Narrative positioning in the interview situation: Young adults resisting identities of “being at risk”

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Abstract

By applying the framework of positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003) and narrative positioning (Bamberg, 1997; 2004) this paper examines young adults’ identity construction as narrative practice in interviews conducted in the context of youth activation programmes (a youth work shop). A particular focus is on locally portrayed identities of young adults “at risk” and on the interplay of identities with socially and culturally shared ideologies and models. The data consists of interviews of fifteen young adults between 17 and 26 years of age, with a focus on their experiences in education, career planning and participating in youth activation programmes and their future aspirations. Narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) was deployed to get a fuller picture of the narrative environment of the participants.

The analysis revealed that the themes in the interview, education and work careers and the context, a youth activation programme, made available both progressive and unfavorable storylines and positions. In the context of the work shop, storylines and positions were evoked and negotiated in a manner that resisted “at risk” identities. However, in interviewees’ stories about imagined futures, there were only a limited range of master narratives bound storylines and corresponding positions available for school dropouts and those with disrupted work careers. Furthermore, most of the storylines and embedded positions were unfavorable.
Consequently, adopted identity positions seemed to restrict their future aspirations in education and work careers.

**Key words**

Interview, Narrative positioning, Young adults “at risk”, Identity, Agency

**Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to examine locally, in the interview situation, constructed identities of young adults “at risk” and the interplay of the situational identities with socially and culturally shared ideologies and models. Young adults refer to people under 30 years of age, in line with the Finnish Youth Guarantee (FNBE) which was introduced in Finland in 2013. On the basis of the country-wide activation policy young adults have both the right and obligation to participate in supportive activities aimed at those whose education or work careers have discontinued. Consequently, they are positioned “at risk” of exclusion from the education and labor market. However, their position is not permanently determined.

In the Finnish society, being “at risk” of exclusion from the education and labor market constructs a position which bears a stigma (Goffman, 1984) of “otherness” or “disadvantage”. Furthermore, being “at risk” constructs a powerful social identity that restrict individual agency and action. Therefore, research focusing on local meaning-making of the individuals is needed to complement traditional, structure-centered sociological approaches to transitions that often ignore individuals’ perspectives.

**Narrative positioning as an approach to identity and agency**

By paying attention to “the discursive production of a diversity of selves” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 47), this paper draws on positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) and its further elaboration, narrative positioning as (Bamberg, 1997; 2004), which pays attention to narratives as situated actions and a means of identity construction. While Davies and Harré (1990, p. 48) regarded positioning as “the discursive process whereby
selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines”, Bamberg (1997; 2004) presented the idea that the narrators actively and agentively position themselves at three different, though intertwined levels in narratives: First, at the level of the story world, which refers to stories about the past, present and future events and characters in stories. Second, at the level of the telling, which refers to storylines and embedded positions initiated in interaction by the interviewees and the interviewer and, finally, at the level of culturally available master narratives and normative social positions beyond the local interview context.

Looking at narratives and storytelling as locally situated practices in a specific context (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008) requires that also narrative environment is paid attention to (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008). In narrative environment, certain storytelling conventions are more preferred than others. In this sense, telling conventions can be regarded as local moral orders, which assign rights and duties to people involved, both rights and duties to act and to speak and give certain kinds of accounts (see De Fina, 2009). Therefore, the local moral order in the interview situation and also in the wider context of a youth workshop may affect what kind of identities are relevant and negotiated (De Fina, 2015).

Following Mishler (1986) and Rapley (2001), interviews are regarded as social actions between the interviewees and the interviewer, although they are different from a common conversation in several respects including power relations. As De Fina (2009) suggests, the stories and the telling are elicited via interactional dynamics. Therefore, the interviewer’s questions and the interviewees’ answers, “small stories” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) with a certain moral point or evaluation, (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2002) intersect. Consequently, the interview can be viewed as a series of speech acts and as socially meaningful performance (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003).

Identity construction can be seen as interaction between the two different, but intertwined layers of narration, the storytelling self and the story world (Bamberg, 1997; De Fina, 2015). In consequence, there is a possibility of rhetorical redescription (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1993). Therefore, storylines and positions, which are embedded both in “fragments of the participants’ autobiographies” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48) and in imagined stories of future events, are negotiated and renegotiated for a certain purpose at hand in the interview situation.
Results and conclusions

On the basis of a detailed analysis of the interview manuscripts in three different levels, two major storylines with embedded positions were identified: the storyline of disruption and the storyline of empowerment. In the beginning of the interviews, the interviewees positioned themselves in their small stories about the past events within education and work as victims or underdogs because of unfavourable circumstances. In consequence, the position of an underdog and adopted “at risk” identity limited their agency to maintain and pursue their educational and work careers. When the interview continued the interviewees positioned themselves in their small stories about activation programmes in a manner that resisted “at risk” identities. They adopted the major storyline of empowerment and wanted to be seen differently.

However, when telling about future, imagined stories, the powerful storyline of disruption positioned them again in a very unfavourable way in respect to possibilities for future actions in education or labour market. Accordingly, the interviewees were not able to draw upon more productive storylines available in the interview and by the interviewer and position themselves as agents, that is, who strive to see different futures. In this respect, the master narratives and the wider narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) and the position of being “at risk” limits what is “logically possible for a given person to say and do” (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 5).

In the context of youth activation programmes and in the interview situation with an educated interviewer, one could argue that the interviewees were obliged to position themselves in a storyline of empowerment and in corresponding repaired identity position, that is, as young adults who have a moral duty to maintain their educational and work careers. Therefore, actions such as telling about applying for work, although employment without a diploma is unlikely, or applying for education again, although one has dropped out vocational education several times, can be viewed as attempts to position oneself as respectable person in Finnish society where education and employment are highly valued.
References


