



The utility of positioning theory to the study of ageing: Examples from research with childless older people



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 November 2012

Received in revised form 8 January 2013

Accepted 4 February 2013

Keywords:

Positioning theory

Childlessness

Emotional support

Residential care

Narrative analysis

ABSTRACT

Growing older is hard to make sense of. Opposing perspectives are presented on everything from individual to population ageing, and there is widespread ambivalence towards many aspects of ageing. Positioning theory is a research approach that can tolerate such ambiguity and provides a clear, useful framework to make sense of research data, while doing justice to its complexity. It is starting to be used in gerontology; the aim of this paper is to give gerontologists the tools and impetus to use it more. The positioning triad is outlined, comprising positions (how we position ourselves and others within a single conversation or across a lifetime), storylines (the individual and social narratives which furnish those positions), and the speech acts (and acts of research) through which storylines and positions are enacted. In addition, considering the rights and duties associated with different positions and storylines can usefully illuminate some of the tensions around competing positions on ageing. Worked examples from a qualitative study on childless older people (38 participants aged 63 to 93) in terms of their positioning of childlessness, views on residential care, and positioning of emotional support show how the complexity of such diverse topics can be usefully studied using a positioning theory framework.

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Introduction

Growing older is hard to make sense of. There are competing images of individuals ageing ‘successfully’, remaining healthy and productive well into later life (Rowe & Kahn, 1997) or calls for more holistic frameworks that do not ascribe narrowly defined success or failure (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). There is widespread ageism and a privileging of youth culture and appearance. At a societal level, population ageing is deemed a triumph of health innovation, public health infrastructure and social advances (United Nations, 2002), or a crisis of increasing dependency ratios, pension and healthcare costs (James, 1995), depending on what issue is being discussed, and by whom.

In this paper, we outline positioning theory as a framework of particular utility and relevance for gerontological research and analysis of complex data. We illustrate components of the ‘positioning triad’ (positions, storylines, and speech acts) to show how each can inform our approach to understanding ageing in all its diversity and ambiguity, whether at the level of an individual’s talk, a health intervention, a research plan, government policy or social norm. We also outline the idea of the rights and duties that can be associated with different positions, a unique component of the positioning approach that can inform moral debates in the ageing field. Examples are drawn from our research with childless older people (a group who are frequently positioned as at risk of lack of support in later life, located outside ‘normal’ family life), as well as brief examples from others who have used a positioning framework for gerontological research (e.g., Jones, 2006; Sabat, 2003). The aim of the paper is for researchers, practitioners, policy makers and others associated with the study of ageing to understand practical ways they could apply positioning theory in their work, and benefit from a framework that provides both rigour

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and flexibility in analysing the complex and dynamic field of ageing.

Positioning theory

The idea of the 'position' was outlined by psychologists Davies and Harré (1990, 1999) to replace the idea of the 'role' in social science (Goffman, 1969). Harré and Davies critiqued the assumption that roles were fixed and static, rather than being 'accomplished' from moment-to-moment in social interaction. Whereas theories of rules and roles denote predictability and stability, the concept of positioning 'catches the continuous shifts in how people perceive themselves and how others perceive them' (Baert, 2012, p. 310).

Positioning theory is 'a starting point for reflecting upon the many different aspects of social life' (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 10), rather than a deterministic general theory trying to predict social life. As such, it fits within the discursive psychology tradition (Osbeck & Nersessian, 2010) with a focus on analysis of actual instances of social interaction, and on the power of words to constitute versions of reality, identity, and aspects of social life. The 'constitutive force of discourse' operates in the 'particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts' (p. 46) of any given position and the moral and personal attributes associated with it (Davies & Harré, 1990); for example, consider the different effects of a person positioning themselves as *childless* vs. *child-free* (Allen & Wiles, 2013); or of being described by others as *never-married* vs. *ever-single*; or as a *confirmed bachelor* or a *career woman*. The focus on understanding how words *do* things in the social world shows the influence of speech act theory (Austin, 1955), social constructionism (Howie & Peters, 1996), and post-structuralist thinking (Davies & Harré, 1999), with an additional (and intriguing) focus on the moral aspects of what rights and duties are associated with different positions, speech acts and storylines (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009).

Positioning theory can also be located within the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences as it examines the way that 'life unfolds as a narrative, with multiple, contemporaneous interlinking story-lines' (Harré et al., 2009, p. 8), at individual, interpersonal, and wider sociocultural levels. A positioning framework of position/speech act/storyline, and associated rights and duties, can be used to reflect on issues like ageing at all these different levels using the 'same conceptual apparatus' (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 12) and thus can potentially bridge some of the divides traditionally made between the macro analysis of sociology and individual focus of psychology. It can also complement a narrative gerontology approach (see Allen & Wiles, 2013).

A positioning framework has been applied to interview talk within social science and feminist research (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2003), including some projects in ageing (e.g., Jones, 2006; Sabat, 2003), and also to larger scale talk of international relations and politics (e.g., Slocum-Bradley, 2007). Positioning theorists have examined the rhetoric of research itself, particularly in science (e.g., Baert, 2012; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Osbeck & Nersessian, 2010), and such examination would also be fruitful in the field of ageing.

The three elements of the position, the storyline and the speech act are conceptualised as an interacting 'positioning triad' to highlight their interconnected, mutually determining

operations in any given social exchange (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 18). The positioning triad is illustrated in Fig. 1 as a triangle (Harré et al., 2009), with an example of an ageist positioning and counter-positioning demonstrated. Each element of position, storyline and speech act, with examples related to childlessness and ageing, is then outlined, followed by a discussion of the rights and duties associated with different positions. Findings from a research project on childless older people illustrate the theory in action, followed by concluding reflections on limitations and next steps.

Positions

Humans constantly position themselves and others, and are positioned at a variety of levels (intrapersonally, interpersonally, between groups, by social institutions or cultural practices), and across different time spans (within a single interaction, across a lifespan, across centuries of human interaction) (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). So, for example, a single interaction with a doctor telling a man he is too old to drive shifts the positions available to him, no longer able to position himself as an independent transport provider but maybe finding other positions that maintain some independence, such as getting access to a mobility scooter (Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Wittert, & Warin, 2007; Wiles & Jayasinha, 2013). In addition, longstanding social norms about men being 'in the driver's seat' as a prized aspect of masculinity come into play, and interpersonal positions also change, for example as he repositions his reluctance to be driven by his wife.

Positions are relative to other positions; if one is positioned as a nurse, someone else needs to be positioned as a patient with associated 'clusters of rights, duties, and obligations' (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 128). Positions can be actively shifted or resisted, but are nevertheless constrained by 'larger stories' or norms that make some positions marginal within certain social structures (Davies & Harré, 1990), such as the negative positioning that can be associated with old age (Jones, 2006). Positions may be refused or resisted, for example a nurse may want to construe an older person as a 'patient' while the older person denies any illness and refuses that position; or a man positioning himself as a patient might want to drive his partner into a position as his 'nurse' (Harré & Slocum, 2003).

Positioning is a discursive process, where discourses, the 'institutionalised use of language', produce 'social and psychological realities' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 45). For example, the category 'older people' is constituted as if it has a pre-existing reality and set of attributes, yet even the chronological age at which one joins the category varies from age 60 in global ageing debates (WHO, 2002), to age 65 when state pension entitlements begin (Work & Income, 2010), or at age 55 to reflect the higher mortality and morbidity associated with social disadvantage of indigenous populations (Hauora, 1997). Subjectively belonging to the category 'old' is even more variable (Hurd, 1999), and a positioning study showed how older people flexibly positioned themselves as both 'old' and 'not old' (Jones, 2006), drawing on different positions 'in ways that suit[ed] the immediate business of the conversation' (p. 89).

There can be some agency or 'notional choice' in the many contradictory discursive practices that can be engaged by either individuals or as social discourse (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46), for example in terms of the wide variety of identities of ageing

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