

Exploring the Application of Positioning Theory to the Analysis of Organisational Change

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ABSTRACT

The present paper proposes the application of Positioning Theory as an analytical tool in organisational change research. Positioning Theory can contribute to an enhanced understanding of organisational change. It is a discursive approach to change. Its dynamic nature can capture a detailed picture of change and provide better understanding due to attention to contexts. It allows consideration of multiple levels of social analysis - people, institutions and society. Positioning Theory in this sense has a dual relevance for research in organisational change, as a theoretical framework and a method of social analysis. Throughout the paper I develop a rationale for this proposition. The theoretical assumptions are underpinned with some examples from a preliminary data analysis.

Keywords: organisational change • change management • employee responses • theories of change • resisting change • change communication

This paper introduces the proposition that Positioning Theory (van Langenhove & Harré 1999) can be applied to and enhance the analysis of organisational change scenarios. Although Positioning Theory has been used as an analytical tool in the investigation of organisational change before, its full potential both as a theoretical framework and a method of qualitative analysis is yet to be fully understood. Research into Positioning Theory has gained momentum over the past decade or so. Its application is becoming more widespread among researchers of various social science disciplines and it has been made use of in the analysis of social phenomena ranging from gender differences in the production of subjectivity to the assessment of quality systems (Boxer 2003; Hollway 1984; Jorgenson 2002). However, one of the most promising yet most underutilized aspects of Positioning Theory, namely its potential to bridge the analytical gap between people, institutions, and societies as levels of social analysis (micro, meso, macro), remains largely underexplored in the current literature. For research into organisational change this potential bridging function has implications. How individuals respond to and cope with change, individual behaviour can make the difference between success and failure of change initiatives. Positioning Theory helps to develop a deeper understanding of an individual's self and identity issues in organisational settings. It enables the researcher to analyse how identity is presented in positions as well as how positioning or the practice of taking positions shapes identities and in turn behaviour. Organisational change with its elevated demands for sense making, interpretation, and construction of meaning challenges the notion of individual identity as a micro phenomenon. It demonstrates the need for research on all three levels of social analysis. Positioning

Theory could provide the means for such a multi level analysis and thus contribute to furthering understanding of the role of individual identity in change management. The present paper explores Positioning Theory in the light of organisational change with a particular emphasis on its potential as a tool in change analysis. The argument of the paper is developed throughout four sections. First, I provide a brief introduction to Positioning Theory. In the second section I introduce the rationale behind the application of Positioning Theory to organisational change in more detail. This section also provides a review of the few examples of research the literature offers. Third, I underpin my argument with some examples taken from a preliminary analysis of data collected for my PhD research project. The fourth and final section of the paper presents a short discussion and some concluding thoughts.

POSITIONING THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION

The introduction of Positioning Theory into the social science dates back to the mid-1980s and is most commonly attributed to Hollway's (1984) work on gender differences in the production of subjectivity. Harré and Van Langenhove who remain major contributors to its development until today took up Positioning Theory in the 1990s (Davies & Harré 1990; Harré 1991; Harré & Slocum 2003; Harré & van Langenhove 1991; van Langenhove & Harré 1999).

Foundations of Positioning Theory

The concept of positioning is best known for its application in the marketing of products, services, and brands. Communication strategies that aspire to distinguish a product from its competitors can achieve this by discursively establishing a position towards one or more unique features that provide the product with an appealing identity. Similarly people take positions within discourses that allow the presentation of a certain identity, or certain aspects of an identity in a particular context or situation. Although indeterminateness or ambiguity may persist to some degree, by positioning themselves and others within conversations people can give meaning to their behaviour and make it intelligible in the light of the storyline of the conversation (van Langenhove & Harré 1999).

The mutually determining triad of positions, storyline, and speech acts or social force constitute the theoretical underpinning that Positioning Theory rests on (van Langenhove & Harré 1999). Positions,

by means of rights and duties that are attached to them, set the boundaries of socially possible actions within a conversation. The specific storyline of the conversation represents the context or situational contingencies. It can provide clues about availability and appropriateness of positions. Speech acts are those actions that qualify as being of social significance to a given situation. An action becomes socially significant by providing meaning to the unfolding conversation (Harré & Moghaddam 2003: 5-6). How a conversation unfolds depends on all three elements of the 'Positioning "Triangle"', the interplay between positions, storyline, and speech-acts (Harré & Moghaddam 2003: 5). A change of the storyline affects both position and speech-act. The presence or absence of certain positions may or may not allow for certain speech acts, hence altering the storyline or not and so forth. While the conversation unfolds other participants may challenge the positioning of the first converser and by means of their own positioning give the storyline a new twist. In turn an altered storyline can affect the initial social force of a speech act and therefore shape the conversation and thus its outcome into a different direction. These are the dynamic aspects of Positioning Theory that distinguish it from other theoretical approaches to the self and identity. Positioning Theory is a more dynamic take on identity that overcomes the shortcomings of static role-based theories in understanding and explaining situational behaviour and short-term alterations to the latter.

Modes of Positioning

Unlike products or brands in the positioning practice of marketing communications, people are not passive recipients of positioning claims. Someone being positioned in a certain way, put into a certain position may not concur and in turn respond with counter positioning. Positioning Theory explains these scenarios or situations by introducing various modes of positioning. Harré and van Langenhove categorise these modes as first, second or third order positioning, performative and accountive positioning, moral and personal positioning, self and other positioning, and tacit and intentional positioning (1991: 395 ff.; van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 20 ff.). I limit the detailed introduction of those categories to the ones more relevant to the present paper.

Moral positioning is constituted by any attempt to make reference to one's role, and the rights and duties that come with it, within a group or society. This is contrasted by a personal positioning, which

refers to one's individually specific properties or life experiences rather than a generic role (Harré & van Langenhove 1991: 397; van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 21). Furthermore, positioning is distinguished into the self-explanatory categories of self positioning and positioning of others. Although, one may note that any 'positioning constitutes the Self and the others in certain ways', thus any positioning of the self implies or requires a positioning of others and vice versa to be meaningful (Harré & van Langenhove 1991: 398; van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 22).

Tacit positioning is part of our day-to-day social interaction and mostly is first order positioning that is happening unintentionally and even unconsciously (van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 22). In contrast first order positioning that involves 'machiavellian' behaviour, lying, deception, or behaviours that resemble Goffman's (1959) impression management fall into the category of intentional positioning. Note that all second and third order positioning is necessarily intentional as it is by definition an active response to a prior first order positioning with the aim of challenging or changing it. There are four subcategories of intentional positioning. Whether the positioning is deliberate or forced and whether it is aimed at oneself or others determines these subcategories. Deliberate self positioning takes place when someone intends to portray a particular identity usually in pursuit of a strategy or goal (Harré & van Langenhove 1991: 400-401; van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 24-25). Forced self positioning occurs as an obligatory response to the request of an external power. A compulsory annual performance appraisal is an example of a situation that forces people to position themselves (Harré & van Langenhove 1991: 402; van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 26)}. Deliberate positioning of others can take place in the presence or absence of those to be positioned. Positioning of others in their presence allows the speaker to create a place in his or her storyline for those others. Gossiping is an example of other positioning in their absence (Harré & van Langenhove 1991: 403; van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 27). Finally the forced positioning of others can occur in cases such as a criminal trial, where the witness is required by law to position others (Harré & van Langenhove 1991: 403-404; van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 27-28).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the current literature on organisational change and Positioning Theory demonstrates that management scholars are yet to fully make use of the possibilities that this approach offers.

Literature Review: Positioning Theory and Organisational Change

The literatures on Positioning Theory and organisational change reveal that although there has been an increased interest in a discursive perspective in the analysis of organisational change, the literature making direct links between Positioning Theory and research problems in organisational change is very limited. Underlining this point is the fact that recent special issues of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management* (JOCM), ‘Organizational change as shifting conversation, narratives and stories’ (Vol. 17, No. 6, 2004) and ‘Storytelling’ (Vol. 21, No. 5, 2008), that took a discursive perspective did not include a single article on Positioning Theory. These publications however demonstrate a growing consensus in the literature that discursive approaches to change analysis may have advantages over more traditional approaches such as behaviourist and cognitivist frameworks of change analysis (Tsoukas 2005). Examples confirming this trend towards more discursive models are Ford’s (1999) proposition of ‘organisational change as shifting conversations’, Heracleous and Barrett’s (2001) ‘organisational change as discourse’ as well as Jabri and Pounder’s (2001) narrative perspectives on the management of change and numerous other examples published in the aforementioned special issues of JOCM (Bridgman 2007; Jabri 2004).

However, the literature does provide, although very few, some examples of research in organisational change conducted under a Positioning Theory framework. Boxer’s (2001) research on barriers to successful change shows how the dynamics between people can obstruct change. He uses Positioning Theory to gain a better understanding of parity and power in change management, analyse difficulties in the change process, and explore ways to overcome barriers to change. His more recent work made use of the Positioning Theory to analyse change in higher education (Boxer 2005). Using a Positioning Theory framework enabled Boxer to identify four different modes of thought about change.

Developing these different perspectives on or positions towards change provides some clues to how to manage different stakeholders and the issues they may experience or cause during the course of a

change initiative (Boxer 2005). The two examples demonstrate that Positioning Theory can be a useful analytical tool for change research. However, they do not capture the full potential that Positioning Theory may offer to the analysis of organisational change. In particular the potential to gain deeper insights into and better understanding of the workings of organisational change by making use of Positioning Theory to bridge the analytical gap between people, institutions, and the wider society remains underexplored in the current literature. I discuss this possible bridging function of Positioning Theory in more detail in the following subsection.

A Rationale for the Application of Positioning Theory to Organisational Change Research

Reasons for applying Positioning Theory to the analysis of organisational change are numerous. The range of justifications starts with the general advantages of discursive approaches, as pointed out by Tsoukas (2005). At the more specific end I will argue that Positioning Theory provides the promise of bridging the analytical gap between people, institutions, and society in organisational analysis. At the core of discursive approaches lies an emphasis on meaning and its link to subsequent behaviours. This makes discursive approaches particularly useful in change analysis, as change more so than usual requires members of organisations to make sense of or interpret and construct meaning (Dunford & Jones 2000: 1208-1209; Garcia & Hardy 2007: 367; Tsoukas 2005: 98). In fact most organisational change heavily relies on discursive processes, such as (re)definition, (re)labelling, or (re)interpretation (Tsoukas 2005: 98-99). Or using the terminology of Positioning Theory, organisational change is brought into being by altering storylines and (re)negotiating positions through the speech acts or social forces of discursive manoeuvring. Furthermore, Positioning Theory provides a fresh point of departure to explore some of the long known, yet still current difficulties in change management. Kotter's (1995) classic article on failed change efforts, which for its persisting relevance was republished by the *Harvard Business Review* only two years ago (Kotter 2007), shows some examples of the difficulties in change management that may be better understood through the lens a analysis grounded in a Positioning Theory framework provides. In particular Positioning Theory lends itself to shedding some light on the issues of change communication, the short-lived character of seemingly successful change, and the failed attempts to institutionalise change described by Kotter (1995).

Finally, one of the most promising yet least explored features of Positioning Theory lies in its potential to close the analytical gap between the three levels of social analysis - people, institutions, and societies or micro, meso, macro level. Extending organisational analysis over all three levels would add depth to the analysis and allow for better understanding and more comprehensive explanation.

The ontological assumptions of Positioning Theory are based on a 'new ontological paradigm' (Harré & van Langenhove 1991: 393; van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 14). This paradigm does not consider the common distinction of people, institution, and societies as the fundamental strata for the study of social phenomena but instead introduces an ontology based on the constructionist assumption that the social is constituted by three basic processes: conversations or symbolic exchanges, institutional practices, and societal rhetoric (Harré & van Langenhove 1991: 394; van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 15). The epistemological implications of this ontology are thus that to gain knowledge of, understand, and explain social phenomena one has to investigate the specific societal rhetoric, institutional practices, and conversations that constitute those phenomena. Local narratives, the storytellers and audiences, and the situation a story occurs in diminish in meaning if they are not tied to the 'underlying cultural-historical fabric' (Brockmeier & Harré 1997: 266). The 'broader cultural set of fundamental discursive orders' linked to locally occurring phenomena need to be taken into account to gain a deeper understanding (Brockmeier & Harré 1997: 266). Research inspired by positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove 1991: 393; van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 14) offers the opportunity to explore social phenomena in the light of all three processes. Other scholars (Abbey & Falmagne 2008; Falmagne 2004) support this call for a multilevel research approach.

Positioning Theory is neither the only nor the first attempt to develop multi level analyses that do justice to the complexities of social phenomena (Corbin & Strauss 1996; Strauss & Corbin 1990). Corbin and Strauss (1996: 140) point out that too often researchers engage in speculation, oversimplify macro phenomena into background information, and therefore force their audience into interpretations of their own that may render the plausibility of analyses questionable. An 'explicit logic and more specific procedures in tracing what are, after all, often intricate linkages' (Corbin & Strauss 1996: 140) is suggested to arrive at more persuasive models of analysis. Positioning Theory

provides a coherent framework for analysis that bridges levels of the social world by introducing a unit of analysis that can be traced over multiple levels – namely positions. Positions can be found in individual conversations, institutional discourses and societal rhetoric. Thus the analysis of positions and positioning makes explicit links and relationships that could otherwise only be speculated about.

SOME POSITIONING EXAMPLES FROM A PRELIMINARY DATA ANALYSIS

The data presented in this section are a subsample of data collected for my PhD research project, which investigates the effects of the implementation of the (now abandoned) Research Quality Framework (RQF), a higher education policy of the former Howard government, on the identities of fulltime academics. The implementation of such an exercise presents an exceptional opportunity for research as its nature is shaped by societal-level discourses. These discourses in turn reflect back upon the management and practices of universities. At the individual level both societal rhetoric and local institutional practices will have an effect on the identities of academics. Yet academics are not obedient, passive recipients of a top-down change. Through individual choices of particular positions towards their changing environment academics have the ability to exercise agency and resist or (re)-negotiate the imposed changes. This large-scale change, affecting a whole industry or sector, provides an exceptional opportunity to explore Positioning Theory as a multilevel analysis tool.

Data Selection and Data Collection

The data analysis for this project is only preliminary and data collection is not yet complete. However, I provide a brief description of the data I propose to use and some thoughts on how to analyse it. To achieve the proposed multi level analysis data on societal rhetoric on the broadest level, institutional practices and discourses on the meso level, and finally data on individual conversations on the micro level needs to be collected. A simplified summary of the RQF shows that its aim was to measure research output quality by assessing past research publications, then to improve output quality through reward and punishment by coupling research funding to assessments of research quality. These measures were aimed at changing the publication culture in universities and in turn publication habits and behaviours of individual academics away from a system of aggregate publication counts that encourages quantity rather than quality (Butler 2003). Thus my data collection at the micro level aims

at academics. Data collection at this level was achieved by conducting interviews with academics and is completed at this stage of the project. Twenty one interviews with academics were conducted. Only twenty of these can be used in the analysis as one informant withdrew consent for personal reasons. On the level of institutional practices and discourse a mix of data sources is proposed to achieve a more complete picture. So far I conducted interviews with management and administration staff in charge of the RQF at the time. Eight in-depth interviews with administrative staff responsible for the RQF at several faculties and central university administration were conducted. I propose to complement these data with documents reflecting the management practices at universities at the time, such as emails to academics, written documentation of procedures, documentation of meetings, and project reports as far as available. Data collection at this level is still ongoing. The list of sources is preliminary at best and by no means exhaustive. Finally, macro level data collection and analysis pose the most challenges to the project. The complexity of individual influences on macro level discourses makes determining relevant informants nearly impossible. Furthermore, Interview data at this level is hard to obtain and costly within the budgetary constraints of a PhD research project. Travel costs to meet informants are beyond my financial means. Therefore I propose the analysis of written discourse in the form of publicly available documents such as any available government documentation regarding the RQF policy and its implementation as well as press releases and general coverage of the topic by the media. Again as in the case of the meso level data, macro data collection is incomplete and the list of proposed sources is not exhaustive.

Data Analysis and Examples of Positions/Positioning

I will use this final subsection of the paper to briefly introduce two themes that emerged from the preliminary analysis of the data described earlier. First, I look at one of the best known yet most difficult issues in change management, change communication. Second, I show some consequences of interrupted or lost communication efforts. The two example themes demonstrate how data triangulation or the contrasting of positions over the levels of analysis help gain a depth of insight into organisational change that may otherwise not be achieved. Data triangulation for this purpose refers to comparing, cross-referencing or cross-examining of positions that are found in the data on each level

of analysis. Note how the positions emerging from the data make different sources and levels of analysis comparable and thereby help to develop better understanding of success or failure of management attempts and the behavioural consequences of or responses to change.

Communication is vital in organisational change. It can make a difference to what people do or do not know. This knowledge or lack of such can in turn shape the behaviour of and choices people make.

Micro level analysis shows that academics positioned themselves as lacking adequate knowledge to make sense of the situation and what it meant to them and their careers. Their self positioning also admitted that they may have been oblivious or even ignorant towards communication efforts.

Statements such as 'I have hardly seen any information on it but by the same token I haven't really been looking for it.' demonstrate this positioning. Or as another informant replied than asked for available information 'I am sure there is lots of information out there. I haven't sought it out. I haven't asked. I just don't have time. ... Even if I got emails about it I won't read them all that closely. ... I don't often go to faculty meetings. So I don't know.'

In stark contrast to the positions found in the micro level analysis are the positions put forward in the data at institutional level. These interviewees also engaged in the positioning of academics in regard to communication and information. Administrative or management staff positioned academics as subjects to extensive communication efforts who were or should have been well informed. Both direct positioning of others such as 'There was a lot of communication. ... probably two or three pathways.' as well as indirect positioning of others through self positioning, 'At the request of several Deans I gave talks on the RQF and updates on the RQF to faculties or schools, to research groups.' and 'We used every channel. ... From direct emails to academics or monthly research afternoon teas over presentations at the faculty meetings, school planning days, the school Research Directors I talk to hoping they talk to their staff. We are using a whole portfolio of communication channels to again raise awareness.', characterised the positioning acts.

Although the storyline of communication emerges at both levels of analysis the diverging positions and resulting speech acts are indicators of potential conflict and obstacles to successful change

implementation. At the institutional level the analysis shows the positioning of others. Management is positioning academics as informed, or at least so they should be. More so this also constitutes a resulting speech act. In the form of the institutional practice of 'using a whole portfolio of communication channels' this speech act aims to legitimise the actions of managerial staff detached from their consequent outcomes or actual efficacy. However, it allows for a moral self positioning of management that demonstrates that the duties associated with their administrative role were full filled. Following the management's positioning there appear to be few positions an uninformed, unknowing academic could retreat to.

In contrast individual positions at the micro level of analysis show a very different picture of the self positioning of academics. There are positions that can provide a basis for resistance against imposed managerial practices. These counter positions can range from more overt resistance such as blunt ignorance of communication attempts to subtler positioning. An example of the latter is the self positioning as the unknowing or overwhelmed victim. This practice portrays an identity that helps to achieve a speech act that legitimises passivity, another form of resistance yet equally effective.

As a result of shortcomings in communication a second strong theme emerged from the preliminary data analysis, consequences such as rumours, false conceptions and anxieties. These are mainly reflected in positions that indicate that the RQF would change the recruitment and promotion criteria of universities: 'I think more and more institutions are willing to recruit people who have quite a, who have books published and who have a more comprehensive publication list for inclusion in the RQF' or 'often the institution gives imperfect signals ... Sometimes they emphasise ... good research and sometimes they emphasise good teaching and good administration in career progression' coupled with positions indicating powerlessness 'In terms of trying to change my strategy as a result of the RQF being implemented I am not in a real position to change my strategy anyway.'

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present paper demonstrates the application of Positioning Theory in the analysis of organisational change. It shows that the existing literature does currently not adequately address this approach. The

rationale for this approach developed throughout the text shows that Positioning Theory can enhance change analysis by adding a multi-level, multi-vocal analysis allowing for thick descriptions and advancing our depth of understanding of change phenomena. The paper contributes to the current literature by developing a theoretically substantiated rationale for the application of Positioning Theory to enhance the analysis of organisational change. It does so by adding to existing discursive approaches (Bridgman 2007; Heracleous & Barrett 2001; Jabri 2004; Jabri & Pounder 2001) through the introduction of a sound theoretical framework and coherent method of discursive analysis, namely Positioning Theory. Furthermore, I introduce sample data to provide some empirically grounded underpinning to the theoretical claims. The paper makes a contribution by introducing an approach to change analysis that can yield a richer and more in-depth understanding of change phenomena over multiple levels of social analysis. This allows for incorporating a multiplicity of voices that enrich findings beyond the traditional approaches. Thus the paper makes a contribution by going beyond and adding to previous attempts to use Positioning Theory in the analysis of change (Boxer 2001, 2005).

Although I was able to provide some starting points and ideas towards a more comprehensive and sophisticated application of Positioning Theory to the investigation of situations of organisational change, the validity of the claims made in this paper could only partially be underpinned by empirical data. Future research needs to develop the approach proposed here further. I suggest two areas of focus for future research efforts. First, due to the preliminary character of the selection of data sources and incomplete data collection no decisive conclusions regarding the efficacy of the proposed data sources for a multi level analysis can be drawn from the present paper. Future research should explore data sources beyond the ones suggested here. Second, attempts to demonstrate data triangulation over multiple levels of analysis within a Positioning Theory framework as demonstrated in the previous subsection of this paper only provide an early point of departure. Future research needs to go beyond simplistic approaches and develop a more sophisticated analysis to make a significant contribution to enhancing research into organisational change and change management.

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