Understanding Small Group Dynamics Through Positioning Theory

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This paper presents positioning theory as an opportunity to approach small group dynamics and small group interaction from a meso-level perspective by considering both the interaction order of small groups and the social structures surrounding the groups. It is argued that although a large amount of research has focused on the analysis of interaction in different small group settings, a relatively minor part of this research has adopted an explicit approach, focusing on small-group-level analysis in addition to discursive analysis. Positioning theory offers an opportunity to approach small group interaction that considers both the interpersonal dynamics and the social structures shaping these dynamics. In addition to presenting some current research in this field, themes related to the theoretical starting points, as well as methodological alternatives, are also discussed.

Keywords: positioning theory, small groups, small group research, meso-level, interaction order, discourse

Despite relatively large-scale changes in Western society characterised by the individualisation of culture and, to some extent, the fracture of broader social structures, the role of group memberships and social groups is still significant in our everyday lives. Group memberships are fundamental to the construction of social identity, as well as in interpersonal

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interactions (e.g. Hogg & Abrams, 1999; Stangor, 2016). In the context of working life, the abovementioned cultural changes are visible in the shift from bureaucratical organisational structures to post-bureaucratical structures characterised by the fluidity of roles, dialogical and communicative power relations and shared responsibilities (e.g. Kira, 2003). To some extent, challenges related to these changes have been tackled by developing team-based organisational structures and working methods. Regarding the study of small groups, social and organisational psychologists have focused their attention on group memberships and the analysis of small group and team processes since the early days of these disciplines. However, during the past four to five decades, these traditional small group investigations, focusing particularly on group interaction, have been overshadowed by poststructuralist and constructivist analyses of interaction and identity, leaving explicit small group analysis aside. One could ask if this is due to methodological issues. If so, how could these issues be tackled? As one possible alternative to approaching small groups explicitly by utilising a discursive framework, this paper introduces this discussion and investigates the possibilities of adapting the theoretical concepts of positioning theory to empirical interaction and small group research. Thus, this paper aims to highlight the potential of positioning theory as a discursive framework that can be adapted to explicit investigations of small groups, small group behaviour and small group dynamics.

Positioning theory, as it is understood in the context of discursive psychology, strives to specify the moral orders that function as the basis of interpersonal relationships, groups and even cultures and institutions (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Harré, 2012). These moral orders set limits on what kinds of rights and duties people have in a group, and how they position one another in their interactions by using different kinds of narrative conventions. Although interaction and the use of different kinds of discourse have been investigated in the context of small groups for decades, analysis focusing on small group interaction from the positioning theory perspective has been relatively minor. What could positioning theory offer to the study of small groups?

PREVIOUS APPROACHES IN SMALL GROUPS AND INTERACTION

Previous studies in small group interaction and communication have focused on either coding or classifying interactions, or studying naturalistic data from a discursive perspective. The former approach is often referred to as the tradition of small group communication research

and the latter, more broadly, as constructivist and naturalistic interaction studies. Although both of these approaches focus on interaction- and communication-related issues and themes, they differ significantly from one another. The small group communication perspective focuses mainly on the statistical analysis of different kinds of data, such as interaction data and questionnaires, aiming at developing theoretical models for effective group work (e.g. Hirokawa, 2003). Small group communications scholars, using different kinds of interaction coding schemes, such as Interaction Process Analysis (e.g. Bales, 1951), focus explicitly on group dynamics in interaction, whereas the discursive approaches, such as discourse and conversation analysis, adopt an implicit approach to the investigation of small groups (e.g. Cooren, 2007). Focusing mainly on the analysis of naturalistic discourse data, the discursive perspectives aim to analyse different discursive actions taking place in a variety of group contexts. They pay little, if any, attention to the explicit analysis of small groups as it is understood amongst small group research scholars. Explicit small group research refers to investigations where the primary interest focuses on analysing group phenomena and group processes. The aim of explicit small group research is, first and foremost, investigating small groups and small group phenomena. Within social psychology, the small group communication perspective represents the traditional small group research paradigm in the context of small group communication and interaction studies. For example, the starting points of the communication perspective have been applied to a large number of studies focusing on the study of small group decision-making (Salazar, 1997), stereotype development (Hausmann, Levine, & Higgins, 2008) and multidisciplinary group work (Bell, 2001), for example. Stemming from post-structuralist and constructionist theories, as well as ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, the discursive and socio-linguistic perspectives focusing on interaction analysis in group contexts have emphasised questions related to identity (Bell, 2003), sequentiality of interaction (Ford, 2004), disagreements (Kangasharju, 2002) and leadership (Svennevig, 2011). Approaches of this nature have been adapted to institutional and educational contexts, especially.

Within small group studies, only a handful of scholars have tackled the issue of combining traditional small group research and the discursive perspectives by focusing on symbolic activities as a part of communicative practices within small groups. Although these perspectives have not been systematically and explicitly outlined as a specific research program, Frey and Sunwolf (2004) have presented a synthesis of such approaches, referring to them as the symbolic-interpretive (S-I) perspective on small group dynamics. In addition to

focusing on the use of different symbolical practices in small groups, the S-I perspective emphasises the notion of 'how groups and group dynamics themselves are products of such symbolic activity' (Frey & Sunwolf, 2004, p. 278). Frey and Sunwolf (2004) suggest an approach of this nature suits the analysis of symbolic predispositions, such as traits, symbolic processes and products like decisions, tasks and goals, and group identities, especially. However, most studies applying the S-I perspective on small groups approach groups more or less explicitly. Both the S-I perspective and positioning theory share an interest in using language and symbols as a primary level of investigation while examining the social construction of collective dynamics. In this regard, positioning theory has the potential to add a novel perspective to the S-I investigations of small groups. Concerning the positioning-theory-oriented analysis of small groups, particularly, it is worth considering in more detail what explicit small group analysis could be and what kinds of theoretical and methodological baselines should be considered when approaching both interpersonal interaction and small groups processes and dynamics explicitly.

POSITIONING GROUPS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

As a discipline investigating interpersonal behaviour and interaction, social psychologists have traditionally been interested in the study of small group dynamics and processes. However, as Fine (2012) quite aptly put it, within the more cultural and sociological investigations, such as the implicit approaches presented above, interesting and important investigations related to the group level of action are often neglected. Taking into consideration both the interactional elements of interpersonal behaviour, as well as the social structures surrounding them, positioning theory represents an approach that can help overcome this gap. That is, it offers an approach focusing on both interactions in a given context, in addition to the social structures that make the interaction and small group behaviour intelligible. However, this requires some further consideration regarding how to conceptualise small groups and how the basic concepts of the positioning theory should be understood in the context of small group dynamics.

In his investigations concerning developments in the field of micro-sociological group studies, Fine (2012) has pointed out the need for a more cultural perspective to the study of small groups. By suggesting an integrative approach that focuses on the investigations of both interaction orders, as well as explicit group processes and the creation of group cultures, Fine and his colleagues (e.g. Fine, 2012; Fine & Hallett, 2014; Harrington & Fine, 2006) present

an alternative to the implicit and discursive approaches that mostly focus on the analysis of local interaction orders. This approach has been referred to as the meso-level perspective on small group dynamics (Fine, 2012; Fine & Hallett 2014). Referring to meso-level understanding here means focusing on the dual nature of small groups, both as constructed in social interaction and as local domains that create a context for interaction order. According to Fine (2012, p. 159), 'groups provide mechanisms through which individuals fit into larger structures and through which social structures shape individuals'. An approach and analysis of this nature presents a framework for small group research where 'a focus on the group–the meso-level of analysis–enriches both structural and interactional approaches, stressing shared an ongoing meaning' (Fine, 2012, p. 159). Such an approach aims to bring groups back into the focal point of research, delineating the role of small groups as worthy of explicit focus. The concept of a meso-level approach in this context refers especially to the previous notion of focusing on the explicit analysis of small groups. Concerning the different analytical focal points that could be investigated within this approach, Fine outlines several interesting group-level processes, in which the dynamics of interpersonal behaviour and being a member of a group are of particular interest. For example, the starting points of this approach have been applied to the investigation of group memberships and social identity, collective action, and the formation of local cultures and extended networks.

From a positioning theory perspective, all the abovementioned investigations are of great interest. Especially from a small group research perspective that has traditionally focused on the small group processes and interpersonal behaviour within small groups, the analysis of collective action is especially interesting. Also, taking into consideration that positioning theory strives to develop a further understanding of interpersonal relations taking place in everyday conversations, the starting points of the theory offer valid analytical tools for such activities in a small group context. This, however, sets a methodological challenge if one is to connect the analysis of situated interaction and the analysis of social structures in relation, for example, to particular group processes. Positions and positioning should always be investigated in relation to the local moral orders and the construction of socially-shared storylines. The local moral orders both set the social structure for small group dynamics and are reconstructed and negotiated in the interactions amongst the group members (see Hirvonen, 2016). An investigation of the discursive practices in small groups in relation to the local moral orders represents a meso-level approach highlighting the interaction order and social structure of a small group.

Harré and Moghaddam (2015) have also discussed the possibilities of applying positioning-theory-oriented analysis to the analysis of social representations. This would set the focus of analysis 'to the ways rights and duties are distributed among the people who share the representation' (Harré & Moghaddam, 2015, p. 225). In the small group research context, analysis of this nature comes close to the investigation of idiocultures and the different ways small groups filter surrounding collective representations (Fine, 2012). This offers an interesting point of view to the study of small groups as arenas for constructing social representations. Approaching these processes from the perspective of local moral orders, positioning theory can be regarded as one possible theoretical and methodological opportunity in outlining such small group research programs.

POSITIONING THEORY AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL FOR SMALL GROUP DYNAMICS

The discussion presented above constructs a framework of different approaches to the analysis of small groups, social relations and interaction, aiming at identifying the location for positioning-theory-oriented analysis in the sometimes-intertwined web of theoretical and analytical approaches to small group research. Although positioning theory has become a relatively influential framework in the analysis of interpersonal behaviour and social relations within the past two decades, the starting points of the theory have been applied to the investigation of small group behaviour in only a handful of studies. Amongst these studies, the emphasis of the role of group-level investigation has varied, although most can be located to the implicit approach of small group investigations. These studies have focused mainly on classroom interaction in an educational setting (e.g. Bossér & Lindahl, 2017) or therapy interaction (e.g. Winslade, 2006). Clifton (2014) takes a step towards the explicit investigations in a study investigating the construction of leadership in meeting interaction. In his analysis, Clifton highlights how some group members can use discursive resources, enabling them to construct a leadership identity. In addition, a few studies focusing on the group-level analysis applying the basic concepts of the positioning theory have also been conducted (Hirvonen 2013; 2016). These studies have highlighted some of the key issues related to positioning and small group processes, such as decision-making and task construction. Focusing on the positioning dynamics in a small group context, the basic concepts of the theory have been developed further by introducing some nuanced correctives. For example, small-group-level analysis has highlighted positioning dynamics related to task-

oriented behaviour in small groups when interpersonal positioning is intertwined in the construction of shared understanding concerning the tasks of the small group, as well as future task-related functions. This activity, which also creates new institutional and interpersonal moral orders in the group, has been referred to as task-positioning. Analysis of this nature has also disclosed the structural elements of small group activities in terms of different storyline structures (Hirvonen, 2016).

In a recent study, Zanin and Bisel (2017) analysed the team dynamics of an athletic department by focusing on the perlocutionary effects of certain speech-acts of the team managers, resulting in the creation of collective resistance. The analysis demonstrates one of the key elements related to positioning dynamics in elaborating not only the illocutionary speech-acts but also their social consequences, that is, their perlocutionary effects. This is the key issue related to the social dynamics of group behaviour and group-level analysis in highlighting the role of positioning theory as a methodology for small group research. The key question here is: What are the group-level consequences of interpersonal positioning in small groups? To answer this question, positioning-theory-oriented analysis can take several approaches, varying from inductive to abductive analysis. A theoretical framework for positioning-theory-oriented small group analysis is presented in Figure 1.
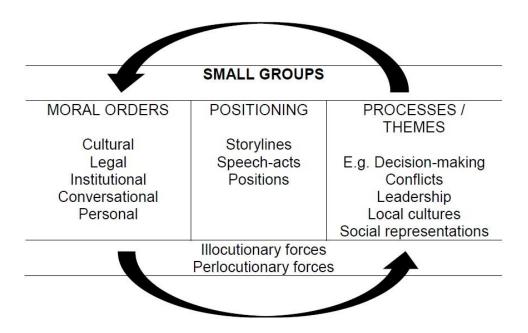

Figure 1. Theoretical framework for positioning theory oriented small group analysis.

The analytical frame concerning possible research data needs to be addressed first, however. What kind of data should we use and what is the focus of the analysis? In this regard, analysis should focus first and foremost on conversations and the use of language in different small group contexts. In accordance with the starting points of meso-level investigations and the symbolic-interpretive perspective, naturally occurring conversations and actual social episodes taking part in small groups should constitute the primary research data. Interviews and questionnaires can be used if needed, especially to assist with the interpretation of the data concerning, for example, the intentionality of different positioning acts. In a more inductive approach, analysis can start with a thematic aim by investigating the discursive construction of small group processes, and phenomena such as decision-making or leadership. Later, these themes can be approached more abductively by introducing the basic concepts of the theory as an analytical frame. The analysis can also be conducted starting with an abductive approach by using the basic concepts of the theory as a methodological tool, by identifying speech-acts, positions or storylines in specific group episodes. Whatever the approach, it is important to note the interdependent nature of the phenomena in which the positioning dynamics of specific speech-acts, storylines and positions co-construct one another and are thoroughly intertwined. In a recent article, Van Langenhove (2017) introduced a specification of the varieties of moral orders that function as the basis of positioning but are also reconstructed as a result of interpersonal positioning. From general to specific, Van Langenhove categorises these moral orders into cultural, legal, institutional, conversational and intrapersonal moral orders. Depending on the context of the social episode, some moral orders might become more active than others because they involve contextually bound expectations of appropriate behaviour. Examining positioning dynamics in small groups could also entail not only the analysis of how moral orders guide the meso-level collective action but also how specific moral orders are constructed in small groups. An analysis of the varieties of different moral orders offers a possibility to further develop group-level analysis highlighting the broader cultural aspects of positioning that go beyond the mere analysis of groups as micro-cultures.

CONCLUSION

Positioning theory is by no means a theory about small groups. Instead, the theory offers a set of analytical and theoretical tools to make sense of the social dynamics related to small group

behaviour and small group processes. Adding to the investigation of small group dynamics, positioning theory can be regarded as a very applicable alternative. The theory sheds light on important investigations about the relationship between interpersonal and social dynamics and small group processes.

What is the possible future of positioning-theory-oriented small group research? Overall, and as stated above, positioning theory offers conceptual and analytical tools to understand almost every aspect of small group behaviour or team dynamics. For example, the key elements of successful teamwork have been outlined numerous times, yet a qualitative and naturalistic analysis of these themes has been somewhat non-existent. This approach offers an opportunity to delineate and construe the ways a shared identity is constructed in a small group. This would bring the analysis and focus close to themes discussed amongst the dialogical-self-theory scholars. Some investigations regarding the similarities and differences of these approaches have already been conducted (see Kuusela & Hirvonen, 2017; Raggatt, 2007), but further investigations are still needed.

Positioning theory offers an opportunity to investigate small groups from a perspective that allows the combination of meso-level perspective and the detailed analysis of interaction orders. Research of this nature has been outlined as one of the key issues and challenges concerning the future of small group research (Keyton, 2016). This can be achieved by a careful interaction analysis using the basic concept of the theory as a methodological and interpretive tool. Analysis of this nature brings forth an explicit approach that considers both the discursive construction of interpersonal positions, as well as their connections to the group processes and group dynamics. This also adds an element to the much-needed discussion about the explicit study of local moral orders. Further investigations are still required, especially in expanding the concepts of positioning to the variety of multimodal resources that play important roles, particularly in the context of small groups.

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