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Moral Positioning: A formal theory

Thomas Aström, Ph.D.

Abstract

This article presents the main outlines of a theory of moral positioning, contributing to the analysis of moralizing as a social phenomenon. It is a formal theory in several of its aspects. The discovered patterns help to explain social interaction in conflicts and how ordinary people use these patterns in relation to others. Moral positioning is frequently occurring in social situations where imbalances and conflicts arise among individuals and groups. Moral positioning is here theorized concurrently with a supporting conceptualization of social positioning. The model here presented can be used to explain the positioning process and is possible to use in order to become aware of, and in a better way, manage a conflict.

The core variable in moral positioning theory has the form of a triadic pattern, built on the moral positions Good, Evil and Victim (GEV-pattern). The moralizing process is easily understood as socially and dynamically constructed patterns of positions. Those identities are related in three basic and complementary dimensions of meaning; Existence, Interest and Moral dimensions (EIM-pattern), each one with its own conflict pattern. The classic grounded theory method was used and the results were first presented in my dissertation in 2003.

KEY WORDS: Conflict, Moral, Positioning, Identity, Interaction, Grounded theory.

Introduction

Originally the purpose of this project was to find out why there are so many complicated relations in a disabled person's life. In my first attempts to research the psychosocial aspects of being disabled and belonging to a family with a disabled child, I met a barrier that prevented me from entering that field and getting access to field data. The strong gate-keeping from officials in bureaucracy that protected persons living their lives with or

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near disabilities also “protected” them from researchers, without even giving them the option to take a standpoint of their own.

Being an experienced therapist, I was well aware of the field’s debates and controversies, and I was also aware of some tabooed areas where the dialogue on psychosocial matters was restricted even among professionals. Some of the professionals I interviewed felt uneasy answering this type of questions. The resistance among professionals to open insight was surprisingly strong. Why is that? Wouldn’t a search for knowledge about these problematic issues benefit the clients? Why were the obstructions to openness so strong and feelings of conflict so tense? Why were well informed and experienced professionals afraid of such issues?

But on the other hand, parents and persons with disability were often ready and sometimes anxious to give their version. An example referred to by a researcher from an interview with a grown man with disabilities: *“One day one of the participants asked me how far I dared to go in my report. He was worried that I in overdone consideration to parents and staff, or because of my personal fear and cowardice, didn’t dare tell about all the hard stuff that had happened in his and the others ... life.”* An urge for plain speaking.

In contrast I met the hesitant attitude in the claims of professionals I interviewed on anonymous cases of psychosocial problems: *“Can you assure me you will burn these tapes afterwards?”* and another: *“I don’t want to be quoted!”* or a third: *“I feel nasty telling you about this”*. Information control seemed to be central in the interaction on such intricate matters. I could later use bureaucrats’ and other professionals’ reactions on the subject as useful data. They indirectly told me what I ought to figure out. And I went on collecting and analyzing more data on the forces in the field of handicap. It became more and more obvious that information control is run by the forces in different types of moral positioning.

In this paper, moral positioning is presented as a theory about the process in which an ordinary person gives moral meaning and identity to subjects and objects. It offers an interactive perspective on the moral issue. Moral positioning isn’t dealing with morality as a religious or philosophical matter on human behaviour; it’s not regarding the normative issue in

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defining what is good or bad. In this project, I focus on how people manage different types of conflicts and how moralizing is used. *Moral positioning* emerged as the core category of what is obviously a very common basic social process.

There are several patterns of moral positioning found in data. The patterns are flexible and can be used by any party in any type of conflict. They show the possible variation and dynamics in the moral positioning processes. By using moral identities the participants are defined through questions like: Who was to blame? Who ought to do what? Who is regarded as Evil or Good? Who runs the risk of becoming a Victim? Whose interest is Evil and whose Good? A lot of different analytic questions could be picked from this social positioning model. It displays a multi-perspective view of a conflict and opens up locked and established illusions.

Moral positioning is, as I said, not about what's morally good and bad. It's about the way we use morality in daily life. Instead of trying to straighten out moral matters, this research is focused on the ongoing, implicit and omnipresent moral patterns and moralizing processes and how they work. In theorizing its dynamics and properties I discovered and theorized several subprocesses like *competitive moral positioning*, *locking of moral positions*, *moral gate-keeping*, and other basic social processes that have important elements of moral positioning like *superhabilitating* and *becoming overdependent* (Aström, 2003). Those processes became important in finding out how participants use moral identities in their field of activity.

Giving moral meaning to something includes the conflict being moralized. The subject of conflict is about existential and/or interest matters. Analyzing conflicts in interaction as a social positioning process involves several implicit patterns. These patterns are of a general nature, each one belonging to its specific dimension of meaning, Existential, Interest or Moral (Aström, 2003). This extended model of interrelated dimensions and positions is a model for social positioning analysis, and it seems to serve well in the analysis of meaning and identities. The morality of an action is always related to meanings in existence and interests and will change in relation to context and situational factors in a dynamic way.

Researching with the classic grounded theory method

enabled me to discover, explore and develop concepts that might be helpful in dealing with conflicts. Moralizing is obviously a central aspect in the course of events in social conflict interaction, both overt and covert. The discovery of the theoretical core pattern, the GoodEvilVictim-pattern, was decisive for analyzing and theorizing these processes. Some major discoveries will be described more extensively since they are obviously very important for the main feature of the theory.

Method

The research method was classic grounded theory (Glaser, 1971, 1978, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005) used in a consistent way following the steps in the emerging of a core process, relevant data sampling, a substantive theory, sampling of differential but relevant areas and finally a formal theory. The cyclic procedures, constantly supported by comparing and writing up, let the theory emerge first as a substantive theory mainly built on data from the field of disability - and then as a formal theory grounded on data from several different fields including education, child care, management, politics and sports.

The first major step in the analysis was the emerging of five substantive subprocesses presented in my dissertation (Aström, 2003): *Competitive moral positioning, locking of moral positions, moral gate-keeping, superhabilitating and becoming overdependent*. Observations and interviews were done with persons with impairments in different ages and life situations, parents and professionals such as physiotherapists and occupational therapists, nurses, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, personal assistants, social workers, work managers and teachers. These conceptualized processes exposed moral positioning as a significant core process in numerous social interactions. The result of this analytic work was a theory of moral positioning.

The second major step was to compare the conceptualizations from the first analysis in the field of disability with completely different fields, searching for possible formal qualities in these conceptualizations. The theoretical core, the GoodEvilVictim-pattern, turned out to be generally applicable in completely different areas and circumstances and to have obvious formal qualities. It was natural to let a formal theory emerge from the comparing of moralizing in a variety of contexts and

situations. Moral positioning emerged as a formal theory.

Sources of formal theory

As the substantive theory seemed to be easy to use in other areas it was near at hand to go forward to formal theory. It seems that people easily apply this theory in their thinking of other cases where they see moral positioning. Starting with substantive theory, the next step was further comparing in other fields of social activity and conflicts found in social services, school, preschool, education, child care, management, working life, politics and sports. Data were continuously collected with theoretical sampling in several different areas of conflict through interviewing, observation, media and research reports. This was followed up by comparing the results with relevant theoretical works including Berger and Luckmann (1966); Berne (1959, 1964); Blumer (1969); Bourdieu (1991, 1994); Braaten (1982); Buber (1970, 2002), ; Elias (2000); Gibson (1977) ;Giddens (1984,1994); Glaser and Strauss (1965,1971); Goffman (1959, 1963); Harré and van Langenhove (1999); Harré and Moghaddam (2003); Lewin (1951); Mead (1932, 1934, 1937); Piaget (1965); Simmel (1955), among others.

Results

During the analysis of the phenomena of moralizing, two interwoven conceptualizations emerged. The way people interacted by giving and taking identities could be described sufficiently by the concepts and structure of an emerging *social positioning model*, which supported the emerging of a *theory of moral positioning*. These results are about how ordinary people use patterns of meanings and patterns of identities in social interaction. This theory will explain to some extent how, while not aware of how these patterns work, we all instinctively use them to familiarize ourselves with a situation and to gain desired life qualities and capital. The use of these patterns represents a natural way of processing information in a conflict and of positioning oneself in the field of action. Such patterns are important parts of habitus (Bourdieu, 1991), integrated during socialization processes.

Part I: Social positioning – an analytic perspective

To understand ‘positioning’ in moral positioning one has to recognize the concepts of the analytic tool social positioning

analysis. The emerging of this tool was parallel to the emerging of a theory of moral positioning and as moralizing is best understood as a positioning process, I will start with a short presentation of social positioning.

A 'social position' is as a concept sometimes perceived as one's place in a social hierarchy, a field of business or other contexts and sometimes as in taking a personal standpoint when certain matters are at stake. But the concept of 'social positioning' is used here in a much wider sense. Social positioning is elsewhere developed as a theoretical perspective by Rom Harré, Luk van Langenhove, Fathali Moghaddam et al. (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). My use and theorizing of the concept of social positioning emerged from a grounded theorizing and didn't follow prime theorists' ideas. Instead, it led to a theoretical tool that differs significantly and, as a theoretical perspective, points in another direction.

Social positioning emerged as a useful and generative theoretical code during the analysis from which the conceptualization of 'moralizing behaviour' and its connected aspects emerged into a theory of moral positioning. Confluent with the conceptualizing of moral positioning, the analytic tool here called *social positioning analysis* was emerging and contributed a lot to the understanding of moralizing. *Social positioning is a perspective that uses positions and their linkings to display patterns of meaning.* The central concepts in social positioning analysis are 'position' and 'linking' that build 'pattern' for social meaning and identities. It's used to describe the 'positioning' that realizes personalized 'constellations' in social interaction. Further, the activation of a position comes through a 'propositioning'. The reply will be the result of an 'impositioning process' where both the person's 'disposition' and the character of the proposition will be the means and forces that form the answer and establishes positions in a current constellation. *The complexity in social interaction could legibly be exposed and divided into separate dimensions of meaning by using a model built on the three combined dimensions, Existence, Interest and Moral (EIM).* The concepts and properties in social positioning will recur in the text below, interwoven in the presentation of the theory of moral positioning.

The analysis indicates that one can't explain moral behaviour solely by regarding the patterns of moral positioning,

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because any moralizing requires an existential and interest matter to make sense. That's why this form of positional analytic structure has to be based on these three dimensions that in an efficient and powerful way can decompose and explain social meaning in interaction. We seem to constantly use the three inherent EIM-dimensions to express, differentiate, combine and interpret meaning.

What is meant here with Existence, Interest and Moral as dimensions? Even if it's quite easy to sort the meanings we give to phenomena according to these categories, it is difficult to give a precise definition of these domains. The *moral dimension* is the dimension that is easiest to define; it's roughly about what we regard as right or wrong in giving meaning to personal behaviour, or any subject or object we perceive. *The concern is to locate moral identities and properties.* *Interest* is the dimension that deals with the resources we strive for, compete over or share. Interest is about socially recognized values. *The concern is to get hold of the appropriate capital.* This includes a wide capital concept. *Existence* is the dimension that contains a vast variety of life qualities concerning survival, development, feelings, health, well-being, ageing, growth/decline, learning/forgetting, etc. to an extent that is difficult to fully describe. The content will be clearer as the core pattern becomes more obvious to the reader. *The concern is to reach the desired life qualities that satisfy one's needs.* By regarding existence, interest and morals as 'dimensions', I note that though each one has a character of its own, their extensions are so immense that it is impossible to make a complete description of them.

A moral standpoint as well as flowing moralizing behaviour of others is always related to conflicts in the existential and/or interest dimensions, and the relations between such positions are mutual and work together. By regarding interaction from a moral positioning perspective, one might understand the way we try to manage existential and interest conflicts. For example: Being robbed of your money (interest), you will be angry (existence) and define the perpetrator as evil (moral). I claim that this three-dimensional meta-structure (EIM) and its implicit functions aren't recognized in many ethic and moral discussions. The relations between the three EIM-dimensions are keys to understand how meanings/identities are constructed and how important the influence from that structure is. The EIM-pattern

will be further described below.

Part II: Moral positioning

It is almost impossible to imagine a society without the phenomena of moralizing. Morality is a powerful social force used in a lot of implicit and unaware interactions. Through analysis, it could be easier to recognize its use and misuse.

Persistent issues of good and evil

Moral positioning is dealing with Good and Evil as commonly used categories with an immense variety of representations. The analysis shows how moralizing works, no matter what is regarded as Good or Evil. The question of what should be defined as Good or Evil is mostly a philosophical matter and that question isn't dealt with here.

However, while everyone in daily life, and in many social processes continuously deals with the question of what is good and what is evil, it is done according to specific patterns. And while we all have to solve daily controversies we have to make more or less temporary judgement on what constitutes good or bad deeds. We also try to co-construct a local moral order in coherence with ethics in society, and we regularly have to transmit or explain moralities to our children. Everyone is expected to take moral stances in a lot of daily existential and interest conflicts. We must try to master the moral issues in our lives. We use moral positioning because it is useful in our lives.

This research on moral positioning has analyzed morality in relations and in different situations and searched for their interactive and dynamic properties. The analysis is focused on why and how moralizing is used and activated in conflicts. It's obviously a social tool in the way that it keeps drives, needs and competition in check in order to protect the society and individuals. *Different moral orders will therefore be in conflict as people have different drives and interests and a moral order works as a hindrance to certain interests and satisfying of needs.* That's why the moral order itself will represent different interests and accordingly sometimes be an object of bitter competition.

There are obviously no consensual rules of what is good in all situations and contexts. But somehow *the GoodEvilVictim (GEV)-pattern survives the harshest competition, and even conceptual fights, and will always be revived.* The moral conflict pattern is

durable and resumes even after the moral issues are neglected or scorned. There seems to be a drive to practice moralities in a mutually coordinated way. One could say that a moral order is used in relation to its utility in the long run: *'What is good for people is good moral*. But moralizing is also based on local (or individual) interests, egocentric or ethnocentric, like: *'What is good for me (us) is morally good'*. Collectively speaking, moralizing is a way to keep the group together, to protect and uphold group member rights and responsibilities. Individually speaking, *moral positioning is also a way of levelling emotional and other intrapsychic unbalances* by defining the relation to others. We use morality at all levels to make a normative appraisal of the situation by giving moral identities to the participants.

As the morally good is depending on what is existentially good for people, the basic benchmarks will be 'access to life qualities'. We continuously compare our access to life qualities with others, but as there are conflicts in interest and existence the question of what really is Good or Evil seems to remain contestable.

Defining the threats around us

Moralizing is one way of defining the threats around us. When someone experiences a precarious or threatening situation in any form, either in existence or from interests, that person will usually activate moral positioning to give meaning to the situation. As a mode of describing social interaction, moral positioning is built on patterns of moral positions. The moral conflict pattern has a triadic form and is composed of the positions Good, Evil, Victim – the GEV-pattern. From that pattern we model constellations to use in social situations by personalizing these positions.

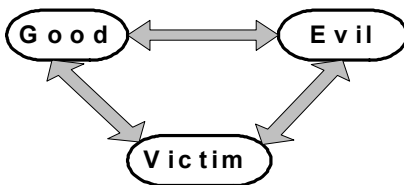


Figure 1. The GEV-triad or the moral conflict pattern

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When the moral dimension is activated anyone feeling threatened may position the threat as the Evil, for example pointing out an evil person. If someone is about to become a Victim and cries out for help, the rescuer will be the Good. By that, the threatening situation is moralized through the GEV-pattern in a personalized constellation. This is an example of a constellation with three persons, but since a pattern of positions isn't the same as a constellation, one person can also hold two of the GEV-patterns positions, for example by simultaneously being the Victim and the Good, as in: *"You are mean to me in spite of the fact that I always try to help you"*, (you= evil, I= victim + good). In many flowing dialogues such as in everyday quarrels or disputes, the participants alternate in all three moral positions.

Anyone can be in a helpless stage, for example stricken with disability or illness. When someone needs help and the help comes natural, like anyone supporting her child without moral reflections, the moral dimension will probably not be activated. *Doing what does good is often natural, with existential rather than moral meaning.* But if participants overrule the local moral order, such as when negligent parents don't support their child, it might trigger an emotional atmosphere and start a moral positioning according to the GEV-pattern. Neglecting may primarily be experienced as a moralized conflict of how to react to helplessness, but is based on unsatisfied existential needs and interests not provided for.

To uphold his/her right the needer may have to fight for it. Rights are in the interest of the needer and if the needer can't force the bystander to help, moral positioning might start. A supporter that intervenes will, as soon as the situation is moralized, probably be valued as the Good, the neglecter as the Evil – and the needer will keep, unimpelled or not, the victim-position, until the conflict fades out. Even a negligent bystander will finally try to recapture a good-position in defining him/herself.

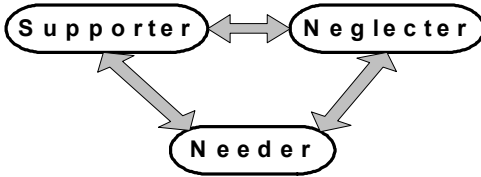


Figure 2. A constellation associated with the GEV-triad. The pattern behind could be found as multidimensional, also communicating existential and interest meaning.

An anxious helper usually tries to keep the good-position as it constitutes important social capital, but inner doubts of one's own good character or identity may also lead to a compelling evilizing of others. Sometimes even a diffuse feeling of unease or discontent might activate a search for someone else to blame. It's sometimes expressed in a self-revealing way as: *"I needed a culprit"* and *"He became my scapegoat"*. The force to fulfil the pattern in current moral constellations arises from the syntagmatic character of the GEV-pattern. *One activated identity in the GEV-pattern will start a force of fulfilling the whole pattern.* It is an entity.

As long as a threat is experienced, the GoodEvilVictim-pattern (GEV) will impel even if the constellation alters. One can't be sure that a specific constellation will last because new actions or circumstances might change the identities knitted to GEV-positions. The more convincing a person label others as Evil, the more confirmed will that person's own identity as Good or Victim appear. The winner of the good-position in moral competing confirms the others as somewhat Evil and/or Victim. This might have a decisive influence on individuals dependent on those who are more resourceful (Swart, & Solomon, 2003; Mitchell, 1981).

Identities will be formed with reference to the dimensions and patterns in the EIM-model, with moral meaning as well as existential or from interest. Will we, for example, still feel sorry for the beggar when he turns out to be threatening and obstinate? Could he be an actual threat to our life qualities and interests? Do we find him more of a perpetrator than a victim? Our current moral constellation will, as we capture it in a threatening situation, lead to repositioning and changes in our own acting. Perhaps later, in a reflective mood, one may find other moral standpoints from a wider existential perspective, including the

beggar's life story, disadvantages and social distress. Moral positioning and its formal conflict pattern can be instantly activated and also deactivated as soon as the threat is gone. When feelings of fear no longer are at their peak, one might be ready, for example, to explore the existential and interest conflicts of the beggar's life story.

Conflicts in suffering

Suffering is a conflict in itself, existentially speaking. The conflicts we experience in embodied suffering have an existential character and will work in different levels of our existence. Pure bodily pain, emotional and psychic suffering and psychosocial discomfort are all basic aspects of an existential status. The sufferings of others often become moralized conflicts in a society, conflicts that some escape and others confront.

Persons stricken with illness or disability will easily be pitied with "poor him" or "poor her" as a persistent identity. The sufferer expects to meet compassion and will probably need it. But a person stricken with a lifelong disability will have a devastating social life if he/she is always pitied. A bodily suffering might be bearable, but not pitying social attitudes. To repel over-compassionate attitudes, without being regarded as unthankful, one has to perform a difficult act of social balancing. On the other hand, lack of compassion from the bystander will be regarded as heartlessness and bad behaviour - and activate a moralized conflict. The existential conflict will thereby be moralized and the stricken person will become the Victim.

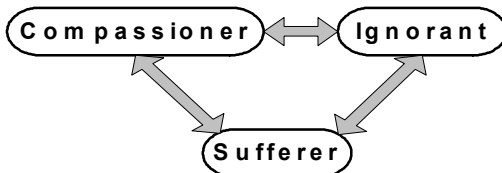


Figure 3. A constellation associated with the GEV-triad.

Especially in a context of guilt, there will be an urge to take a standpoint in favour of the sufferer. The social moralizing is then near at hand and *moral competing* on who is the 'best in being Good' will sometimes occur as, for instance, when participants overdo their compassion in order to be on the safe side. Relations sometimes become unnecessarily cautious and tense as if interacting in an avalanche risk zone. There is a *moral*

balancing between the compassionate and the ignorant attitude to the sufferer. Being too good isn't Good, trying to be the only person that is good isn't Good either.

It is sometimes suggested that children who are frequently pitied and victimized during his/her upbringing, runs the risk of integrating these identities as dominant. It would work like a habituated GEV-pattern that imposes the person in a dominant way to interpret and construe the situation from the self-identity as 'poor creature' and 'Victim'. A dominant self-positioning from these identities proposing 'I have been mistreated' will in any conflict tend to give others moral positions as Good or Evil. *When a GEV-pattern is repeatedly proposed from any taken position, it will be imposing and unpleasant for others and often a hindrance in social life.*

As there might be many social consequences connected to a person's disability in interaction with fellow-creatures, daily conflicts might be near at hand. An oversensitized moral disposition will in that situation become a problem. Practically everyone meets unsolved existential and interest conflicts by taking a moral standpoint, but the level of moral affection and action differs a lot.

Sometimes we meet a conflict by proposing a moral good-alliance, with a clear-cut Evil on the outside, before any analysis or problem solving. The fear of losing control can make us lock such a conflict constellation. Persons or groups that are evilized are of course excluded from the togetherness in a good-alliance. *Moral gate keeping* is effective in drawing the line between 'us and them'. Taking possession of the good-position makes it possible to capitalize on it in several ways. The good-alliance can also be formed and kept together with rules like: *'If you aren't with us, you are against us'*, or *'Only our enemy's enemy can be our friend'*. Such rules serve to lock a moral constellation. *Model power* (Braten, 1982; Aström, 2003) is about having a social capital that gives the power to actualize, activate, establish or dissolve a constellation. *Moral threatening* is a way to exercise moral model power, and it can be combined with the threats in interest and of existential bereavement in social processes like *expelling, stripping of rank, excommunication and freezing-out.*

The helpful other

"I sometimes let them help me, though I don't like it. But it

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makes them feel good”, says one woman with motor impairment. Moral obligations obviously aren’t one way even, if we sometimes think so and it’s not always clear who is helping whom.

To make someone else feel well is usually morally good. Feeling well when making others feel well is also common. But it doesn’t mean that the moral dimension actually is activated. Feeling well is a life quality, and as such an existential matter. One may feel well by doing good. But on the other hand one may also feel very well by gaining capital in a morally dubious way. The social identity of a ‘good’ person is what our doings look like in the eyes of others, not what he feels like. If the social moral identity is important for a person’s self-esteem, the current moral order will impose on a person’s social positioning.

When not being able to help, one may feel helpless and even fall into a self-positioned, self-blaming Evil identity. When the inward moralizing becomes unbearable, one turns to moral positioning outwards, and projects the unwanted identity on others. One mother cried over the child she couldn’t help. She felt helpless and no good at all. Perhaps someone else could do this better she said, “someone who could save my child to a better life”. This mother had low self-esteem, devaluing herself as being ‘not-able-enough’, and even ‘not-good-enough’ in a self-moralizing way. Parents’ moral identities sometimes seem to be more crucial for their self-esteem than their existential identity even if they coalesce. It’s expressed in a comment: *“I’m not perfect but I will fight for my children’s future”*.

Being unhelpful or neglectful is usually Evil in a local moral order. Being an ‘unable parent’ is sometimes mixed up with being a ‘bad parent’ or an ‘evil parent’, because the practical insufficiency is moralized in a devaluating way. Separating these identities is sometimes crucial for the support of a parent’s self-esteem in a faltering parenthood. In most contexts, existential aspects like suffering seem to connect to moral identities. We will search for the cause of the suffering, and we often prefer to personalize it - to point out a culprit. But there are also contexts where the interaction is kept strictly professional, in a morally neutral way; for example, when the task is strictly medical - to save life whoever is stricken – or when someone keeps up a ‘strictly business’-attitude, with no existential or moral considerations. Another example an attitude of ‘none-of-my-business’ as a way to mark one’s limited moral responsibility,

ridding oneself of moral obligations and emotional involvement in the other.

Fear and defence

The activation of moral positioning has several alternative drives, but fear and bereavement are of great importance. Moralizing is a means to regulate behaviour to be acceptable and unharmed, and will therefore be frequently used. *Moral recruiting* is sometimes used to assemble support for 'a good cause', like things that correspond to highly valued life qualities or capital. Arousing fear or anticipated loss might 'gather the troops', and the demonizing of a counterpart will strengthen a constellation modelled from the GEV-pattern. The drives are existential and/or from interests, but work through *moral susceptibility*.

Feelings of fear activate defence and are near at hand when individuals are weakened and exposed as stricken with misfortune, stronger competitors or earlier victimizing. In *moral gate keeping* certain participants mark the border of interest and existential security with the help of a GEV-constellation. Within the borders, there will be one or more objects of protection, thus the presumed Victims. The ward will be protected by institutionalized rules, both formal and implicit moral rules of conduct. The intruder will by all means be kept out, and the object of protection, perceived as vulnerable and helpless, will be kept safe inside. The intruder is evilized as a threat to values of existence or interest, as it arouses feelings of fear as if existence is put in jeopardy. A lot of representations are possible. Moral gate keeping is a basic social process, described in more detail elsewhere together with its subprocesses.

Existential fight and interest competition

Conflict activities within the existence and interest dimensions seem to differ in character. An existential controversy is more or less an animated fight, based on feelings and affects. An interest conflict is basically more of a competitive challenge over a desired capital. It isn't necessarily animated and ruled by feelings, it could as well be a cool, calculative strategic manoeuvring and manipulation to win the capital at stake. Mostly these modes of conflict activity, fight and competition seem to be combined to some extent, but they also occur separately.

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The hierarchy of social status capital in 'Over/Under'-relations is a basic and often ruling identity structure. During interaction, we constantly define others and ourselves as equal, top dog or underdog and we act to keep up or improve our social status, or any other social capital. As a context, the hierarchical social structure seems to represent one type of institutionalized allotment of social capital. There are probably rules for roles, and to what extent these are changeable or possible to equalize. A stiff hierarchical structure may force the participants to have either top dog or underdog positions. Positioning in the hierarchical context may be rooted in the competitive evaluation of things like physical or economic strength. A person's access to important life qualities and social capital are compared. If moral qualities are capitalized and if competition dominates the context, there probably won't be room for all in a good-position. *The context may force the participants to regard others as moral competitors.*

A moral order, local or universal, is a social construction that says what is to be regarded as Good or Evil. Though it's formed to keep up systems of relations in a specific way, it leaves a lot to the participants. We reconstruct it in social relations at any level. Doubts about another party's *moral credibility* make the interaction insecure and unpredictable, rationalizing our interest in moral imprinting on new generations. *Moral order is complex and variable but seems to depend on how positions in the GEV-pattern are perceived as life qualities and reified as capital.*

During analysis, moral positioning was found to be a central aspect in many processes concerning human conflicts. Such conflicts are moralized with varying strength, from aggressive and accusing to subtle and vaguely insinuating. *Moral hinting* represents a covert interaction style that is opposite to open moralizing. Conflicts on moral matters can either be openly recognized and debated or covert with masked moralizing and tabooing. For example, in conflicts in parenthood and caretaking around a disabled child, an area with strong tensions that often displaces staff discourse to informal fora; a matter that is only discussed in secured zones.

Patterns and dynamics of a moral conflict

To understand how moral positioning works in conflicts one has to understand the dynamics of social positioning and the

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force in implicit structures. Even if the pattern isn't fully exposed in all its positions, it is still there implicitly.

The GEV-pattern is easily applied and recognizable as a basic pattern for everyday life. The answer to the moral question 'Who is good (or evil, or victim)?' is always modelled in a constellation that follows the GEV-triad. The pattern is activated even when all positions aren't obvious and clearly personalized. In the sentence '*The mother rescued her child from being abused*', there is also an abusive (implicit Evil) power present in the constellation. Even when someone says: '- *He hit me!*', the good-position is present in the constellation because one regards hitting someone as Evil and the listener is expected to hold the implicit good-position. If the answer is: '*You earned it!*', there would probably be some *moral confusion* about what is right or wrong. Unclear constellations that are built on a pattern like GEV will urge fulfilling questions like '*Who did what?*'.

Positions and linking

With the concept 'position' one can display how meaning is linked to meaning in a specific way. The constellations formed in social interaction use symbolic patterns like GEV. In personalizing positions, we give and take identities in correspondence to the conflicts and concerns with which we deal. A proposed meaning usually has to be accepted to serve social interaction.

In a flow of changing meanings, it's possible to move from position to position to create new constellations perhaps being evil today and being the good guy tomorrow. For changes of moral identities, there have to be structures that aren't locked in sanctifying, demonizing or victimizing. A structure can be both enabling and constraining (Giddens, 1994, 1984). Consider, for example, how table manners work. They make us able to succeed at the dinner table thanks to the restrictions attached. The linkings can be strong in constellations that are often used, like in an institutionalized doctor/patient-constellation. The linkings can be even stronger in a hard conflict that serves the ruling order, powerful interests or significant needs. A stiff-linked constellation can be institutionalized in a context as an important structure.

As positions form the pattern through their links, they also form a specific meaning coming from the specific way they

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connect meanings. That's why a specific type of linking is decisive. The meaning of the whole constellation is decided by the meaning in its linkings. For example, the link between Good and Victim is 'makes good/takes good'. The link between Evil and Victim is 'makes bad/takes bad', and the link between Good and Evil is 'makes good/makes evil'. Moving from one position to another means different things in different links.

When we analyze patterns, we search both positions and links because it's the linking that gives the position its complementary meanings and builds the pattern. One can't understand what Good is without also understanding the complementary meanings of Evil and Victim. In analyzing a constellation, we need to find out what dimension and dimensional positions are active in people's construction and how identities relate to each other. In real life situations we just 'feel it' and 'do it' but are seldom aware of it. If the moral dimension is activated in someone's mind, the GEV-pattern will surface automatically.

As a formal pattern serves a lot of different situations, a pattern of that type resists change in all possible usage and withstands dynamic forces and reconstructions of meaning in interaction. If the Victim is found to be the one who hit first, the constellation will be recomposed after the same basic pattern but maybe with the former Victim as the perpetrator, as long as the moral dimension is activated.

Giving and taking positions

In everyday social interaction we continuously search for and compose meaning and identity (Berger & Luckman, 1966). The social interactors are proposing, more or less impressively, the identities they prefer. We propose our own identities in 'self-positioning' and others in 'other-positioning', to gain capital and life qualities. Others don't always accept a proposed self-identity, thus a person's ability and skill in social positioning will be important to accomplish his/her concerns.

When we take and give identities in constellations, we model all the activated identities into a coordinated meaning in the form of a specific constellation. *The consequence of self-positioning is that we simultaneously propose a complementary identity to others, whether we intend it or not. We continuously identify others in relation to ourselves and ourselves in relation to others.*

When giving an identity to others, the result of an activated pattern is that you at the same time propose an identity for yourself. For example, a strong marking of oneself as a morally good person may be taken as an exclusive identity, which offers the positions as Victim or Evil to others - a proposal that may arouse feelings of conflict or competitive action on the issue. Alternatively, if we point out a Victim, there will be an instant filling-out and proposing of who is Evil and who is Good in a personalized constellation, because of the fulfilling character of the triadic GEV-pattern. Not all activated patterns will result in an established constellation, as the perception of a proposed meaning might be transient or abandoned. But some will be accepted as relevant, or imposed as inevitable, and therefore realized as important social identities. In a tense situation and a conflictive context, moral imposing tends to be strong and the position difficult to escape.

The giving and taking of positions are often flexible and mobile. A common and ordinary family tiff might be like a moral merry-go-round in taking and giving positions in Good/Evil/Victim-turns, as an ordinary everyday interaction. At one moment, a member is the good guy - and in the next the bad guy. To gain a good-position one may have to reduce another person's good-capital by blaming them and seizing the victim-position. Snapping the good-position at opportunity often involves active good deeds, but it can be done in different ways. Thus, basic patterns of moral conflict are the same in family conflicts as in higher levels of societal processes.

Patterns and constellations

We continuously use patterns from our social disposition in modelling various constellations for daily life practice, in constellations of persons and objects. Some patterns seem to be old and lasting because of their usefulness, and some are formal and have a form that's basically the same whatever the situation, context or participants. The constellations can be varied on the formal pattern according to personalizing, context, combined patterns, emotional strength, drives, main concerns etc.

A personalized constellation on the GEV-pattern is built on the personal pronouns (I, you, he, she, it, we etc.) and can be combined in all sorts of ways. They are pronominal positions that will be used as basic identities in interaction about who-is-what

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or who-has-what. Patterns like GEV are easily combined with personal pronouns. That's how positions and constellations make sense. We model a constellation in 'I am', 'You are' and 'He/she/it is (or they are)' and others adapt it to patterns they recognize. When the constellations are modelled after the GEV-pattern they take form, for example, in: 'I am good', 'You are a victim' and 'He is evil', as relevant social identities in a specific situation and context.

GEV-pattern as an analytic unit

The basic pattern of moral conflicts, the GEV-pattern, works as a model for social interaction and is repeatedly used in all sorts of situations and levels of abstraction. Its positions bear symbolic social meaning that are easily understood by everyone even when they aren't accepted as identities. In observations of children's play it was obvious that the GEV-pattern is variable and adaptable to uncomplicated meaning in children's play as well as advanced interaction. In children's play relations they interact with opinions like Nice, Nasty and Someone being treated nice or nasty.

The GEV-pattern is also a pattern useful in deconstructing a conflict situation. When participants give the conflict a moral meaning, they have modelled the situation and identities in a certain way. Deconstructing each party's perspective and how they give moral meaning to needs, concerns and interests, may clarify their locking of the conflict constellation. Sacred values, crucial needs, strongly felt interests and demonized opposites can then be exposed to reflection.

The pattern of moral conflict is best understood in combination with the patterns of existential and interest conflicts, the EIM-model, but this limited presentation of pattern for social positioning analysis cannot show the full range of variety. There is usually a dynamic movement between conflict and balance in all three dimensions to take into account, for example when a person gets sick and becomes socially devalued by a morally sensitizing sickness as AIDS/HIV (Gilman, 1988).

Dimensions and conflict patterns

The constellations we form in daily life are based on limited knowledge, habituated patterns of behaviour, personal drives and interests, and will therefore be temporary and situational. They

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will be formed in a flow, concurrently influenced by context and situational factors. The constellations of conflict can be puzzled out with the help of the patterns in the EIM-model.

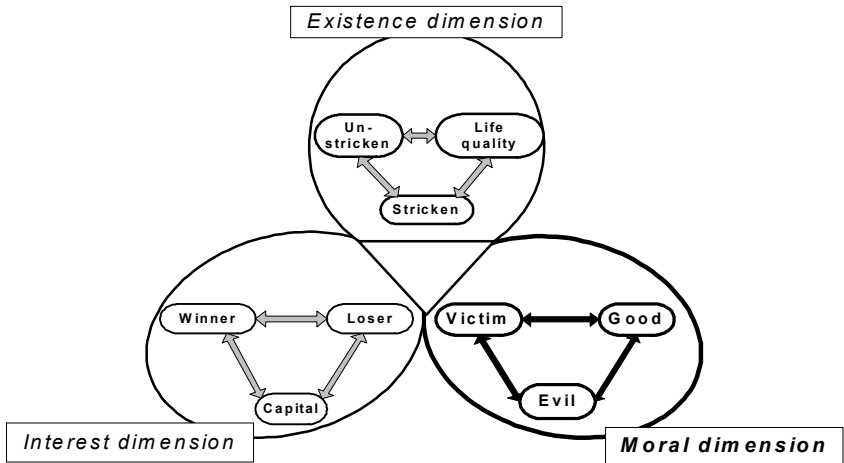


Figure 4. Existence, interest and moral dimensions and the dimensional conflict patterns.

The EIM-model is the result of a grounded theory analysis and offers the possibility to visualize conflict positions in a lot of different applications. Every position in this model is combinable with any of the others in the relevant constellation or combination of meanings, and these dimensional patterns are abiding in transfer into different levels of abstraction.

It is important to point out that in the existential dimension there is a tremendous amount of 'life qualities' that can be termed in different levels, but its basic conflict meaning is caught in the expression 'being vs. not being'. In a similar way, the interest dimension has an enormous variety of 'capital' and 'capitalizing' in social life, and here the basic conflict meaning is 'having vs. not having'. Both 'the need for a life quality' (an existential drive) and 'the interest for a capital' (a capital drive) are concurrent socially constructed dynamics of life. When a new need arises, it usually awakens an interest of capital that can be supportive to satisfaction. This is about how to obtain what supplies or satisfies (capital) a certain need (life quality).

When a primary conflict in the existential and interest

dimension, is reduced or resolved, the moralizing fades out. The moralizing activity is no longer nourished by a perceived conflict. The patterns we possess in our habituated repertoire are obviously activated when triggered - and inactivated when not needed. It's the emotional imbalance that seems to animate the GEV-pattern even when the conflict is historic or, as in other cases, anticipated.

Reflections and Discussion

The results of this research are in two main areas: (1) the *discovery of the moral positioning process*, its dynamics and the formal properties of the core variable, the GEV-pattern; (2) the *discovery of a meta-structure (EIM-pattern)* that explains much about how moralizing can be understood as a dynamic force in handling conflicts in existential and interest matters. To make sense the moralizing process has to be related to imbalances in significant aspects of existence and interest, and this can be visualized as a meta-pattern of three cooperating dimensions that implicitly support the participant in giving, making and interpreting meaning and how this can be analyzed, described and visualized as a social positioning process. The limited space available in a single article can't give full justice to the theory.

Social positioning, as a concept emerged from analysis of 'attitudes between persons in social interaction with one stricken by impairment'. It is grounded in two characteristic attitudes: the stricken as a 'risk' and the stricken as an 'object for sympathy'. While analyzing the processes around moral positioning, several processual concepts in line with social positioning emerged. They were urged by the analysis to explain what was going on. Having developed a limited conceptual apparatus for social positioning analysis through a grounded theory analysis, I started to search for references in research literature. Harré and Langenhove had just published their book *Positioning Theory* (1999) but as I didn't know about the articles that preceded this book, this conceptualizing of Social positioning wasn't influenced by those but had, instead, taken another direction though some concepts are quite similar. Their main focus is the positions in storyline in the dialogue; mine is the use of consistent patterns of positions and identities socially constructed. Their alignment is more in describing the dialog and mine is in finding the abstract patterning of positions used in processes of interaction at any level. Though they don't use the concept 'social positioning', these

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two alignments are comparable and probably combinable in many aspects.

As conflicts are both within us and between us, and since balance and conflict are constantly recurring for different reasons, one has to regard positioning as a myriad of positionings, creating a myriad of constellations, sometimes based on socially co-constructed patterns. Social interaction is taking place on several levels at the same time, with several simultaneously ongoing conflicts in all dimensions. Several basic social processes might be activated at the same time, they come and go when needed, possibly with other dimensional systems working simultaneously. Visualizing the social interaction as positional patterns may be regarded as seductive and simplifying; but on the other hand, it may be a virtue in using this as a tool, to be capable of making the meanings and identities in social interaction clear and simple. Actually, there is a potentiality for building a more composite pattern.

The aim has been to find the core concepts that catch what is going on in social interaction when moralizing is activated. The result should be regarded as a proposal, and the patterns and concepts should be scrutinized. But these results can also be used with generative power, other patterns on different levels can be found and explored, due to the social positioning perspective. Its patterns can be applied in real life and tested as tools for a social discourse.

The reasons for moral positioning vary depending on what drives and interests are activated. Already known is that people use moralizing in a lot of different ways and for different reasons. Such reasons are to *reach balance within one's own mind* and emotionally charged world, *promote better positions* for oneself and/or others in questions of interest. That is for *reaching important capital and for gaining positive life qualities*.

When I tried to find out the importance of moralizing in conflicts, I was surprised to discover that the conflicts could be classified and analyzed in a three-dimensional model (EIM) with great coverage in the social field. Moralizing could be understood and expressed with its core pattern, GEV, in relation to activity within the dimensions of existence and interest.

I found that the meta-structure EIM, in a formal way, exposes how moral meanings are related to striving for desired

life qualities and competing for significant capital. The model emerged after repeated use in supervising staffs and persons with disabilities. With this model it's easy to display how separate meanings link together in patterns, through positionings when we interact socially, and how mixed meanings can be separated and clarified. 'Position, pattern and link' were chosen as theoretical codes as they seemed to work, and that's why I talk about meanings as positions. They take form in both lasting core patterns, and in flexible and changeable instant patterns.

Why moralizing is easily activated

Moralizing is a specific mode of handling a conflict. The questions why the interaction within fields of suffering so often is socially and emotionally charged could be answered with reference to the multiconflictual situation concerning existential and interest matters. That's not surprising. *Conflicts that can't be solved by a participant will be emotionally charged and thereby easily moralized.* Any conflict could be moralized, but when the participants have other means to handle the situation, the moralizing seems to be unnecessary. It seems like *power is related to moralizing in the way that the less life qualities or capital a person or a group has, the more important moral model power is.* Moralizing is sometimes used to charge an imbalance in life qualities or capital with moral meaning. The struggle about conceptual meanings will be about what is good, evil and victim, and who is holding these separate positions.

Having moral model power (Braten, 1982) is to have capital that makes it easier to keep the constellations the way one prefers. Disabled, sick, poor people will probably have a better chance if the moral order supports their needs and interests, and balances their shortage of such values.

The reason why this type of area is filled with tense relations and psychological tensions seems to be that it contains difficult conflicts that easily activate moralizing. Conflicts of existence and interest are natural and all the time current in all these fields. If it's of great importance to be recognized as good, it gives the social interaction a specific character. When the context is conflictive, the identification of the 'guilty' and evil becomes important, in line with what sometimes is called a 'guilt context'. Guilt is, both as a feeling and a social matter, built on the GEV-pattern. Some of the professionals interviewed felt really uneasy

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answering questions about social and psychological aspects in connection to a guilt context.

The resistance among professionals to open insight is surprisingly strong and often overthrows the problems originating from obstructions to openness. The lack of resources that is the outcome of the unwillingness to speak out about needs for psychosocial help among disabled children isn't morally conflictive; at least not at the same level as the feelings of conflict when talking openly about the situation of these children. It's the conflict perspective that decides what the main moral issue is. The answer to why, in the field of handicap, there is a sort of righteous cautiousness and tip-toeing on matters of social and psychological character is complex but can lean on the theory of moral positioning. Professionals may also have an interest in giving priority to protecting their own capital or life qualities when they come in conflict with clients and that is a choice that either is moralized or is kept out of the moral dimension.

Formal core patterns

A formal pattern can work as an analytic unit in different levels of abstraction and in any relevant area of praxis. The GEV-pattern stays the same for anybody, anytime and everywhere in moralizing, because it's formal. For adults and children, for a carpenter and a bank clerk, for a priest or a criminal, the moral positioning is built and interpreted with that pattern. Its form can be activated from any participant perspective, since it is formal.

The GEV-pattern has a seemingly enduring form. It's a tool that doesn't deform though constellations change in any personalizing of positions. The GEV-pattern helps us to assign important identities of Good, Evil and Victim among participants, in any new situation, in any moment or place. Even if the definition of what exactly is good or evil changes, the pattern will endure. The pattern is combinable to a large number of other patterns in contexts where moral positioning is activated. For example, a moralized conflict can be formed with the GEV-pattern in any combination with existential or interest conflicts.

As a formal pattern, the moral conflict pattern has no obvious limitations. I have interviewed and tried this pattern on persons from different cultures and religions. Since moralizing is used extensively, mostly in conflicts, the GEV-pattern is

applicable in any field of social activity that can be moralized.

Emerging of the dimensional EIM-pattern

When analyzing the term 'victim', that frequently occurred in data and seemed to be significant, I found that the use of it was unclear. It carried actually three differing meanings that could be better termed as 'stricken', 'loser' and 'victim'. This was the initial step in the discovery of the three complementary dimensions, the EIM-pattern that successively emerged from a lot appearances (indicators). In all these appearances, it became more and more obvious that they have had an essential base for the meaning they carry, and that could be regarded as a dimension. In an analysis of meanings, it's possible to scrutinize any terms by asking if there is any hidden existential, interest or moral connotation in the term. When appropriate such analysis results in new triadic patterns, as new discoveries of meanings that are connected and based in respective dimension.

The focus is here on the moral dimension and its moral conflict pattern (GEV). The other dimensional conflict patterns that emerged, belonging to existence and interest dimensions, are extensive and need further analysis, but their main patterns of conflict seem to work and fit very well for analyzing conflicts.

There are probably more than one core pattern for conflict in each of the existence and interest dimensions. To begin with, I found two important patterns for existential conflict. One is 'Stricken/Unstricken/Life quality' and the other is 'Able/Not able/Life quality', and they seem to reflect two sides of a conflict about a life quality. 'Being stricken' with blindness (eyesight is a life quality) is almost the same as not 'being able' to see, but not exactly the same. Stricken is more related to 'impairment' and Not-able is more related to 'disability', two concepts used for differentiation in 'handicap-research'. There is also an important difference in 'I am able to' and 'I am not stricken by'. Secondly, I found that the conflict patterns in the interest dimension are both about 'Having/Not having/Capital' or 'Getting/Not getting/Capital', two sides of the pattern that gives the identities Winner/Loser/Capital. These terms did emerge as concepts when their patterns and properties became visible.

The dividing line between meanings of existence and meanings of interest is to some extent tentative, but so far the differentiation of meanings originating from these three

dimensions seems relevant and working. Some words in ordinary language are pure representations of one of the dimensions (one-dimensional), and other words are representing two or all three dimensions. When used in language some words carry a composite meaning which includes connotations of both existential, interest and moral character (three-dimensional).

One has to bear in mind that a pattern is a simplified phenomenon, probably more effective and communicable when it's simplified, than if a phenomenon's whole complexity was displayed at the same time. When the pattern reaches its simplest form it becomes generalizable. The complexity can be added in showing social interaction with its intensity, amplitude, nuances, associations, compound meaning, combining patterns etc. A formal core pattern is covering both simple and very complex processes. It's the skeleton of a moving body.

The theory in practice

The instinctive way of using these habituated patterns makes us sometimes go wrong considering our ability for social interaction is limited. To begin with, we are constantly driven by conflicts in our social interaction (Simmel, 1955) and the moral positioning theory shows how some inherent structures rule us. Secondly, people act socially in accordance with these patterns of identity, and automatically include several simultaneous intern and extern conflicts, which may contradict logical reasoning and the correspondence with individual concerns. We are not always capable of using all the potentiality in positioning processes that we need to gain our purposes. Consider that we if are in contradictive or collaborative interaction with others whose impact on the structure may be strong, we will be influenced in either a constraining or an enabling way (Bourdieu, 1994; Giddens, 1994, 1984).

There seems to be a continuum of consciousness (Glaser & Strauss, 1965), different modes of activity from 'unaware to aware', from 'reactive to strategic', and most people are mainly unaware and reactive in the social processes of which they are a part. Some people have a better capacity to survey the action field, reflect upon others and their own behaviour, keep track of concurrent conflicts and will therefore more easily act strategically. As an instrument for analysis this model is usable for any persons needs. It may help us not to get caught in

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constellations that drain off positive life qualities and important capital. Anyone can, to a certain extent, learn how to use the core pattern for gaining more model power (Braten, 1982), to understand what is going on and learn how to do strategic positioning.

Using the social positioning analysis is one way of becoming aware of what is going on in relation to other persons. It can be implemented in groups for an analysis of the group members' identities and significant constellations. The Evil vs. Victim constellation can be changed to a not-able vs. stricken constellation, and by that be the start of a development of the relations. To understand the difference in meaning between 'not-able' and 'evil' in a private constellation is crucial for relations blocked by conflicts. A clear division of what is an existential problem and what is immoral behaviour, reduces the tension in a conflict. It makes it easier to understand problematic behaviour of other persons.

I have frequently used moral positioning theory in supervision, seminars and education – as have others. There seems to be an instant grab in several of its aspects, when people recognize and associate to their own experiences. Presentation of the model will sometimes cause laughter, giggling or feelings of embarrassment among audience participants as they become aware of their own covert moral positioning in daily life. Some persons learn very quickly how to understand and apply parts of the model to their own cases, and it will only take a few hours to learn how to use the whole social positioning model as an analytic tool.

In professional groups with complicated tasks, there are often tensions leading to conflicts and certain risks for over moralized interaction. Participants under social and psychological stress, might react by displacing the inner conflict to a moral judgment on the behaviour of others. By introducing the EIM-model to professionals they can learn how to handle these tensions in a way to minimize the moral positioning within a group, and also in relations to clients. People with noticeable disabilities who will meet imposing attitudes can learn how to handle these and secure their self-esteem, self-confidence and model power. As it's easy in an underdog position to become ruled by other people's preconceived opinions, it may be necessary to oppose stereotypes and imposed identities in a clever way. The

social positioning model can be used as a tool for that.

One can learn how to move focus from one dimension to another while scrutinizing the conflict. Asking questions like: What dimension is dominant at the moment? From where come my feelings of unease? In which dimension belongs my own and others acting? Which identities are activated? How is the constellation personalized? Where am I in that? For what life qualities are the others and I fighting? Are they threatened? What similarities and differences are obvious between the parties' perspectives? What sort of solutions and compromises could balance the situation? What life qualities can be agreed on as mutual and basic? What is a fair balance of capital in certain significant aspects? With questions like these, it is possible to expose the way in which the conflict involves morality, existence and interest matters and what sort of problems one has to deal with. As such, the social positioning model offers a structure that allows anyone to produce critical and analytic questions.

Moral positioning seems to work as a stand-by social function and can be activated anytime when significant imbalances are recognized. One possible way of resolving a morally locked situation is to use this model to clear out the person's perspectives, concerns and drives and disentangle the actors from embarrassing moral identities. By balancing existential and interest conflicts one can contribute to morally neutral relations. Controversial moral positions may fade out, if not for good perhaps for a while. As every participant uses social patterns to form his/her best constellation in social interaction, it means that every constellation is both individually and socially constructed, otherwise it wouldn't work. In a social positioning analysis, one needs every significant perspective to be able to understand the use of constellations, how conflicts are constructed and how positioning for balance is enacted.

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