

Positioning Analysis: A model for assessing change processes in group activities^{*}

Paolo Cottone[§]

Summary. *The paper presents a research aimed to demonstrate a possible application of the positioning analysis as a tool for evaluating the processes of change in group activities. The positioning analysis takes shape within the theoretical framework of post-modern social sciences, and is proposed as a dynamic alternative to the traditional static concept of role and identity. In order to test the proposed model, a group activity was investigated. The activity consisted of various workshops whose purpose was to investigate the social construction of identity and gender, in the context of urban security and gender violence. The results show good prospects for the Positioning Analysis in capturing the processes of change taking place in group activities and offer some interesting ideas for further applications.*

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[§]Ph.D, Researcher at the FISPPA Dept., University of Padua, Italy. E-mail: paolo.cottone@unipd.it

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Theoretical references

The idea of positioning takes shape within the theoretical framework of post-modern social sciences, and is proposed as a dynamic alternative to the traditional static concept of role and identity. The authors who have worked to define this concept have focused their analysis on intra personal and social levels, and refer to the guidelines of the social constructionist perspective (Cole, 1996).

Hermans (2001) proposes a graphical representation of the space made by the many positions that individuals hold in their life. Hermans argues that society influences the processes of positioning through what he calls a “collective voice”. This process occurs when the individual holds social positions disciplined and organized by social definitions, expectations and requirements, which are distinguished from personal positions (Cottone & Schiavinato, 2004). The latter instead receive their strength from the way in which individuals organize their lives, sometimes in opposition to the implicit demands of society. Bamberg (2004) refers to the concept of positioning primarily in relation to the analysis of the forms and content of the narratives, as part of the research aimed to explore how the self and identity are formed.

The concept of positioning is based on the assumption, shared by these authors, that any social phenomenon lies within a framework which cannot be ignored in order to be understood and studied. According to Bamberg, a relationship with the environment is crucial since those who participate in an interaction act constantly to adjust their actions to what is being created in the current process, react to previous stages of the conversation and direct, through the schemes, the future of communication.

Objectives and Hypothesis of the research

The objective of this research is to show a possible application of the positioning analysis as a tool for evaluating the processes of change in group activities, such as training, counselling groups, self-help groups, and groups support. These are activities that involve the whole person, and through the logic of reflexivity, cooperative learning and self-training are aimed at adapting to the dynamic nature of contemporary society, characterized by flexibility in timing and roles, where spaces and opportunities for communication widen constantly, keeping pace with technological change.

In order to evaluate the results obtained by the participants in these activities, it is necessary to adopt an approach oriented towards reflection, learning and research, with a view that emphasizes the personal experience of each person and the relational dimension as well. Within this framework, the evaluation is considered as a process of applied social research as it tends to reconstruct the system of relationships that social actors have generated in the course of activities under investigation. Therefore, not only the expected results are part of evaluation analysis, but through careful observation of the entire process, any result. «In this way the evaluation is accredited the ability to say something about the changes that the training activity could generate» (Lipari, 2006).

Methodology

In order to test the proposed model, we selected as the target of the intervention, an activity called Metro Safety Workshop (MSW), funded by the Equal Opportunities Committee of the University of Padua. The objective of the workshop was to analyze the social construction of identity and gender, to understand the dynamics, promote best practices and expand the possibilities of living and read the interactions among individuals. The MSW workshop focused on the issue of gender-based violence, in order to stimulate the development of cognitive tools of defence against fear,

favouring the subjective emancipation and spreading positive and constructive models of sociability. MSW is divided into two different group activities: seminars and workshops for intervention.

Academics and experts on gender violence attended seminars as speakers. The topics addressed were: What sex are you wearing today? Labels, roles and desires; What kind of violence? Projects compared; Fear of the metropolis. Action to take word: it's up to you. The workshops were intended to explore and promote participants' awareness of their own ways of relating through gender roles and power in relationships, encouraging the exploration of the implications of gender roles in relational contexts other than their own. The workshops were run by two staff. The run used narrative techniques, theatre techniques for body awareness, role reversals (Taylor, 2003), theatre of the oppressed (Boal, 1979) and group facilitation techniques (Rohd, 1998).

The corpus of data consisted of video recordings of the seven meetings held, lasting 4 hours each, which saw the participation of 12 students who actively followed the entire workshop. The analysis was carried out with the aid of the software Transana (Halverson, Bass & Woods, 2012). and, in agreement with the theoretical assumptions of the research, we adopted a methodological approach based on the critical discourse analysis. The critical discourse analysis is an evolution of discourse analysis interested in ideology, power, mechanisms of production and perpetuation of social inequalities and social change.

Specifically, the analysis was focused on the use of indexical, referring to male and female gender, and of the symbolic regulatory environment in which the narrative is situated. In addition, we took into account the interactions between the participants, emphasizing the speaker and talks to highlight the discursive processes and relationships that lead to the construction of a shared repertoire.

Results

In order to highlight possible changes, the analysis took into account three main areas, consistent with the structure of MSW:

- a) definition of gender-based violence;
- b) definition of security;

c) definition of critical situations and strategies for action.

Each macro area is investigated focusing on positioning (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991) of the participants, considering the speaker as a person who has a place and a point of view from which it perceives, self-perceives and is perceived, acts and is acted upon. This position is a fourfold spatial, temporal, moral and social location that takes place in the interaction. In this sense, we can consider the different positions as flexible, the result of continuous trading through a process of negotiating opinions, speeches, narratives and representations.

Gender-based violence

Through the analysis it is possible to highlight how, at the beginning of the workshop, gender-based violence is defined as a widespread phenomenon, but far from daily interactions. Gender-based violence is constructed as an object of which we speak, but that remains alien, using stereotypes and phrases based mostly on elements belonging to media discourse on violence. The analysis also reveals certain fixed roles according to gender, that see women as victims and men as aggressors, without giving the possibility of change. At the end of the workshop the group is positioned in relation to the issue of gender-based violence, in a totally different way. The group examines critically the familiarity of the typical dynamics of the sphere of violence, identifying relationships characterized by power imbalances determined on the basis of gender.

Security

At the beginning of the workshop, security is defined as a construct imposed by others that affect our daily lives, determining space and time. The participants did not describe themselves as agents with the ability to transform the feeling of insecurity, defined as pervasive. In addition, they recognized the political role of spreading such a sense of awe, recognizing

the lack of trust and relationship with the other as an index of fear that characterizes social relationships. Furthermore, this social construction of a sense of security defines the roles, behaviours and different rules according to gender. At the end of the workshop the label "security" is no longer represented by its negative connotations, but through a transformative narrative where women and men are equally involved.

Critical situations and strategies of action

From the analysis we can see that the beginning of the workshop showed critical situations that saw women as subordinate actors characterized by feelings of fear and victims of mechanisms of protection and control. Also, we saw a reality that cannot be changed through actions, leading to identify, as the only possible reaction strategy of individual escape. With regard to collective strategies, however, some participants could see opportunities for transformation in the possibility of building a network of cooperation and in the process of subjectivation. At the end of the workshop, the group assumes that only in respect with the implementation of strategies aimed at building relationships of trust and complicity, is it possible to create new scenarios that go beyond the discourse on criticality and danger. The participants see themselves as active agents in the environment in which they live, provided with appropriate tools for the process of change.

Conclusion and discussion

Some interesting insights emerge from the analysis of three main areas, both in terms of content, and in terms of future prospects for the use of the analysis of the positioning as a tool for evaluation of the processes of change. The analysis of the processes of change that occurred during the workshop showed how it was possible to reach the co-construction of a

common position within a space of reflexivity shared through the negotiation of relationships, desires and goals.

Among the main aspects of the content, it was stressed that there are several tools to overcome an imbalance, considering the social roles as constantly subject to a process of redefinition in which each person is in possession of agency and power. It is assumed that, both the content and the actors involved can be varied. The participants recognized that it is not the biological sex that is an indicator of gender-based violence, but the relationship that is manifested in the content of a dispute related to the social construction of gender identity, which includes roles, expected behaviours, expectations and symbolic constructions. Also in that process of “undoing gender” comes discursive and relational skills.

Interestingly, when the group considers the social actors involved in the feeling of insecurity, the migrant is identified as a prototype of fears and is considered a “scary element”.

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