

USING POSITIONING THEORY TO UNDERSTAND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT CONTRADICTIONS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to take up a call for more “identity” research in construction management by exploring the potential of position theory as a framework for examining the ongoing construction of self through discourse. Using some basic constructs: storyline, speech-act and position, we examine how tensions and contradictions unfold in high-stake conversations at the micro-level, and how these micro-level features may be linked to contradictory institutional practices. The data – consisting of audio-recordings and extensive field notes of body language, facial expressions and stance of the meeting participants – were collected during five strategy meetings focused on an organisation’s new environmental strategy. We argue that a positioning theory lens enables the researcher to “get inside” the discourse and provides better understanding of how actors construct their identities in discursive practice with others.

Keywords: contradictions, discursive practice, positioning theory, self-concept, strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Managing organisational activities challenges actors’ abilities to negotiate contradictions and paradoxes inherent in much human practice. To help deal with these challenges, organisational scholars have devised generic, cognitive models for dealing with paradoxes, e.g. engage, avoid or transcend (Poole and van der Ven, 1989), or manage paradoxes by embracing and balancing them (Smith and Tushman, 2005). Such models, albeit helpful for researchers at an abstract macro-level, do not address the dynamic, relational and elusive nature of contradictions as they emerge through organisational talk and action at the micro-level.

Based on a review of strategy literature in construction, Price and Newson (2003) argued that strategic-management success depends on strategists’ ability to balance binary opposites, e.g. rational versus creative strategies, strategies versus organisational effectiveness. Their study is predicated on the claim that construction organisations lack “appropriate” knowledge and skills to develop formal strategic processes. To remedy this situation, the authors rather than offer a model, prescribe normative, textbook propositions, e.g. construction organisations must develop an effective strategic planning process; they need a guide to best practice and a framework to serve as a checklist; they need to supplement their short-term approaches with long-term approaches. Although these prescriptions may be sound on a general macro-level,

the authors ignore the empirical evidence emerging from the strategy-as-practice field, showing the situated messiness and contradictions that obtain at the micro-level of strategising (e.g. Whittington, 1996; Johnson et al, 1998; Hendry, 2000). The strategy-as-practice scholars argue that strategy is not a stable product that an organisation develops and then possesses; rather it is something that the people in an organisation continuously do through talk and action.

Beech et al (2004) criticised the notion of cognitive, unitary solutions to paradoxes, suggesting that if left open, paradoxes could rather serve as resources to stimulate creative and transformative actions. Using an action research approach and designing a “serious play” framework (focusing on emotions, creativity, meaning making and rule breaking), the authors explored how paradoxes may be dealt with in practice. They argued that attempts to solve paradoxes through the use of cognitive models and problem-solving approaches are likely to lead to inertia, while “living with paradox” and using it as a stimulus increases possibilities for creative action. Further research would need to be carried out to test this claim.

Still, much of the literature on organisational paradoxes remains theoretical. There is a need for empirical studies of how paradoxes and contradictions arise and are negotiated in situated practice. Influenced by the “practice turn” in the social sciences (e.g. Schatzki et al, 2001), organisation and management studies have increasingly been taking a practice-based approach to the study of organisational activities (e.g. Nicolini et al, 2003; Hendry, 2000). Simultaneously, if not consequently, more and more attention is being paid to the role of discourse and discursive practices in the construction of organisational identity, culture, knowledge and routines. This “linguistic turn” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) has resulted in an upsurge of qualitative and interpretative studies of organisational and managerial discourses (e.g. Holman and Thorpe, 2003; Räisänen and Linde, (2004); Westwood, 2001).

Shotter & Cunliffe (2003:18-20), drawing on Bahktin’s (1986) view of dialogue, show the advantages of studying the “moment-by-moment unfolding of relationally responsive events occurring in the ‘interactive moment.’” They suggest that managers in their management of interactions can be “practical authors” of the textual outcome of the organisational conversations they have since they “create meaning in relationally responsive ways ... [and] might be seen as someone able to restore a flow of action, giving shape and direction to the actions of other participants in the organisation when they are either disoriented or stuck.” This view seems to be an idealized view of managers’ reach, pertaining mainly to their authority embedded in predetermined transactional behaviours primarily aimed at solving problems, achieving goals and generally getting things done. It tends to see “manager” as an organisational role, underscoring the formal, static and ritualistic functions of “manager”.

Yet, the job of managers spans a continuum of activities, in which transactional objectives are intricately intertwined with relationally oriented actions and idiosyncratic behaviours. Affordances and constraints for the deployment of these behaviours exist not only in the contexts in which they are deployed – the institutionalised structures and local situations – but also the perception of self that an individual enacts in a particular situation. Individuals’ beliefs and representations of themselves are neither consistent nor always coherent; they may even be contradictory. In one and the same conversation, the way individuals think of themselves may shift depending on the context, situation and unfolding of the actual conversation at hand. By extension, this same conversation may have unpredicted implications and consequences for some future conversation. To understand the complexity of social interaction, position theory offers an analytical tool that enables us to examine the

ways in which individuals position themselves in conversation with others. Moreover, understanding how contradictions arise and unfold in situated discursive action will raise interlocutors' sensibilities to the relational aspects of social interactions and mitigate face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

The purpose of this paper is to take up the call for more "identity" research in construction management advocated by Brown and Phua (2011) by exploring the potential of position theory as a framework for examining the ongoing construction of self in a discursive practice. We use some basic constructs of positioning theory to examine how tensions and contradictions unfold, get resolved or get locked in high-stake conversations at the micro-level, and how these micro-level discursive activities may be linked to broader institutional practices. The data is drawn from strategy-audit meetings focusing on an organisation's new environmental strategy. The issues under scrutiny in the audits were: Top-management's intention with the audit; the interpretation of the strategy downstream; and the actions generated by the strategy downstream.

POSITIONING THEORY

The constructivist view sees individuals as continuously constituted and reconstituted through the multiple discursive practices and activities in which they participate. As such, individuals are active agents in the development of their identities; who one is at a specific moment in time will depend on the positions that are made available in conversations with others as well as with oneself (Langenhove and Harré, 1999). Individuals use fluid positioning to cope with the situations that they find themselves in. Positioning theory as defined by Moghaddam et al (2003: 140) is "concerned with the process by which short-term and small-scale moral orders are established and maintained, and with the way the actions of participants are constrained to flow in accordance with sharply delimited schemata or conventions."

The root of the theory is that the self or personhood of an individual is "ongoingly" produced and is relational to the ongoing production of others' selves in discursive practices (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003). Positioning theory thus offers a framework for analysing the dynamics of micro-social relationships as these are being negotiated in conversations, in contrast to role-theory in which an individual's personhood is separated from his/her formal and pre-determined set of behaviours.

Discursive action takes place within a specific local moral order of speaking and acting. The force (or impact) of an individual's speech-act or utterance within this context is relative to the rights, duties and obligations that obtain within the moral order in which the conversation unfolds. In other words, in a conversation the interlocutors locate themselves and others according to personal stories, *storyline*, which render their actions intelligible to themselves as social acts. A speaker positions him/herself within his/her story as well as opens a position for the interlocutor to take up. The moral and personal attributes of the speaker, *moral order*, and the force of the speaker's utterance, *speech-act*, determine his/her success of legitimising the particular position that allows the speaker to be both effective and powerful. Hence, conversations have a tri-polar structure consisting of a storyline (culturally influenced and conventional description of events and cast of characters) enacted through speech-act (linguistic acts defined by the intention, belief and attitude of the speaker (illocutionary force) and a position (the implicit or explicit actors' adoption of a set of rights, duties and obligations that avail them in the ongoing storyline). This position may or may not be changed during the conversation. In this paper we focus on four types of positioning (Langenhove and Harré, 1999):

- Deliberate self-positioning: strategic positioning with a specific goal
- Forced self-positioning: position established by the institutional structure
- Deliberate positioning of others: positioning another to enable an objective to be attained.
- Forced positioning of others: positioning to bring people into order by using institutional power.

THE SETTING AND DATA

As part of the current greening wave, contractors are keen to demonstrate that they are harnessing their resources to mitigate negative impact on the environment. In accordance with this trend, the contractor in this study focused on greening in its 2008-2010 strategy revision, highlighting one specific strategy: “to be a sustainable builder of society”. This strategy, according to the environmental top-manager, should distinguish the contractor from its competitors in the eyes of the clients. Therefore, this strategy was to be prioritized and compliance evaluated by means of an audit throughout the levels of the organisation.

In 2008, data were collected from one initial top-management meeting with audit consultants and from four audit-meetings carried out by one of the consultants in one geographical region sorting under a regional manager. The four audit-meetings, lasting approx. 15 hours in all, were audio-recorded and transcribed in part. The initial top-management meeting was not audio-recorded, but extensive field notes were made. The meetings took place at different venues in the contractor regional offices. In all, 11 actors from the constructor were involved in the audit meetings, some attending two or more. These represented all the management levels in the organisation as well as HR, executive development staff, and environmental management. Since the focus of this study was micro-level interpersonal interaction, detailed notes were taken on the speakers’ body language, facial expressions and gestures. ‘Water cooler’ conversations between the meetings and during short breaks were also documented.

We listened to the audio recordings several times, first separately and then together, resulting in a rough analysis of the meetings in terms of speech-acts and storylines. We then transcribed one meeting in full and mapped the ongoing construction of the interlocutors’ selves through identifying the positions they took up and made available during the conversation. We compared our detailed analysis with our rough ones and with our field notes. For this paper we discuss three short speech-acts from the initial meeting and one short exchange from one of the audits at district level.

CONVERSATIONS AT CROSS PURPOSES

In the following section we present the interlocutors followed by the examples and our analysis of the conversations. In the examples, the left-hand column identifies the speaker, followed by the speech-act in the middle column, and in the right-hand column is our interpretation of storyline and of position taken up or made available by the speaker.

Interlocutors

Environmental Consultant (CON): Female in her 50s; soft-spoken and conciliating; older woman with expert knowledge and genuine interest in environmental issues; she carried out the auditing at all the levels of the region.

Corporate Environmental Manager (CEM): Male in his 40s; executive; very busy; only time to attend part of the initial meeting; used hortatory discourse.

Corporate Development Staff (CDS): Male in his 30s; close to top management; actively involved in the process of strategy formulation and communication; no decision-making mandate, familiar to most managers in the organisation.

District Manager (DM): Male in his 40s; non-compliant with the audit; lacked familiarity with corporate management systems; had not prepared for the audit; dominant and charismatic.

Most of the representatives from the constructor were men in some kind of position of power. The few women in this study, apart from the consultant, had advisory roles with no decision-making mandates and very little power.

Example 1. *Initial meeting at corporate level: Corporate Environmental Manager, Corporate Development Staff representative and 6 Auditing Consultants.*

¹ CDS	Our environmental strategy: to be a sustainable builder of society, has to be funnelled downstream in the organisation.	Instruction storyline Forced self-positioning
² CEM	Sustainable builder of society is an overarching principle...it is this strategy that shall distinguish us from other constructors. The environmental bit is now being strongly pushed in the company.	Instruction storyline Deliberate self-positioning
³ CDS	It is ok though to clear "hygiene level".	Clarification storyline Forced positioning of consultants

Note: The speech-acts in this example are not consecutive utterances.

The venue for the initial meeting was a conference room at the constructor headquarters and included three organisational strategists, the environmental top-manager and six audit consultants. These consultants were from an environmental-auditing and accreditation firm with long-standing professional experience. The purpose of this meeting was to inform the auditing consultants of top-management's intention with the strategy and audit as well as to identify the areas upon which the audit should focus. The consultants' jobs were to assess the degree of compliance with the strategy out in the organisation, the level of competency concerning environmental issues, and how the environmental measures and indicators were being handled.

An "instruction" storyline was consistent throughout the initial meeting. The consultants were gathered to receive information and instructions for their upcoming audits. The corporate development staff representative opened the meeting. He was used to this kind of situation and took up the forced self-position that his role ascribed him, i.e. as proxy for top-management. This position allowed him a cluster of rights, duties and obligations: the right to instruct people that were senior, older and more knowledgeable than he; the duty to behave in a manner conforming to the values of the organisation; and the obligation to provide the consultants with the information that would enable them to carry out their commission effectively. It should be noted here that when he positioned himself, he automatically positioned his interlocutors, the consultants. They willingly took up the deliberate positioning made available to them by the executive, namely that of "being instructed," and typically responded by back-channelling, posing questions, asking for clarifications and repeating information. The Corporate Environmental Manager arrived in the middle of the meeting and only stayed long enough to reinforce the instructions using hortatory statements, see example 1. He maintained the "instruction" storyline and deliberately positioned himself as an authority. He did not add any information to what had already been conveyed, but his presence bestowed weight and corporate legitimacy to the younger executive's speech-acts.

The third speech-act in the example had a different force from that of the CDS's earlier speech-acts. Rather than "instruction," the storyline now seemed to be "clarification," in the form of a proviso. As we interpret it, the CDS is implicitly force positioning the consultants to carry out the audits according to informal norms rather than the "objective" audit procedures of the consultancy. This speech-act contradicted much of the hortatory discourse that had preceded it, and may have contributed to the locked positions shown in example 2. The phrase "hygiene level" appeared to be commonplace in the organisation, meaning to fulfil the base qualifications of greening. However, "hygiene level" and the notion of "sustainable builder of society" are somewhat paradoxical, which the participants of the initial meeting chose to ignore.

Example 2: *Audit District B: Consultant, District Manager, Environmental Rep, Environmental Project Rep*

CON	Your SCI is 80%. Is that an objective for this year or have you always had 80%? Do you work with continuous improvements?	Audit storyline Deliberate positioning of DM
DM	Well, I think we have had index at 70 as well as 100. But I don't know the average value.	Competent manager storyline Deliberate self-positioning
CON	I mean do you set goals that are a little bit higher each year in order to sharpen your efforts further?	Audit storyline Forced positioning of DM
DM	No, we have had 80 for a long period of time. Sometimes we reach our goal, and sometimes we do not.	Competent manager storyline Deliberate self-positioning
CON	But isn't it interesting to try to perform better and better for each year?	Audit storyline Forced positioning of DM
DM	It depends on your reasoning. Sometimes it is fun to exceed the expectations. [...]	Game storyline Deliberate positioning of CON
CON	But I do not agree with you	Refuses storyline and position
DM	Well, then we have different opinions.	Competent manager storyline Deliberate self-positioning
CON	From the quality perspective, it is all about trying to improve...	Reverts to audit storyline Tries to re-establish her position
DM	But there is nothing that prevents improvement. The main thing is that you know what to do, and that the group is behind it.	Competent manager storyline Deliberate self-positioning
CON	That's true, but isn't the result supposed to be a little bit better than last year?	Audit storyline Deliberate positioning of DM
DM	But how do you get that result, then?	Competent manager storyline Deliberate positioning of CON
CON	By taking exactly the measures that you have.	Competent manager storyline Takes up the position made available
DM	Yes....	Competent manager storyline Reinforces his position

Note: This example is part of a longer dialogue between the consultant and the district manager.

The audit at district level, of which example 2 is an extract, took place in a conference room in one of the regional offices. Present are the consultant, the district manager, a district environmental official and a project support official. The latter two audit participants took minor parts in the conversation, but played important roles in the interaction. When needed they were either mobilised by the district manager to support his storyline of competent and caring manager thereby strengthening his position, or they themselves volunteered with expert commentaries and digressions. Either way, they supported the manager's resistance to the audit.

In order to make this extract intelligible, more details are necessary. As for all audits, this one started with a round of self-introductions of the participants, which was set in motion by the consultant. She responded to each introduction with small talk thus evoking a storyline of

“friendly conversation” and positioning herself as competent consultant. However, the tense atmosphere in the room created by the body language of the district manager, whose facial muscles were taught and arms were crossed, contradicted her storyline. Without saying a word, he had positioned himself as antagonist. When it was the consultant’s turn to introduce herself, she signalled a shift in her storyline to “environmental audit” by code shifting to formal discourse and deliberately positioning herself as competent environmental expert. She ended her presentation of herself by saying: “So I have seen the problematic side of construction.” No sooner had she completed the utterance than the district manager interposed: “Yes, yes, yes, exactly, may I ask a question? Do you live in Sweville?” Through this speech-act he refuted the position of auditee that the consultant made available for him, reverting back to the earlier story line of “friendly conversation,” but with a rather aggressive undertone. He enacted the rights, duties and obligation his institutional role bestowed on him, shifting the prerogative of controlling the conversation to himself. He then maintained the storyline of “friendly conversation” over several exchanges, subtly making available the position of “guest” for the consultant. Since she did not want to confront the manager, her only option was to play along and accept the position he offered. The DM frequently used these kind of interruptions and non-sequiturs during the conversation to resist the audit and destabilise the consultant.

The extract in example 2 took place in the latter half of the audit and was part of a longer exchange concerning the district’s Satisfied Customer Index. The CON tried to maintain the “audit” storyline and fulfil her task of evaluating the environmental compliance to the corporate strategy in terms of goals and actions. In her three first speech-acts she tried to force position the DM, but he refuses to take up the position and counters by deliberate self-positioning. The DM resists her attempts by refusing to align with her storyline. Instead he maintains his own storyline of competent and caring manager. He challenges her right to question his authority, his control or his routines, justifying his decisions as being the outcome of co-worker consensus. What we see in the excerpt, which epitomises the audit, are two parallel storylines and incompatible positions. The DM either purposefully refused to answer the CON’s questions, or he did not understand them. She wanted concrete measurable figures in answer to her questions concerning goal setting and actions, which she could then report back to top-management. The DM gave her equivocal answers. The CON was not able to break the locked positions nor was she able to fulfil her audit satisfactorily. The DM evoked the patriarchal values of a good leader and the importance of engaging and motivating co-workers. His district was performing well, and this, according to him, should be sufficient information for the CON. The audit ended in a deadlock.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The brief analyses presented here suggest that individuals seek to demonstrate distinct social identities or self-concepts that position them as knowledgeable and responsible members of a social group. As such, through the storylines they create and the speech-acts they use to enact the storyline, they reveal not only the value, but also the emotional significance that they attach to their membership (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In the case of the audit meeting, the DM’s attitude and affect toward the audit is patently reflected in his speech acts, his behaviour and his actions. He almost takes pride in showing ignorance of index figures: “Well, I think we have had index at 70 as well as 100. But I don’t know the average value.” Earlier on in the audit, he shows his lack of familiarity with the organisation’s performance-assessment system and his total lack of preparation for the audit. At one point in the meeting, he even has to go to his office to get his laptop.

In a study of organisational change, Moghaddam (1997) found that informal aspects of organising sustained normalcy in spite of formal rules and directives. In the case of the audit, it is interesting to observe how the DM subverts the institutional and formalised audit discursive practice that the consultant tries to achieve by imposing an informal meeting discourse that he is probably more comfortable with. For example, he answers her questions with questions, he questions her knowledge of the organisation, and he refuses to provide the information she seeks in the form she wants it. These micro-level features are revealed using a positioning theory lens, which allows the researcher to “get inside” the discourse. It also enables a deeper understanding of how actors construct their identities in discursive practice with different others, e.g. superiors, blue-collar workers, inspectors.

In example 2, we showed how the storylines of the consultant and the DM are “self-sealed” (Beech et al, 2009) with no attempt at engagement. The storylines militate against dialogue, which we can predict will have negative effects on the strategic environmental change that top-management is advocating. Beech et al (2009) in their study of three contesting change stories in a financial service company found that the stories, in spite of their proximity, did not, or could not, engage with each other. Each story had its own logic, constructing problem and solution according to its storytellers’ world-view and work-view. The positioning of each story did not open up for dialogue across the self-created group boundaries. The consequence for senior management of these three change story processes according to Beech et al (2009) was that the change initiative remained at the strategic level. Senior management created a platform for the change, but failed to translate the rationale for the change in a discourse that the various groups could make sense of.

The focus of positioning theory is to understand how psychological phenomena are produced in discourse. However, conversations take place in a context, and between interlocutors that have some kind of association with each other. It is therefore important for the researcher to have knowledge of contextual and relational factors. For example, a conversation always has a fore-life and an after-life (Pearce, 2007). Example 1 serves to illustrate the importance of taking account of these dimensions of a conversation in one’s analysis. From the consultant’s point of view, the initial meeting is an important part of the fore-life of the audit, and could help explain some of her behaviour during the audit. At the initial meeting, the consultants are sent off to do their job with the somewhat paradoxical proviso “it is ok to clear hygiene level.” This proviso contrasted to the hyperbolic discourse of the corporate environmental manager earlier on in the meeting could have given rise to uncertainty even in an experienced consultant: on the one hand she has institutionalised rules and routines for the audit, but on the other she has to relate to the somewhat vague proviso. This could explain her seeming reluctance to wield the rights, duties and obligations that the moral order of the audit avail her, e.g. to confront the district manager’s refusal to cooperate and, more importantly, to forego her duty to report the environmental-management flaws that were so obvious. The latter puts in question the purpose of the audit, and, we can speculate, will have an effect on future conversations. For the district manager, the outcome of this conversation underpins his storyline of competent and caring leader who knows what is best for his district and co-workers.

As Shotter & Cunliffe (2003) suggest, the DM in this case could be viewed as the practical author of the textual outcome of the audit, rather than the consultant as would be expected. The likely after-life of the audit conversation, in the same way as the change stories discussed earlier, is an entrenchment of the current (informal) environmental practices and solutions already authored by the DM. Rather than lacking “appropriate” knowledge and skills to

develop formal strategic processes as suggested by Price and Newson (2010), organisations and their members seem to lack awareness of the psycho-social mechanisms and dynamics that underpin or undermine organisational structure and processes. No matter how effective the strategic plans, process diagrams and checklists are to strategists, if the operational levels cannot make sense of them they will not appropriate them. The consequences will inevitably be lip-service compliance or overt non-compliance.

This study has introduced positioning theory and illustrated the value of micro-level analysis to raise researchers' and practitioners' awareness of the inextricable link between talk and action. If we are to understand how construction managers think and function, and why they behave the way they do, or what drives them, we need, as Brown and Phua (2011) promote, "a sophisticated appreciation of how they conceive their selves." We would like to suggest position theory as a strong candidate for achieving such an appreciation.

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