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Chapter 3

Accounts of Ruptures and Narrative Positioning in Qualitative Follow-Up Research

*Päivi Siivonen and Maija Korhonen

*Corresponding author

Päivi Siivonen, University of Turku, Finland, paivi.siivonen@utu.fi

Maija Korhonen, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland, maija.korhonen@uef.fi

Abstract This chapter applies and develops a small-story approach and narrative positioning analysis to examine employability as a temporal process of interpretation in adult graduates' educational and working-life trajectories. The method of analysis applied and developed in this chapter represents a novel interactionally oriented and practice-based paradigm for theorising about the connections between narrative and identity. The chapter illustrates the narrative positioning analysis of follow-up interview data using one adult business graduate as a case example. The analysis focuses on one adult graduate's temporarily evolving accounts of ruptures, such as dismissal, in her working-life trajectory. Moreover, the analysis examines the agency dilemma and how the graduate negotiates her agency in relation to employability over time, thus also navigating the constancy/change dilemma. The narrative positioning analysis of follow-up data makes visible the multi-voicedness of identity positionings in narrated accounts at two different timepoints (2019, 2020). Depending on the situation and audience (e.g., employers, colleagues, and students), different versions of the self are performatively created. This also reveals important narrative and psychological functions. The small-story approach and narrative positioning analysis provide methodological tools with which to analyse adult graduates' employability as an evolving and multi-voiced process of identity construction, which manifests itself in relation to situated expectations and demands, as well as various audiences.

Keywords:

- Employability
- Adult graduate
- Account for rupture
- Narrative positioning
- Narrative follow-up research

1 Introduction

In this chapter, we apply and develop narrative positioning analysis and a small-story approach to examine employability as a temporal and interactional process of interpretation in adult graduates' educational and

working-life trajectories. We illustrate narrative positioning analysis and our reading of follow-up interview data by using one adult business graduate, Elsa (a pseudonym), as a case example. Elsa's case is part of the large dataset that we generated during a consortium project (HighEmploy, 2018–2022) about graduate employability in Finland between 2019 and 2020¹. The first Author was the leader of the aforementioned project and the second Author was involved in the project as the leader of the narrative follow-up study. Both Authors have extensive experience in developing and applying narrative methods.

We suggest that the narrative positioning analysis of follow-up data is well suited to analysing meaning-making related to employability, as there is a broadening understanding that employability should be viewed as a processual phenomenon that evolves across multiple contexts and over time (Holmes, 2013, 2015; Korhonen et al., 2023; Siivonen et al., 2023a; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021). Thus far, however, narrative positioning analysis has very rarely been applied to qualitative longitudinal data (Korhonen, Komulainen & Okkonen, 2020; Siivonen et al., 2023a). Overall, this approach has only seldom been applied in educational and working-life research (see, however, LaPointe, 2010; Mutanen & Siivonen, 2016; Mutanen & Sivenius, 2017; Siivonen et al., 2022; Siivonen et al., 2023a).

We examine employability critically, viewing it as a societal master narrative or discourse that sets new normative ideals and demands for higher-education institutions, as well as for students and graduates (Siivonen et al., 2023b). Higher-education institutions face increasing demands from both governments and employers to produce a competent labour force for the market and ensure economic competitiveness, as well as demands from students who expect “outcomes” in exchange for their higher-education investment (Siivonen et al., 2023a; Tomlinson, 2012). Moreover, employability creates normative ideals for students and graduates, who are in continual need of development, ensuring their suitability and potential for future jobs. They must increasingly demonstrate personal qualities, such as being accountable, agile, active, independent, self-responsible, creative, and enterprising, in order to gain and maintain employment (Laalo, Kinnari & Silvennoinen, 2019; Siivonen et al., 2023a). Not only do individuals need to possess the “right” kinds of qualities and skills, but they also need to perform the “right” kind of active and enterprising agency. This creates a need to constantly reflect on the self, one's characteristics and abilities, in relation to the normative ideals of employability.

Our focus is on adult graduates in general and, in this chapter, Elsa's case in particular. There are two main reasons for this. First, adult graduates' educational and working-life trajectories may seem deviant, as their

¹ We interviewed 76 higher-education business graduates at the time of graduation in 2019 and followed up 44 of them in 2020. The interview themes covered education and working-life trajectory; experiences with university studies, employment, and working life; current life situation; and future prospects and goals. The duration of the narrative interviews varied from around 1 to 3 hours. The interviews were conducted and analysed in Finnish; only after the analysis were the data extracts translated into English. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Eastern Finland Committee on Research Ethics.

transitions between higher education and working life are not smooth, straightforward, and linear. Paradoxically, a linear trajectory and a “societal curriculum” that defines an individual’s life, from birth to death, using normative transitions and expectations (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) are encouraged despite the emphasis on lifelong learning and continuing education (Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016). However, adult graduates’ experiences are often diverse: they may have graduated more than once in adulthood from different educational levels and completed several qualifications in their youth (see, e.g., Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016). They may also have accumulated work experience from diverse jobs in various fields. Second, their working-life trajectories are more likely to contain ruptures and breaks, for example, periods of unemployment, short-term contracts and dismissals (Korhonen et al., 2023; Siivonen et al., 2023a).

Ruptures are analytically interesting, as they interrupt what is considered ordinary, normal, or normative in a specific situation (Korhonen et al., 2020; Zittoun et al., 2013). While they break up the ordinary and normative, ruptures tend to enhance narrative meaning making: people experiencing ruptures must make sense of their selves and the causes and consequences of these ruptures in terms of their past, present, and future lives (Korhonen, Zittoun, & Komulainen, 2019). Unexpected or undesired ruptures in working-life trajectories, such as dismissals, may be interpreted as signs of low agency in relation to employability, as they jeopardise the perception of the individual as an active agent who is in control of their own working-life trajectory. Narrative meaning making regarding ruptures is, therefore, essential in constructing oneself and performing as an active and valuable actor.

We chose Elsa’s, aged 40, as our case example, as she had graduated twice from a university of applied sciences², first with a bachelor’s degree and later with a master’s degree (in 2017). She also described diverse short-term work contracts and dismissals that created ruptures. Such ruptures needed to be accounted for for various audiences, such as potential employers or other employees, to restore her identity as morally worthy.

In this chapter, we interpret the small stories constructed in situated interactions through the lens of ruptures in Elsa’s working-life trajectory. By “situated interaction,” we mean that Elsa accounts for ruptures in her trajectory by engaging in constant acts of positioning. Her positioning varies across time, contexts, and situations, as well as with the real or imagined audiences to whom she gives accounts. The detailed analysis of accounts of ruptures makes the normative ideals of employability clearly visible.

Moreover, the small-story approach and narrative positioning analysis enable the reading of identity positionings by negotiating change and continuity of agency in relation to employability. In using “the concept of identity,” we refer to an interactional process of interpretation and

² Universities of applied sciences concentrate on providing professional and vocational education. The research profile of universities of applied sciences is regional development and, thus, complementary to that of universities.

negotiation regarding who one is (Bamberg, 1997; 2004). Identities are not essentialised within this paradigm but are seen as firmly grounded in specific interactional processes and narrative practices (De Fina, 2015). Answering the question “Who am I?” also includes the negotiation of one’s agency in relation to societal master narratives or discourses, such as those on employability. To illustrate narrative positioning analysis via Elsa’s case, we ask the following: How do adult graduates account for ruptures and breaks that are deemed problematic in their educational and working-life trajectories? How do they interpret and negotiate agency in relation to employability across time, contexts, and audiences? The main objective of the chapter is to propose and illustrate an interaction-oriented narrative approach to the analysis of identity and agency in follow-up interview data. This will deepen our understanding of the longitudinal processes of employability.

2 The Small-Story Approach and Narrative Positioning Analysis

The method of analysis illustrated and developed in this chapter represents an interactionally oriented and practice-based paradigm used in theorising about connections between narrative and identity (Bamberg, 1997, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2007). This paradigm, which is informed by conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, differs from biographical ones, which regard the life story as the target of analysis (e.g., Linde, 1993; McAdams, 1988). Biographical research mainly analyses stories as representations of the world, as well as identities within those representations. It suggests that identity building via storytelling is intended to produce a coherent and positive sense of self (De Fina, 2015). However, instead of “big” life stories, people often tell “small stories,” which are fragmented or disorganised and do not comply with traditional narrative forms and coherent identities (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Hyvärinen et al., 2010). Overall, biographical approaches have been criticised as overemphasising the temporal dimension of coherent identity construction at the expense of the interactive and cultural dimensions and functions of discourse (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011).

The interactionally oriented small-story approach neither theoretically claims nor normatively presumes that identities are integrated, coherent entities. Instead, it focusses on the process of identity construction and how people, as agentive actors, achieve, contest, or reaffirm specific versions of “who they are” in their talk (Bamberg, 2011; Bamberg et al., 2011; De Fina, 2015, p. 352). In this view, identities are understood as *situated performances of the self*, which are accomplished/achieved through the acts of *positioning* (Davies & Harré, 1990; Depperman, 2013). Identity construction and related acts of positioning concern the past, present, and future selves (Korhonen et al., 2020). Consequently, it is the action orientation of the participants in small stories that forms the basic point of departure for narrative positioning analysis. The emphasis is on

the function of interaction rather than what is represented in the stories told. This makes the small-story approach crucially different from biographical research. A small-story approach is interested in how people use stories in interactive engagements to construct a sense of who they are, whereas biographical research mainly analyses stories as representations of the world, as well as identities within those representations.

Thus, identity positions are locally occasioned and designed, multifaceted (potentially contradictory), as well as temporally and situationally flexible: different versions of the self are relevant or irrelevant, as well as approved or contested, in different situations (De Fina, 2015). Consequently, narrative positioning has *context- and situation-specific functions*. For example, through positioning, people aim to deal with issues that are perceived as problematic. Experiences and situations that somehow deviate from the expected, such as ruptures in educational and working-life trajectories, create a *need for accounts* (Juhila, 2012). Accounts, including justifications, excuses, and explanations, are specific types of speech acts and small stories in which people evaluate the reasons for their deviant situations and reflect their consequences (De Fina, 2009; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Accounts are given to make sense of the deviant situation and, ultimately, restore morally worthy identities, but they also embody what is viewed as culturally normal or abnormal, as well as desirable or undesirable, in a certain situation (Juhila, 2012). Although positioning often illuminates the moral characteristics attached to the self and other people, analysing accounts of deviant situations places special attention on the moral aspects of situated identity performances (Korhonen & Komulainen, 2018; Korhonen et al., 2020).

Accounts are dialogic and given with a specific *audience in mind* (De Fina, 2009). Accounts of deviant situations, especially, are intended to convince an audience (Juhila, 2012): in their accounts, people negotiate how they want to be seen in the eyes of others (Bamberg, 1997, 2011; Korhonen & Komulainen, 2018). Within the small-story approach, the audience is typically thought to mean the actual interaction partner, for example, the interviewer. According to De Fina (2009, see also Scott & Lyman, 1968), accounts are given as guided, recipient-oriented responses to an interlocutor's explicit or implied "why" and "how" questions. However, we suggest that multiple imagined audiences also appear in small stories (see also Lassila & Hyry-Beihammer in this book): concrete other people (e.g., other graduates, work colleagues, and employers), as well as the "generalised other" with whom a person is communicating. "Generalised other" refers to the mental representation that a person has of the common norms and expectations about how to act and think in a given situation within a particular society/cultural context (Mead, 1962, pp. 154–158).

Narrative positioning analysis typically involves three intertwined levels of analysis, or analytical lenses (see also Lassila & Hyry-Beihammer in this book): 1) the story world, 2) the telling of the story, and 3) societal master narratives or discourses (Bamberg, 1997; Bamberg & Georgakopolou, 2008). The term "story world" refers to how the characters in the story, such as the main character her/himself, co-workers, other employees, and

employers, are constructed and how they are positioned in relation to one another. The telling of the story is focused on how the narrator positions her/himself in relation to the audience: what is she or he trying to accomplish, and what are the context-specific functions of the story (Bamberg, 1997, 2004)? The analysis of societal master narratives or discourses involves the analysis of narrative positioning *vis-à-vis* discourses such as employability (Bamberg, 2004). In this chapter, our emphasis is on level-2 and -3 analysis. We focus on Elsa's situated, audience-oriented acts of positioning, as well as the functions of her telling, by analysing how she accounts for ruptures in her educational and working-life trajectories. Moreover, we focus on positioning *vis-à-vis* the normative ideals of employability discourse.

Bamberg (2011) suggests that identity negotiations, as a form of narrative interaction, include three dilemmas individuals must navigate in order to answer the following question: "Who am I?" The first dilemma is that between constancy and change, which refers to a sense of self across time: How am I the same person I used to be, and how have I changed? The second dilemma relates to sameness and difference: How am I simultaneously the same as and different from others? The third dilemma deals with the perception of agency: Am I a subject who is in control or am I an undergoer being subjected to the situation? While navigating the "agency dilemma" subjects can either lean toward a person-to-world or a world-to-person direction of fit (Bamberg et al., 2011). In the first case, they position themselves as agentic self-constructors marked by high agency, for example, a heroic self or a person who is self-determined. In the second case, they position themselves as victims or at least less influential, powerful, and responsible and, consequently, also less blameworthy.

The follow-up interview data enable us to explore how narrative positioning and related navigation with the identity dilemmas change/stay the same between small stories, as well as how they evolve across contexts and audiences, at two time points during the follow-up interviews (2019; 2020). In our follow-up analysis of Elsa's case, we specifically explore Elsa's temporarily evolving accounts of ruptures in her working-life trajectory. In terms of identity dilemmas, we focus on the agency dilemma and how Elsa interprets and negotiates her agency in relation to employability across time, thus also navigating the constancy/change dilemma.

3 Elsa's Case: 'My work career has not been a normal one by any criterion'

In her first interview, Elsa, a business graduate with a master's degree from the university of applied sciences, described her working-life trajectory as 'not clear' and 'different'. She mentioned short- and fixed-term employment contracts, as well as dismissals from the few permanent positions she had managed to get.

Elsa: I can't say that my career has been clear by any means. My whole working-life career, I have been doing only short- and fixed-term contracts or some substitutions, so I haven't had -- so-called permanent jobs, but so far, I've been made redundant from all of them, where I've -- tried to begin -- I've had, that way, a different kind -- of career. (First interview, 2019)

Although Elsa interprets her working-life trajectory as 'different' and thus not explicitly problematic, such a non-linear trajectory represents a deviation from the normative assumptions of permanent employment and an uninterrupted career, which required an explanation. In the next section, Elsa explains and justifies her 'different' trajectory to various audiences, also navigating the agency dilemma in her accounts.

3.1 Navigating the Agency Dilemma

In the following small story, Elsa justifies her winding working-life trajectory with the fact that this gave her a chance to gain wide experience, competence, and networks for the student audience.

Account of the Short-Term Contracts for the Student Audience

Elsa: When I've been giving talks for students -- about my own career, I've at least thought about it this way, that -- if I had worked in one or two places, nowhere would I have been able to do such a plethora of diverse tasks as I've been able to and am able to do because of that. And that network and all that, the different business sectors I've been able to see and experience, and learning all the new things through that, through changing jobs, you will never get that on just one job. So, it has also been an enriching experience for me. It has also brought me that kind of courage, -- so change is really not such a big deal for me. It's just, hey, this is this kind of thing. Let's just do it. So, that way, others who are so attached to certain routines, for them, any change is extremely difficult, as they are not able to make it, and any change mixes up things. But, for me, it hasn't been any kind of a problem or an issue really. (First interview, 2019)

In the small story above, Elsa accounts for the vast array of benefits she has gained due to her 'different' working-life trajectory. She positions herself as an experienced mentor and establishes her worth as an employee explicitly for the student audience by describing diverse work tasks in different business sectors, a wide network, and extensive competence, which she would not have gained by staying in only one or two jobs. By comparing herself with others for whom change is a challenge, she positions herself as a courageous employee with high agency who is not afraid of taking on new tasks and challenges. In contrast, she makes the following statement: 'Those routine tasks are, in a way, even a bit scary.' Elsa, thus, portrays her problematic situation as beneficial: other employees' fear of change, lack of courage, and desire for routines become larger problems than the breaks in her own working-life trajectory.

However, Elsa also negotiates with herself, saying 'I struggle with myself', regarding whether continuing change and short-term employment

contracts are a positive or negative thing. Talking to a different audience, the interviewer, she posits that 'It would be nice to stop somewhere, needing to change jobs more often than every year in the worst case. It also uses you up, so it's not -- so pleasant. -- It is really tough.' This highlights the fact that while addressing the students, Elsa navigates the agency dilemma by convincing her audience that she is in control of her employment situation and employability. However, while talking to the interviewer, she positions herself as not influential or agentive in relation to her employment situation.

In the following small story, Elsa gives a different kind of account for her non-linear working-life trajectory. She accounts for her situation via her lack of a master's degree, thus, referring to the time when she only had a bachelor's degree.

Account for The Lack of a Master's Degree

Elsa: I've been a bit of an underdog, -- so those tasks that I've been doing, they have been -- managerial positions, but then, I've only had that bachelor's degree. And, then again, when I've applied for those jobs, then I haven't had that education, even though I've had enough work experience. -- I've had so much work experience that they don't hire me for basic office-like secretarial [jobs] any more -- so that was perhaps also kind of, what the heck, now, I will interrupt the game, and now, I can apply for those jobs which require a master's degree and, in a way, focus on -- the tasks and my own interests and expert competence so that I clearly upgrade the level.

Interviewer: Mm, did you often feel that you were lacking this higher-education degree?

Elsa: Mm, I don't know if it was very often, -- but it was more because -- they didn't hire -- me for those basic jobs anymore. So, I had that work experience. I was only lacking the paper, so I would have been able to advance to the next level, -- but then again, [there was] the assumption that she will quit at some point anyway, so in a way, those work tasks would not have been challenging enough. (First interview, 2019)

Elsa positions herself as 'an underdog' in working life. Falling between two stools portrays Elsa as a passive object rather than an active actor, and therefore, it needs to be accounted for for the audience, that is, for the interviewer and potential employers. Elsa seeks to address her value as an employee by emphasising her extensive work experience in challenging management-level positions despite having only a bachelor's degree. She rejects the interviewer's implied suggestion that the lack of a degree would have been a constant obstacle in her career by describing her lack of a master's degree as 'only lacking the paper.' This highlights the fact that her real worth as an employee is not determined by a degree. She also positions herself as a self-determined actor who does not passively accept her situation. Rather, she emphasises her own agency, 'interrupts the game,' gets a master's degree, and searches for work at her own level of competence.

In the first interview, Elsa highlights her worth as a desired and easily employable employee who has been "invited to jobs." 'I've been employed so that -- hey, can you come and work for us, are you free -- in the middle of recruitment processes, but -- someone has just hired me on the spot.'

When she describes an ICT job that she obtained in 2017, Elsa positions herself as the right kind of “person” for the job: ‘My mate collaborated with this business. -- He said that you would be the right kind of person to work there, -- that the ICT world is such that -- it’s good to be a certain kind of person to manage there.’ At that point Elsa, already had a master’s degree, but she nevertheless emphasised age and work experience as the most important reasons for her employment: ‘I’d say that age and work experience were the most important things behind it. Education did not matter so much here.’ By emphasising her work experience and personal characteristics, she positions herself as employable with or without a master’s degree, thus also accounting for the former problem of the lack of this degree.

In addition to her personal characteristics and education, she explains her employment situation for the interviewer by constructing the geographical region where she lives as a challenging one in terms of employment opportunities: ‘Geographically, this is a very challenging region to work or look for a job,’ ‘There is not much choice here,’ and ‘If it has been a fixed-term contract, I haven’t been able to change it to a permanent one.’ In these accounts, Elsa positions herself as an actor who is at the mercy of the supply and demand of the regional labour market and, thus, not blameworthy for her employment situation. Elsa also posits that ‘I’ve not been very picky about jobs—the title or such. I’ve been courageous enough to send in [applications], as us women are always blamed for expecting that every area must match before you send one in.’ Despite or because of the demanding regional labour market situation, she positions herself as exceptionally courageous, self-assured and active in the job search in comparison with others and especially other women (as a generalised other), whom she addresses as her audience, giving them advice about job searching. She, thus, attributes inequalities in working life to women themselves, who do not seize the opportunities that are available for them.

In the above accounts, Elsa positions herself in two contradictory ways: as an underdog who takes what she gets in the geographical region where she lives and as a competent, desired, and agentive employee who manages well without a master’s degree due to her personality but also actively develops herself through education and by taking on challenges in working life. She, thus, navigates the agency dilemma and aims to convince the audience, that is, the interviewer; employers; other employees, especially women; and students, of her desire and ability to actively take control of her working life.

In addition to short-term contracts and the lack of a master’s degree, her dismissal from a permanent job is a rupture that creates the need for an account. In the following small story, Elsa positions herself as such a competent, desired, and highly educated employee that she becomes a threat to other employees.

Account of a Dismissal from a Permanent Job

Interviewer: You told me that -- you’ve been made redundant from many jobs. Would you like to talk more about that?

Elsa: Well, -- the first one, which was this dismissal, it was this kind of situation that I was engaged in another job and we bargained for a long time because the new employer wanted me to -- start right away, and I said that I cannot free myself, that I've promised to stay this and this long. -- I told them the date, that, this much, I can be flexible, and they said that okay, yes, if you can start then, it's all right, so they -- urged me to work there. I had come to them through a recommendation, so they knew they could ask me. And, -- then, it turned out that, well, I was, in that firm, -- the most highly educated. -- We were three people there, and those two had been longer in working life, as they were older, -- but I had the highest level of education, and then, I was hired -- in the most poorly paid job there, so the demands were the lowest. And, then, at the same time, it happened that the CEO changed jobs. He went to a different organisation, and I think the one -- who stayed... Of course, they started recruiting a new CEO, so they thought that I was a threat and they just needed to get rid of me -- out of sight, out of mind, -- a bit like that -- but officially, I was made redundant during the trial period.

Interviewer: How did you come to this conclusion that it was this kind of a threatening situation for them?

Elsa: Well, -- you just know it. And then, [regarding] those reasons for the redundancy, there are none. If I had done my work badly or in the wrong way or if there had been something to complain about, they should have given me a chance to correct it. -- I was a kind of a pawn on the chessboard, but I also had a little bit of bad luck, and it just culminated that way when they got rid of me. -- It's the easiest thing for them -- because -- if the reason is redundancy during the trial period, then there is no reason behind it. (First interview, 2019)

In the small story above, Elsa performs herself as a desired and loyal employee whom the new employer eagerly wanted to hire based on a recommendation ('They -- urged me to work there. '), even though she was still committed to another job and wanted to keep the commitment she had agreed to. Elsa highlights the unfair situation by presenting herself as the most highly educated employee in the firm and, implicitly also the most competent one. She was, however, hired to do the most poorly paid job in the firm. She accounts for her dismissal during the trial period by explaining that due to her high educational level, she became a threat to the other two employees after the CEO left the firm and a new one was being recruited. Elsa navigates the agency dilemma by presenting herself as a desired and loyal employee, as well as 'a pawn on the chessboard,' with low agency. By positioning herself as an underdog and a pawn, Elsa rejects doing something wrong or badly as a reason for her dismissal. She, thus, convinces her audience of her value as an employee despite the dismissal.

3.2 *Constructing Constancy and Change in the Self*

In the follow-up interview conducted in 2020, Elsa told the interviewer that she had bought a business with two partners and become an entrepreneur. Elsa represents herself as an employee across time and constructs both change and continuity in her identity and agency. In the following account, she navigates the constancy/change dilemma by creating a *difference*

between her past self, as an employee who is not influential, and her present self, as an independent and agentive entrepreneur.

Account for Change: Becoming an Independent Entrepreneur with Long-Term Goals

Interviewer: Well, if you think of your job from the perspective of skills, abilities, and competence, how does it meet your expectations, and also, are you now able to benefit from the master's degree and the competence it has brought you?

Elsa: Yes, well, this is now like, like winning in the lotto in the sense that now, I'm able to, in the long term. We surely talked about it before that I've had such project-based short work contracts and such fixed-term and all that, so -- of course, from the marketing and sales perspective, it is very short-sighted that kind of work. -- So, this is surely so that I can really do my own kind of work, -- and I can decide myself that -- I don't need to hide my competence, and of course, I need to keep developing myself all the time. That one, one degree does not take you very far.

Interviewer: Do you think that this situation would have been possible without master's studies at the university of applied sciences? What do you think?

Elsa: Well, I think it would have been possible. I don't think that one degree determines anything, because it is not why I'm now [an entrepreneur]. But I'd say that -- it gives me more confidence, confidence in my daily work and understanding the development of daily business. (Second interview, 2020)

Elsa positions her past self as an employee who has no agency over her work and is, thus, forced to work in a short-sighted manner. She addresses her worth as an entrepreneur by positioning her present self as someone who can plan, apply her full competence, develop herself, and do things in her own way. Elsa, thus, constructs her present self as an entrepreneur who is more agentic and self-responsible as compared to her past self, an employee in short-term employment. As in the first interview, Elsa questions the self-evident value of a master's degree for her employability and becoming an entrepreneur ('I don't think one degree determines anything.') but holds, nevertheless, that a master's degree leads to confidence at work.

In the following small story, Elsa represents herself as an employee across time and constructs *continuity* in her identity and agency as an enterprising employee and entrepreneur.

Account for Continuity: Lifelong Courageous and Enterprising Employee

Interviewer: Are there some experiences, elements that have, nevertheless, stayed the same during your long working-life career? Is there some continuity that you would recognise?

Elsa: Well, maybe that kind of endless, endless madness to engage in new things... so once crazy, always crazy. So, in that sense, if I didn't have that kind of courage to start new things, try out new things, I wouldn't be here. - - So, [there is] that kind of confidence that life carries, and things that are meant to happen, they happen. -- And, of course, also listening to your own intuition and trusting that you make the right decisions and, overall, standing behind those decisions you have made. So, I think [it] is something that hasn't changed much. -- And, of course, I have needed to take responsibility

now in a different way from before, but I think I have always been someone who takes responsibility for things. Even as an employee, I -- don't feel I have ever been only in an employee's role in that way. [I feel] that I have always wanted, wanted to do things a bit better and always with that kind of an enterprising attitude. No matter in which organisation I have worked, I have always done my work well. (Second interview, 2020)

As in the first interview, Elsa positions herself as "crazy" and courageous in starting new things. Moreover, she positions herself as responsible and confident, as an employee who has always done her work well and in an enterprising manner. This highlights her active agency and control of her employment situation. Navigating the constancy versus change dilemma is intertwined with the agency dilemma: by emphasising that she has always been an agentive, responsible, self-confident, and enterprising employee, Elsa rejects the implicit assumption that she would be less engaged as an employee in short-term employment.

In the follow-up interview, Elsa responds to the interviewer's evaluative question and narrates another small story about her working life trajectory that is "abnormal" and "not typical." She rejects the blame implied by the idea that a non-linear career would be "a bad thing."

Account of The Positive Consequences of a Non-Linear Working Life Trajectory

Interviewer: Well, I was reading through the first interview before our meeting, and there, you said several times about your work career that it is, like, different, that it is not normative. What do you think about this now, in this moment, about your work career?

Elsa: Well, [I] still [think] in the same way. I haven't had any normal, normal stages in my work career, largely because -- of those fixed-term contracts, which is not in any way a bad thing. [It is] just that it is not that kind of, still not a typical one--going somewhere to work and staying there for 30 years and retiring from there. And I don't know if I have ever really tried to get anything like that, -- so it has been my path, and everything that I have done has kind of brought me to this point. And, then, [I have] that kind of courage to throw myself and such -- readiness for change and such -- when, for many others, even small changes are difficult. Those become like the end-of-the-world things. They can result in mental drama and such. And, for me, this is not something like that. For me, the threats are different. --However, my journey is still in progress. -- Different things will still happen. We don't know that, -- now, -- our business grows and gets visibility and develops at its own pace. -- I'm kind of, can I say, I desire titles. I do have this kind of a dream that I would be something, even though this is an important role where I am at the moment. But, somehow, a kind of a big role in society might come, like through this entrepreneurship. (Second interview, 2020)

Elsa constructs recapitulations of past events in her working-life trajectory as a guided response to an evaluative question asked by the interviewer (De Fina, 2009). Elsa does not account for the reasons for her non-linear working-life trajectory. Instead, she emphasises its positive consequences and suggests that her atypical working-life trajectory has led her into her current positive entrepreneurship situation ('Everything that I've done has kind of also brought me to this point.'). Elsa highlights the

fact that this non-linear trajectory has been 'my path' and, thus, constructs personal and unique value for it. As in the first interview, Elsa positions herself as a courageous employee who is ready for change. She rejects the idea of having aimed at an uninterrupted and linear career. She talks about 'many other' employees as a generalised other and constructs continuity as an employee who does not follow the normative career model of 'going somewhere to work and staying there for 30 years and retiring from there.' Rather, she positions herself as an employee who does not appreciate stability and security, but unlike many others, she is capable of entrepreneurial risk-taking and high agency.

Towards the end of the small story above, Elsa reflects on the future. She emphasises that her working life trajectory is still 'in progress' and portrays a future that is full of tempting options ('different things will still happen'). Even though she rejects the idea of having aimed at a linear career path, she confesses to the interviewer that she dreams of formal recognition for her competence ('I desire titles.'). Elsa positions her future self as a successful entrepreneur who has an important role in society.

4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have focused on a novel interactionally oriented approach to analysing narrative and identity (Bamberg, 1997, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2007). We apply and develop a small-story approach and narrative positioning analysis to read follow-up interview data in the context of higher education and working life. We illustrate our reading with one adult business graduate's (Elsa's) case example. In our follow-up analysis, we specifically analysed Elsa's temporarily evolving accounts of ruptures in her working-life trajectory. In terms of identity dilemmas, we focused on the agency dilemma and how Elsa interprets and negotiates her agency in relation to employability across time, thus also navigating the constancy/change dilemma.

Our analysis shows that while accounting for her 'different,' 'not clear,' and 'not normal' working-life trajectory for different audiences—the interviewer, employers, other employees, and students, Elsa rejects the generalised other's suggestion that her non-linear working-life trajectory is somehow deviant. Instead, she positions herself, in line with the employability discourse, as a competent and desired adult graduate and employee with the 'right' kind of personality and an enterprising mindset (see also, Laalo et al., 2019; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016). In doing so, Elsa presents herself in two contradictory ways: as an underdog who is not influential and blameworthy for her employment situation in the geographical region where she lives and as an agentic employee and entrepreneur who actively develops herself and is not afraid of taking on new challenges. She is not discouraged in the face of adversity; rather, portrays herself as resilient and ready for risk-taking in comparison with others, especially other women. Elsa navigates the agency dilemma and aims to convince the audience of her desire and ability to actively take

control of her working life. She also navigates the constancy/change dilemma by positioning herself as someone who has always been enterprising at work and has never wanted a permanent position and normative working-life trajectory that is in line with “the societal curriculum” (Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016). However, she constructs some change in her identity when she evaluates her more stable position as an entrepreneur as ‘winning in the lotto.’ Moreover, in contrast to the first interview, in the follow-up interview, she also mentions her desire for titles and, thus, her desire to be a person with a high status in society. The position of an entrepreneur and high status permit high agency in relation to employability, implying that she is influential, proactive, and responsible.

Elsa’s case example clearly shows that a non-linear working-life trajectory must be explained to and justified for various audiences, despite the current emphasis on continuing education and the concept of the ideal flexible, enterprising employee who is ready to seize new opportunities (Laalo et al., 2019). The interactionally oriented narrative positioning analysis makes visible the multi-voicedness of identity positionings in narrated accounts: Elsa does not construct a coherent identity as an employee and actor. Instead, she navigates the agency dilemma by leaning towards both the person-to-world and world-to-person directions of fit (Bamberg et al., 2011). She, thus, portrays herself as having high agency and self-determination, as well as low agency and less influence, in relation to employability. Moreover, she navigates the constancy/change dilemma by positioning herself in terms of change against a background of constancy and *vice versa* (Bamberg et al., 2011). The above-mentioned multi-voicedness is present within individual small stories, between the small stories, as well as between the two interviews (2019; 2020). Narrative positioning takes place in situated interactions, in which, different versions of the self are performatively created depending on the situation and the audience.

The construction of different versions of the self has important narrative and psychological functions. The positioning of the self as having high agency has an important function in restoring and maintaining a socially and morally desirable version of the self in terms of the normative ideals of employability. The function of positioning the self as having low agency contributes to locating situations that are seen as problematic outside the self. As a result, failure is not interpreted as one’s own responsibility but, rather, as outside of one’s own control. The emphasis on the positive aspects of a “deviant” working-life trajectory may also be interpreted as a way to naturalise and normalise a non-linear trajectory and thus highlight the self as morally worthy.

The multiplicity of narrative positionings and the diversity of audiences also reveals that being an employable employee requires performances of the self that enable individuals to deal with a variety of social and power relations (Hall, 2020; Korhonen et al., 2023). First, accounts relate to the power relations of the interview situation: they are responses to the interviewer’s specific or implied evaluative questions and illustrate attempts to respond to the interviewer’s expectations and presuppositions (De Fina, 2009). Second, accounts targeted at other employees (e.g.,

former colleagues and female employees) and employers position the narrator in relation to the competition and power relations inherent in organisations and working life. Elsa, for example, deals with social injustice she has experienced in working life (the most highly educated person completing the least demanding tasks), criticises employer performance (dismissal without legitimate justifications), and thus aims to gain recognition as an employee. Third, Elsa communicates using societal master narratives as her interpretative resources. She presents herself as an enterprising employee in relation to the discourse on employability. Moreover, she explains her working-life trajectory in relation to the “societal curriculum,” which normalises linear trajectories as more valuable than non-linear ones.

The small-story approach and narrative positioning analysis provide methodological tools with which to analyse adult graduates’ employability as an evolving and multi-voiced process of identity construction, which manifests itself in relation to situated expectations and demands, as well as various audiences. The small-story approach is ethically sensitive, as it is based on a subtle reading of the narrator’s own meaning-making, and thus, interpretations of identity (cf. coherent identity) and agency (cf. strong or weak agency) are not made beyond what can be read in the small stories. The researcher’s voice is present in the interpretations and the multi-voicedness of the narrator is taken seriously. More broadly, the small-story approach strengthens our understanding of the multi-voicedness of identity and agency.

As we have illustrated with Elsa’s case example, the small-story approach is especially suited to studies that examine situations that are seen as somehow not normal or deviant, for example, non-linear transitions or ruptures (e.g., dismissals) in educational or working-life trajectories that challenge people to reflect on how they perceive their identities and agency. In addition, recognising different audiences makes visible how the social world outside the narration and the power relations within it become part of that narration and people’s self-understanding. Moreover, the follow-up data and analysis allow us to investigate constancy and change in identity performances across two time points and in different contexts. Overall, we suggest that the small-story approach and narrative positioning analysis increase our understanding of the moral aspect of narrative meaning-making in educational and working-life settings.

Our reading of Elsa’s case example illustrates that identity is under continuous negotiation regarding the cultural ideals of employability that a graduate worthy of employment is expected to reach. There is no single endpoint in terms of employability, such as a set of skills or attributes; rather, it is an ongoing process of negotiation (see also Siivonen et al., 2023a). Acknowledging the importance of continuous identity negotiations also has practical implications for adults’ career counselling. For example, it seems important for people to thoroughly negotiate their selves with a specific audience in mind and thus make their ruptured educational and working-life trajectories more manageable and perform and establish morally worthy identities.

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