

# Utilising discursive positioning in counselling

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*ABSTRACT* Foucault's concern with the production of subjectivity has led to the development of positioning theory, as it has been called by Bronwyn Davies, Rom Harré and Luk van Langenhøve. The concept of discursive positioning has particular value for counselling because it shows how people are positioned in discourse in particular moments by their own and by others' utterances. Positioning theory also points to the efforts people make to resist and refuse discursive positions they are called into in conversation. This article demonstrates how listening to the nuances of discursive positioning in a conversation can enrich professional practice. I shall use several examples from narrative counselling conversations in order to demonstrate these principles in action.

## Introduction

Michel Foucault has left a legacy of concern with the ways in which subjectivity is negotiated in relation to the 'great anonymous murmur of discourses' (Foucault, 1989, p. 27) that swirl around the social world. He was at pains to distinguish this perspective from the dominant humanistic perspective in psychology, a perspective that has been very influential in the assumptions that underlie much counselling practice. Rather than a focus on how the self is predicated on an inner self-actualising potential, or on a set of biological instinctual drives, he sought to decentre the position of the individual in the authorship of his or her own life and to place the work done by and through discourse in a much more central place.

That this decentring is not to be confused with an erasure of the self altogether was made clear in his later work on the 'technologies of the self' (Martin *et al.*, 1988). Here, he articulated a view of self as always in process of creation (and of the individual person as agentive in this creation) rather than as determined by social structure or family of origin dramas or environmental contingencies. Foucault's arguments have opened up the beginnings of a psychology that does not rely on a singular location of the self or on the possibility of stable identity. Rather constructionist writers have articulated a vision of a self that is multiply located in competing stories, and produced over and over again in the process of interaction,

that is, in discourse, rather than proceeding out of a programmed inner core (see Burr, 1995).

When people come to counsellors for assistance, they are usually focused on the immediate struggles of their personal lives and are not routinely concerned with the need to tackle widespread social discourses or bring about social change. There would, indeed, be ethical concern about counsellors who set out to politicise the counselling session in a way that was focused on general social change without addressing the particular local experience of the client. At the same time, approaches to counselling that do not take cognisance of the effects of power relations can be accused of failing to understand the production of psychological problems in social contexts. For example, an account of depression that solely features chemical changes in the brain, or anger turned against the 'self', or cognitive distortions of thinking and omits mention of a person's unemployment, poverty, experience of domination in a marriage, internalised effects of 'the gaze', or social marginalisation on the basis of race or sexual orientation can scarcely be considered adequate. [1] So the question arises, how can counsellors work with a consciousness of the effects of pervasive social discourses and at the same time attend to the particulars of personal experience? Much counselling theory until recently has neglected this question and has focused solely on the construction of the individual psyche in the dynamics of the nuclear family and the immediate interpersonal environment.

### **Introduction to the concept of discursive positioning**

Building on Foucault's concept of subjective positioning, Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990) suggested the value of thinking in terms of 'discursive positioning'. I want to argue here that it is a concept that offers us some leverage in addressing local and particular experiences without losing sight of powerful social discourses within which subjectivity is constructed. It is in this relationship between the personal and the social that people live their lives and it is here too that they experience the problems that they bring to counselling. The concept of positioning is useful in the conceptualisation of the counselling task because it focuses attention on this relationship.

Positioning theory argues that people take up positions in relation to discourse in the very moment of making an utterance in a conversation (including, of course, counselling conversations). Each utterance [2] must necessarily be situated in discourse simply because it uses discursive material (words and meanings) in order to make sense. Bakhtin (1986) has elaborated a dialogical perspective of the utterance that suggests that everything we say has no meaning in itself but only in response to other utterances in a dialogue or in the history of dialogues in a particular genre of conversation. His notion of the utterance parallels Foucault's (1972) version of the statement (in French Foucault's use of *énoncé* carries more of the sense of illocutionary force than the English term statement). These different sources work together to provide theoretical support for the concept of discursive positioning.

An utterance is not just a representation of discursive meanings that have their existence somewhere else. It is also where the event of discourse production takes

place. As we speak, we create and exchange pieces of discourse. This productive function of discourse was also an important aspect of Foucault's concern. People are not just recipients of the influence of social discourse. They are also producers (and reproducers) of it in their participation in social exchange. Thus, each utterance, even if just for a moment, creates a social relation (or participates in the creation of sets of relations). The utterance structures this relation, sets up relative speaking rights, and creates an immediate moral sense of 'moment by moment oughtness' (Linehan & McCarthy, 2000, p. 442) for each of the participants in a conversation. Foucault's (1978, 1980) notion of disciplinary power established through the institution of social norms relies on the multiple repetitions of utterances that contribute to the patterned mosaic that constitutes a social discourse. In making utterances, individuals seek to establish positions for themselves, both in an immediate relation with an 'other', but also in relation to the many other exchanges that go to make up patterns of discursive exchange.

At the same time as we establish a discursive position for ourselves in making an utterance, we also offer the other person(s) we are addressing a position (or a choice of positions) from which to respond. They are called into particular positions, not just in obvious terms like agreement or disagreement, but also in much more subtle ways as affiliating with, and implicitly giving support to, whole frameworks of meaning. If each utterance establishes a position in a social relation, then the other points in that relation are necessarily implied in the utterance. Any position in a relation creates an implicit (even if not explicitly stated) platform for another to respond from and gestures towards the other an invitation to stand upon that platform in making a response. The analysis of positioning therefore deconstructs the illocutionary force of an utterance. Jacques Derrida's (1997) approach to deconstruction in which the relationship between explicit meanings and the implicit background reference to a chain of deferred meanings is echoed here.

As people speak, they position themselves not just in immediate relation to the other person(s) in a conversation, but also in relation to utterances in other conversations (Bakhtin, 1984, 1986). As someone speaks to a counsellor and describes her personal experience, she may have moments where she is conscious of how what she is saying may sound, not just to the counsellor's ear, but to the other significant figures in her life. Her utterances may, moreover, be responses, not just to the counsellor's immediate words, but also to the many messages she has been exposed to from friends, relatives and media sources. The concept of positioning therefore suggests a process of production of the self that is intertextual (Bakhtin, 1986; Kristeva, 1986), and always constructed in a complex relational field, rather than, say, referenced primarily inwards to biological drives.

### **The politics of meaning-making**

As a theoretical tool, the concept of positioning strengthens the link between pervasive discourses that permeate the social world and the particulars of localised exchanges of meaning. Any utterance in a social interaction (including those in

counselling conversations) calls upon a discursive background in order to make sense. It carries traces of the assumptions built into the concepts and language formations that live in this discursive background and it relies on these in order to build the basis for speaking and, at the same time, to build the basis for the relation that is being spoken into. As it does so, often outside of the conscious intention of the person making the utterance, it is inserted into a social context made up of patterns of meaning. In the process, any utterance can be shown, even in a small way, to shore up the assumptions that are built into the foundational meanings of the statement and to undermine other possible meanings.

Because there is a range of possible meanings, we often find ourselves in the middle of a contest about which meanings will prevail. The discursive field of contested meanings that is thus established can be understood as a political field. Prevailing meanings can have material consequences for people's lives because they necessarily privilege certain positions in social relations over others. In the contests over meaning the politics of meaning-making are played out. In order to appreciate what is taking place in the politics of meaning-making, it is necessary to draw upon theories of discourse control, discourse dominance or discursive hegemony. Some meanings will come to dominate the understandings of participants in a conversation, not so much because of their superior truth value, but because they resonate more strongly with the dominant discourses that hold sway in a social field. These are the meanings that have been authorised with institutional legitimacy, blessed with the assent of the most privileged social groups, or, through constant repetition by the majority of people, have just come to be accepted as how things are. Such meanings begin to serve a hegemonic function (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) in relation to other possible meanings. Other meanings, and by elaboration, alternative identity positions, are thus systematically excluded by processes of social legitimation and authorisation. It is simply much harder to get such alternative meanings heard.

Because speaking rights in relation to a substantive topic may be effectively revoked in this way, discursive positioning is about processes of social constraint as well as about social production. The analysis of sexist language, for example, has provided many examples of exclusionary positioning for women. A similar analysis of disability discourse has shown how the repetition of patterns of disabling language produces disability as much as bodily impairment (Oliver, 1996). Unequal conditions of possibility in social relations are created by the use of sexist language, or the language of disability, through the recognition and legitimation of some people's actions and not others. Such hegemonic processes can even obscure the possibility that other meanings exist. Any single usage does not achieve what the overall pattern of such discourses achieves, and hence those who object to particular usages are frequently accused of overreacting. But any single usage nevertheless relies on the existence of the discourse pattern in order to make sense.

This idea of positioning builds on Foucault's (1978, 1980) descriptions of how power becomes constituted in the everyday exchanges of life. It accounts for how people take up, say, gendered subjectivities, even when this costs them personally. It allows for distinctions between 'forced' and 'deliberate' positioning of either ourselves or of others (Harré & van Langenhøve, 1991, p. 399), and between 'tacit

and intentional' positioning (Harré & van Langenhøve, 1991, p. 398). And it also accounts for ways in which people are effectively silenced through being excluded from legitimate positions from which to speak (Drewery, 2003). This view entails an understanding of power in Foucault's terms as a 'constitutive force' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46) realised primarily in the exchange of utterances.

### **The advantages of positioning theory for psychology**

The advantages for psychology in general, and for counselling in particular, are both theoretical and practical. Positioning theory (as it has been called; Harré & van Langenhøve, 1991) enables a study of the detail of how discourse operates in the production of relationships and of personal subjective responses. And it also enables counsellors to talk with their clients about the discursive positions they choose to take up rather than to simply accept those they are offered. That is, discursive positioning is not just about the establishment of meanings in an abstract way. It is deeply implicated in the production of the identity narratives that people recount in counselling. Indeed, it is possible to advance a notion of identity as a product of the clustering of repeated identity positions accepted and taken up in a multitude of conversations, rather than resorting to essentialist explanations of personality (see Burr, 1995, for a social constructionist deconstruction of the notion of personality).

Positioning theory makes cultural influences visible in discourse on a moment-by-moment basis but avoids essentialising such cultural influences as determined by membership of social categories, referencing them instead to the contested world of discourse production. And it makes visible the ways in which people resist and refuse the discursive positions they are offered in the midst of conversational exchange. Because it includes a focus on the subtle nuances of contradiction and discontinuity (Davies & Harré, 1990), it opens space for people to make choices, to take stands, or to protest injustice. In other words, the possibility of contradiction enables us to exercise agency. In this way, the concept of discursive positioning creates more leverage than overly generalised notions of cultural identity that are currently popular in the multicultural counselling literature.

In other words, discursive positioning leaves theoretical room for changes to be possible on both personal and social levels. It enables us to understand individual experience as swept by the winds of cultural trends, which sometimes blow in different directions at different times and places. At the same time, it underscores the difficulties, not just of their own making, that people must wrestle with as they turn into the wind and negotiate changes in their personal worlds. At such moments, it also allows people to make links between personal stands they are taking and the wider politics of meaning-making in their social worlds. Rather than just asserting personal autonomy, for example, a person may be seeking to make a change in his personal life and to conceive of this as taking a stand on behalf of others as well as on his own behalf. People do draw strength from social movements for their personal projects.

There are, moreover, research implications that emerge from a consideration of positioning theory. There is much potential for the analysis of discursive positioning to be incorporated in what is currently known as ‘critical discourse analysis’, as championed by Burman and Parker (1993), Billig (1998), Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), Fairclough (1992) and Parker (1992). An explicit focus on the analysis of discursive positioning in conversation can potentially shed much light on the detailed outworkings of the politics of meaning-making. Such analysis is ‘deconstructive’ and at the same time facilitative of the emergence of new possibilities. This kind of research has the potential to open to view the work being done by dominant discourse ‘behind our backs’ to create personal subjective experience and culturally patterned social relations. It is worthy of much greater attention in the field of counselling because its potential explanatory power.

### **Positioning theory in counselling**

I shall now turn to an explanation of the practical value I see of the concept of positioning in the process of counselling. This explanation shall be accompanied by some examples of exchanges from counselling conversations. It is based in a narrative approach to the practice of counselling, which aims to help people disidentify with stories that are proving problematic in their lives and to re-position themselves in alternative narrative trajectories that are more satisfying. This approach was initially elaborated by family therapists Michael White and David Epston (Epston & White, 1992; White & Epston, 1990; White, 1989, 1995, 2001). They have been joined by numerous others who have articulated a narrative practice in various formulations and in a variety of contexts (for example: Bird, 2000; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Monk *et al.*, 1999; Winslade & Monk, 1999; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). Tina Besley (2002) has previously foregrounded in this journal the debt that is owed to Foucault by narrative therapy.

What distinguishes a narrative approach to counselling (along with some other ‘postmodern’ approaches like solution-focused brief therapy—Berg & Miller, 1992; de Shazer, 1985, 1991—and collaborative language systems therapy—Anderson, 1997) is its rejection of an essentialised understanding of the origins of human subjectivity. Assumptions that are jettisoned include the idea that problems are hardwired into people’s personalities, that a person’s ‘true’ nature will emerge if repression is removed, that the cultural world restrains the individual from reaching their autonomous destiny, that counselling is primarily aimed at the cathartic release of emotion, or that symptomatic behaviour can be traced back to underlying personal deficit conditions.

Instead, a narrative perspective suggests that a person’s problems and struggles in life, and their resources for dealing with those problems, are largely cultural in character. They are produced within stories, or in discourse. If, as counsellors, we are to help people make shifts in their stories about themselves, then we need to work explicitly with the effects of dominant discourse in their lives and with the discursive resources that they can muster to re-author preferred stories to serve as the basis for

going forward in life. Thus, what is understood as 'natural' in some counselling approaches is de-naturalised in a narrative approach and understood within the context of discourse. However, it is clearly not possible to change a dominant discourse within a single counselling conversation. This is because the concept of discourse, as articulated by Foucault, refers to a patterned set of meanings and social practices established through a multitude of conversations (written and spoken) across a wide social landscape. It thus makes no sense to speak of an individual having his or her own personal discourse. If an individual is not therefore in charge of a discourse, how can we entertain the possibility in counselling of discursive shifts?

It is here that the concept of positioning becomes useful as a psychological concept. While a dominant discourse must be conceived of as larger than the individual, it also has personal effects. Individuals are positioned by and within discourse and such positioning has particular material effects in their lives that can be traced and understood. In a narrative approach to counselling, the practice of building externalising conversation (White & Epston, 1990) is a technique built upon this assumption. Rather than making a pathologising assumption about the origins of a problem in a personal deficit in the client, a narrative practitioner will typically seek to locate the problem that brings a person to counselling outside the person and in the world of discourse and story. This is the world in which meanings are being contested, in which power relations are negotiated, in which privileged social positions and marginalisation are established, and in which injustices and abuses of power occur. The practice of externalising also brings with it a close examination of the deeply personal effects of the internalisation of dominant discourse in persons' lives.

But people also resist the effects of dominant discourse in their lives. Through social movements they develop alternative discourses with which to contest the power of dominant discourse. Thus, for example, the discourses of decolonisation, multiculturalism and biculturalism have developed to contest the dominance of a discourse of Eurocentric superiority. And feminism has developed a counter-story to the dominance of patriarchal discourses. In their personal lives, people also resist the ways in which they are positioned within dominant discourses and seek to re-position themselves in more favourable positions. A counselling conversation can be conceived of as an opportunity to express this resistance to the power of dominant discourse and to craft a viable position in an alternative discourse. So while a discourse cannot be changed in one conversation, positioning within a discourse can change. A counsellor can assist a person to negotiate a positioning shift within a discursive field of play to significantly re-shape the negative effects of a problem and to open up new possibilities for living, based on positions of resistance. From this perspective, the purpose of counselling is always political, since it is always about taking a stance within a contest for privileged status of particular meanings.

A process for a counselling conversation that pays attention to discursive positioning might work through the following steps:

1. Build trust in a relationship and explore the problem(s) that brings a person to counselling.
2. Develop an externalising conversation that deconstructs the problem story and locates it in the world of discourse.
3. Map the discursive positions that the person is invited into by the problem story.
4. Identify the person's efforts to resist being positioned in this way.
5. Inquire into the person's preferences for the kind of re-positioning that would make a difference.
6. Develop an account of such position changes that is located in personal history, in a community of membership and also in alternative discourses/knowledges that can serve to sustain the positioning shift in the face of the continued assertion of dominant discourses.

In order to illustrate these ideas, let me refer to some exchanges from counselling conversations. These examples are fictitious exchanges in that the dialogue is constructed for this purpose, although each is based on an actual counselling conversation, with many details and identifying information changed. The content of the counselling conversations on which these examples were based was drawn from some practice counselling tapes produced by three students in a Masters level counsellor education programme. [3] Some of their words are preserved but others in the responses are my own additions. Each conversation is so heavily edited for the sake of brevity that it bears little relation to the original exchange.

#### *Example one*

Janine: 'When I was 7, I just had to do one little thing wrong and my mother would beat me. She wouldn't hold back. It was awful. I used to hate her. We used to live in a trailer park and the neighbours used to hear me scream and then look at me funny for a few days. Then when I got to be a teenager she would tell me sometimes you're never going to be worth anything, you're not going to do anything.'

Counsellor: 'What effect did that have for you?'

Janine: 'It has stayed with me and when I am feeling down it comes back and haunts me.'

Counsellor: 'So it has wormed its way inside you and it affects you. What does it affect in your relationships with others?'

Janine: 'It makes me feel like I am different all the time and that I don't really belong with people who are smart or have a nice house or a good job.'

Counsellor: 'So it undermines your sense of being OK in yourself.'

Janine: 'Yes, I think it's half the reason why my identity always seems to be lacking something, because of all the self-doubt that I have accumulated.'

Counsellor: 'Do you ever resist that self-doubt and not let it run the show?'

Janine: 'Well, sometimes I think things like how stupid it all is and how my mother was just feeling hopeless about her own life and really there's no



reason why I can't think of myself as being as good as anyone else.'

Counsellor: 'Is there anything that helps you to stay with that thought and not let it fade away in the face of the self-doubt?'

Janine: 'When I think about my daughter and what I want to give her for her life. As a Mum now I try to provide a safe environment for her. I try to be very fair about disciplining her. And I try to be a lot more loving than my mother was. Plus I am continuing my studies and I want her to grow up seeing me do that and knowing that a better life is possible rather than being told it's hopeless all the time.'

In this example, Janine is describing being positioned by a discourse of social class as it was repeated to her by her mother's utterances. She has internalised this discourse and it has an ongoing effect on the identity positions she has available to her in a wide variety of social interactions. It is not hard to imagine such identity positioning affecting her employment prospects, the kinds of relationships she might seek out, and the life projects she might consider herself fit for. The counsellor's responses do not hold her responsible for this positioning, nor do they ascribe these positions to the dynamics of her family of origin. Instead, they are located through a process of externalising as products of the kinds of discourse that might have circulated in her family and in the trailer park in which she grew up. They were expressed to Janine through her mother's utterances and physical abuse of her. The self-doubt that Janine references as an effect of the internalisation of these utterances [4] helps construct the identity positions from which she now interacts with others. The counsellor externalises the self-doubt too, in an effort to create room for Janine to disidentify with these identity positions. In the process, a window opens up in which Janine expresses an alternative position, based on the idea that her sense of worthlessness is a 'stupid' idea and that really she is as good as anyone else. The conversation begins to craft a story that is based on such re-positioning. It will need to be developed a lot further than it is here but the opening is there for the expression of resistance to being positioned in this particular dominant discourse.

#### *Example two*

Maria: 'Most of the time I just ask myself why did this happen? Why did my marriage break up? These questions just go round and round in my head.'

Counsellor: 'So the questions trouble you a lot. Do they ever get answered? Do you have troubling answers that bother you too?'

Maria: 'I think I wasn't good enough. I wasn't a good enough wife.'

Counsellor: 'In what way might you be "not good enough"?''

Maria: 'He would tell me that he didn't love me any more because I got too fat. And it's true, I did put on too much weight. I just wasn't attractive to him any more.'

Counsellor: 'What was that like for you?'

Maria: 'It really hurt. He was judging me in such a shallow way and it was just not fair.'

Counsellor: 'So, on the one hand you were tempted to believe the story that you weren't a good enough wife, but on the other hand you wanted to object and say that's not fair.'

Maria: 'Yes but after he left, I was so upset and I just felt so bad about myself and I blamed myself a lot.'

Counsellor: 'You lost touch with the "it's not fair".'

Maria: 'Yes.'

Counsellor: 'What if we were to talk a little about the "it's not fair" story? To give it more of a chance to stand up to the story of you not being good enough. Would that be of interest to you?'

In this example, Maria is experiencing prolonged distress as a result of her husband's decision to leave their marriage. The particular character of her distress is referenced to some questions and possible answers to those questions that she has internalised and is replaying over and over in her head. In other words, her distress can be understood not so much as an essential response to separation as an expression of her positions in the particular discourses that have been governing the process of separation. In the context of these discourses, the meanings she has available to her are very demeaning of her worth as a person. They entail a harsh judgment of her on a scale of attractiveness which is patriarchal in nature. Her husband's words reproduce the effects of the male gaze on the female body which she internalises and measures herself against (and of course is found wanting). So she is invited into a position of self-blame for the end of her marriage. Along the way, though, she mentions a small voice in her that would protest and say that this is not fair. It is an opening to an alternative discursive position that expresses her resistance to being positioned as worthless and unattractive. The counsellor picks up on this expression of resistance and offers her the chance to participate in a conversation that carries the potential for re-positioning to take place.

### *Example three*

Rhonda: 'My family say things to me like, why are you wanting to go and study more? Why don't you get a proper job? Why don't you find yourself a man and get married?'

Counsellor: 'So do those messages get to you, do they get under your skin?'

Rhonda: 'Yeah they make it hard. But they don't stop me. I have had to work hard on myself not to believe that stuff, not to give in to those values. Sometimes I have to give myself a poke and say, look around you. Look at what they are wanting for you. Is that enough to make life worth living? It's hard but I keep thinking, who wants to be satisfied with a life that's not worth much?'

Counsellor: 'So does it feel like those family stories are betraying you

through not supporting your hopes and dreams?’

Rhonda: ‘Yeah well a bit. But it’s not them really, that’s society speaking. Think about it. We women learn that if you don’t have a man, if you don’t have a relationship, you’re nothing. So we go out of our way for a relationship. Even if we know that this man is not treating us right, even if he is cheating on us, we will go out of our way to make it work. Why? Because we don’t want to be thought of as less than . . . So we put up with a lot of things that we shouldn’t have to. That’s why it’s important to me to get myself together now so that my children in future see something different.’

Rhonda is an African-American woman who is active in her own deconstruction of the discursive positions she is being offered by ‘her family’. These positions are based on social divisions along racial and gender lines established through the systematic reproduction of dominant discourses of race and gender. Rhonda is invited to accept and internalise the implications of these discourses for her own identity and life decisions. She expresses, however, a determination to resist these position calls and to articulate her own identity in defiance of dominant discourse. She is determined not to be thought of as ‘less than . . .’ Her analysis is articulate and more sophisticated than most and her personal project of re-positioning is well-advanced. At the same time, she expresses a sense of struggle. It is still hard to resist the ongoing position calls that the dominant discourses of race and gender exert. It requires ongoing vigilance. The counsellor’s job then becomes one of giving her space to listen to herself ‘speak herself into existence’ (Davies, 1991) through her re-positioning efforts. It will also be necessary for Rhonda to continue to develop a membership community (either in her family or outside it) that recognises and validates for her the positions of resistance to these dominant discourses. This might be an important focus of counselling in this context.

These are three brief examples of a counsellor listening to the stories that a client tells with an ear for the discursive positions into which a person is being invited and then opening a conversation in which those positions are to some degree deconstructed. In the process, the possibility of re-positioning in relation to a dominant discourse is opened up. Once a person makes a commitment to such re-positioning the task of counselling then becomes one of developing a sustainable account of this new position and weaving it into daily life. The dominant discourse will, of course, continue to exert its influence and issue its position calls in an ongoing way. Care needs to be taken in this process that the resistance to the dominant discourse that is articulated belongs to the intentional world of the client and not to the political predilections of the counsellor.

Each of these examples illustrates the practical value of listening for the effects of discursive positioning and the possibility of inviting people to turn the discursive gaze back on itself. As a particular discursive positioning is evaluated and either accepted or rejected, individuals have the opportunity to re-position themselves and, in the process, to renegotiate their relationships and their identity conclusions. Thus counselling can be conceived of as an opportunity for reflection upon the personal

effects of the operation of discourse and for the intentional construction of alternative discursive positions, where this is what a person prefers.

In addition, there is theoretical value in the concept of discursive positioning. It is a theoretical tool that enables close inspection of the detail of conversation and the ways that people negotiate meanings. Such close inspection provides material for the theorising of the kinds of discursive shifts and changes that counselling is supposed to support. Until now, most discourse analysis studies have focused on the ways in which people work up identity projects through the establishment of subject positions that draw upon discourse, including ways in which people resist the influence of dominant discourse. Less attention has been paid to processes by which people shift and change positions. How people make changes in identity projects is crucial, however, to the kind of research that might inform the practice of therapy.

Positioning theory promises sensitivity to the moment-by-moment negotiation of meaning in conversation. It combines well with critical discourse analysis in its attention not just to the immediate features of conversational exchange but also to the background functioning of dominant discourse to render meaningful the content of what is said. It combines the analysis of content with the analysis of linguistic process. It enables a researcher to show, not just that there are substantial 'orders of discourse' (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) at work in the background of a conversation, but also how particular utterances in moment-by-moment interaction shape and re-shape the relationship of participants to these background orders of discourse. It therefore has potential as an analytical tool in counselling research and in the development of, and understanding of, the ways in which counselling produces effects in people's lives.

## Notes

- [1] See Waldegrave *et al.* (2003) for an argument along these lines.
- [2] I am using the term 'utterance' in the way that Bakhtin (1984, 1986) articulates it, in preference to alternatives such as the 'statement'. 'Utterance' may refer to a range of discursive events, from a spoken sentence, including a monosyllabic response, all the way to a lengthy written text. The term that Foucault uses in French is '*énoncé*', which has something of the same sense of illocutionary force.
- [3] I would like to acknowledge the contribution made by Megan de Witt, Leon McNaught and Michelle Myers for agreeing to let me use examples from their taped practice counselling conversations and for their respective clients (other students in the same university) who also generously contributed their time and personal stories to the process.
- [4] See Michael White's (2002) article 'Addressing personal failure' for an analysis of the relation between experiences of self-doubt and power relations as they are constituted in discourse.

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