typically involves an action of a proper subgroup of some larger group counting as an action of the group's. Thus, the action of the subgroup has, in Searle's terminology, a status function. I will offer an analysis of the concept of a status function in terms of the concept of a constitutive, as opposed to regulative, rule and the concept of a conditional we-intention (drawing on my account in (...)). Traffic laws are regulative rules governing an independently existing activity; the rules of chess, in contrast, are constitutive rules, for following them constitutes the play of chess. The concept of a constitutive rule I will analyze in terms of the concept of an essentially collective action type.

In outline, the account goes as follow. Some action verbs express essentially collective intentional action types, like shaking hands or singing a duet, while some do not, such as lifting a piano, or singing the national anthem. Verbs that express essentially collective action types express action types that (i) involve a plan of action with roles for more than one individual, where the plan of action is defined by a set of rules which are to constrain behavior while members of the group are executing it and (ii) require that the role occupiers engage in the activity with we-intentions directed at that activity and group. This way of understanding collective action types can be used to analyze the concept of a constitutive rule, for the activities which are constituted by rule following are intentional collective action types defined in terms of the intentional joint following of certain rules. Thus, a constitutive rule is not a special type of rule but rather a rule that has a special status with respect to the definition of a type of collective intentional behavior.

An object has a status function in virtue of people so regarding it (in a sense to be further explained), and in virtue of which it plays a certain role in social transactions. To be a ten dollar bill or a congressman is to have a certain status function. For any status function, there is a corresponding intentional collective action type defined in terms of rules constraining behavior, in which something plays a certain role in the activity, and which counts as a thing of that kind in virtue of ascertainable features of it plus the very fact that enough individuals have relevant conditional we-intentions with respect to it. Thus, that a piece of wood shaped in a certain way is the King in chess is its having a status function constituted by people having conditional we-intentions with respect to its use in certain contexts, where that use is defined by constitutive rules for a certain kind of activity. The conditional intentions all have the same basic form: if it is appropriate to engage in rule constituted action of collective intentional type T, then objects with properties P are to play the role R specified in the rules for the action of type T.

Proxy agency requires an institutional practice. Not just anyone can say something and have it count as the administration's announcing something. Being a spokesperson is having a certain status function, which is constituted by the conditional we-intentions of members of the relevant community (including but not restricted to members of the spokesperson's group). Crucially, the spokesperson must be appropriately authorized by the group, and particular messages the group wishes to convey must be authorized, if the spokesperson's performance of a certain utterance act is to count as the group's announcement. This shows that the group's action is not constituted just by the spokesperson's utterance act. That utterance is the last stage in a multistage action that the group undertakes, earlier stages of which involve composing and authorizing a message, as well as authorizing an utterer of it, setting a time and date, and so on. Thus, the announcement the group makes is one to which each member contributes, though different members in different ways, with the role of the mouthpiece being only one of them. This, I suggest, will serve as a general model for proxy agency, and an important tool for analyzing complex institutional action, which often involves series of proxy agents.