

## A Discursive Psychological Approach to Positioning

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*This article examines the current state of positioning theory as it has emerged in the work of Rom Harré and his colleagues, particularly with respect to its intended alignment with discursive psychology. Although Harré's discursive approach to positioning has been useful for drawing attention to the dynamism of social interactions and the collective construction of sociality, his ethogenic and ontological constructionist assumptions undermine his discursive approach by capitulating to cognitivist assumptions about mind, world, and discourse. Harré's discursive approach overlooks the action orientation of positioning in an attempt to reveal a realm of moral order and social rules. In contrast, I argue for (and illustrate) a discursive psychological orientation to positioning that is not tethered to ethnogenic or ontological constructionist assumptions. Rather, it is a nonontological, epistemological constructionist discursive approach that understands acts of positioning neither through psychological speculation nor cultural exegesis but rather through a close analysis of the relationship between discursive actions and social identities.*

**Keywords:** discursive psychology; identity; positioning; Rom Harré

Over the last half century, social scientists have increasingly interpreted human action as the dynamic interplay between “mind” and “world,” that is, between a mental world of thoughts, beliefs, and emotions “within” and the social, normative, and ideological world “out there.” In illuminating this dynamic interplay, concepts such as *schemas* (Bartlett 1932/1961), *scripts* (Schank & Abelson 1977), *frames* and *framing* (Bateson 1955/1972; Frake 1977; Goffman 1974; Gumperz 1982; Tannen 1993), *footings* and *alignments* (Goffman 1979/1981), and *stance* (Ochs 1996) have populated the vernacular of the social sciences. Though disparate in significant ways, common to these concepts is an interest in both the active, dynamic, and constructive processes of human interaction and a view that what emerges in such interactions is to varying degrees shaped by what people bring to the interactions (mind) and/or by the norms, rules, and ideologies (world) that are thought to constrain such interactions.

This dual commitment to the “inner” and “outer” constituencies of human action has, however, rarely been even. The interactive realm has historically been treated as ontologically subordinate to ideational and ideological realms that are often posited as more foundational and determinate. For instance, footings, though conceptualized as highly local and interactive phenomenon are, for Goffman (1979/1981) and others such as Deborah Tannen (1993), ontologically subordinate to and dependent on frames for their meanings.

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Frames are seen as the overarching, more fundamental, and perceptual gestalt-like cognitive structures that makes an interpretation of footings possible. Scripts, too, are often seen as the broader cultural structures against which a local conversational stance is understood. This hierarchy, of interpreting local interactive action by looking inward to mind or punting outward to world, surfaces time and again in the descriptive vocabulary of the social sciences. The constitutive power of the interaction is thus often washed out by recourse to a backdrop of ideational and ideological phenomenon. The effect is that the interactive realm is treated as an epiphenomenon, the constitutive power of the discursive moment is marginalized, and discourse itself is conceptualized as simply a window into (or reflection of) mind and world.

Since the early 1990s, Rom Harré and his colleagues have advanced a discursive psychological approach to “positioning” that, in part, attempts to reverse this hierarchy (see Davies & Harré 1990; Harré & Moghaddam 2003; Harré & van Langenhove 1992, 1999). The central premise of this article is that Harré’s particular discursive approach to positioning does not have the corrective potential it advertises. Though Harré’s approach to positioning has been sanguine in revealing a sensitivity to culture and context, to the collaborative construction of social reality, and to a focus on collective (not static) processes and relationships, it nevertheless promotes a view of discourse that capitulates to cognitivist assumptions about mind, world, and discourse. Though discursive psychology is itself a heterogeneous discipline with various definition of “discourse,” it has at the very least been historically recognized as a noncognitive alternative for psychology. Harré’s alignment of positioning with a cognitive view of discursive psychology, therefore, raises questions concerning what exactly is distinctive about a discursive approach to social action. At stake in such a clarification is the coherence of not simply discursive psychology but also of a variety of qualitative approaches that may contradict and at times negate the corrective potential they promise. In order for positioning to work as a truly new analytic concept for describing human action, and to be aligned constructively with a discursive view of mind and world, it must resist the assumptions of cognitivism. In what follows, I will show how Harré’s project fails to do this. I will then offer a more contemporary discursive psychological view of positioning that avoids the problems of cognitivism and will accompany this with a worked example.

### **Positioning: Harré’s New Social Ontology**

For Harré and his colleagues, positioning was conceptualized as part of a new social ontology in which the emergent, interactive, and dynamic realm of social interaction was given primacy. Positioning was seen as a fluid and dynamic replacement for a clutch of static, nondiscursive, and overly cognitive concepts such as “role” and “role theory,” though the force of this critique applied not only to role theory but also to the reifying potential of other concepts such as frame, script, and schema.

Role, as used to describe the social typology of relational constellations, such as “father-son” or “teacher-student,” was criticized by Harré for being a relatively static and oversimplifying concept. In actual situations, people rarely take-up or resist roles in straightforward ways. Role was thus too dramaturgical or theatrical, in the sense that roles construe people as actors with lines already written and their relational constellations more or less scripted or framed (Davies & Harré 1990). In everyday settings, Harré argued that the rights and duties that dictate the adopting or resistance of a role or the supplementing or correcting of a role are neither prewritten nor evenly distributed through a social group (Harré & Moghaddam 2003). The same could be said concerning the influence

of frames, scripts, ideologies, or schemas. Instead, performance rights depend on subtly varying relational constellations and the rules bracketing them. Harré and his colleagues introduced positions as a way of fleshing out the unequal distribution of rights and duties as well as the shifting nature of rule-role relational constellations. Positions emerged as a way of underscoring the dynamism of social relations, a dynamism not evidenced by broad shifts in role and not explained away by recourse to frames, scripts, ideologies, or schemas, but rather illuminated through the subtleties of interactively degreed positioning shifts. Positions thus infused the interactive realm with an onto-formative and constitutive power. This squared with Harré's (1983, p. 58) dictum that "the primary human reality is persons in conversation." Positioning would be the vanguard for such a view.

### **Aligning Positioning with Discursive Psychology**

In allying positioning with a Wittgensteinian program for social psychology, Harré sought to advance a new *discursive* paradigm of research (see Harré & Gillett, 1994) that focused on "situation-specific meanings and sets of context-sensitive rules that embody a particular moral order," an approach that Harré believed "led to an alliance with the newly emergent field of discursive psychology, which was directed to a similar end product" (Harré & Moghaddam 2003, p. 3). However, unlike the often cited discursive psychological work of Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter (see Edwards 1997; Edwards & Potter 1992; Potter 1996), a distinction that will be elaborated on in due course, Harré (1999) understood discursive psychology as the study of the language of meanings, intentions, plans, and rules that reflect the agentive powers of people to act intentionally. An "agentive" picture of human life is one where "people work together to fulfill their intentions and achieve their projects according to local rules and norms" (Harré 1999, p. 43). Harré (1999, pp. 43–4) believed that a discursive methodology involves "try(ing) to make explicit the implicit norms, rules and meanings immanent in what people are doing." Therefore, what we ascribe to people when we study their discursive practices are the skills necessary to perform them (Harré 1998).

In connecting his discursive psychological view with positioning, Harré defined positions as "clusters of rights and duties to perform certain actions" and as "patterns of beliefs in the members of a relatively coherent speech community" (Harré & Moghaddam 2003, pp. 4–5). Positions are social to the extent that the relevant patterns of beliefs for group members are similar to those of every other. In order to assess the similarity of these positioning-defining beliefs, we must discursively examine "how each social actor expresses his or her beliefs about positions" (Harré & Moghaddam 2003, p. 4). Though this examination would be of persons in conversations, Harré is careful to note that these patterns of beliefs that take the form of positions are actually transcendent to conversations. Harré and Moghaddam (2003, p. 4) state that "in each social milieu there is a kind of Platonic realm of positions, realized in current practices, which people can adopt, strive to locate themselves in, be pushed into, be displaced from or be refused access, recess themselves from and so on, in a highly mobile and dynamics (sic) way." In short, Harré's ontology of positions oscillates between immanence and transcendence. Positions are immanent to the extent that they are realized conversationally; they are transcendent to the extent that they reveal (or are windows into) a kind of storehouse of platonic positions. Unfortunately, this oscillation undermines Harré's project of a 'new' social ontology where local discursive practices, rather than a transcendent realm of platonic positions, are the "primary human reality."

## Ethogenics and Ontological Constructionism

The central critique, therefore, of Harré's discursive project for positioning is with the problems inherent in his *ethogenic* program for positioning as well the *ontological* constructionist assumptions embedded in his discursive psychology. Harré's embrace of positioning is motivated by a broader *ethogenic* interest in how people use rules and how rules are immanent in conversations. Harré's ethogenic conception of positioning is aimed at revealing the dynamic and ever changing assignment of rule-governed rights and duties (inherent in story lines) among groups of social participants (see Varela & Harré 1996 for a more elaborate discussion). Though Harré is clearly concerned with the interpersonal realm, it is less clear how his focus on positioning is radically *interactional*. Instead, and in a way consonant with ethogenics, social interactions and the positions realized therein are the sites for the production of something more paramount, that is, rule-following or conventional types of interpersonal behavior.

Harré's view of positioning is thus akin to his view of social representations—while both are immanent within social practices, they nonetheless maintain a kind of cognitive ontology (see Harré & Moghaddam 2003; for an extended critique, see Potter & Edwards 1999). Though the knowledge needed to manage such rules is said to be immanent within the discourses themselves, social rules and representations are not reducible to the discourses (Varela & Harré 1996). Harré thus focuses on acts of positioning in order to *extract* from discourse sets of rules that people use. This suggests a kind of storehouse of social knowledge which enables acts of positioning to stand as indexes of the moral order. As Potter and Wetherell (1987) have argued, extracting social rules from the construction or performance of them is problematic. Not only does it obviate the diachronic relationship between description and evaluation, but it also reifies the ontology of social phenomena.

A central dilemma with Harré's ethogenic-discursive view of positioning is that it necessitates a commitment to ontology. An *ontological* discursive approach is essentially a theory of how ideational and/or ideological entities are produced, embodied, or revealed in discursive action (for extended explanation and critique, see Edwards & Potter 2005; Potter & Edwards 2003). Smuggling in ontological assumptions means accepting at least one of two premises—that 1) entities like minds or social representations are *talked* into being so that they are *essentially* or *ontologically* discursive or 2) that discourse is the product, realization, or expression of minds and social rules/representations such that conversational/interactive phenomenon are *essentially* or *ontologically* nondiscursive. At the least, Harré's approach to positioning accepts the second of these two premises, a premise that squares with a cognitivist view of discourse and social action. A cognitivist view of discourse treats talk as the product, expression, or realization of, in Harré's argument, a platonic realm of positions, rules, and/or social representations. Discourse becomes a methodological resource for research into the realm of social order and shared belief systems.

For the last decade or so, Jonathon Potter and Derek Edwards (Edwards 1997; Edwards & Potter 1992, 2005; Potter 1996; Potter & Edwards 2005) have been carefully articulating a nonontological, purely epistemological constructionist approach to discursive psychology that avoids the problems of cognitivism. Potter and Edwards' discursive psychology (hereafter, DP) rejects the necessity of accepting either of the two ontological *assumptions* noted above. Their DP is mute or agnostic on issues of ontology. They do not, in other words, reject or affirm any particular relationship between discourse and mind/world, or of any ontology involving mind or world. While outright denials and rejections have been associated with other varieties of discursive psychology (Harré & Gillet

1994), the constructionism of Gergen, the ordinary language philosophy of Wittgenstein, or the Soviet-inspired constructivism of Vygotsky, Bruner, or Piaget, it is not a part of Potter and Edwards' discursive psychology. What they reject is the assumption that discourses and mind-world are necessarily wired together in a referential way. Instead, they ask that we consider the relationship differently. The current analytic task of DP, therefore, is one of *epistemic constructionism*—that is, examining how, on what occasions, and in the service of what kinds of interactional practices, discourse handles and manages the topics of mind and world (Edwards 1997; Potter & Edwards 2005). DP thus takes an interest in *how* people construct versions of objects in talk and texts, *how* these versions are undermined, and *how* they are rhetorically developed to resist being undermined.

An epistemic constructionist approach to discursive psychology alters the status of positioning and social rules. In DP, positioning is performative social action, not the product, expression, input, or output of something else. Acts of positioning, like discourse itself, are the domain of public accountability in which psychological states and societal rules are made relevant. Social rules and representations are therefore features in participant's discursive practices, oriented to in an "as if" (rather than "as such") way, which means they are constructed and described as people perform social action. They are not, therefore, explanatory resources that analysts haul to the discursive scene to make sense of talk, but rather they are the topic(s) of study. Rules and social representations are treated analytically as discourse's topics and business. Harré's discursive approach overlooks the action orientation of positioning in an attempt to reach hypothetical, underlying, and shared social rules. While Harré acknowledges that some might want to avoid this kind of commitment to ontology and conceptualize positioning in a purely descriptive way, as a kind of summary account of a pattern of discursive actions to be discerned in an analysis of distinct episodes, he is clear that he prefers to see positions as a reflection of the shared presuppositions of the social order or of some pre-existing system of beliefs or cognitive predispositions (Harré & Slocum 2003).

Though Harré's preference reproduces the assumptions of cognitivism, thus failing to advance a noncognitive or discursive approach to social action, it is not difficult to understand its appeal. People will argue that whatever is revealed in an analysis of local acts of positioning and social action, there must be some underlying realm of ideational or social competence that makes it possible. This argument is circular (see Edwards 2006). Edwards (2006) notes that competence need not be anchored in either mental representations or in some societal storehouse of rules or norms, particularly since the evidence of representations and rules is the very domain of discursive practices that they are supposed to explain. In what follows, I will argue that the viability of a discursive psychological approach necessitates avoiding looking through acts of positioning to a societal moral order of rules/norms. Rather, it is to ask, what are the acts of positioning (or procedures) that participants have for making their practices appear (or not appear) normative or rule-governed? To paraphrase Sacks (1992), it is to suspend the assumption that acts of positioning *reveal* the moral order and, instead, to ask: are there ways of positioning self and other that people use which have as their effect a kind of showing that is treated as "normative" or "rule-governed"?

### **A Discursive Psychological Approach to Positioning**

The variety of discursive psychology being advocated here is one that is consonant with the discursive work of Edwards and Potter (1992), Edwards (1997), Potter (1996), and,

more specifically, with the discursive-ethnomethodological approach to identity in Antaki and Widdicombe's (1998) *Identities in Talk*. With respect to Edwards and Potter's orientation, this approach is similar in at least two ways. First, though not strictly conversation analytic, the current discursive approach to positioning begins with a close analysis of the *discursive practices* of describing, avowing, disavowing, and attributing psychological entities (Edwards & Potter 1992). However, like Antaki and Widdicombe's (1998) ethnomethodological extension of this approach, these practices are additionally analyzed as ways of doing or rejecting category membership. This brings the focus closer to a critical discursive perspective, since most identity categories are not directly named but indexed by occasioning the features of categories, features whose association with the category requires cultural knowledge. Whereas much of conversation and discourse analytic work has been concerned with how categories function in talk to accomplish certain social actions, the current approach is concerned with how social actions directly and indirectly index features of social categories that are inference-rich with respect to socio-cultural identities.

A second parallel with Edwards and Potter's approach, one that is particularly useful for drawing a distinction with Harré, is that the current discursive view of positioning is *not* anti-ontological (i.e., asserting that social rules or cognitive entities do not really exist) nor is it ontologically relativistic (i.e., asserting that everything is simply discursive). Rather, it is noncognitive in that it attempts to lay out an approach to social life that is not susceptible to the critiques of cognitivism (Edwards 1997; Potter 1996). It is resistant to the way "description" and "evaluation" are treated in perceptual-cognitivism and of the omissions that ensue (see Potter & Edwards 2005). It resists what Edwards (1997) calls a "communication model" of talk, where talk is treated referentially. This type of cognitive or telementational (Coulter 2005) model of discourse washes out the crucially important interactional, rhetorical, and addressive nature of acts of positioning.

Acts of positioning are understood not by punting 'out' (to a world of social rules/representations) or inward (to mind), but by examining how social interactions are ordered, made relevant, and attended to by persons-in-conversations (Korobov & Bamberg 2004a, 2004b, 2007). This does not require a new social ontology, let alone a social ontology at all. Rather, it is an epistemological constructionist approach to positioning without recourse to either psychological speculation or cultural exegesis, but instead to the dynamism of social interaction itself. This discursive view of positioning promotes a tight fidelity to the discursive moment where positions are actually occasioned and put to use. Positions are, in the first instance, interactively drawn-up in particular contexts, resisted in particular contexts, and amended or mitigated in particular contexts for particular purposes. They are indexed and occasioned as an effect of the way the social interaction is ordered, made relevant, and attended to as an ongoing and active accomplishment of persons in conversation.

### ***Positioning and Identity***

To sync acts of positioning with identity, acts of positioning must not be taken as equivalent to "discursive actions" in the way that discursive researchers typically use this term. The notion of a position must embody more than discursive actions, or else an act of positioning is essentially a discursive action, and the two terms would be redundant. Positioning would thus be unhelpful for discursive researchers who already have a sophisticated set of terms for describing discursive actions. Instead, positions are second-order phenomena or a way

of describing the *force* or *effect* that certain discursive actions have for establishing the *identities* of the participants present or imagined (Korobov 2006; Korobov & Bamberg 2007). Consider, for example, the following exchange between three young men talking about the night when Ben tried to “hook up” with a mutual friend’s little sister (for extended discussion, see Korobov in press). Consider the way their evaluations and descriptions begin to make relevant (which is to say, position) an identity that Ben takes up (line 5) and treats as consequential for the interaction.

(1) (from Korobov, in press [see Appendix 1 for transcription notation])

1. Ben: that was the night that we took the Night Owl home
2. Kevin: an you tried to hook up with one of our friend’s little sisters
3. Chris: co::ld
4. Kevin: a freshman
5. Ben: a fa:resh:::man ((laughing)) ththat’s(hh) right

No clear or obvious identity categories are invoked in this excerpt to describe Ben, yet Kevin and Chris’ descriptions and evaluations arguably position Ben as having a certain kind of culturally available identity. This identity is indexed as the cumulative or second-order effect of Kevin’s descriptions of Ben’s actions (trying to hook up with “our friend’s little sister” who is a freshman) and Chris’ evaluation of this description of Ben’s action (co::ld), implying that there is something potentially insensitive or callous about Ben’s behavior. Ben treats this positioning as consequential for the interaction (line 5) by agreeing with it, though interestingly his agreement is laced with laughter, which has the potential to make light of this behavior and it is negative evaluation, suggesting that it is the kind of thing one could take a jocular attitude toward, possibly because in some way it is naughty or anti-normative. Regardless of the identity we might want to argue is being worked up here for Ben (and by Ben), what is worth noting is that it is the young men who orient to the features of a certain identity in an as if way (not a definitive way) so as to conduct a certain kind of social business (e.g., teasing, making light of sexual hook-ups, or seductive advances with younger women), business that is reciprocally itself a central feature of the identity categories being occasioned.

In other words, acts of positioning work not only in the establishment of social interaction, but they also work, as Sacks (1992) notes, as one of many membership categorization devices (or as “identity devices”) which order together the speakers into collections of certain kinds of people with certain kinds of identities. When one analyzes how acts of positioning are ordered and attended to by speakers, one can begin to see how they accomplish not only social interaction, but also how they cast people into endogenously produced identities.

Positions are thus the identity-relevant effects of the way speakers order conversational devices and discursive activities (Korobov & Bamberg 2007). An analysis of positioning is thus a way of connecting an interest in studying talk as it is used for doing social interaction (the typical agenda of discursive work) with an interest in studying talk as it is employed to “do identity” (see Antaki & Widdicombe 1998; Bamberg 2003, 2004). Acts of positioning are not discursive actions in the same way that disagreeing, teasing, and blaming are discursive actions. One can show where and how a participant is disagreeing, for instance, and how it is taken-up by other interlocutors. But simply examining its formulation and receipt within social interaction doesn’t *necessarily* tell us anything about its usefulness in the

accomplishment of identities. Consider the following exchange where speaker B disagrees with speaker A.

1. A: we should stop and ask for directions
2. B: no (.) our turn is two lights up

Though the case can be made that B is disagreeing with A, it would be far more difficult to make the case that B's disagreement is an act of positioning, since it is not clear how an identity category or its features are being occasioned. However, were we to claim that disagreement is part of a *positioning* activity, we would additionally be obliged to show how disagreement functions in a certain environments to position speakers as having certain kinds of identities. Consider what a different form of disagreement might be doing by speaker B below.

1. A: we should stop and ask for directions
2. B: no (.) we don't stop and ask for directions

Although we do not know who "we" is, we can see that B uses the iterative present tense to script the behavior of the "we" group as having the feature of not generally stopping and asking for directions. It would obviously be a leap, from the limited data given, to suggest that this scripting is a feature of a certain kind of identity, though we can imagine that with more data, this discursive action (disagreement) could be situated alongside a cascade of other discursive actions that may occasion the features of a certain identity position. In short, this discursive approach to positioning attempts to underscore the ways that some social actions, and the rhetorical devices and sequential arrangements that constitute them, are sometimes employed in the doing of not only social action but also social *identities*.

Performing a sequentially grounded analysis of conversational positioning entails a close scrutiny of the shifts, inconsistencies, and contradictions that characterize everyday identity work. In daily interactions, people may routinely and creatively engage in discursive actions that directly and indirectly position themselves alongside various identity ascriptions. For instance, speakers can engage in positioning by caricaturing other social groups or by orienting to social attitudes in an ironic or tongue-in-cheek way, as Ben does in line 5, so as to create a negotiable amount of distance or ambivalence about the lurking identity ascription. At other times, speakers may (counterintuitively) claim an identity position in order to resist being positioned in socially injurious ways. An analysis of conversational positioning entails, therefore, sensitivity to ways social actions are conventionally associated with identity categories, and vice-versa. Whatever is known about certain discursive actions can be invoked as a way of positioning an identity; these acts of positioning, in turn, work as inferential resources which help us interpret a person's past, present, or future behavior.

### ***Analyzing Conversational Positioning***

Positioning, like all discursive action, takes place within an ongoing argumentative context (Billig 1987; Potter 1996) where talk is used not simply in an active way to create "selves" and "things" but also in an anticipatory or preemptive way so as to avoid doing

certain things. Analytically, this suggests that acts of positioning are to be studied not simply in relation to how they directly or indirectly construct certain identities, but they should also be seen as potentially countering other identity ascriptions that the participants themselves are “orienting to” as alternative (Potter 1996). Potter (1996) calls this the “offensive” and “defensive” rhetorical nature of talk, an idea highly resonant in an analysis of positioning. Positioning works *offensively* in so far as it undermines alternative identity positions; positioning works *defensively* in so far as it has the capacity to resist or deflect potential challenges or counters. Since talk usually encompasses a variety of rhetorical functions (both offensively and defensively), conversational positioning will vary from turn to turn and involve the selective deployment of discursive formulations to bring off identity claims that are well-fitted or finely tuned, that is, claims that are not easily assailable.

Because talk has an offensive and defensive rhetorical organization to it, a discursive analysis of positioning has a double focus. It examines both the discursive strategies used to work-up identity positions, while at the same time considering the strategies used to inoculate against alternative versions or potential challenges. This double focus of rhetoric shades into the often cited notion of “stake and interest” management (Edwards & Potter 1992; Potter 1996) or what has been called the “dilemma of stake” (Potter 1996). The dilemma refers to the ways that conversational positions may be discounted because they appear to be motivated by a concealed stake or interest on the part of the speaker or on the part of the group to which the speaker belongs. In daily life, people often treat one another *as if* they have a stake or interest in some course of action or, in this case, in some form of identity to which their talk is directed. Because of this, speakers will often work up their identity positions in ways that inoculate against the obvious appearance of stake or interest, and conversely, people will often work to position other people’s identity ascriptions so that they appear motivated by stake or interest. The analytic goal of positioning is to describe how people, in joint communicative activity, strategically undermine self/other positions by invoking interests, and how, in turn, they design their identity positions to resist such undermining.

### **A Worked Example**

The following segment of conversation was chosen, in part, because the participants do not directly claim or resist any specific identity categories, making it less obvious how identities are relevant. Despite this, an analysis of positioning is both possible and helpful in connecting a view of discursive action with identity. This particular slice of conversation involves three adolescent boys (for extended discussion, see Korobov & Bamberg 2007). It was recorded as part of larger research project where young men’s spontaneous conversations were audio-recorded while they rode together in the back of a van to various after school outings. There was only one adult in the van at the time, the driver, who was out of earshot of the conversation and was thus not involved in the conversation at all. The transcript picks up right after Jamal remarks that his dad once let his brother rent the movie *Striptease*. After hearing this, Kyle (in line 1) announces “STRIP POKER,” which is a reference to a cable television trivia game show (USA Network) that involved, among other things, attractive young women slowly stripping off their clothes when questions were answered incorrectly. The conversation shifts to evaluating the television game show, *Strip Poker*.

(2) (from Korobov & Bamberg 2007)

- 1 Kyle: STRIP POKER (.) THEY DON'T SHOW NUT'IN  
 2 Jamal: I KNOW (.) they have like THREE PAIRS of underwear on (.) and like  
 3 [FIVE BRA::S]  
 4 Kyle: [they have like] they have like 46 pairs of shorts for em' (.) LIKE FIVE  
 5 PAIRS OF SOCKS ON (.) TWO PAIRS OF SHOES (.) LIKE SIX  
 6 JACKETS (.) I MEAN WHAT'S WITH THIS (1.0) IT SAYS STRIP (.)  
 7 poker (.) not let's let's see who can wear the most AND NOT STRIP  
 8 ((laughter, 2.0))  
 9 Arthur: yeah (.) I WISH THEY'D HAVE SOMEBODY ACTUALLY strip=  
 10 Jamal: =yeah they are still left with like a shirt on and two pairs of underwear=  
 11 Kyle: =yeah (.) the farthest they got once was like underwear and a bra (1.0)  
 12 that's the farthest they got

### *What a Discursive Analysis of Positioning is Not*

Because Harré's positioning theory has rarely been applied to actual empirical analyses of talk (but rather has been occupied with a conceptual refutation of traditional psychology), it is challenging to offer an analysis of the above excerpt. Having said this, his ethogenic discursive approach to positioning would likely conceptualize the boy's positions as evidence of, for instance, "the rules of talking about the spectacle of nudity," "the rules that dictate responses to attempted seduction," or "the rules of voyeurism" for the social group in question (the list could go on). Certain role positions, like Kyle's position about the show not delivering full stripping, might be conceptualized as a social role that allows speakers (e.g., young men) to demonstrate social competence or status concerning displays of heterosexuality among other members. Discursive positions like Kyle's would *reveal* this moral/social order. Researcher led interviews with these young men might be sought as a follow-up way of confirming or disconfirming the relevance, context, and application of these rules to various situations. The positions articulated in these interview accounts would be taken, most likely, as relatively accurate windows into the realm of social competence and social beliefs that guide member's behaviors.

### *A Discursive Analysis of Positioning*

In contrast, a discursive approach to positioning focuses on positioning as the identity-relevant force of certain discursive actions. To reverse Harré's approach, the guiding question would be: What are the ways of positioning self and other, and the discursive actions formulated that bring these identity positions off, that these young boys use which have as an effect a kind of showing that is treated as normative or rule-governed? Answering this begins by examining the various discursive actions in this extract. Beginning broadly, there are descriptions about the types of clothes that the contestants layer on and the amount they take off. And there is an overarching evaluation that, despite what the show promises (stripping) and of the fact the contestants once stripped to their "underwear and bra," the show nevertheless shows "NUT'IN." Among a myriad of things the contestants do not do, and of topics Kyle could comment on, Kyle is alerting us to the relevancy of a specific behavior (stripping) not taken by the contestants. Though much could be made of these descriptions and evaluations, I argue that they are formulated

in a way that brings off the discursive action of *complaining*. The complaining becomes a *positioning* activity because it makes relevant certain social identities that the boys can more or less take-up.

Kyle's initial (line 1) idiomatic grammatical formulation of "NUT'IN" in line 1 is delivered loudly with an informal, southern U.S. colloquial drawl, thus indexing a casual and emphatic tone. Over the next several turns (lines 1–7), Kyle and Jamal collectively expand this tone in building upgraded, hyperbolic descriptions about how much the contestants *do not* show. In so doing, they are doing more than complaining. They are also displaying knowledge about the show, what it offers, what it does not offer, and how the disconnect between the two potentially positions the viewers in a frustrated relationship with the show. The complaining and displays of knowledge are performed through exaggerated, if not impossible, sounding descriptions (e.g., "46 pairs of shorts") of all the clothes that the contestants layer on. Their descriptions are hearable as a gag and treated as one, as the boys end up laughing in line 8. Although the grammatical idiom and exaggerations are performed informally and humorously, they are about the absence of something (nudity) that Arthur (line 9) displays desire in. Arthur plays "emotions" against "world" in claiming that he "wishes" they would have somebody actually strip. A formulation where the world (the show) blocks emotions (desire to see stripping) is a way of foregrounding frustrations that are ingredient in acts of complaining. There is, therefore, demonstrable evidence that the exaggerated descriptions, laughter, and emotion-world payoff is a part of an activity of complaining, albeit attenuated complaining.

Research on conversational interaction has found that complaining is a delicate project that involves formulating complaints in recipient-designed ways (see Buttny 2004; Drew 1998; Edwards 2005). On the one hand, complaints are ostensibly important matters that must be formulated in believable ways so as to be taken seriously, otherwise it might be said that one is "complaining about nothing." On the other hand, and in a way apposite for the present data, complaints must not be formulated in ways that seem *too* serious, implicating speakers as overreacting, overly sensitive, or overly absorbed in their problems (see Drew 1998; Edwards 2005). The essence of this dilemma was captured nicely by Sacks (1992), who noted that complaining is something we love to do, but love to avoid being characterized as doing. Complaints are therefore often mitigated (see Caffi 1999), which refers to the rhetorical softening or attenuating of a potentially negative hearing. As such, the discursive management of complaints reveals what is normative for speakers. Presumably one would not complain about nothing, nor would one work to manage the receipt of a complaint if its hearing did not impinge on normative expectations. By examining this handling, we see what is at stake for speakers, in terms of what counts for them as a complainable item and, by extension, how this process, as an effect of its normative valence, may index the features of certain culturally available identities.

In other words, the complaining, its mitigation, and the accompanying displays of knowledge are potentially useful as *positioning* activities that may be hearable indices of certain identity categories. For starters, the weight of detail in the descriptions, coupled with the emphatic stress, makes the descriptions hearably absurd (see Antaki 2003). Absurdity, as Antaki (2003) notes, is good camouflage. Unlike precisely stated detailed descriptions, absurd sounding ones are not easily undermined. They can be retracted or laughed off quite easily. This allows the gag to double as a complaint, since complaining is generally something one does not want to be obvious about (Sacks 1992). In addition, Kyle's "I MEAN WHAT'S WITH THIS" (line 6) is an idiomatic formulation, delivered with emphatic stress, and packaged in the form of a rhetorical, wh-question construction. These types of rhetorical questions often come in an already established environment

of complaint, and as such, work to underscore something problematic about prior utterances. These types of formulations have been variously called “displays of uncertainty” or “displaying a lack of understanding,” and are common in the analysis of prejudice talk (Edwards 2000; Speer & Potter 2000). By displaying uncertainty, Kyle is able to indirectly construct something as problematic by claiming to have a difficulty understanding it. Because of its indirectness, his uncertainty can be easily denied or deflected if challenged for appearing to be chauvinistic, immature, shallow, or sexist. Kyle could claim that he is railing against the hypocrisy of the show, and not so much against the lack of female nudity *per se*.

These rhetorical devices allow the young men to air complaints about topics that are potentially self-incriminating as members of a certain social group, namely heterosexual young men. Potentially self-incriminating topics include the desire to see female nudity, or the frustration of being promised nudity, and thus a kind of access to female bodies, but shown “nut’in” but bras and underwear. Airing these kinds of mitigated complaints are parts of *positioning* activities because they arise in a social situation where aligning (or not) with the features of certain identity categories is at stake. Arguably, the complaining aligns the young men with the features of heterosexual and stereotypically masculine identity positions, such as objectification, voyeurism, and overt expressions of sexual desire. However, the complaints are formulated in ways that inoculate against the appearance of being obviously shallow, hostile, or chauvinistic. Their idioms, exaggeration, laughter, and displays of uncertainty are delicate ways of guarding against culturally dispreferred features of masculinity.

Their positioning, in other words, attends to issues of stake and interest (Edwards & Potter 1992; Potter 1996), that is, to the precarious disputability or edge of anti-normativeness that may be heard in complaints about “what men want, but don’t get” when it comes to sexual desire and access to female bodies. When the young men’s complaining is analyzed as a *positioning* activity, it has, as an effect of its rhetorical construction, a kind of showing that is demonstrably normative or rule-governed. This particular discursive approach to rules is a reversal of Harré’s discursive approach to positioning. By examining the rhetorical construction of young men’s positioning activities, we can see not only what is at stake for them, in terms of what counts as a complainable item, but more importantly we can also see, as an effect of the way they rhetorically finesse dual positions about such items, how certain rules, norms, and identities are both enlivened and attenuated as part of the fabric of social interaction.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to take stock of the current state of positioning theory as it has emerged in the work of Rom Harré and his colleagues, particularly with respect to its intended alignment with discursive psychology. Harré’s discursive approach to positioning has been useful for drawing attention to the dynamism of social interactions, the importance of cultural contexts, and the collective construction of norms and social representations. Despite this, there are problems inherent in Harré’s *ethogenic* program for positioning as well the *ontological* constructionist assumptions embedded in his discursive approach to positioning. An ethogenic and ontological constructionist discursive approach capitulates to cognitivist assumptions about mind, world, and discourse. It overlooks the action orientation of positioning in an attempt to reveal a realm of moral order and social rules, thus failing to advance a noncognitive approach to discursive action.

In contrast, the discursive psychological orientation to positioning being advanced here is a nonontological, epistemological constructionist approach that understands acts

of positioning neither through psychological speculation nor cultural exegesis but rather through an analysis of the relationship between discursive actions and (the features of) social identities. It is a view that connects a prototypical fine-grained analysis of discursive action with an analysis of identity categories. Discussions about identity have, unfortunately, been historically dominated by traditional psychological approaches that treat identity as an internal state of being or by radical constructionist/narrative approaches that see identities as *ontologically* discursive or storied. A discursive orientation approaches the question of identity by way of positioning, where positions are ways of describing the force that certain discursive actions have in the establishment of a sense of self and other, or of a relational constellation. This approach opens a space to consider identities as topics in conversations, or as recipient-designed rhetorical projects, and invites social scientists to closely examine the discursive work done to ground as well as preempt and deflect possible counters to the hearable trouble of certain identity projects.

This calls for a distinctly noncognitive discursive psychology that takes seriously the social business that participants themselves are conducting when they engage in discursive actions that occasion the features of identity-rich categories. A discursive view of positioning provides a local and grounded account of what we mean by identities, and of the conversational processes of taking up and managing the features of identity-relevant categories. A discursive psychological approach to positioning allows us to account for the dexterity participant's exhibit in shifting identity positions in the course of conversation. It allows us to understand how they interpret the social meanings of these identities and how they use those meanings to position their own and others' identities in talk.

There remains a kind of temptation, as noted earlier, to argue that whatever we learn in an analysis of local acts of identity positioning, there must be some underlying sense of self that is at least somewhat stable and knowable across time, as well as some storehouse of social knowledge that lets speakers know that talking in certain ways implicates certain identities. In other words, there must be a realm of ideational and social competence to which our talk about ourselves refers. Putting aside the circularity of this argument, it is important to note that the approach advocated for here does not affirm or deny these assumptions, but instead asks us to consider the relationship between discourse and identity differently. The question is this: what are the discursive actions, and the rhetorical strategies used to bring them off, that participants use for creating a sense of identity that has as an effect a complying with, and at other times a resisting, of a sense of conventionality or normativity? A discursive psychological approach to positioning must work from this counterintuitive starting point, or else it runs the risk of reproducing cognitivist assumptions. The noncognitive discursive view of positioning discussed throughout this article perhaps is a step in the right direction for forging a distinctively discursive relationship between discourse and identity.

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## About the Author

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## Appendix 1

### *Transcription Conventions*

(.)	Short pause of less than 1 second
(1.5)	Timed pause in seconds
[overlap	Overlapping speech
?	Rising intonation / question
°quieter°	Encloses talk that is quieter than the surrounding talk
LOUD	Talk that is louder than the surrounding talk
<u>Underlined</u>	Emphasis
>faster<	Encloses talk that is faster than the surrounding talk
<slower>	Encloses talk that is slower than the surrounding talk
((comments))	Encloses comments from the transcriber
Rea:::ly	Elongation of the prior sound
=	Immediate latching of successive talk
[. . .]	Where material from the tape has been omitted for reasons of brevity.