

Chapter 2

Positioning Theory and Life-Story Interviews: Discursive Fields, Gaze and Resistance

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2.1 Introduction

in the faculty / I already knew really nice German people / besides like all Germans / they walked around with this completely false idea / that we Spanish women are an inexhaustible well of bodily joy >laughing< / which meant I had a lot of friends / so in this sense / on the one hand I felt accepted / not only by the foreign students / but by the Germans in the faculty / and at the same time tremendously rejected by officialdom / only one professor took me seriously during the entire year / I wasn't used to that / and the others made it clear that they thought I was (.5) a total airhead / and that was the hardest part (.5) seeing that / I don't know / for the first time / this had never happened to me before / that they didn't take me seriously / for being a woman / for being a foreigner / all of which meant / ehm / that since then I have had a pretty appalling impression of Germany / I don't have any / I haven't gone back / I haven't read any German since / nothing in German since then / some kind of total rejection / (Elena 27/09/01)

en la facultad / ya conocía a gente alemana muy maja / además como todos los alemanes / iban con esta idea totalmente falsa / de que las españolas somos un pozo inagotable de alegría para el cuerpo >laughing> / pues tenía muchísimas amistades / entonces en este sentido / por un lado me sentía muy integrada / tanto con los otros extranjeros / como con los alemanes de la facultad / y al mismo tiempo tremendamente rechazada por las instancias oficiales / solo un profesor me tomó en serio en todo el año / yo no estaba acostumbrada a eso / y los demás me habían claramente hecho ver que pensaba que yo tenía (.5) un vacío total en el cerebro / y eso fue lo más duro (.5) ver que / no sé / por primera vez / que no me había pasado nunca / que no me tomaban en serio / por ser mujer / y por ser extranjera / con lo cual / pues / tengo una impresión de Alemania desde entonces bastante horrorosa / no tengo ningún / no he vuelto / no he vuelto a leer alemán / nada en alemán desde entonces / una especie de rechazo total / (Elena 27/09/01)

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This excerpt is taken from a life-story interview which I carried out in London some 17 years ago as part of a three-and-a-half-year study which explored the adaptation of French, German and Spanish nationals to the English educational system and how they worked as language teachers and lived their lives in Greater London (Block 2001, 2005, 2006). The speaker is Elena, a 29-year-old Spanish woman who at the time of the interview was working as a French and Spanish teacher in a secondary school south of London. As is the case with all excerpts from interviews, there is a lot going on, some of it immediate and of the here-and-now and some of it out of sight. Thus, one might read meaning off the transcribed words but there is also the need to consider how the meaning of Elena's words is out of sight, embedded in the rich sociohistorical context which underlies and shapes the very moment when Elena relates this particular part of her life. Thus while we may understand from her transcribed words that she is a feminist and that she is not someone who takes a slight lying down, there is so much more that does not leap off the page because it is part of the rich texture of her past and present experiences which both precede and surround her account of this part of her life. This paper is about what may be read off immediately from accounts provided during life story interviews, but it is also about the phenomenological layers of life story interviews which we need to consider in a thorough and rigorous way if we are to arrive at a fuller understanding of the meaning of interviewees' words.

The backdrop to my discussion here is the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences and educational research which has taken hold over the past three decades (Bruner 1986; Clandinin 2007). This turn has meant that researchers are showing more and more interest in how individuals self-present through productions of what count (in the context of research) as their life stories. These life stories are elicited from informants by a variety of means, from more traditional pen-and-paper written diaries to, in more recent times, electronic logs. However, it is by far the face-to-face interview which has been the elicitation mode of choice over the past three decades. In such research, life-story interviews are generally lengthy, lasting up to three hours, and they are by nature open-ended, resembling day-to-day conversations. They are often organized around particular stages in the interviewee's life, such as early childhood, early primary school and early adolescence, but they may also be more specifically focussed on short-term experiences such as a teacher training course. The researcher may conduct a single one-off interview with an informant, or he/she may conduct a set of two or three interrelated ones, fairly close together in time (Wengraf 2001). Alternatively, he/she may adopt a longitudinal approach, which involves multiple interviews, carried out at intervals over a long period of time (Block 2006). Whatever the number of interviews per informant, in the end, the goal is generally the same: 'the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it ...' (Atkinson 1998: 3). In previous publications (e.g. Block 2000, 2006, 2015), I have taken on the problematic nature of interviews as a means of 'getting at' the life stories of individuals, questioning the view that things said during interviews reflect the deepest inner thoughts of informants and/or constitute true representations of their

experiences. Following Kvale (1996), I have instead suggested that they are often more symptomatic of deeper feelings and/or a product of the immediate interaction between interviewer and interviewee. In this chapter, I continue with this tack, but add a layer to my thinking about interviews as I consider the potential usefulness of *positioning theory* (Harré and van Langenhove 1999a) as a methodological framework for understanding the communicative processes unfolding during interviews. As I have done in my past work, I aim to shed some light on how we might understand interviews as socioculturally-situated co-productions.

2.2 Positioning Theory

According to Davies and Harré (1999: 37), '[p]ositioning is the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines'. By 'discursive process', the authors mean individuals' day-to-day participation in communicative events involving one or more other individuals, drawing not only on language but also other forms of semiotic activity such as direction of gaze, posture, gestures and other embodied behaviour. Being 'located ... as observably and subjectively coherent participants' is about the kind of image management engaged in by participants in face-to-face conversations (Goffman 1981). It is about how, for example, individuals draw on a range of communicative resources to portray themselves as what Gee (2008: 3) calls 'types of people'. Or, in Judith Butler's (1990) terms, it is about performativity, or how constellations of communicative resources in use create the effect of particular possible, plausible and recognisable subjectivities. At the same time Harré (2004: 4) points out that positioning theory also entails 'the study of the way rights and duties are taken up and laid down, ascribed and appropriated, refused and defended in the fine grain of the encounters of daily lives'. In recent years, positioning theory has been employed in range of contexts, ranging from conflict resolution (Moghaddam et al. 2008) to public relations (James 2014).

van Langenhove and Harré (1999) suggest that any communicative event can be framed as a mutually determining triad with each point impacting on the other two (see Fig. 2.1). On the righthand side is the 'storyline' which emerges in the interaction between interlocutors, understood to be 'the conversational history and the sequence of things already being said' (Harré and van Langenhove 1999b: 6). In the middle of the triangle is 'position', which as we have just observed is about 'the moral positions of the participants and the rights and duties they have to stay certain things' (Harré and van Langenhove 1999b: 6). Positions may be manifested in binary alternatives such as 'powerful or powerless, confident or apologetic, dominant or submissive, definitive or tentative, authorized or unauthorized, and so on' (van Langenhove and Harré 1999: 17). Important here is how the characters in the storyline being developed are portrayed. As Wortham and Gadsden (2006: 319) put

it, ‘narrators “voice” or position people represented in their narrative, including their own various narrated selves, as recognizable types of people’ (see the reference to Gee’s work below). In addition, as Wortham and Gadsden (2006: 319) explain, ‘while voicing themselves and other characters, narrators also evaluate these voices, such that the narrator him or herself often takes a position on the types of characters represented’. In these circumstances, there might be a simplistic form of heroes and villains or there might be an altogether more sophisticated and nuanced character development at work.

Finally, on the left hand side of the triangle, there are what Austin (1962) would have called ‘speech acts’, that is, words uttered with purpose and effect as the minimal units of human communication. In the development of speech-act theory, Austin famously distinguished between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, where the former term refers to the functional meaning of utterances (e.g. relating one’s thoughts on a matter) and the latter is about the effect of utterances. However, positioning theorists have expanded on the notion of speech act from Austin’s original linguistics-based definition considerably, making room for the larger notion of communicative acts, which would include, for example, a handshake:

Every socially significant action, intended movement, or speech must be interpreted as an act, a socially meaningful and significant performance. A handshake is an intended action. Does it express a greeting, a farewell, congratulations, seal a bet, or what? It is only significant as far as it is given a meaning in the unfolding episode of which it forms a part. Once interpreted it falls under rules of propriety and standards of correctness, not only in itself but also in what are its proper precursors and consequences. (Harré and Moghaddam 2003: 6)

Taking into account the discussion thus far, it is possible to construct a positioning triangle such as the one in Fig. 2.1.

In the interview excerpt which opens this paper, we see how Elena develops a storyline around her experiences in Germany, specifically how she found acceptance among students but generally felt rejected by university staff, and how the latter experience lead to her subsequent rejection of all things related to Germany. She adopts the position of a no-nonsense, independent Spanish woman who accepts neither facile stereotypes nor slights to her self-esteem, be these individual or institutional. The notion that ‘Spanish women are an inexhaustible well of bodily

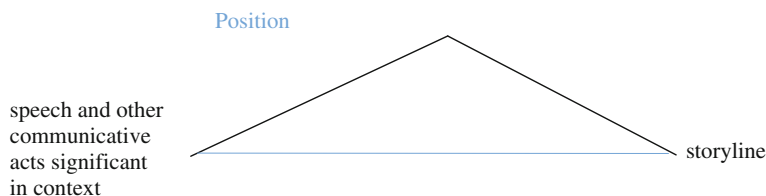


Fig. 2.1 The Positioning Triangle (based on van Langenhove and Harré 1999: 18; Harré and Moghaddam 2003: 5–6)

joy' (a nice turn of phrase, to be sure) is dispatched without reservation as 'completely false', and Elena very compellingly reveals her refusal to accept some of the positions identified by van Langenhove and Harré (1999): powerless, submissive, tentative or unauthorized. She strengthens her positioning vis-a-vis her interlocutor (me) by beginning with a description of harmony among students. This move grants her a warrant as a fair assessor of her own experiences, which in turn becomes important when we come to her withering criticism of the higher echelons of the German university, ultimately portrayed as sexist and even xenophobic.

In this way (and very briefly), I might apply the positioning triangle described and illustrated above to Elena's account of her German experiences. However, in doing so, I am engaging with what is on the surface, the words uttered by Elena, but I am not going too far beyond them (or *under* them).¹ To be fair to the originators of positioning theory (Harré and his associates), I am also applying a fairly basic model here. And to stay at this level of analysis would be to ignore work in recent years which has either challenged some of the foundations which undergird positioning theory or which has attempted to clarify aspects of positioning theory (e.g. work by Harré and his associates). In the next section, I examine some of this critical and clarifying work as I attempt to improve positioning theory for the purpose of making sense of life-story interviews.

2.3 Extending Positioning Theory

Butler (2004 [1997]) develops an incisive critique of Austin's original speech act theory and most significantly queries what it means to say that *things can be done with words*, or if we follow Harré and Moghaddam's (2003) expanded version, we might add: *things can be done with any semiotically mediated act*. She wonders how words, or indeed other modalities of communication, can both name or signify something while also being constitutive of, or enactments of, or performances of, actions. The issue is that in such a theory, a speech/communicative act is framed as an 'intended action', as Harré and Moghaddam put it, and therefore it is an individual act for which only the individual is responsible. In addition, a speech/communicative act is said to be 'only significant as far as it is given a meaning in the unfolding episode of which it forms a part', which makes it emergent in the ongoing flow of interaction while stripping it of any synchronic embeddedness in any social structure or diachronic embeddedness in any historical structure. For Butler this way of framing communication is problematic: in the former case, it is asocial; in the latter case, it is ahistorical. Butler explains her position as follows:

¹Crucially, as one reviewer of an earlier version of this chapter noted, I am also limited somewhat by the fact that my transcription captures minimal information about how the exchange took place: while it indicates the rhythm of what was said and pauses where relevant, it does not represent a wide range of semiotic elements such as gaze and gestures.

If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that “success” is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices*. It is not simply that the speech act takes place *within* a practice, but that the act is itself a ritualized practice. What this means, then, is that a performative “works” to the extent that it *draws on* and *covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force. (Butler 2004 [1997]: 221; italics in the original)

Butler’s views find resonance in Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of voice and intertextuality when she attributes the success of the performative to how it ‘echoes prior actions’ and ‘accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices’. While voice is about how words uttered by individuals in communicative acts are imbued with the meanings invested in them in the past by other speakers in communicative acts (Bakhtin 1981), intertextuality is about how texts, as more extended productions of words, are interlinked in terms of meaning and interpretability with previously produced texts (Bakhtin 1986). In short, we cannot understand communication as a strictly individual action, the product of individual intentions (between, say, an interviewer and interviewee); rather, all communication is sociohistorical situated such that the past weighs as heavily as the volatility of the immediate context in exchanges taking place on a moment-to-moment basis.

However, it can be argued that something akin to attention to the sociohistorical does arise in the second point on the triangle in Fig. 2.1, position, which is defined as follows:

... a cluster of rights and duties to perform certain actions with a certain significance as acts, but which include prohibitions or denials of access to some local repertoire of meaningful acts. In a certain sense in each social milieu there is a kind of Platonic realm of positions, realized in current practices, which people can adopt, strive to locate themselves in, be pushed into, be displaced from or be refused access, recess themselves from and so on, in a highly mobile and dynamic way. (Harré and Moghaddam 2003: 6)

This ties in with notions of discourse, as developed by authors such as Weedon (1997, 2004), and in particular Foucault’s (1979) notion of ‘discursive fields’ as the ‘competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes’ (Weedon 1997: 34). A discursive field is understood to be a social space in which not only language, but also a range of other semiotic resources ranging from dress to body movement, are deployed as individuals participate in activity either alone or in the company of others. In addition, similar to Terry Eagleton’s concept of ‘discursive formation’, a discursive field ‘can be seen as a set of rules which determine what can and must be said from a certain position in social life, and expressions have meaning only by virtue of the discursive formations within which they occur, changing meaning as they are transported from one to another’ (Eagleton 2007: 195). In this sense, discourse comes to be conceived in very broad terms, as what Gee (2008) calls capital ‘D’ discourse, that is, “ways of being in the world” ... “forms of life” ... [and] socially situated

identities' (Gee 2008: 3), which are emergent in ongoing interaction but also relatively stable. This effect of stability emergent in interaction is explained by Harré and Moghaddam when they discuss the third component of the positioning triangle, the storyline:

We have emphasized the enormous importance of the dynamics of social episodes, how they unfold as this or that person contributes to the pattern, episodes do not unfold in any random way. They tend to follow already established patterns of development, which for convenience have come to be called story lines. Each story line is expressible in a loose cluster of narrative conventions (Harré and Moghaddam 2003: 5–6)

It is also worth noting that as the different components of the positioning triangle come to life, there are reciprocal actions of positioning and being positioned, As I suggest elsewhere (Block 2007) participants in an interaction situate themselves through their discursive practices and at the same time, they are situated by others. During such activity, there is a sense of what constitutes a coherent socially-situated identity, one which makes sense for the context. In other words, all actors will position themselves and others according to their sense of what constitutes a coherent narrative for the particular activity, time and place in which they find themselves.

While being situated by others, individuals may find themselves the subjects of structuring and disciplining discourses. An early example of what structuring and disciplining discourses might mean is to be found in Marx's *Capital 1*. In the chapter entitled 'The working day', Marx (1990 [1867]) describes in great detail the ways in which factory owners are able to subject workers to their will via their control over time and space. However, a more recent (and more relevant) discussion of discipline can be found in Michel Foucault's work on the clinic. Foucault charts a shift from a medical profession which relied purely and strictly on an academic knowledge to cure patients, to a policing role, which included taking decisions regarding what was normal and what was abnormal, and what was legitimate and what was illegitimate. He explains:

Medicine must no longer be confined to a body of techniques for curing ills and of the knowledge that they require; it will also embrace knowledge of *healthy man*, that is, a study of *non-sick man* and a definition of the *model man*. In the ordering of human existence it assumes a normative posture, which authorizes it not only to distribute advice as to healthy life, but also to dictate the standards for physical and moral relations of the individual and of the society in which he lives. (Foucault 1973: 34)

The key to making this normative behaviour effective in medical practice is the right of doctors to impose their 'gaze', a technical term used by Foucault in reference to how observation is not just about taking in and documenting what is happening before the observer's eyes; it is also about categorising and shaping others according to dominant discourses of normativity. This change in how gaze might work is summed up by Foucault as follows:

.... the medical gaze was also organised in a new way. First, it was no longer the gaze of an observer, but that of a doctor supported and justified by an institution, that of doctor endowed with the power of decision and intervention. Moreover, it was a gaze that was not

bound by the narrow grid of structure (form, arrangements, number, and size) but that could and should grasp colours, variations, tiny anomalies, always receptive to the deviant. Finally, it was a gaze that was not content to observe what was self-evident; it must make it possible to outline chances and risks; it was calculating. (Foucault 1973: 89)

Crucially, Foucault is not so much interested in how individual doctors enact or impose the medical gaze on patients, or how a prison official enforces the judicial gaze on a prisoner; rather, 'it is the anonymous medical fraternity that has a gaze, as does the anonymous legal fraternity' (Boxer 2003: 257). In this sense, gaze is about power residing in institutions as discursive fields. It is a discursive resource as opposed to an individually-held right or entitlement, even if individuals are invested with the right and entitlement to gaze by virtue of occupying social positions of which the gaze is one of many constituent features. Where there is gaze, there is often compliance, acquiescence and acceptance; however, there is also often resistance, or the 'intentional, and hence conscious, acts of defiance or opposition by a subordinate individual or group of individuals against a superior individual or set of individuals' (Seymour 2006: 305). Resistance always exists as a counter to hegemony and uneven power relations and it may or may not be successful as an attempt to challenge and overturn such relations. This means that in any analysis of interview data, it is interesting not only to consider instances in which the gaze is, in effect, accepted and owned by the gazed-upon, but also instances in which it is resisted, and beyond this, the effect of resistance.

To summarise the discussion thus far, positioning theory, in the expanded form presented here, offers a suggestive way of making sense of interview data and it is no doubt for this reason that it is often drawn on in narrative research. However, 'drawing on' positioning theory in many cases means merely mentioning it in passing. Or, it is explained briefly to make the point that individuals through their actions during interactions adopt different subject positions on a moment-to-moment basis. Of course, to make the latter point one does not need positioning theory as one might more fruitfully refer to Erving Goffman's work on footing and framing (e.g. Goffman 1981).² Here I have attempted to get behind some of the basic tenets of positioning theory and in doing so I have managed to include the work of scholars who have discussed discursive fields, gaze and resistance. In this sense, I have emphasized the sociohistorically-situated nature of positioning while injecting a power dimension into the framework. Revisiting the positioning triangle presented above, perhaps there is room for an expansion of it to take into account some of the extensions which I have discussed. I attempt to capture how such a triangle might look in Fig. 2.2.

In her detailed discussion of narrative methods, Riessman (2008) describes different ways of analysing narratives and it is perhaps interesting to see how the

²Footing is 'the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance' (Goffman 1981: 128) and framing is the interlocutor's 'understanding of what it is that is going on' and how 'individuals fit their actions to this understanding and ordinarily find that the ongoing world supports this fitting' (Goffman 1974: 247).

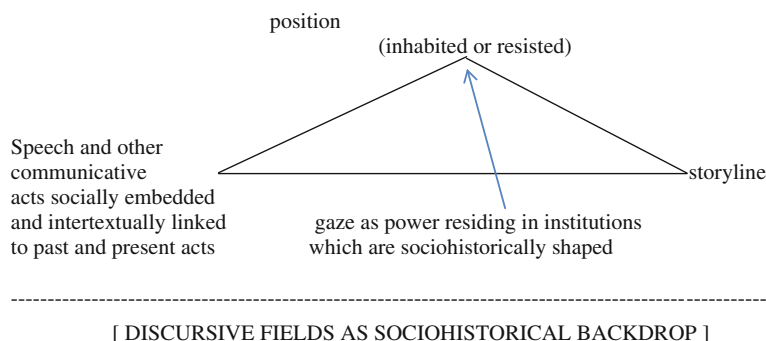


Fig. 2.2 The positioning triangle extended

model presented here articulates with her discussion. First, there is what she calls *thematic* analysis, which is primarily a focus on the content of what is said. Although this approach may be seen as overly intuitive and even simplistic (reading meaning off words), Riessman makes clear that it requires a great deal of rigour, as the researcher has to identify key themes and strands in the data and make sense of them, drawing on history, sociology, anthropology and other social sciences disciplines in the process. Second, there is *structural* analysis, which addresses how narratives are produced. On the one hand, this approach may focus on the micro-level linguistic phenomena, such as grammar, lexis and accent; on the other hand, it may examine how different clauses are assembled to produce a story line or the strategies adopted by the story teller as the story is told. The third approach, which Riessman calls *dialogic/performative*, draws on elements of the previous two approaches, but goes beyond being a mere combination of them. As Riessman explains, ‘if thematic and structural approaches interrogate “what” is spoken and “how”, the dialogic/performative approach asks “who” an utterance may be directed to, “when,” and “why,” that is, for what purposes?’ (Riessman 2008: 105). Thus, the analyst works from the immediate context, in terms of the minutiae of interaction, discourse patterns, the background of interlocutors, the general socio-historical backdrop and so on, eventually working up to border social categories, related to institutions and cultures, and the identity inscriptions outlined earlier in this chapter (e.g. social class, gender, ethnicity, etc.).³

In the extended positioning theory triangle presented in Fig. 2.2, content analysis is certainly in evidence, as this is what is done when a storyline is interpreted. There is also a degree of structural analysis implied in the examination of speech acts, although we would need to be clear about exactly what kind of structural analysis is appropriate for the research being done here (multimodal, pronoun use, speech acts

³It should be noted that there is a fourth approach discussed by Riessman, what she calls *visual analysis*. This approach builds on the previous three approaches and is concerned with what images are produced, how they are produced and why they are produced. It is not of direct relevance to my discussion here.

as linguistic phenomena and so on). Finally, there is a move beyond the what and how of stories and an attempt to understand positioning as discursively constructed with relation to discursive fields and as connected to larger social structures. And here a concern with “‘who’ an utterance may be directed to, “when,” and “why,” that is, for what purposes?” (Riessman 2008: 105) may be addressed.

A more in-depth understanding of Elena’s account of her experiences in Germany arises if we apply some of the ideas introduced in this section and reflected in Fig. 2.2. In the story that she tells about Germany, we have her portrayal of what we might call, for lack of a better term, the German university gaze.⁴ In Foucault’s (1973: 34) terms, this gaze is about ‘the ordering of human existence’ at a German university. The university ‘assumes a normative posture, which authorizes it not only to distribute advice as to [university] life ..., but also to dictate the standards for [academic] relations of the individual’ in the university context. In Elena’s account of her time in Germany, the university gaze positioned her as an ‘airhead’ and generally as an unworthy interlocutor.

For her part, in the midst of what Seymour (2006: 305) terms ‘differential power relationships’, Elena rejects and resists this gaze, in the end, by leaving Germany and finding somewhere else to study where she feels validated. Of course, as Seymour (2006: 305) notes, acts of resistance may be ‘counter-hegemonic but may not succeed in effecting change’ and one has to wonder about the effect of Elena’s evasive action as regards its potential to undermine authority and ultimately the German university gaze which she felt herself to be the victim of.

Moving to another level of analysis, I might apply the triangle not to the story inside Elena’s life story interview but to the interaction between her and me, that is, to the most immediate, on-the-surface, interactive level, and the different positionings that emerge as interviewer and interviewee interact. Georgakopoulou (2006, 2007; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012) offers us much food for thought in this regard in her work with Greek adolescent girls. She noted how her informants took on ‘telling identities’ in group interviews, that is, they adopted subject positions related to their role—active, less active, relatively silent and so on—in the ongoing development of a storyline and overall conversational management. These more immediate, situational identities are linked by Georgakopoulou to ‘larger social identities that are consequential for the construction and interpretation of stories ... have[ing] to do with the participants’ group-internal roles, relations and hierarchies on the one hand and their gender on the other’ (Georgakopoulou 2006: 99)

In Gee’s (2008: 3) words, in this excerpt Elena presents herself *discursively* as the embodiment of particular ‘ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, [and] speaking ... that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities (or “types of people”) by [the interviewer]’. Specifically, she inhabits the position of an empowered individual, in control of her story. And as was observed

⁴While Elena does make reference to Germany and Germans in general in the excerpt, she is clearly talking specifically about her experiences at a Germany university in this part of the interview.

previously, she is able to dispatch the entirety of German higher education (and indeed Germany and its language and culture) with a few well-chosen phrases. The core to all of this, and indeed, the essential backdrop to it, is a discursive field of gender theory and practice which has arisen worldwide in recent years, and which Elena is able to tap into. Among other things, she ‘flips the script’,⁵ or challenges some established thinking, in her assessment of Germany with regard to gender relations. I say this because Germany is a country which is generally favourably compared with the countries of southern Europe when it comes to gender relations. Elena positions herself an independent-minded and intelligent woman, and also as a Spanish woman, who encountered a degree of sexism in Germany.

2.4 More Thoughts and Conclusion

This discussion of positioning theory could end with Fig. 2.2 and my discussion of Elena’s German story, as we have made Harré’s original postulation more socio-historically embedded as opposed to individual and intention driven. However, there are other issues to consider in narrative research that might be addressed through this expanded model of positioning theory. Here I will cite three.

The first issue is related to timescales and when a story is being told and how the story is placed in terms the past and the teller’s personal ongoing life narrative. Linde (1993) reminds us that all accounts of life experiences are told in the present and therefore perhaps tell us more about how interviewees wish to position themselves now than what really happened in the past. Elsewhere, Mishler (2006) has very perceptively written about how story tellings may be more about their endings. He cites the work of Ricoeur (1980) who questioned the strict chronological, clock-based approach to narrative analysis, what he called the ‘arrow of time’ metaphor. Narratives, in Ricoeur’s view, have two dimensions, one ‘chronological’ and the other ‘non-chronological’. The former is about events tied together in sequence to constitute a coherent account of an episode in life with a beginning, middle and end (one supposes that these latter constituents can be juggled around, as in films with flashback scenes). This dimension is evident in approaches to narrative which include the notion of sequenced events, such as Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) oft-cited model, according to which a narrative begins with a quick synopsis of the story to be told, followed by the provision of key background information, the development of a complicating action, an evaluation of what happened, a resolution and a coda in the form of a return to the ongoing conversation in the present. The second dimension in Ricoeur’s thinking, the non-chronological, is about how plot is made out of what might well be

⁵‘Flipping the script’, or semantic inversion, ‘refers to turning a meaning into its opposite or divesting a concept of its received meaning to inscribe one reflective of the speaker’s experience’ (Richardson 2006: 11).

scattered and unrelated events in the past. In this case, it is the necessity which comes with knowing the ending which drives the process. The point I wish to make here is that with Elena and any other interviewee, this temporal aspect needs to be born in mind. The Elena I spoke to in September 2001 relives her experiences from five years earlier not as the 24-year-old Elena of the time but as the 29-year-old Elena who was sitting in front of me. And this 29-year-old Elena has had the benefit of five more years of experience as she makes sense of what happened to her during her stay in Germany.

This discussion of position in time is related to the credibility of the interviewee and it brings to mind a second consideration worth mentioning, and that is how Elena's words might be treated as truth or as something else. Elsewhere (Block 2000, 2006), I have dealt with this issue in the following way. First, I would argue that the extent to which the notion of accuracy of storytelling or truth comes to be a central issue is proportional to the extent to which the interviewer is concerned with obtaining a veridical account of past events. Interviewees are engaged in the process of positioning themselves in the present via the accounts of events and experiences that they provide. And with this in mind, the researcher may adopt a position whereby he/she is not dependent on whether or not an interviewee is telling the truth about his/her life, or about what he/she has done or whether or not what he/she has said about any number of topics is *really* what he/she thinks. Indeed, there are very few cases in life (and the same applies to research contexts) in which we can verify with third parties accounts provided by interlocutors.⁶

Instead, there is a view of interview talk as the enactment of Weedon's (1997) *discursive fields*. As we observed above, discursive fields are defined as "competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes." (Weedon 1997: 34). For Weedon, any version of events provided by an interlocutor is the expression of a position (in Harré's model) which is linked to a particular *discursive field*. What is actually said and how it is said may be classified as plausible or reasonable within that particular *discursive field*. It is, therefore, a particular voice which a particular speaker has adopted perhaps momentarily, though it may also be more permanent, with a view to projecting a particular position in the ongoing storyline being produced. In Elena's case, the veracity of what she said happened to her is less important than how her storyline is used to construct her as a particular type of person in this case, as an intelligent, independent woman.

A third and final issue to consider in narrative research is what counts as narrative and what does not. This is a good question, especially because I have called

⁶One reviewer of an earlier version of this chapter pointed out that here I open a can of worms with regard to the notion of truth in narrative research (and indeed empirical research in general), noting how scholars such as Polanyi (1958) have for some time highlighted the difficulties in making sense of the personal knowledge manifested by informants in word and deed. Elsewhere (Block 2000, 2006), I have dealt with this issue in more detail (albeit with limitations), but here find that there is not ample space to do justice to this topic.

my interview with Elena a ‘life-story’ interview which could imply that everything she said was ‘narrative’ in that it was about events in her life. I had, after all, opened the interview by asking her to tell me her life story. At one point in the interview, Elena said the following:

the more I go back to Spain / well the more you realise / that life there is a lot easier / but at the same time/ what I said / you live well / but you don’t work well / and here it’s the other way round / so I don’t know / also at this point (.5) it’s a joint venture / (Elena 27/09/01)

cuanto más vuelvo a España / pues más te das cuenta / de que la vida allí es mucho más fácil / pero al mismo tiempo / lo que he dicho / se vive muy bien / pero no se trabaja muy bien / y aquí pasa lo contrario / entonces no sé / además a estas alturas (.5) es una situación conjunta / (Elena 27/09/01)

I should mention that Elena uttered these words in response to my question about how long she thought she would live in London. So it is first of all useful to consider that I had momentarily interrupted the flow of her story-telling to get her to comment on a more general point. Also, the mention of a ‘joint venture’ cannot be understood unless the reader knows that Elena had incorporated her boyfriend into her storyline immediately prior to this part of the interview. In any case, while this excerpt could be classified as the expression of an opinion arising from the bald comparison of the UK and Spain (one speech act in a larger flow of other speech acts), it contributes to a fairly coherent position that Elena constructs for herself during the course of the interview. So here we can add to ‘feminist’ and ‘intelligent, independent woman’, the notions of ‘highly mobile’, in that she does not seem reticent about changing countries again, and ‘cosmopolitan’, as she is not tied to her home country of Spain.

But perhaps the big issue here is how this comment by Elena in response to a question posed by me, constitutes an evaluative comment relevant to a key aspect of her life story, her move from Spain to the UK. As Labov and Waletzky (1967) note, evaluation in narrative is directly about a narrated event and it examines the consequences of this event in both cognitive and affective terms. It may be embedded in ongoing story-telling or it may occupy a kind of taking-stock position in the narrative as a whole. Here the latter applies as Elena offers a partial evaluation of her life in the UK via her comparative comments. She obviously could offer a broader more comprehensive evaluation of this part of her life were she prompted not do so, but as it stands, this excerpt is, as I explain above, the response to a specific question. In any case, my point is that as an evaluation, it may be seen to constitute a part of the ongoing story-line being constructed. And as for the issue I originally raised—where narrative begins and ends in an interview—I will have to be non-committal if we are referring to interviews in general. However, in the case of the transcription of my interview with Elena in September 2001, I would say that it is all narrative.

There are obviously more auxiliary issues which I could add to my list here. And they would all serve to complicate still further the implementation of my expanded positioning theory triangle, as laid out in earlier sections of this paper. In a paper of this type, where the goal is more to problematize than resolve, it is often hard to

bring matters to a clean and clear conclusion. Suffice it to say that in this paper I have tried to offer a working model (which is very much a work in progress, I might add) for making sense of life-story interviews, and I have endeavoured to exemplify how it might work by examining an excerpt from an interview I carried out some years ago. But my conclusion is that reflecting on interviews as a means of collecting data in narrative research is a task that is never finished.

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