

Reflexive Positioning and Culture

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'positioning' is a relatively new ontological paradigm within the social sciences, which was originally used as a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of 'role' in the analysis of interpersonal encounters (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1992). Positioning is largely a conversational phenomenon predicated upon the idea of psychology as the study of discursive practices (Harré & Gillett, 1994). Within the persons/conversations referential grid, positioning can be understood as the process by which speakers discursively construct personal stories, affording positions for speakers to take up in relation to each other so that participants' actions are made intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts. In moving from the use of 'role' to 'position' as central organizing concepts of social analysis, the focus of attention shifts from the more ritualistic and formal, to the more dynamic and negotiable, aspects of interpersonal encounters.

In this discussion, we extend the positioning concept for use in the *intrapersonal* domain, where the term "reflexive positioning" will be taken to refer to the process by which persons position themselves privately in internal discourse. At least three recent developments in the psychological literature on the self have led us to propose that the positioning concept may also be useful in the analysis of intrapersonal processes.

First, there is an increasing tendency to conceive of identity as something that is not always conferred on or ascribed to individuals, but actively negotiated and achieved by them (Erchak, 1992; Greenwood, 1994). In departing from the focus of the classical dramaturgical model (Goffman, 1959) on 'role' as the determining basis of action, the positioning concept affords us a view of ourselves "as choosing subjects, locating ourselves in conversations according to those narrative forms with which we are familiar and bringing to those narratives our own subjective lived histories through which we have learnt metaphors, characters, and plot" (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Second, there is a growing interest in the conceptualization of such aspects of the self as "self-esteem" and "self concept" not as global, generalized averages

of self-images, but in terms of ongoing, dynamic, and continuously changing processes. For example, such concepts as “current ongoing self-esteem” (Wells, 1992) and “working self-concept” (Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Nurius, 1986, 1987) have been proposed to elaborate on the idea of a self-esteem and a self-concept “of a given moment.” Clearly, there is a need for frameworks such as the positioning concept which capture the more fluid and dynamic aspects of intrapersonal processes.

Third, there is an increasing awareness that the existing views of the psychology of the self tend to reflect contemporary Western, and particularly North American, ideals of personhood (Miller, in press; Moghaddam, 1987; Sampson, 1977, 1981), summarized by one researcher as analytic, monotheistic, individualistic, materialistic, and rationalistic (Johnson, 1985). Accompanying this awareness of a Western ethnocentric bias in the contemporary literature on the self is an interest in modes of analysis which transcend cultural limits, such as the limits imposed by the individualistic and rationalistic conceptualization of the self which reflects a Western view of personhood (Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992; Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

Our aims in this discussion are twofold: 1) To extend the positioning concept to the intrapersonal level in an exploratory fashion, and 2) to broaden the scope of the positioning discussion by considering how positioning practices are culturally imbedded. Because reflexive positioning cannot be examined in isolation—removed from a consideration of the specific moral orders in which the speakers are operating—it is our view that a satisfying discussion of positioning (on any level) absolutely *requires* the inclusion of cultural considerations. In taking these steps, we hope to use the positioning framework to present an active and dynamic view of the self, while being mindful that fundamental aspects of intrapersonal positioning practices may vary widely with culture.

Definitional Issues

At the outset it would be well to address some definitional issues with regard to the different aspects of selfhood. According to Robinson's (1976, 1982) scheme, ‘personal identity’ refers to biographical data (such as name, date of birth, nationality, occupation, and social security number) which distinguish individuals from the perspective of another; ‘self-identity’ comprises all the autobiographical information (for example, the storehouse of personal experiences one has amassed) by which one knows *who* one is; and finally, the concept of ‘self’ is tied to that minimum level of awareness such that an entity has an experience. Thus, a person possesses a self-identity but no personal identity among strangers, while an amnesiac may have ‘lost’ his self-identity if he no longer knows *who* he is, but not his self so long as he acknowledges *that* he is.

In the discourse on positioning, we are not so much concerned with introspectively accessible 'selves' for whom questions of validity, verification and evidence never arise, as we are with issues surrounding 'self-identity' and 'personal identity,' which invariably require evidentiary evaluations (Robinson, personal communication, November 7, 1994). One cannot know another's self-identity, but only aspects of another's personal identity. Whereas more public forms of positioning, such as interpersonal and intergroup positioning, involve issues surrounding personal identity, any discussion on private reflexive positioning centers on self-identity – which is known only to the self.

I. REFLEXIVE POSITIONING

The Concept of Reflexive Positioning

In the same way that autobiographical aspects of conversations are the basic matter of interpersonal positioning (e.g., Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1992), reflexive positioning is a process by which one intentionally or unintentionally positions oneself in unfolding personal stories told to oneself. This process can take various forms, the most elaborate of which might be the writing of one's private diary or autobiography.

Few lives, however, are written down in diaries and autobiographies: Most are offered 'locally,' as fragments of unfolding personal stories of a speaker to himself or herself. One's appraisal of one's performance, one's justification for having taken a certain course of action, the attribution of one's actions to the whims of supernatural powers, one's private response to having been depicted by someone else in this way or that, one's supposing what repercussions one's actions will have on one's group, and the formation of an anecdote about one's day that one plans to tell another (and the imagined response of the listener) are all examples of the ways in which persons position themselves to themselves throughout the course of a day. Indeed, one inevitably positions oneself in ongoing internal discourse as all utterances both position a speaker and must emanate from some position as a speaker.

Discursive positions in storylines and the 'illocutionary force' of one's speech-acts (which generally refers to the status of a communication e.g., a promise, command, description, warning, apology, or exhortation [Lyons, 1977]) mutually determine each other. More specifically, "The social meaning of what has been said will be shown to depend upon the positioning of interlocutors which is itself a product of the social force a conversation action is taken 'to have' " (Davies & Harré, 1990).

In the telling of fragments of one's personal stories, various discursive positions emerge and are made available for participants to 'take up' in the storylines. For example, in the recounting of a personal story of an encounter with a con

artist, one can position oneself as smart or foolish, astute or gullible, sophisticated or naive, suspicious or trusting, powerful or powerless, dominant or submissive, and so on, based on how one's utterances are hearable to oneself with respect to particular dimensions which are salient to the speaker. Claims such as "there is nothing I could have done to prevent this; the con artist beats everybody" may reflexively position a person as helpless and ineffective, while claims such as "I'm not a fool; I just tend to look for the best in people" may reflexively position a person as optimistic and trusting. Statements such as "I'm a home-maker," "I'm the youngest member of the family," or "I'm a graduate student" have a very different social effect, and position a person in a very different manner from statements such as "I'm *just* a home-maker," "I'm *only* the youngest member of the family" or "I'm *still* a graduate student."

Conversely, the social force of the speech-act depends in part on the positions one takes up. In other words, the illocutionary forces of reflexive positioning is circumscribed to some extent by the way a person positions himself or herself. Positioned as ineffective, one's utterance "I guess I've learned something from being conned once" is hearable as a question or conjecture, but positioned as effective the same utterance is hearable as a declaration or assertion. A person who positions the self as ineffective may be unlikely to convincingly say in the next instant "I am going to motivate myself to change my life," whereas a person who positions the self as effective is not likely to convincingly say, "there is nothing I can do to change my life." If, however, a person who was reflexively positioned as ineffective convinces himself or herself that he or she is effective, this would involve a changing and shifting in reflexive positions. We shall expand on the dynamic character of positioning, an important feature of this concept, in the next section.

A reflexive position in internal discourse, then, is a figurative concept through reference to which one's moral and personal attributes as a speaker are compendiously collected by oneself so that one's speech-acts can be made intelligible and relatively determinate to oneself. The term 'internal discourse' will be taken here to cover the multiplicity of speech phenomena not aimed at others, but which is similar to and perhaps stems from public conversations (Luria, 1976; Vygotsky, 1962).

Although our focus in this discussion is on intrapersonal positioning, we do not mean to isolate it from positioning practices on other levels, such as the interpersonal and intergroup levels. Clearly, persons can and often do simultaneously position themselves on more than one level at a time, a process which we call "parallel positioning." We can expect the three levels of positioning to mutually influence each other, so that, for example, the ways in which a person positions herself to another person both affects and is affected by her reflexive positioning. A job applicant who is privately unsure she is qualified for a job may engage in interpersonal positioning in "congruent" or "incongruent" ways. She may, for instance, tell the interviewer "I feel quite anxious." Or, she may position herself as particularly confident and experienced.

The Dynamic Nature of Reflexive Positioning

Reflexive positions are always emerging, changing and shifting based in part on how a person's utterances are hearable to oneself as speaker. One's life story and fragments of it are never fixed or sealed but are in ceaseless movement, continually retold as new experiences are integrated. So it is that the convert pays tribute to Divine intervention throughout his life from the first, even though he has lived half of it as an atheist. The objective events in his history have not changed but he recasts his story with the resources (characters, metaphors, images, etc.) afforded by vantage points afforded by a new repertoire of positions. By this account, Jane Blogg's autobiography must more accurately be referred to as *one* of Jane Blogg's autobiographies—it is only one combination of positioning steps out of an endless array of dances.

Because discursive positions and the vantage points they afford are dynamic and constantly in flux, changing and shifting in relation to an evolving storyline, meanings of what one has said to oneself can also modulate and change with the evolving narrative and one's shifting discursive positions. This is apparent when one rereads a journal, each time from new vantage points in relation to what has since transpired, and as an episode that makes sense with reference to one's presently unfolding narrative. Just as the illocutionary force of speech-acts and behaviors in intrapersonal positioning is determined by a mutually created storyline, one's own thoughts and behaviors are interpreted within the framework of the particular autobiographical storyline which is unfolding at that time.

Certain storylines and particular reflexive positions, however, may become more salient to a person than others. The respective narratives of the "former alcoholic," "orphan," "underdog," "struggling artist," or "future lawyer" and the accompanying range of positions these themes make available may tempt the speaker into compelling narratives that fit so comfortably that they may even conceal possibilities of choice. In view of this, the goal of therapy might be better articulated as an effort to free clients from relatively "frozen" narratives enabling them to construct new personal stories (Spence, 1982).

Reflexive Positioning and the Dialogical Self

How is it possible for a person to be the positioner and the one positioned? For James (1890), an important and inherent characteristic of the self is its reflexivity. This is apparent in the classic Jamesian distinction between self-as-knower (self as subject, or the *I*) and self-as-known (self as object, the *Me*). The Jamesian *I* (characterized by continuity, distinctness, and volition), metaphorically observes and reports on the actions of the *Me* (comprised of material and spiritual and social constituents). In this way, the *I* positions the *Me* in the way that it reports

on and interprets the movements of the *Me* within the particular storyline. The inherently dynamic character of the self is apparent in the problem of the 'fleeting I': As the *I* positions the *Me*, the *I* of the previous moment becomes the *Me* which can then be repositioned by the *I*.

Is the *I* limited to observing the *Me* from one vantage point, speaking with a singular voice of an omniscient narrator—the voice, presumably, of the self? We rather follow a multi-vocal conceptualization of the self which resists an "authorial self" (Wolf, 1990). Instead, one often seems to be eavesdropping on a murmur of voices in an internal dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981; Todorov, 1981) so that one has access to many vantage points, allowing multiple—and often oppositional—readings of the same thoughts, behaviors and events. Multi-vocal private discourse (e.g., in solitary play) has been documented in children as young as two years old, the ability to adopt multiple stances towards the same objects or events developing into "voices" marked by distinctive patterns of performance, content and linguistic features (Wolf, 1990).

Hermans and his associates (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992; Hermans and Kempen, 1993) have elaborated on this notion of a 'dialogical self,' proposing that the *I* can take up a multiplicity of 'I positions' in which it not only takes up different vantage points, but "speaks" with "voices" emanating from these various positions. A useful link has been drawn between the notion of a dialogical view of self and Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel, in which the independent voices and stories of several independent heroes are braided into a common storyline (Bakhtin, 1973). So it is that a person's private narrative comprises not one, but a polyphony of "voices." Each voice "speaks" from a different position, from which each can confer with and oppose the other in a dialogical relation to mutually negotiate a storyline. Thus, a person who has just been promoted to a desirable position overhears a myriad of voices as she anticipates how she will relate the news to her co-workers, imagines their individual responses, recalls what her deceased uncle used to say as he belittled her achievements, replays the conversation that just took place at the board meeting, and wonders what her supervisors might have told the board behind closed doors.

Further resisting an individualistic and rationalistic conception of the self, Hermans and his associates incorporate Caughey's (1984) and Watkins' (1986) views, rejecting the notion that social relationships should be taken to refer only to relationships with actual beings. More specifically, Caughey (1984) observed that cultural studies of social organization have neglected a fundamental aspect of subjective experience which he proposes to be characteristic of every society: Pervasive involvement in imaginary social relationships with various imaginary beings. He provides a typology of three classes of such "beings" with whom people often "interact": Media figures (such as film stars, world-class athletes, charismatic leaders, and so on, through whom people often vicariously experience a fantasy world), imaginary figures produced by an individual's own consciousness (for example, ghosts, dream figures, guardian angels, and one's conscience), and

imaginary replicas of people whom we interact with or once interacted with in our daily lives (such as spouses, parents, friends, mentors, leaders). Watkins (1986) contends that imaginal others influence our encounters with "actual" others just as our encounters with others affect imaginal interactions.

Imaginal dialogues are thought to play a pervasive and central role in daily life in both Western and non-Western cultures (Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Thus, another way the self is positioned intrapersonally is through the storylines which evolve in imaginal dialogues and conversations in which the "I" takes up a multiplicity of positions in relation to multiple "Mes based on the vantage points of oneself as well as a host of imaginary others.

II. CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN REFLEXIVE POSITIONING

Positioning always takes place within the context of a specific moral order of speaking (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1992) such as a bridge club, church choir, group of artisans, assembly of worshippers, gender group, ethnic group, tribe and society. Moral orders are "maintained by certain linguistic practices through which social relations between people (such as friendship), between persons and things (such as property) and between groups of people are regulated (such as team games and social hierarchies), and by which social norms or standards for personality, character and physical appearances are promulgated . . ." (Harré, 1984, p. 246).

Clearly, then, reflexive positioning cannot be considered in isolation, removed from a consideration of the specific moral orders in which the speakers are operating. Our view is that a satisfying discussion of positioning on any level absolutely *requires* the inclusion of cultural considerations. Here, we explore only three examples of how cultural factors may fundamentally affect positioning practices: Positioning practices vary with 1) the particular cultural ideals persons desire to move toward through positioning; 2) the particular dimensions which persons find relevant in positioning themselves and others in discourse; and 3) with the preferred forms of autobiographic telling, which may influence the types of stories people tell themselves about themselves in the process of positioning.

Positioning and Cultural Ideals

Reflexive positioning is integrally associated with local normative systems through cultural ideals, which act as guides for persons in given cultures as they position themselves. Consider, as examples, American Transcendentalists and Islamic Sufis, which both enjoy a rich tradition of focused discussion on reflexive

positioning. Although these movements have emerged in different parts of the world and during different historical periods, they seem to have key characteristics in common, at least on the surface. Both movements emphasize intuition as a guide to universal truth. More important for the present discussion, both movements seek a “freeing” of the self, in order to allow the self to have what they regard as a “higher” form of experience. Thus, in the writings of American Transcendentalists and Islamic Sufis, we discover a persistent and focused concern with the ideal self. This ideal is then used to position the self and others: “That is how we all should be like!” “Shame on me that I am so far removed from the ideal!”

a. The Case of American Transcendentalism

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential factors of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life . . .”

Henry Thoreau (*Walden*)

“Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to your self, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.”

Emerson (*Self-Reliance*)

From a cultural standpoint, the reflexive positioning that takes place in American Transcendentalism can be best understood in the context of a larger and more far-reaching characteristic of American life: individualism. When Emerson states that, “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (*Self-Reliance*), he is reflecting the strong biases of the larger society, rather than a sentiment unique to Transcendentalists. But there is a peculiarity in the solution adopted by the Transcendentalists to “finding” and enriching the self, in the face of dangers represented by society. In its most clear and symbolically powerful form, this solution is represented by the life of Henry Thoreau, or at least that part of his life during which he retreated to Walden Pond.

We interpret Thoreau’s retreat to the woods (1845–1847) as an attempt to achieve reflexive positioning through the use of a selected ideal state. His journals reveal a strategic use of an ideal for self-to-self positioning.

Thoreau’s strategy was to “simplify, simplify, and simplify” so that he would come to live life in the woods in what he saw to be its raw essence. Through eliminating what he assumed to be “unessential” in life, he would touch the raw nerve, the marrow of life. This did not just involve discarding material “garbage,” but also abandoning the social rules and the baggages of “civility” that society

loads onto individuals. By isolating himself, and by getting rid of all non-essentials, he would come to know life in its pure and unadulterated form.

A careful scrutiny of *Walden* reveals that a first part of the ideal form of life Thoreau is seeking is a self unencumbered by the material and social “baggages” of society. He seeks to “confront himself” as he really is, on the assumption that a person “in” society is prevented from identifying the “essential” self by material and social obstacles. A second aspect of this ideal is the achievement of a relationship between an “essential” self and nature, as represented by, for example, the woods, the pond, and the sky.

Thoreau’s goal, then, is to find the essential self by stripping away all that society has loaded onto his person. This essential self is “superior,” in that it allows life to be lived in its essence. The essential self is positioned as morally superior to an “unessential” and socially imposed self, the “baggage” that impeded the discovery of the essential self.

b. The Case of Islamic Sufism

Sufism is a mystical sect of Islam. Sufi literature and ceremonies focus to a considerable degree on the self. For example, consider the following poem by Abdollah Ansari (our translation from Farsi):

“What should he want with life, he who comes to know you? What should he want
with his children, family, and possessions,
he who comes to know you?
He will be possessed when you bless him with both worlds.
What should he want with both worlds, he who is possessed by you?”

A major theme in such poetry is the finding of a “true” self, through stripping away all that is “worldly.” We are reminded of American Transcendentalism and in particular of Thoreau’s strivings to arrive at an “essential self.” However, while American Transcendentalism starts this process at a point of departure outside the body and strives to first strip away and simplify the external world, sufism takes a point of departure within the body and attempts to strip away all that is inside. Some aspect of this Sufi thinking is captured by Ansari, who plays on the farsi word “khod,” which can refer to both “me” and “you” or “thou.”

In thy (khod) path, at first make me (khod) without myself (khod),
Then lead me (khod) toward you (khod), without myself? (khod).

The use of the pronoun “khod” allows for a rather special kind of reflexive positioning in farsi, one that stands in contrast to what is possible in reflexive positioning through Western languages. This positioning is special because it assumes a much less rigid boundary for the self than is typically conceptualized in the West, so that the “khod” can at the same time be “me,” “I,” and “you.”

The movement implied in the phrase “lead me (khod) toward you (khod) without myself (khod)” is only possible because of an interdependent conception of the self, where the boundaries of people are more fluid than generally assumed in the West.

Dimensions Used in Positioning

One of the basic assumptions inherent in positioning theory is that a person’s moral and personal attributes are the most salient dimensions by which speakers locate themselves and others in discursive positions. However, we can expect that the particular attributes or other dimensions that are taken to be most salient and relevant in positioning oneself and others, will also vary widely with culture and cultural ideals (see, for example, Triandis, 1989, on cultural variations in facets of self-understanding that are prominent in self-awareness).

To cite one example, Geertz (1984) reports that one of two sets of fundamental dichotomies of the Javanese sense of personhood (the first being the “outside”/“inside” distinction which may be more familiar to us) is grounded in an “alus”/“kasar” (“refined”/“vulgar”) contrast. The Javanese seek to be “alus” through the use of proper etiquette (in the outer realm) and meditation (in the inner realm), to be “pure,” “refined,” “subtle,” and “ethereal,” as opposed to “coarse,” “rough,” “impolite,” and “insensitive.” Of course, we can find certain equivalents to the outside/inside and alus/kasar contrast in American society—for example, Americans also consider themselves and others in terms of being more “unmannered” or more “sophisticated.” By Geertz’s account, however, the “inner/outer realms” and “alus”/“kasar” contrasts represents more salient dimensions by which persons assess themselves and others in Java, compared with American society. We might also assume that the “alus” ideal in both inner and outer realms is a more important cultural ideal for Javanese than Americans do strive towards in positioning practices.

A more fundamental question is whether or not persons universally locate themselves and others in positioning practices primarily in terms of enduring individual moral attributes such as “shy,” “helpful,” or “honest.” Some data suggest, for example, that persons in some groups tend to describe themselves in terms of their roles and social categories (e.g., see Triandis, Leung, Villareal & Clack, 1985). Personality descriptions are extremely rare in other societies: For example, among the Ilongots of the Philippines who view environmental, social, political and spiritual forces as direct influences so that behavior need not be mediated by self-reflection (Rosaldo, 1984). Indeed, the Wintu, a Native American people, do not even have a word equivalent to the Western meaning of ‘self’ (Gergen, 1977).

The individualism-collectivism dimension (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, Leung, Villareal & Clack, 1985; Triandis, 1988) refers to cultural variations in the

boundaries between the self and other. More specifically, culture defines the boundaries of the self, or the distinction between that which is and that which is not to be considered to be an intrinsic part of the self (Lock, 1981). This dividing line between the self and the social and/or natural environment is not definite and may be drawn at different places, varying with contexts and cultures. In an individualistic society such as the United States, social relations tend to be voluntary and temporary in nature, involving the interaction of mobile and independent individuals so that the unit of concern is the individual person and a sharp boundary is drawn between the self and others. However, several researchers such as Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that this notion of an independent and unbounded self is rare among the world's cultures (Geertz, 1979) and distinctly Western in its cultural orientation, and that non-Western cultures tend to embrace a more collectivistic orientation. In collectivistic societies, the group—kinship system, tribe, class and so on—is the primary unit of concern and no sharp boundary is drawn between the self and others. Rather than striving for the Western ideal of the distinct and autonomous self, various forms of interdependence and connectedness are seen as desirable.

Tajfel and Turner (1986) use the term “social identity” to refer to the part of a person's self-concept which derives from knowledge of his or her membership in a social group, taking into account the value (both positive and negative) and emotional significance attached to that membership. We can expect that social identity is more salient to persons in collectivistic than individualistic societies so that *group* (as opposed to individual) attributes, identities, and histories may be more important in locating speakers reflexively in positioning and other discursive practices. For example, in more collective societies one's utterances may be given and/or taken as a group declaration rather than a personal undertaking. Among his observations of Maori culture, for instance, Best wrote that “it is well to bear in mind that a native so thoroughly identifies with his tribe that he is never employing the first personal pronoun [when referring to his tribe]” (1924, p. 397).

The symbolic meanings assigned to attributes (or other dimensions) will also vary from culture to culture. For example, the Maori traditionally consider “hospitality” to be one of the “eight sources of the heart” (“e warunga pu manawa”) or qualities deemed necessary for leadership (Smith, 1981). Thus, a person's capacity to be hospitable, usually considered to be an attribute of a warm host or hostess in Western culture, appears to be associated with the “chiefly nature” of a leader among the Maori.

In the metaphorical terms of the positioning concept, then, before one is able to evaluate whether the basic “co-ordinates” might be the same, one must first examine the different “axes” which persons may be using to locate themselves and others in the positioning “grid.” Even so, it would be well to remember Sapir's (1929) remark that “the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached” (p. 209).

Preferred Forms of Autobiographical Telling

Canonical forms of autobiographical telling (or what are to be considered coherent arrangements of events into satisfying personal storylines) and the poles around which the stories revolve (e.g., characters, plot) also vary with cultural ideals. Published autobiographies cannot be taken to be true examples of reflexive positioning, as an autobiographer always tells his or her story to a group of listeners (Elbaz, 1988) and releases the story to the public. Nevertheless, we can assume that written autobiographies reflect something about the writer and his or her immediate audience, and their favored forms of public autobiographical telling. American autobiographers, for example, favor a chronological arrangement that is oriented around emblematic events and "stages" of life, marked by "life crises" explicated in the work of Erikson (1950), and focus on the movement between private and public realms (e.g., home to school) (Bruner, 1990, 1993). Bruner (1993) contrasts this style with Crapanzano's (1988) report of a Moroccan sample, which does not order events chronologically, and portrays the central character as one who is subject to external forces rather than as an active agent who negotiates life's crises.

Concluding Comment

In conclusion, this analysis contributes to the ongoing discussion on positioning in two ways. First, the positioning concept is extended to the intrapersonal level. Second, the scope of the discussion is broadened with the consideration of how cultural differences may fundamentally influence positioning practices. We have argued that a satisfying discussion of positioning must necessarily take into account the particular ideals, dimensions and storylines that people in different societies are likely to find relevant in positioning themselves and others, and the meanings they attach to these constructs. This would be fundamental to studying the local or "emic" and the universal or "etic" features of positioning styles across cultures (Moghaddam, Taylor & Wright, 1993).

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