Lectio Praecursoria

Positioning dynamics in small groups

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Within the past three or four decades, organisational structures of working life and work itself have undergone significant changes. These changes are often characterised by the transition from bureaucratic organisations to post-bureaucratic organisations, where the rigid organisational structures, hierarchies and clarity of roles and power, for example, have been replaced by fluid network structures, non-hierarchical relations based on dialogue and constant negotiations of identities and power. Team and group-based methods of organising work have also become more evident. Consequently, there is currently a demand for social psychological thinking and knowledge related to how groups and teams function as well as for determining the underlying interpersonal dynamics of groups and teams in working life.

Understanding how groups work and how group memberships influence members' behaviour, such as decision making, forms the core of both the history of social psychology and social psychological thinking; however, despite the long history of study on small groups, mainstream social psychological small group investigations have mainly utilised experimental methods, often examining artificial groups in non-naturalistic environments, such as laboratories, or examining groups and teams through questionnaires appointed to the group members. Investigations of real-life groups and what

actually occurs in the groups in their everyday settings while focusing on their mirco-cultures is still limited in the field of small group studies.

Just as small groups are often characterised by having dual aims – a task-oriented aim and a social-emotional aim – my doctoral dissertation also had dual aims. First, a methodological contribution has been achieved by delineating the methodological possibilities of the so-called positioning theory in micro-cultural group studies. Second, this study sheds light on small-group phenomena, such as decision making, collective identity and conflicts, from the perspective of discursive positioning. According to Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove, positioning theory can be defined as 'the study of local moral orders as ever-shifting patterns of mutual and contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting'. In this context, moral orders are understood as the everyday rules of contextually bound appropriate behaviour. In other words, in a very dynamic and ever-changing way, positioning theory strives to explain how people place themselves and each other in different positions in conversations. Within the past 20 or so years, positioning theory has become an influential framework in research areas related to communications, education, intercultural and interorganisational relations and personal identity; however, investigations on positioning in small groups have been somewhat neglected.

Positioning theory sets to investigate the relationship between what people perceive they can do and what they actually do. According to Rom Harré, individuals' conceptions about the rights and duties to do something is key in understanding this relation. The rights and duties to act in a certain way unfold in different ways in different social contexts and episodes depending on the local moral orders. Within this framework, conversations hold a predominant role as the primary source of public and private processes, such as memory, decision making, conflicts and problem solving. In fact, as Harré stated, 'conversation is to be thought of as creating the social world just as causality generates a physical one'.

In this rather provocative quote, Rom Harré crystallises the fundamentals of his social psychological thinking, arguing that most social and psychological phenomena originate and are assigned their meanings in everyday social relationships. Positioning theory is often introduced as a criticism of the concept of a role, where the idea of positions is presented as a more dynamic alternative to the concept of a role that does not depict the multifaceted dynamics of social episodes or conversations in a sufficiently rigorous manner. In other words, a person representing one role can occupy and be assigned several different positions.

To analyse how rights and duties are assigned to and interpreted by individuals, conversations or other forms of language use must be examined from three perspectives. First, situation-specific storylines must be addressed. Positioning occurs as a part of a lived storyline, which is the context-specific shared understanding of how the social episode should unfold. Second, the speech acts of the conversation's participants should be considered. This means examining how the interlocutors orient towards each other's speech acts and identifying the social consequences of the speech acts. Finally, the actual positions ascribed to others or adopted by individuals themselves should be analysed. In this context, a position refers to the context-specific rights and duties to speak and act in a certain way, whereas positioning as action refers to the speech acts and social actions through which positions are constructed, assumed and assign-

ed. These starting points can be presented visually in a triad-like construction, which is often referred to as the positioning triad.

Positioning has different forms and varieties. First-order positioning refers to a positioning act that is not challenged by others and that is an interaction that continues uninterruptedly. Second-order positioning refers to a situation in which a previous positioning act is challenged by someone else. When either first- or second-order positioning takes place outside the original social episode but concerns the events of the original episode, this positioning is referred to as third-order positioning. Finally, re-positioning refers to the reconstruction or renegotiation of previous positionings.

To meet the aims of my study, I investigated two types of contexts of small group interactions consisting of two video-recorded and transcribed data sets. The first is comprised of one interprofessional team meeting in the context of elderly care, and the second is comprised of seven management team meetings from two Finnish public research institutes. The interactions were transcribed in detail according to conversation analytical transcription conventions, resulting in some 1000 pages of transcribed data. I conducted the data analysis by utilising an inductive thematic analysis, an abductive positioning analysis based on positioning theory and an abductive analysis of dialogue and multivoicedness.

In my first sub-study, I investigated how positioning theory suits the aims and purposes of micro-cultural groups studies. For the purposes of this study, I analysed the interprofessional team meeting of data set 1 by identifying both positioning acts taking place in the interaction and the storyline structures of the meeting. Overall, the findings demonstrate the suitabi-

lity of positioning theory when studying small group interactions and behaviour. In addition, the findings unveil the ways different storylines guide the proceeding of and positioning within the meeting. According to the findings, the storyline structure of the meeting is in a constant dynamic state, meaning that although the meeting follows a certain storyline structure, the positionings taking place in each storyline result in minor, ephemeral sub-storylines. Depending on how the group members adopted new positions or challenged others' positions, the perlocutionary effects of these positioning acts had an impact on how the whole group functioned. In this sense, the second-order positionings resulted in micro-level social change concerning the functioning of the group. All these positioning acts thus resulted in manifestations of micro-level storylines (sometimes only a few utterances) within the predominant storylines.

My second sub-study focused on small group decision making from the perspective of positioning dynamics in a Finnish research institute. The findings demonstrate that decision-making episodes consist of varying storylines and that positioning acts in these episodes result in task positioning and the re-creation of local moral orders. In addition, positioning during the episodes intertwined with different group-level phenomena, such as the progression of the meeting, establishing the chair's position and negotiations on constructing an understanding regarding shared themes and concepts. Perhaps most interestingly, the analysis of this sub-study led me to the conceptualisation of task positioning as a specific group-level form of positioning. The positioning acts and the storylines created during decision making often entailed an element that dealt with how the group should continue with the task at hand, what the central concepts regarding the task

meant or what should be done about the matter in the future. For example, simply stating that the matter at hand was important and allowing for more time for the presentation of the matter resulted in creating a specific type of an institutional and conversational moral order.

In sub-study three, I focused my analysis on the collective positioning taking place in the meetings. Together with Dr Pekka Kuusela, we chose to analyse the strategy discussions of the management boards of the institutions in data set 2. Our analysis focused on how the members of the management boards positioned themselves through we-positioning during strategy discussions, simultaneously establishing an understanding of who they were as representatives of a specific type of institution. Our aim in this sub-study was to analyse the collective positioning in the management teams by applying a qualitative method developed to analyse the dialogicality in the context of individual identity construction. The findings demonstrate three types of we-positions, or collective voices, occurring in the meetings: a we-position focusing on the overall nature of the institution, a we-position with reference to the use of specific performance indicators and a we-position dealing with communications and public relations. These collective positions were constructed with reference to either broader cultural understandings and procedures, such as cost efficiency and applying measurement indicators, or to the basic functions of the groups within the organisation.

In sub-study four, I focused on conflict episodes during management board meetings. The findings of sub-study one had already suggested the usefulness of applying positioning theory to the investigations of small group conflicts. For the purposes of this study, I operationalised conflicts as sequences of interpersonal interactions in which one interlocutor's position is challenged by another group member. In terms of positioning theory, this is referred to as second-order positioning. Within this context, I applied Kenneth Gergen's distinctions of different types of dialogical scenarios. I paid special attention to the social outcomes of each conflict episode and labelled them based on either generative dialogue, which has an aim that the participants construct together by adding to each other's inputs, or degenerative dialogue, which can, according to Gergen, 'move toward animosity, silence, or the breaking of a relationship altogether'. Instances of second-order positioning were identified as degenerative conflict episodes when a second-order positioning of one of the group members was followed by positioning acts that did not include re-positioning of the conflict counterparts and therefore the original conflict was left unresolved. This involved either silencing the initiator of the conflict altogether or simply moving on in the meeting without explicit attempts to find a solution to the conflict. These types of conflicts can be characterised as malignant conflict storylines. In the case of generative conflict episodes, the group members were able to solve the conflict, resulting in the construction of a new shared understanding of the issue at hand or in the construction of a new local moral order related to the group's tasks. The new understanding was achieved by re-positioning the conflict counterpart as someone else in the group explained and made sense of the details regarding the discussion or the statements of conflict counterparts. These conflict episodes can be referred to as salutary conflict storylines.

Interpersonal positioning should be understood as a moral activity in which the local moral orders of a given episode play an integral role. Therefore, examining positioning dynamics and their connections to the central fea-

tures of work groups should also entail a moral evaluation. Based on their generality or specificity, moral orders can be divided into cultural, legal, institutional, conversational and personal moral orders, and they should be considered as fields that generate structures for social behaviour but that are also defeasible and negotiable. Just as one of the key figures in the history of social psychology, Kurt Lewin, emphasised, the focus of analysis in social psychology should be set to the dynamics between the person and the environment. In the context of small group and organisational studies, we can outline a theoretical framework of fields of moral orders surrounding small groups and can determine how these moral orders are recreated in small groups. Indeed, fields of moral orders should not be understood as fixed structures but rather as the result of interactions. Examining the key themes of my findings from this perspective connects the themes of tasks, aims, roles, col-

lective identity, decision making and conflicts to the overall framework of moral orders. These basic themes and issues in the field of small group studies often lack the micro-cultural investigation and the analysis of natural groups.

Overall, studying small groups from the perspective of positioning theory holds the potential to investigate interpersonal actions by acknowledging the themes of agency and structure. Moral orders provide structures for interpersonal interactions, which in turn result in the possible reconstruction of these orders. Small groups form one arena for these interactions and still constitute a pivotal area of study in social psychology. After all, as social psychologist Gary Alan Fine and his colleagues have stated, 'small groups are still where the action is'.