SUSTAINING AND CHALLENGING GROUP-BASED INEQUALITIES IN EVERYDAY LIFE: A MEANING CENTERED APPROACH

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SUSTAINING AND CHALLENGING GROUP-BASED INEQUALITIES IN EVERYDAY LIFE: A MEANING CENTERED APPRAOCH

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ABSTRACT

An enduring aim of psychologists is to understand and explain regularities in human thoughts, feelings and actions. Since the founding of the discipline in the 19th century, two explanatory frameworks have co-existed, the causal scientific model and the normative scientific model. The causal model explains regularities by referring to cause-effect mechanisms, while the normative model explains regularities in terms of human action that is oriented to culturally normative ways of being. Central to a normative scientific explanation of patterned behavior is the recognition that people act in accordance with the meanings they give to phenomena; hence the way people ascribe meaning to phenomena become a central object of study. In this dissertation I adopt a normative scientific perspective to explore social inequalities, specifically economic inequalities. Most psychological research on this topic seeks the causes of social inequalities and neglects people’s meaning-making activities and their orientation to normative systems. In two empirical studies I examine how people use language to give meaning to everyday practices in ways that negotiate power between economically unequal groups. The first study is based on field work in Caracas, Venezuela and uses the concepts of interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and carriers (Moghaddam, 2002) and tools of discourse analysis to detail how a culturally-valued practice (beauty) becomes a site where the meaning of social class categories is contested.
such that debate about income inequalities is sidelined. The second study adopts Positioning Theory (Moghaddam, Harré, & Lee, 2008) and examines how power is negotiated in interpersonal relationships between people of widely differing economic means (nannies and their employers in an affluent neighborhood in Washington, D.C.) through the storylines they invoke. These studies combine to show how the ways of distributing power that people take for granted as independently existing truths (in the form of conventional storylines or interpretative repertoires) are cultural phenomena that are sustained through the normative activities of intentional human actors. Acquiring this knowledge is a first step towards a more open and critical dialogue about how we want to deal with social and economic inequalities.
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Chapter One

Background to the Research Project

This dissertation builds on a long-standing tradition in psychology of inquiring into how people use cultural resources (language and other symbolic systems) to assign meaning to their experiences and act according to the meanings they ascribe. The concern in psychology with meaning and culture extends back to 19th Century proposals for a Second Psychology that would complement experimental laboratory studies (Cahan & White, 1992). For instance, Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), lionized in traditional introductory psychology textbooks as the ‘father of experimental psychology,’ spent several decades of his life completing a 10-volume work on a Second Psychology, which he called *Völkerpsychologie* (often translated as ‘Folk Psychology’ or ‘Cultural Psychology’), (Wundt, 1916). This second psychology was to be the study of ‘higher-order mental processes’ that are shaped by cultural products such as language, myths, and customs. While Wundt promoted experimental methods for the study of ‘elementary psychological processes’ (sensation and perception), he proposed that methods from the ‘interpretive disciplines’, such as linguistics, folklore, and ethnography, were needed to understand higher-order mental processes.

Wundt’s Second Psychology was overshadowed by his experimental psychology. Originally conceived of as appropriate only for ‘basic’ (panhuman) psychological
processes, the experimental method was quickly appropriated to study psychological phenomena that are constituted through cultural processes. Experimental psychology was taken up with particular fervor in the United States (Blumenthal, 1975, 1980; Danziger, 1990), which after World War II became the leading producer of psychological knowledge. As psychology matured as a discipline and sought its place among the ‘hard’ sciences, it largely neglected culture as a constitutive part of psychological phenomena (Moghaddam & Lee, 2006; Moghaddam, 1987). The experimental method itself was not to blame for this neglect of culture. Rather, it was the assumption that all human psychological phenomena investigated in an experimental manner can be accounted for by cause-effect mechanisms that operate independently of cultural processes and human intentionality (acting in accordance with the meanings one assigns to phenomena).

While laboratory experiments have been treated as the ‘gold standard’ of scientific psychology since the late 19th Century, alternative research methods and theories of human action never completely vanished. The 19th Century voice of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), for instance, who saw a place for psychology among the ‘human sciences,’ was echoed in the 1960s and 1970s ‘crisis in social psychology.’ The crisis was far-reaching and complex. Vociferous critics challenged many of the fundamental assumptions of traditional social psychology, including its causal model of social behavior (Harré & Secord, 1972), its research methods (Miller, 1972; Rosenthal &

The fruits of this period of internal critique are found in the variety of Alternative Psychologies that have matured in the past twenty years (for general discussion see Moghaddam, Lee & Harré, 2007; Moghaddam, Erneling, Montero, & Lee, 2007; Moghaddam, 2005; Smith, Harré, & van Langenhove, 1995; Moghaddam & Harré, 1995). These include: Discursive Psychology (Harré & Gillett, 1995; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992), Narrative Psychology (Bruner, 1986, 1990), Cultural Psychology (Shweder, 1991; Moghaddam, 2002; Cole, 1996), Critical Discursive Psychology (Parker, 1992; Burman & Parker, 1993), and Rhetorical Psychology (Billig, 1991; Billig, 1987/1996; Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, & Radley, 1988). Alternative Psychologies have become well-established internationally and have led to the founding of journals such as *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* (1971), *Theory & Psychology* (1991), *Culture & Psychology* (1995), *Culture, Mind & Activity* (1994).

The Alternative Psychologies or ‘New Schools’ (Moghaddam, 2006) are concerned with intentional (meaningful) human action carried out in specific cultural contexts. In contrast to traditional psychology’s tendency to adopt an individualistic and deterministic view of the person, alternative approaches share a concept of human beings as agentic and oriented to norms (Moghaddam, Erneling, Montero, & Lee, 2007;
Moghaddam & Harré, 1995), whether in laboratory settings or in everyday life (Moghaddam & Harré, 1992).

Alternative and traditional psychologies also pursue different research questions. While traditional psychology asks *when* and speculates *why* people behave as they do, alternative approaches ask *how* people give meaning to phenomena. Though diverse, alternative psychologies typically conduct research in order to (1) understand *how* people construct meanings using culturally available symbolic tools, (2) analyze the *functions* of these social semiotic practices in the local context where they occur, and (3) consider the social-political *implications* of these local practices. Despite the different concepts of the person supported by traditional and alternative psychologies, their empirical analyses can be mutually informative. For instance, the traditional approach offers insight into *when* certain phenomena are likely to occur, and alternative approaches explain *how* these phenomena acquire value-laden meanings.

A useful way of distinguishing between traditional and alternative psychologies is to understand their different objects of analysis. Moghaddam (2002, 2006a) provides conceptual clarity on this matter by distinguishing between two aspects of human performances, each associated with a different explanatory system. On the one hand, we can investigate *performance capacity*, how well we do things such as see, hear and smell. A causal scientific model is appropriate to explaining differences, regularities, and changes in performance capacity. For instance, our capacity for discerning pitch is
determined by features of our auditory system. On the other hand, we can investigate
*performance style*, the manner in which we do thing and the meanings we attach to those
performances. Differences, regularities, and changes in performance style require
normative scientific explanations, because performance style arises from cultural
processes, in particular our conscientious or habitual orientation to norms, values and
beliefs.

A central means by which we attribute meaning to phenomena of all kinds is
through language, a cultural product that allows for the most subtle and wide-ranging
discriminations of meaning. Discourse-oriented Psychology and Narrative Psychology
are those among the New Schools of Psychology that study how psychological
phenomena are constituted (at least partly) through our use of language. This view of
language as having constructive functions, rather than simply mirroring an independently
existing reality (representational view), has deep philosophical roots.

**Language as social action**

Wittgenstein (1953) and Austin (1962) were central figures in challenging the
representational view of language and laying a foundation for a normative psychology.
In a series of provocative lectures, Austin (1962) showed how we use language to
perform important acts that would be impossible without language, e.g. marrying,
christening, and knighting. The received view of the time was that all statements were
descriptions (‘constatives’) whose truth or falsity could be assessed. This view persists in
some areas of psychology, where attempts are made to ensure that research participants
provide ‘accurate’ responses, uncontaminated by the context of the experiment.

Austin introduced the notion of ‘performatives,’ statements that perform socially
meaningful actions like christening ships, declaring a truce, or getting married.
Performatives can produce the speaker’s intended effects or ‘misfire,’ depending on
whether certain ‘felicity conditions’ are met, such as whether the utterance is recognized
as a conventional procedure, whether the appropriate people participate, and whether
people hold beliefs and intentions that are appropriate to the event. Performatives
function as they do because certain psychological and cultural conditions are satisfied;
people hold certain beliefs about what the event means, and conventions are followed,
usually tacitly but sometimes consciously. Austin’s iconoclastic assertion was that all
statements have performative qualities: all statements are socially meaningful acts (have
‘illocutionary force’). As Potter (2001) puts it, Austin’s general theory of speech acts
makes all utterances “parts of practices, locked into psychology and sociology by a
matrix of felicity conditions” (p.45). This includes the utterances produced by research
participants.

Wittgenstein (1953) also promoted an action-oriented account of language, but
moreover he developed an extended philosophical argument revealing the logical
contradictions of treating natural language as purely representational. His *Philosophical*
Investigations has been deeply influential in the human sciences. In this work, Wittgenstein urges us to disabuse ourselves of the belief that words are only used to name objects. Instead, he proposed that language be looked upon as a toolkit. Any utterance can serve multiple functions in a variety of projects, e.g. Woody refers to Annie as ‘unstable’ to express his fondness and empathy towards her in one conversation but uses the same term later to justify their break-up. Another key point Wittgenstein makes is that many of our life activities are ‘language games,’ practices in which language plays an integral role. Consider the essential role of language in courtrooms, congress, classrooms, and playgrounds.

The main point of these works for psychology is that people – including research participants – can be heard performing all sorts of socially significant acts by using language, such as promising, defending, and mitigating. Furthermore, language is primarily if not wholly performative rather than representational. We can no longer take people’s self reports as true or false descriptions of something durable and internal to the person.\(^1\) Self-reports can instead be productively studied as public performances carried out using the symbolic tools available (rating scales, partially completed sentences, gestures, natural language) and with an orientation to the local context. These ideas are at the foundation of discourse-oriented psychologies.

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\(^1\) Attempting to do so assumes that we can fact-check the self-reported attitude or belief by comparing it to an internal representation, a neurophysiological manifestation perhaps. However, even peering into the brain does not afford us this power. There is no way to study internal states in a psychologically meaningful way independent of some public criteria for designating what the internal state is (Harré & Tissaw, 2005).
Power relations, discourse, and narrative

In this dissertation I use tools from Discursive Psychology and Narrative Psychology to examine power relations in two different contexts of everyday life and in two different countries, Venezuela and the United States. Most scholarship on power relations adopts a causal science model and seeks the causes of social inequality, with leading culprits being political, economic, and legal structures at the macro-level and individual biological and psychological processes at the micro-level, although impressive alternatives have been developed in sociolinguistics (Fairclough, 2001; van Dijk, 2008).

In social psychology, Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius, Pratto, van Laar, & Levin, 2004) and System Justification Theory (Jost & Benaji, 1994, 2004) are two major recent accounts of why and when unequal social systems are endorsed, particularly by those who benefit least from the status quo.

Social dominance theory (SDT) takes an evolutionary perspective. It assumes that most kinds of group conflict and oppression ‘can be regarded as different manifestations of the same basic human predisposition to form group-based social hierarchies’ (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 38; see also Sidanius et al., 2004, p. 846). This predisposition is captured by the alleged personality trait ‘social dominance orientation.’ SDT also sees a role for structural factors and ideologies in maintaining such hierarchies (Sidanius et al., 2004).
System justification theory (SJT) takes a cognitive approach and defines system justification as ‘social and psychological needs to imbue the status quo with legitimacy and to see it as good, fair, natural, desirable, and even inevitable’ (Jost & Benaji, 2004, p. 887). The theory proposes that one’s motivation to uphold the status quo can be stronger than one’s need to view oneself and one’s ingroup as positively distinct. Justifying the status quo can involve embracing ideologies that are predicted neither by identity nor by interest-based intergroup relations theories.

Both SDT and SJT build on longer-standing theories of intergroup relations, including social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see Brown, 2000, for a review), self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987), relative deprivation theory (see Walker & Smith, 2002, for a review), and the ‘just world’ hypothesis (see Hafer & Bègue, 2005, for a recent review).

Though Social Identity Theory (SIT) arose from Tajfel’s aim to make shared societal values and norms the core object of inquiry (see Condor, 2003), most empirical work inspired by SIT adopts a causal, individualistic model of human activity and seeks the independent (causal) variables that presumably determine intergroup behavior, an endeavor shared by SDT and SJT. While traditional research carried out in the causal science model has explored the laboratory conditions under which researcher-defined, group-based inequalities are likely to arise and be endorsed, this research ignores a crucial dimension of socio-cultural reproduction, and power relations more broadly: the
means by which people sustain or challenge unequal social arrangements in everyday social practices, in distinctive cultural settings. This second question concerns performance style (Moghaddam, 2002, 2006a) and requires a normative science model of explanation. In two empirical studies, I address this gap.
Chapter 2

Reproducing Social Class in Venezuelan Discourse on Beauty

In Venezuela, beauty is one way social class is displayed by women. In this study, I set out to enrich existing traditional research on social inequalities, in particular socioeconomic inequality. Instead of focusing on the conditions under which people are likely to endorse socioeconomic inequality, I examine how people perpetuate or challenge this form of inequality by evaluating mundane practices as ‘class’ practices. This inquiry examines the details of these meaning-making practices using analytical tools from Discursive Psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Billig, 1999) and Cultural Psychology (Moghaddam, 2002).

Context of the Field Study: Caracas, Venezuela

The political salience of class membership is palpable in Caracas, Venezuela, making it an ideal setting for investigating how socioeconomic inequality is negotiated in discourse. After four decades of party-ruled democracy (Punto Fijo) - criticized by some as elite power brokering - the self-declared ‘outsider,’ Hugo Chávez, was elected president in 1998. Chávez declared a Bolivarian Revolution that would usher forth a ‘21st-century socialism’ and return Venezuelan oil wealth to ‘the people.’ A new constitution guaranteed Venezuelans ‘revolutionary’ rights to adequate housing, free education, and free hospital care. Chávez allegedly challenged elite rule by opening formal channels of
direct democracy, although Ellner (2003) argues that this weakening of party-dominated rule contributed to ‘hyperpresidentialism.’ Chávez also implemented institutional changes said to benefit the lower classes (Ellner, 2003), including limiting privatization of the state oil company and social security system, increasing spending on social programs, and removing some protections of private property.

Socio-political polarization has risen, evidenced by opposition-led activities such as the April 2002 attempted coup, February 2003 general strike, and August 2004 presidential referendum. Roberts (2003) claims that Chávez has embodied a new ‘popular political identity’ (p. 70), the expression of which long lay dormant in Venezuela’s political sphere. Nevertheless, Roberts sees a paradox in that class organization has been decreasing even while the political saliency of social inequalities has been increasing.

Class resentment is a persistent theme in the Venezuelan media. While social scientists have organized Venezuelans into class categories for their analytical purposes (Briceño-Leon, 1992), as far as I am aware the informal, popular modes of social class construction in the Chávez era have not been examined. While this study was not designed to address the real or apparent paradox that Roberts (2003) identifies, the analyses I will present offer insight into how the meaning of a precursor to class mobilization –class membership – is constructed.

Methods
I chose the topic of female beauty as a vehicle for understanding one way in which a valued everyday practice can become a ‘class practice.’ Venezuela has won more international beauty contests than any other country in the past 50 years. Montero’s (1998) textual analysis of newspaper reports on the Venezuelan beauty queens and Miss Venezuela competition shows how Venezuela’s international success in beauty competitions is a powerful source of positive national identity. Not surprisingly, Venezuela’s beauty industry flourishes. Venezuelans reportedly spend one-fifth of their income on beauty products (Sosa, 2001), and the majority of Venezuelan women report thinking about their physical appearance ‘all the time’ (Society, 2001). These statistics indicate the centrality of beauty to Venezuelan women’s everyday lives. Nevertheless, as in other industrialized societies, female beauty in Venezuela is tightly linked to financial resources. The majority of women are economically ‘poor,’ and they lack the resources to engage in the beauty rituals of wealthier women.

At the same time, beauty is arguably an imperfect correlate of wealth. Beauty can be seen as a matter of aesthetic taste and not fully determined by one’s financial means. Furthermore, throughout Western cultural history beauty has had a fickle value, as it has often been equated with superficiality, deception, and other moral defects (Hanson, 1990; Sonntag, 2002/2005). Hence, female beauty appears to represent a valued domain of practice in which Venezuelans can signal economic positions and express a variety of moral judgments.
**Participant Sample and Interview Method**

Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2005. I conducted a pilot study of 47 digitally recorded interviews to refine and finalize my interview questions. I then conducted 17 mostly individual, semi-structured interviews with female residents of Caracas, Venezuela. Most interviews took place at a community clinic in Caricuao, a zone in Caracas with sectors considered both ‘middle class’ and ‘poor’ (as measured by income level, educational level, and occupation). Interviewees were patients and employees referred to me by a female gynecologist whom I met through personal contacts. Two of the 17 participants were recruited at a shopping center, and one was approached at an open market. When interviewing, I wore long skirts and no jewelry except for a silver wedding band. In comparison to the women I interviewed, I wore fewer accessories and my dress was looser fitting and longer. I am also mixed race (Eurasian) and speak Spanish with a light American English accent, so ethnic and national origins were usually an opening topic. I explained that my mother is a South Korean immigrant to the US, and that I learned Spanish while working in Puerto Rico and as an advocate for Latina immigrant women in the US.

All interviewees consented to take part in a confidential, recorded conversation in Spanish on the topic of Venezuelan female beauty for the purposes of an academic study. Interview questions covered women’s beauty ideals, the value of beauty, personal beauty
practices, and class differences in appearances. Demographic questions (age, occupation, marital status, number of children) were asked at the end of the interview. Interviews were transcribed by the author and a research assistant, resulting in a 22,000-word transcript in Spanish. Analyses were conducted on the original Spanish transcript with reference to the full interview, although they will be rendered here in English. A modified Jeffersonian transcription convention (Jefferson, 1972) suitable to my analysis is used (See Appendix for transcription key).

Method of Analysis

My analysis begins from the view that an interview is also a dialogue in which people use discourse to moral ends. Dialogues occur in and constitute an ‘ethico-rhetorico landscape’ (Shotter, 1992). I use this concept to underscore the rhetorical dimension of constructing the ‘local moral orders’ given prominence in Positioning Theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Moghaddam, Harré, & Lee, 2008). Positioning Theory has highlighted ‘local moral orders’ as ‘the local system of rights, duties and obligations, within which both public and private intentional acts are done’ (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 1). Rhetorical Psychology has emphasized speakers’ orientation to ‘argumentative contexts’ (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988). I view people as using rhetorical means to construct local moral orders.
We need not speculate on speakers’ internal feelings or motives in order to grasp the way talk about even routine activities like domestic chores or disciplining one’s children involves moral positioning. Speakers’ moral concerns and rhetorical techniques are displayed sequentially in their talk, a quality that serves as a resource for both interlocutors and the analyst (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). This non-traditional understanding of talk (and by extension the research interview) is in line with post-structuralist trends in the analysis of language traceable to Wittgenstein (1953) and Bakhtin (1981), among others.

Analysis

In the interviews discussed here, speakers talked about female beauty in ways that positioned people within ethico-rhetorical landscapes. Interviewees used a variety of membership categories (ethnic heritage, gender, national identity, and social class) to accomplish these maneuvers. However, since my interest in this paper is in the connection between female beauty and social class, I focus only on the instances of talk where speakers used social class categories – ‘low class’ (clase baja), ‘middle class’ (clase media), ‘high class’ (clase alta), women of class (mujeres de clase), women from
the ‘slum’ (mujeres del barrio), from a humble family, or from the residencias – to characterize women’s beauty practices.

Interviewees routinely stated that class-based differences in women’s appearances exist, although all but one elaborated by using variations on the word ‘different’ rather than making upward and downward comparisons (e.g. ‘better/worse’, ‘attractive/unattractive’). Nevertheless, participants did subtly cross the line from a discursive theme of ‘mere’ differences to one that implicitly invoked a class hierarchy. This was accomplished in three patterned ways, which I will refer to as the discursive themes of deficiency, compensation, and exceptions. After providing detailed analyses of each of these discursive themes in their local context, I will consider ways of synthesizing across interviews.

1. Some Women Are Lacking

Selma is a university-trained information technologist. Prior to Excerpt 1, she described ‘the Venezuelan woman’ as ‘very coqueta,’ a term used by nearly all interviewees to explain their nation’s success in international beauty pageants. Selma used this term to index a consistently well-dressed female. Coquettishness was claimed to be an internal trait acquired at a young age, possibly even indigenous to Venezuela. Selma cited herself
as devoted to dressing well and going to salons. I then ask her if she can differentiate
among Venezuelans by social class.

**Excerpt 1** - *Selma [052b:1:15]*

1. Naomi: Can you distinguish between women of different social levels

2.  

3. Selma: Here in Venezuela, yes. A lot. A lot because, more than anything for

4. instance the girls from the lower class, well. It’s obvious that, clearly,

5. they don’t have the same level («nivel») as one who has work and such.

6. They can’t:: dress like one (who works) or anything. And one yes:: one

7. is identifiable, just as the middle class, just as those from the upper class.

Selma uses a variety of externalizing devices (Woolgar, 1988) to construct her opinions
as facts existing independently of human agency. First, her very use of class as a
‘membership category device’ (Sacks, 1992) must be understood not as a merely
representational naming process but as (re)constituting a social order (Potter, 1996). In
fact, all speakers who used social class categories as an explanatory resource helped
sustain this stratified version of social reality. Second, Selma portrays class differences as
‘obvious’ and ‘clear’ features of the social environment, verifiable by any sighted person.
She also refrains from mentioning herself in relation to ‘girls from the lower class’ or
‘one who has work.’ Selma thus betrays no personal stake in the situation she creates
above, although earlier she identified herself as a university-trained professional who
conforms with the prototypical, *coqueta* Venezuelan woman. By externalizing her account, she is protected from charges of class prejudice or conceit.

At the same time, Selma’s response is built on a crucial assumption. In calling attention to what women of ‘lower classes’ do not have and cannot do — the level and dress of a professional woman — she categorizes these women *en masse* as lacking something women of some other classes have. ‘Lower class’ women are spoken of as not simply different but deficient. By spotlighting these deficiencies, Selma portrays ‘lower class’ women as deviating from the Venezuelan beauty norms embodied by her description of ‘the Venezuelan woman.’ Selma does not explicitly talk about why ‘lower class’ women ‘don’t have’ the status and ‘can’t’ dress like ‘one who works.’ Whether consciously or not, she elides talk about the economic stratification that links to her constructed class hierarchy of beauty.

This *discursive theme of deficiency* was present in all interviews with women who positioned themselves above ‘lower class’ or ‘slum’ women, usually by claiming ‘middle class’ status. After asserting that class differences existed, these interviewees matter-of-factly enumerated what ‘lower class’ women lacked, e.g. boutique apparel, plastic surgery, certain aesthetic taste and habits. They routinely noted ‘lower class’ women’s deficiencies without explicitly calling them inferior to ‘higher class’ women.

Speakers who identified as having limited financial means also used the discursive theme of deficiency, yet they displayed quite different moral concerns. An
example follows in Extract 2. In prior talk, Marta reported that she rarely goes to salons, ‘but,’ she claimed, ‘I do try to have my hair a little like that’ (‘Pero sí trato de tener cabello un poquito allí’). She colors, blow-dries, and styles her hair, efforts that result in her looking ‘like this’ (‘me quedo así’). ‘Like this’ (así) and ‘like that’ (allí) can be heard as deictically signaling a disparity between her own beauty and that of women who frequent salons and achieve a ‘look’ for which Marta strives. A few turns later I ask Marta whether there are class differences in appearance.

**Excerpt 2 - Marta [43.9:11]**

1 No, yes there are because there are many women who really don’t have a way to:: go
to a salon, to buy themselves creams. So, a lot of effort. They make the effort to to
3 maintain themselves beautiful. And nevertheless there are many women from the
lower class who conserve themselves. They are very pretty.

Like Selma, Marta gives a depersonalized response that (re)constructs class categories while obscuring her own personal stake in the matter of class differences. She does not outright refute a class-based hierarchy of beauty but instead defends a means by which ‘lower class’ women can maintain beauty. In her remarks, access to salons and beauty creams is an implied guarantor of beauty, and ‘lower class’ women’s opportunity to retain any beauty they have is threatened by their lack of access to such goods and services. ‘Lower class’ women must work for beauty. Marta leaves ambiguous how ‘lower class’ women compare to wealthier women: they are ‘very pretty’, but are they as
pretty as wealthier women? Marta’s utterances serve the limited function of countering
the charge that ‘lower class’ women are categorically unattractive because of resource
constraints. Hence, Marta partially upholds a class-based hierarchy of beauty: wealthier
women have guaranteed access to beauty, whereas less fortunate women must expend ‘a
lot of effort’ (line 2) to ‘conserve’ themselves or ‘maintain’ what beauty they have.

Marta insures that ‘lower class’ women are not misunderstood as irreverently
rejecting normative beauty standards. By positioning ‘lower class’ women (and herself)
as striving to look beautiful, Marta repudiates a class-based hierarchy of Venezuelan
feminine virtue. Other interviewees who identified as economically limited also used the
discursive theme of deficiency and, like Marta, took care to acknowledge beauty as a
valuable practice: ‘lower class’ women may lack the means to participate in all beauty
practices on offer, but they still aspire to be beautiful.

**Ideological Practice**

Discursively-oriented approaches to ideological practice can help theorize the
implications of using a discursive theme of deficiencies. Shotter and Billig (1998) and
Billig (1999) begin from the observation that language use is both expressive and
repressive: in our conversations we say some things and not others, broach some topics
and not others. We participate in ‘dialogic repression.’ Communities of speakers share
patterns of dialogic repression that help sustain a moral order and reproduce speakers as moral members.

In the discursive theme of deficiency, speakers display a routine means of stating ‘lower class’ women’s deviance from valued beauty norms and doing so under moral cover. Speakers did not say which class looks ‘better’ or ‘worse.’ However, these evaluations lay in the subtext of routine talk about ‘lower class’ women’s lack of such things as beauty products, fashionable clothing, surgery, and so on. Through sequential conversational turns that cannot be fully examined in this paper, speakers’ routines of talking about these shortcomings signaled a social class hierarchy of beauty, one that insinuated a parallel moral hierarchy, where those committed to certain beauty practices were also ‘better’ women. Economically poor speakers in particular worked to expose and falsify this insinuated moral hierarchy by explaining their deviance as externally imposed rather than as wilful defiance or neglect.

The notion of pushing away certain topics (i.e. which class looks ‘better’ or ‘worse’) from explicit discussion while also presuming their truth value helps us theorize the social consequences of the other two routine ways speakers signaled hierarchical class locations in talk about female beauty.

2. Compensating Some Women for Their Short-Comings
The following lines pick up from Excerpt 1, where Selma talked about how ‘clearly’ and ‘obviously’ ‘girls from the lower class’ look differently from professional women.

**Excerpt 3 - Selma [052b.2:12]**

1 Selma: […] But yes you can tell, you can tell a lot. One can distinguish between different levels (.) in women.
2
3 Naomi: It’s mostly from the –?
4 Selma: From one’s clothes and from one’s manner, every time. And:: on one side, it’s bad because well regardless:: (.) I think, of ‘status,’ or what you have or not, you have to be equal to everyone else in the world. But unfortunately not everyone in the world thinks that way. There are people who think that since they have money, have the latest model of car, well. They think they are better than the rest. But well, that’s how it is, it’s (.) up to each person how he thinks. Unfortunately that’s how it is.

Selma ‘eternalizes’ (Thompson, 1990) class differences by citing clothes and manner as enduring differences, removed from social-historical contingencies. Instead of comparing and contrasting the clothing and manners of each class, which could be heard as class prejudice, Selma critiques such prejudice by enacting a debate. In claiming that each person is ‘equal to everyone else in the world’ (line 6), she counters wealthy people who measure human worth by material possessions and ‘think they are better than the rest.’ This staged debate helps Selma mitigate her prior talk about how ‘obviously’ women
differ along class lines (Excerpt 1) and her extreme formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) above that a woman’s clothing and manners reveal her ‘low class’ status ‘every time’ (Excerpt 3, line 4). By placing all women at some ambiguous, essential level of equality, Selma uses a discursive theme of compensation to secure a morally commendable position for herself both before me and vis-à-vis the ‘low class’ and ‘wealthy’ characters she voices.

However, Selma describes her opponents’ reasoning as ‘unfortunate’ and not unjust or unacceptable. Her debate is one of minor differences in thinking; it does not concern the ideological divide between, for example, tolerance and bigotry. Furthermore, Selma grants prejudiced, wealthy individuals the right to ‘think’ as they please, without interference or criticism from others: ‘But well, that’s how it is, it’s... up to each person how he thinks. Unfortunately that’s how it is’ (lines 9-10). Far from challenging the legitimacy of unequal wealth distribution or the logic by which wealth is made a correlate of human worth, Selma weakens her own critique of class prejudice by treating such prejudice as an individual right. She conveniently positions herself as both enlightened in contrast to others’ prejudices and tolerant of each person’s right to an opinion.

In Excerpt 4 Dolores contrasts worldly equality with spiritual equality.

**Excerpt 4 - Dolores [044.9:00]**

1 Naomi: And are there, are there ways of dressing that, that you wouldn’t use so
2 that you don’t look like a woman from another:: social level?
3 Dolores: In one’s manner of dress, yes::, one, one can tell a person((’s class)). Like I
told you before, in some cases. But not in all. But yes, yes there is a way
to see. One can tell by the person what level they belong to.

Naomi: Mmm-hmm, and:: in [your experience -

Dolores: [For society, because on the spiritual level we’re all
equal. This I have present here ((signals her chest)). We’re talking about for
society. Go on.

Dolores gives only depersonalized responses despite repeated attempts on my part (lines
1 and 6) to gain personal details that might threaten the moral cover she maintains.
Dolores twice affirms class-based distinctions, but she delimits these to one plane of
human existence: society. She shifts from constructing a class-based hierarchy ‘on earth’
(lines 3-5) to flattening it in the spiritual realm (lines 7-9). By defending people’s
transcendental equality, Dolores restores dignity to those at ‘lower levels,’ who are made
unequal by mere ‘society.’ Her own stake in the discussion is ambiguous, although she
does indicate that spiritual equality is meaningful to her (‘This I have present here,’ line
8). This utterance cannot be interpreted as self-solace, since Dolores keeps her own,
present economic situation from scrutiny until I inquire. She responds only by sharing
that she is ‘from a very humble family.’

The strength of Dolores’s defense of the ‘lower’ class rests on her constructed
dichotomy of the worldly and the spiritual. This move resembles Selma’s dichotomizing
of financial and human worth (Excerpt 3). In affording all women spiritual equality,
Dolores compensates the ‘lower’ class for their presumably inferior earthly position. Just as Selma did in Excerpt 3, Dolores uses the discursive theme of compensation to ameliorate one type of inequality with another type of equality. In these contexts, the discursive theme of compensation works to de-problematize social inequalities: perhaps the ‘lower classes’ are denigrated, but at least ‘deep down’ or ‘on a spiritual level’ everyone is equal.

Again, it must be stressed that speakers using the discursive theme of compensation did not make explicit upward or downward class-based comparisons in beauty. However, built into the discursive theme of compensation was the idea that beauty is both valuable and unevenly distributed across social classes: denying ‘lower class’ women equality in the arena of beauty warranted compensation along some other dimension(s) of human worth. Indeed, after affirming class-based ‘differences’ in beauty or identifying ‘lower class’ women’s short-falls, nearly all self-ascribed ‘middle class’ interviewees granted ‘lower class’ women compensatory qualities (e.g. generosity, intelligence, or human equality). Granting this compensation allowed wealthier women to counter charges of class prejudice and superficiality made available by their prior talk about ‘lower class’ women’s ‘difference’ in the arena of beauty. ‘Poor’ women who used this discourse could preserve their dignity in the face of threat. Speakers accomplished these acts of positioning dialogically, with me and with the social actors and groups voiced in our conversations. Speakers’ routines of explicitly compensating ‘lower class’
women for their assumed low position in the beauty hierarchy with character traits or transcendental equality may contribute to a vision of society as just. Indeed, laboratory research has shown that when college students are briefly exposed to ‘complementary stereotypes’ such as ‘poor but happy’, they tend to judge society as more just (Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003).

The next section discusses a third discourse pattern, adopted by nearly all interviewees who identified themselves as ‘lower class’, from a ‘humble family,’ or from the barrio.

3. Exceptional Cases of Women Not Looking Their Class

**Excerpt 5 - María [39.11:50]**

1 Naomi: One last question, do you think you can distinguish from appearance if a
2 person is from:: uhm, oh, which social class a person belongs to, which
3 social class, if you can tell whether -
4 María: [No::
5 Naomi: From one’s make-up?
6 María: No. There are always people who stand out more than others, no? But not
7 necessarily because. Because I know people like who, who are people
8 who really have (things). Have power and that, that … and they are very
9 simple to look at - in how they dress, in things.
María denies that women can be neatly categorized into social classes by appearance. Like most other interviewees, she produces a depersonalized response that affords her a distanced objectivity and moral cover. Yet María can also be heard protecting ‘lower class’ women from stigmatization when she discusses a counterexample to the expectation that wealthier classes always ‘stand out more than others.’

María constructs the exceptional case of the powerful ‘haves’ who look ‘very simple.’ In citing this case, she argues against the counter-opinion that people of different classes look categorically different, specifically that the poor look ‘simple’ and the powerful look better than the poor. Nonetheless, the rhetorical force of her counterexample depends on an assumption of how ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ typically look. The notion that the poor typically look ‘simple’ and the rich look ‘better’ emerges in María’s very argument that these stereotypes are contestable. Without a presumed class hierarchy of beauty, the occurrence of wealthy, powerful individuals looking ‘very simple’ would not be worth mentioning as exceptional.

Three of the four interviewees who used the discursive theme of exceptions in answer to my question on class differences identified as having limited financial means (Extract 6 presents the one ‘middle class’ instance). In all three cases the discursive theme of exceptions functioned to refute a version of reality where beauty perfectly corresponds to class, and speakers could be instantly identified as ‘low class’ and judged inferior. However, the argumentative force of these exceptions depended on an implied
stereotype about how ‘low class’ women look. Linking this discourse to the idea of ‘dialogic repression’ (Billig, 1999), what women explicitly asserted (counterexamples) depended on and thus helped reinforce the unspoken (stereotype).

Excerpt 6 is taken from a mother-son dyad who are the only self-proclaimed ‘middle class’ respondents to use a discursive theme of exceptions in talking about class differences in beauty.

**Excerpt 6 - Elba and Jaime [51.23:00]**

1 Naomi: Do you think you can differentiate between women of different levels, uh economic levels, from physical appearance?

2 Jaime [son]: Yes.

3 Naomi: Yes you can tell –

4 Elba [mother]: [There are times one can’t.

5 Jaime [son]: In some people.

6 Elba [mother]: No, there are times one can’t. There are times, there are people – I’ve gone for job interviews... and there are people who are well-groomed, very presentable, very pretty, smell good. And they live in the plac- on the top of the hill ((copito de cerro)) and have (hardly anything) to eat. And there are people who live in the residencias and ( ), and they aren’t well-groomed like this other person, so one can’t tell the difference.
Naomi: Mmm-hmm. Yes.

Elba [mother]: It’s the truth.

Jaime [son]: And do you think you can ( ) what we would be?

Naomi: What you would be? Middle class?

Elba [mother]: Mmm-hmm.

Jaime [son]: Neither rich, nor poor.

Similar to María previously (Excerpt 5), Elba mitigates the moral dubiousness of affirming class differences by providing counterexamples to stereotypes. These stereotypes can be gleaned from her talk about exceptional slum residents who ‘are well-groomed, very presentable, very pretty, smell good’ (lines 8-9). As in Excerpt 5, the rhetorical force of Elba’s counter-examples is mustered in their contrast to normative expectations: one would normally expect people ‘from the top of the hill’ (the ‘slums’) to be unpresentable, unattractive, and foul-smelling. Elba’s two ‘other repairs’ (Garvey, 1979) in line 5 (‘There are times one can’t’) and line 7 (‘No, there are times one can’t’) are instructive for how they rework her son’s responses (‘Yes’ in line 3, ‘In some people’ in line 6) into more oblique invocations of a class hierarchy. Elba’s repairs model a more socially appropriate response, one that cloaks constructions of class hierarchy in tolerant-sounding language.

The discursive theme of exceptions is linguistic evidence of how ‘lower class’ women face a version of the ‘good copy problem’ (Moghaddam, 2006a, 2006b;
Moghaddam & Solliday, 1991), by which no matter how beautiful they are, they are at best adequate copies of ‘middle’ and ‘high class’ women. When invoked, the exception device measures a ‘lower class’ woman’s beauty relative to that of other ‘classes,’ and her class membership is unassailable. The discursive theme of exceptions implicitly constitutes beauty as important, social class as fixed, and female beauty as generally corresponding to class hierarchy, where wealthier women set the standards. Similar to the discursive themes of deficiencies and compensation, the discursive theme of exceptions presupposes - and thus helps uphold - social class hierarchies as a reified feature of society.

**Interpretative Repertoires**

The aim of this analysis was to investigate how Venezuelan women negotiate ‘class’ positions in talk about a quotidian, resource-dependent practice (beauty) in a context where social class categories have heightened political salience. The concept of interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) can bring a higher level of analytical order to these locally situated discursive practices, which I have identified as the discursive themes of ‘mere’ differences, deficiencies, compensation, and exceptions.

‘Interpretative repertoires,’ first introduced by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) in their study on scientists’ discourse, was further developed by Wetherell and Potter (1992) to
theorize relationships among discourse, speakers, and social structure in a manner that falls prey neither to vulgar Marxism (where people naively reproduce elite-manufactured discourse) nor to Foucault’s tendency to disembody discourse from speakers and invest it with causal powers. What people say is neither a simple repetition of pre-existing discourses, nor is the person a lone creator of discourses. People are not passive receptacles of ideology, but rather may engage in ideological practice, using interpretative repertoires to ideological ends.

Interpretative repertoires are ‘clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images’ (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 90). They provide analysts with a way of understanding the content of discourse. They can be heard as the ‘systems of signification’ speakers use to ‘manufacture versions of actions, self and social structures in talk’ or as some resources used for ‘making evaluations, constructing factual versions and performing particular actions’ (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 90). While repertoires can be heard ‘in circulation,’ their meanings and effects can only be properly understood by investigating their situated use. Interpretative repertoires are abstractions from locally situated, discursive practices. This study, for example, details how Venezuelan women built up patterned ways of talking with a North American researcher about female beauty as a class-differentiated, Venezuelan practice. While the details of each situation were unique, a general pattern could be abstracted from these ‘case studies.’
The discursive themes of mere differences, deficiencies, compensation, and exception can be conceived of as four interrelated interpretative repertoires. Women engaged in dialogue about Venezuelan female beauty and were asked about social class differences by a North American researcher. The four repertoires helped reveal how my question placed ‘lower class’ women in the face-threatening predicament of publicly valuing practices that are financially beyond their reach. This predicament may have been made more urgent by their position in the research interview as a ‘representative’ of Venezuelan women to a US-based researcher, whose stated reason for approaching them was to learn about Venezuelan female beauty. ‘Middle class’ speakers faced the predicament of talking about Venezuelan female beauty as an aspect of national female identity while also asserting class-based divisions among Venezuelan women, assertions that splintered national solidarity in the face of an ‘outsider’ and might also be heard as prejudiced or superficial.

Instead of making explicit, categorical upward or downward comparisons, speakers talked about how ‘lower class’ women lack the taste, upbringing, or consumer goods that other women possess (deficiency repertoire), yet they have other redeeming qualities (compensation repertoire). Or, some ‘lower class’ women blend in with ‘higher’ class women (exceptions repertoire). These three repertoires were some of the ‘moves’ speakers used in ways that assumed a class hierarchy of beauty while avoiding mention of which strata are ‘more’ or ‘less’ beautiful. Because this hierarchy was only implicitly
asserted, interviewees were protected against potential charges of class prejudice or superficiality (in the case of wealthier speakers) or of moral defectiveness (in the case of economically poorer speakers).

The notion of ‘carriers’ (Moghaddam, 2002) helps further integrate these repertoires.

**Beauty ‘Carrying’ Class and Feminine Virtue**

The three repertoires sustained the notion that beauty is both valuable and distributed unequally across (re)constructed socio-economic strata. In this sense, we can see beauty as a ‘carrier’ (Moghaddam, 2002) of both feminine virtue and class. Carriers are the mutually understood signifiers and social norms that circulate in a culture. They are a working part of people’s social practices, where their meanings and implications are negotiated.

In the Venezuelan case, it appears that women may discursively construct female beauty (including beautification) as polysemous, a carrier of both class and feminine virtue. However, social class itself was an unstable carrier of feminine virtue. On the one hand, interviewees displayed their moral concerns and moral judgments in talk about ‘classed’ selves and others (e.g. as arduously striving for a salon look or refusing to ‘look like more than one is’). On the other hand, speakers destabilized class as a carrier of feminine virtue by using the repertoires of compensation and exceptions. The
compensation repertoire granted ‘lower class’ women (who presumably lacked beauty) qualities that may be considered of greater worth than female beauty, that is, spiritual equality, humility, patriotism, intelligence. This repertoire (used most often by ‘middle class’ women) afforded ‘lower class’ women alternative routes to becoming ‘good’ Venezuelan women. The exceptions repertoire (used mostly by ‘lower class’ women) destabilized class as the sole carrier of female beauty: some ‘lower class’ women were asserted to be indistinguishable from women of other strata. Hence, the exceptions repertoire ensured that the moral goodness derived from being beautiful was not the exclusive purview of the ‘higher’ classes.

**Implications of Contesting Class as a Carrier of Virtue**

We can speculate on the implications of class as an unstable carrier of feminine virtue by linking this study to recent theorizing on social class in a domain of sociology that has embraced the ‘cultural turn’ and explores the everyday, lived experience of ‘class’ and constructions of ‘class identity’ (Bottero, 2004; Devine, Savage, Scott, & Crompton 2005). A salient aspect of this research and theorizing (based almost exclusively on British and US samples and in the tradition of Bourdieu) is the understanding of class as a *moral* category (Finch, 1993; Lamont, 1992, 2000; Lawler, 2005; Sayer, 2002, 2005a, 2005b). Sayer (2005a) develops the idea of the ‘dual character of lay morality,’ whereby the value of cultural practices partly maps onto a class hierarchy but is also partly
independent of class (and other) divisions. He asserts that the struggles of the social field concern competition over goods and practices and over ‘what is worthy of esteem’ (p. 958).

The present study raises the question of whether these ‘struggles’ for ‘esteem’ serve ideological ends by mitigating the felt injustice of economic inequalities. By using repertoires that restore the dignity of the ‘lower class’ in spite of their ‘low’ status, speakers of various self-ascribed ‘class’ positions displayed a concern with moral equality outweighing a concern with the material inequalities that make ‘class’ categories possible. Applying Shotter and Billig (1998), the routines of debating moral equality may help accomplish routines of not debating economic inequality. This possibility raises the question of to what extent the ‘esteem’ proffered through discursive practice, including populist rhetoric about ‘the people,’ may function as a substitute for economic equality.

Concluding Comment – Study 1

Certainly, female beauty is only one of many normative practices, talk about which may reproduce class positions while making equivocal the moral significance of class in the Venezuelan setting. Class categories are constructed in innumerable conversations at the ‘popular pole’ (Larrain, 2000), whenever class is used as a resource for evaluating people’s participation in valued normative practices and making them ‘class practices.’
The way people raise their children, spend their free time, manage their finances, practice religious convictions, and engage in romantic liaisons are some of the practices that may become carriers of ‘class’ position and contested carriers of moral worth, in ways dependent on the particular cultural, political, and interactional context.

It is an empirical question whether the repertoires of lack, compensation, and exceptions arise in talk about other normative practices and in talk among Venezuelans. However, to view the research interviews presented here as isolated interactions would be to deny the dialogic quality of our meaning-making practices and the broader cultural and political context. Speakers may have oriented to me as a North American researcher, but it is unlikely that they created a way of talking about ‘class’ practices that is entirely removed from what might be said in other interactional contexts.

This study shows the value of complementing highly controlled, laboratory-based research on group-based inequalities with analyses detailing how people, in situated conversations about ordinary practices, contribute (however minutely) to versions of social reality that propagate group-based inequalities. Recognizing how some discursive practices can uphold inequalities is a step towards critique and change. This study in particular may help foster critical dialogue about the role of female beauty as a source of Venezuelan national and personal identity, adding to studies such as Montero (1998). This study also adds to the concept of carriers (Moghaddam, 2002) by showing how the instability of a carrier can be a source of social stability: as actors attempt to dissociate
class from moral goodness, they also reinforce a vision of society where the basis of class, unequal distribution, can persist without moral objections.
Chapter Three

The Discursive Presentation of Power Relations between Nannies and their Employers

Rationale

Study 1 sheds light on how power relations (specifically group-based income inequalities) may be partly reproduced through discourse about the moral significance of culturally-valued, resource-dependent, everyday self-presentation practices. I used the general tools of discourse analysis and the discursive psychological concept of interpretative repertoires to perform my analysis. Study 1 was limited in the sense that the everyday practice of beautification does not require direct negotiations of power between people of different economic means. An economically more advantaged Venezuelan woman can carry out her beauty practices without having direct encounters with less economically advantaged women.

As a next phase of inquiry I wanted to understand how power is negotiated in interpersonal relationships between people of different economic means. I anticipated that participants to relationships marked by economic inequalities would display a strong orientation to power distributions in talking about their everyday interactions with each other. Study 2 examines power relations in the interpersonal and more functional context of employers and their domestic childcare providers. This is an area of life where people
of usually widely disparate economic means interact closely and depend on each other on a daily basis. Hence, it is a site where power finds expression in the way rights and duties are contested, distributed, and explained.

While in Study 1 I used discourse analysis to identify a set of interpretative repertoires speakers use in ways that uphold socio-economic inequalities, in Study 2 I adopt Positioning Theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Moghaddam, Harré, Lee, 2008), which is especially well-suited to understanding interpersonal negotiations of power in distinctive cultural contexts. Positioning Theory bridges Discursive Psychology and Narrative Psychology by highlighting how social interactions unfold according to normative conventions in the shape of culturally available narratives (‘storylines’). Thus Positioning Theory makes contact with a key topic in social psychology, conformity to norms.

**Storylines and Positioning Moves in Employer-Nanny Relations**

Social psychologists have long been concerned with conformity to norms. However this literature tends not to examine meaning-making processes. Instead, empirical research typically deals with static environments that ‘fix’ independent variables and measure conforming activity (see Vallacher et al., 2003). Some independent variables studied experimentally include group size (see Bond, 2005 for a meta-analysis), cultural membership (see Bond & Smith, 1996 for a meta-analysis), unanimity (e.g. Asch, 1956),
accountability for accuracy (Quinn & Schlenker, 2002), priming of conformity-related terms (Epley & Gilovich, 1999; Pendry & Carrick, 2001), group identity (see Postmes & Spears, 1998 for a meta-analysis) and task importance (Baron, Vandello & Brunsman, 1996).

Although this literature casts light on features of the environment, person, and tasks that correlate to conformity, it does not take into account the participants’ interpretation of the experimental situation. In the experimental paradigm, conformity is studied more as a matter of performance capacity, (i.e. an effect of causal mechanisms), than performance style (a meaningful human activity regulated by normative systems). The leading theories dealing with conformity as reviewed by Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) speculate that one or more of the following underlying motives explains conforming behavior: 1) to accurately perceive reality and act accordingly 2) to obtain social approval and maintain relationships and 3) to maintain one’s self-concept through self-categorization and self-esteem protecting processes. The first two motivations were first introduced by Deutsch & Gerard (1955) and referred to as ‘informational’ and ‘normative’ conformity motivations. Although these motivations are theorized as the source (cause) of conforming behavior, participants’ explanations of their actions in experiments are generally neither recorded nor analyzed. Furthermore, the status of ‘motivations’ is conceptually vague. What observational data can provide definitive evidence that any particular motive preceded a person’s actions? From a Positioning
Theory perspective, our talk about motives is one of the many speech acts we perform in the course of our everyday social relations.

The present study fills a gap in traditional psychological research on norms by attending to the meaning-making processes that sustain norms. This study also makes a direct link between norms and power by examining how people invoke norms in ways that distribute power in interpersonal relationships.

**Positioning Theory as an Analytical Framework**

Positioning Theory deals with the flow of meaning-making that is ubiquitous in human life, including when people participate in psychological research studies (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Moghaddam, Harré, Lee, 2008). Positioning Theory places power, in the form of distributions of rights and duties, at the center of human activities. People are understood as intentional beings who orient to the moral contexts they inhabit, where questions of what one ought to do (duties) and may do (rights) are ever-present and often debated.

The main aspects of a positioning analysis are captured in the metaphorical positioning triangle. The triad consists of mutually defining speech acts, positions, and storylines. Our speech acts are not merely the words we utter but also what we achieve in saying something (illocutionary force) and by saying something (perlocutionary force) (Austin, 1962). For instance, you might announce to your waiter, “My soup has a fly in
it”, an utterance that could be heard as a complaint (illocutionary force) and result in a reduced bill (perlocutionary force).

‘Positions’ are clusters of rights and duties to speak and act in particular ways and to have our actions understood in particular ways. They are a “loose set of rights and duties that limit people’s possibilities of action” (p.5, Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). When we position someone, we attempt to assign them certain rights and duties, which they can in turn accept or refuse. We can also engage in self-positioning acts, assigning ourselves particular rights and duties. There are also ‘pre-positions’ and acts of ‘pre-positioning,’ which involve assigning and sometimes justifying skills, character traits, and biographical ‘facts’ (Harré et al., 2009) or characterizing people’s activities (‘lying’, ‘helping’) (R. Harré, personal communication, March 27, 2009). Pre-positioning moves do not assign rights and duties but they do place normative limits on the range of positions that are made relevant. For instance, if a father characterizes (pre-positions) changing his child’s diaper as ‘helping’ the mother, he implies that his ordinary duties do not include changing diapers while the mother’s do. He uses the pre-position ‘helping’ in a way that positions himself as not having particular duties.

Social episodes unfold in neither pre-determined nor random manner. Instead, people actively use and modify conventional narratives or storylines to forge a mutual understanding of the episode underway. The storyline answers the question, ‘what is going on here?’ to which an answer might be ‘dining at a restaurant’, ‘telling a joke’, or
‘giving a sales pitch. Harré & Van Langenhove (1999) stress that storylines may be ambiguous. We nearly always confront some level of indeterminacy and ambiguity in understanding ‘what is going on.’ However, we can examine people’s sequential turns for displays of how each actor understood and contributed to the storyline. This insight is shared with conversation analysis (ten Have, 1999). Each storyline constrains both the range of actions people can reasonably perform as well as the manner in which their actions (including talk) are interpreted. In other words, storylines imply positions and speech acts.

From a Positioning Theory perspective, power is at play in how social actors assign rights and duties to themselves and others through the speech acts they perform and the storylines they invoke. Motives and intentions are dealt with as speech acts that may serve a variety of social functions such as assigning blame, taking responsibility, or excusing. The traditional psychological concept of ‘norms’ as deterministic rules for action is refashioned into the dynamic concept of storylines.

**Immanentist perspective on patterned human performances**

An important feature of positioning theory is that it adopts an immanentist perspective on regularities in human productions (Davies & Harré, 1990). According to this perspective, patterns in performance style (the manner and meaning of our activities) exist only as concrete occurrences of normative action and not as independently existing,
causally powerful rules. The latter is a ‘transcendentalist’ perspective. The immanentist perspective appears too in Wittgenstein’s analysis of rules and rule-following (Wittgenstein, 1953; Harré & Tissaw, 2005), Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984), and in discursive psychology (Edwards, 1997, Potter, 1996).

Wittgenstein’s (1953) writing on rules and rule-following helps clarify the immanentist perspective on norms. Here, I will follow the interpretation offered by Harré & Tissaw (2005). For Wittgenstein, ‘rule’ is a metaphor that applies to everything people do in an orderly manner; thus ‘rule’ includes norms, conventions, customs, scripts and any abstract concept scientists and lay people might use to describe orderly behavior. Rule-following behavior requires training (implicit or explicit) and constitutes normative action because we apply standards of correctness to the behavior. We can follow rules in more or less skillful ways, depending on our training. We express rule-following behavior two ways: ‘following a rule’ entails acting on an explicit instruction, while ‘acting in accordance with a rule’ entails behaving in an orderly fashion when carrying out a practice, which might be assessed for its conformity to unspoken norms.

According to Harré & Tissaw (2005), in neither case of rule-following is it conceptually accurate to attribute causal powers to rules themselves. In the case of ‘following a rule’, for instance, we might observe airline passengers following immigration officials’ orders and posted placards, but it would be inaccurate to say that the passengers’ behavior is determined by the immigration officers’ commands or posted
rules. People conform to these instructions but they could have done otherwise. Likewise, in the case of ‘acting in accordance with a rule,’ when all four dinner party guests wait for the host signal the start of the meal, the guests are acting in accordance with rules of etiquette, but their behavior is not caused by those rules. Again, they could have done otherwise. This second expression of rule-following is sometimes interpreted as occurring because explicit rules have become internalized as ‘rules-in-mind’ that causally determine our behavior. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, though, there is no need to insert causally powerful rules into the mind in order to explain such regularities. The reason the four dinner guests acted similarly is because they all acquired the necessary (implicit or explicit) training to know that in that situation it is appropriate to wait for the host to announce the start of the meal. Some of the guests may have applied the rule more conscientiously than others. Some may have acted out of habit and done what ‘comes naturally.’ Whether people conscientiously or habitually act in accordance with the rules of etiquette they learned as members of a particular culture, Harré and Tissaw contend that a causal, rules-in-mind explanation is conceptually flawed.

As social scientists and non-scientists, we can abstract regularities from the flow of daily life and point them out as ‘norms,’ ‘conventions,’ or ‘rules.’ However, from an immanentist perspective, in doing so we create abstractions; we do not identify the causes of our actions. Harré and Tissaw (2005) point out that interpreting an act as ‘normative’
reflexively constitutes the situation as one in which a particular rule applied. In other words, actions can be discursively produced as normative. Another way of understanding the discursive production of normative actions is to consider the ethnomethodological insight that for rules to determine behavior, people must know when to apply one rule over another. Yet rules do not contain exhaustive rules of application, hence it is illogical to view any occasion of human performance as ‘rule-governed’ in any straight-forward manner (Heritage, 1984). Which rules apply is a matter of interpretation that can be constituted in how we talk about the situation and the actions taken in that situation. This indeterminacy of meaning further challenges the transcendentalist claim that an intermediary mental process between rules and actions is a necessary condition for normative behavior. It also directs our attention to discourse.

Discursive psychologists have detailed a range of ways that people reflexively constitute normative actions in discourse. Analysis focuses on how people use norms as resources for giving meaning to everyday behavior. Edwards’s (1994, 1995, 1996), for instance, has shown how people use ‘script and breach’ formulations to characterize people’s activities as ordinary (scripted) or not (a breach). His approach contrasts with transcendentalist, classic script theories (Shank & Abelson, 1977) that view people as applying mentally encoded scripts to everyday situations. Potter (1996) identifies a range of ways people construct activities as routine. Some strategies include event
pluralization (we had arguments), temporal adverbs (always), and verbs with an iterative aspect (he gets so mad).

In Positioning Theory the notion of ‘storylines’ offers an immanentist alternative to transcendentalist rules. Although storylines place normative constraints on the range of moves a person can make in a social episode, people can always choose to flout the norms that storylines invoke. People can also counter one storyline with a second one that makes their actions understood as normative action. In this study I explore the value of using an immanentist, Positioning Theory approach in the context of relationships between employers and their nannies.

The domestic childcare industry and normative rights and duties

In the United States there are laws concerning such issues as minimum wage and overtime pay for domestic workers. However, such matters as maternity leave, sick pay, bonuses, health insurance, and vacation scheduling are not written into law and thus require negotiation. These issues involve questions of how to distribute rights and duties among employers and employees. The domestic labor market is also an arena where employers and employees often differ greatly in terms of economic power, education, English proficiency, and cultural capital, a disparity that raises social justice concerns.

Paid domestic work is overwhelmingly female (92.5% in 2006) and ethnic minorities are overrepresented (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). In 2006, Latinos made
up 32.8%, Blacks 11.1%, and Asians 2.5% of domestic workers nationwide (ibid), indicating that Latinos are overrepresented, perhaps because they accept lower wages. Written employment contracts are rare and not legally binding. In a 2006 survey conducted in an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C., only 16% of live-out domestics reported having a written contract (Gaines et al., 2006). In the same survey, 51% of live-in and 13% of live-out domestics reported earning wages below the legal minimum. My observation of classified advertisements indicates that nearly all nannies in the D.C. area are foreign-born, particularly from developing parts of the world, including Latin America, the Philippines, the Caribbean, and Africa.

Scholarly literature on domestic labor has mostly come from sociology, which deals with domestic work in the context of globalization, especially the migration of women from the developing to the developed world, and the growing inequalities between women in the developing and developed worlds (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Salazar Parreñas, 2001; Chang, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Ehrenreich and Hochschild, for instance, consider how affluent working women in the developed world owe their freedoms to pursue careers and escape domestic chores to women from the developing world, who migrate to the developing world to work in the ‘care’ industry but gain neither great wealth nor status through the transaction.

Field research on employer-domestic relations sheds some light on how power might be distributed between employers and their domestic employees (Hondagneu-
Sotelo, 2001; Rollins, 1985). Rollins (1985) undertook a participant-observation study of 20 domestics and 10 employers in the Boston metro area. She reports that employers and their domestics engage in ritual acts of maternalism and deference, respectively. According to Rollins, employers display maternalism towards their domestics through gift-giving, expressions of love, expressions of ownership, and treating the domestic worker like a child. Domestics reportedly display deference through polite forms of address (e.g. ‘Mrs.’), respecting their employers’ privacy, eating separately from their employers, and answering more often than asking questions of the employer. Rollins argues that these practices constitute ritual acts of maternalism and deference that sustain the relationship as one of unequal power, where employers dominate employees. From a Positioning Theory perspective, the maternalism-deference dynamic that Rollins cites may be one of the ‘storylines’ that is immanent in employer-nanny relationships. Yet it is an empirical question whether from employers’ and nannies’ perspectives this storyline is valid. Would employers and nannies understand their relationship dynamics in this manner? Rollin’s study also raises the question of whether employers and nannies interact in ways that invoke yet other storylines.

Evidence that employers of domestic workers display a concern with how power is and ought to be distributed between themselves and their nannies comes from field research conducted by Hondogneu-Sotelo (2001). In her study, employers evaluated various management practices in terms of whether they were just, exploitative or
generous. Interestingly, these evaluations were made by indexing ‘industry norms’ that employers assumed operated in their social networks. This observation suggests that employers do invoke norms as part of justifying and scrutinizing distributions of power between employers and nannies. It also suggests that employers equate usual practices with morally sanctioned practices. However, because Hondogneu-Sotelo did not provide any detailed analysis of employers’ talk it is unclear whether storylines such as the maternalism-deference storyline of Rollins’ (1985) study was invoked by employers.

My study addresses some of the unanswered questions raised by Rollins’ (1985) and Hondogneu-Sotelo (2001). Specifically, I ask what kinds of storylines employers invoke to give meaning to their interactions and how these storylines distribute power (in the form of ‘rights’ and ‘duties’) between employers and nannies. I chose to focus on employers because I viewed this group as the more important and more easily reached target of intervention.

Methods

Recruitment and Participants

Employers of nannies (n= 29 individuals, 25 households) were recruited to take part in a study on hiring and retaining nannies. Participants either responded to an advertisement that was posted to the Chevy Chase neighborhood list serve by a second-generation neighborhood resident and personal contact of the author, or they were
recruited by referral from other participants through a snowball technique. No compensation was offered. Chevy Chase is an affluent neighborhood straddling Northwest D.C. and Maryland. Only those employers who had managed a nanny for at least 6 months qualified for the study. All participants had employed a foreign-born nanny for at least six months.

Two participants self-identified as Asian and one self-identified as Black; the remaining twenty-six were White. Four interviews were conducted with husband-wife pairs in their homes. One interview was with a divorced father at his home. The remaining twenty interviews were conducted with mothers (n= 19 married, n=1 divorced), either in their homes (n=12), their offices (n=5) or in café (n=3). One interview with a White, married mother conducted in her office was not captured on the recording device and was thus excluded from my analysis.

**Interview Method**

In preparation for developing an interview method, I conducted preliminary research on discussion board postings on a website (DCUrbanMoms.com) designed to be a resource for parents in the Washington, D.C. area. The discussion board devoted to “Nanny Issues” was a forum where anonymous participants exchanged advice and information about nanny-employer relations. In line with Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (2001) observation that employers evaluated managerial practices by referencing norms,
discussion and debate on DCUrbanMoms.com frequently centered on what kinds of practices were ‘normal’ or ‘standard.’ Discussion threads often began with a self-identified employer or nanny inquiring into the ‘usual’ or ‘standard’ practice is in domains such as compensation and sick leave, but also more mundane issues such as what kinds of birthday gifts are appropriate for the nanny and whether to include her in family holiday celebrations. In these discussion boards, employers took for granted that some practices are widely shared and therefore appropriate. Based on this preliminary research I felt that by engaging employers in discussions about their personal experiences managing nannies, employers would likely display an orientation to normative ways of distributing rights and duties between employers and nannies. In other words, when asked to narrate their personal experiences, employers would likely invoke storylines that positioned themselves and their nanny in distinctive ways.

Thus, I introduced my dissertation to the participants as a study of how families navigate the nanny industry and the relationship between nannies and their employers. I expressed an interest in collecting families’ personal stories and invited participants to freely narrate their experiences, both positive and negative, in whatever manner came naturally. Occasionally I asked participants to speculate on what kinds of practices were usual or customary in the employer-nanny arrangement in order to elicit more explicit talk about perceived norms.
Interviews lasted 1 to 2 hours and were digitally recorded with the informed consent of the participants in accordance with the requirements of Georgetown University’s Institutional Review Board. All recorded interviews (n=24) were transcribed in full by the author and undergraduate research assistants who were blind to the participants’ identities. Each transcript was checked against the recording for accuracy by the author. Transcripts totaled 537 pages of single-spaced text. A modified Jeffersonian transcription convention (Jefferson, 1972) suitable to my analysis was used (See Appendix for transcription key).

Method of Analysis

As a first step in my analysis, I read the entire set of transcripts several times to gain familiarity with the data. Since my interest is in power relations between employers and nannies, I then focused on those portions of the interview where employers spoke about areas of conflict and negotiation in their relationship with their nanny. All 24 interviewees shared such stories with me. Using the Positioning Theory triad storylines-positions-speech acts, I analyzed those portions of the interview where interpersonal conflicts or negotiations were recounted.

ANALYSIS

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In what follows I provide illustrative extracts that display how employers of nannies invoke six different storylines (See Figure1) in ways that distribute power (in the form of rights and duties) between employers and nannies. I also hypothesize four nanny storylines (See Figure 2) that are indirectly reported by employers.

The following employer (the interviewee) and her husband (not present at the interview) are physicians and have five children living at home. They hire both an au pair and a nanny to insure year-round childcare coverage. In the following extract, I will examine how the employer discusses her nanny’s vacation scheduling. Earlier in the interview, the employer complained that in the original work agreement, it was agreed that the nanny’s could schedule her vacations independently of her employers’ or the au pairs’ schedule. She also expressed that her nanny earns a ‘pretty good salary’ and owes the employers ‘a tremendous amount of money.’

**Extract 1 - Employer04.366**

1 Naomi: Do you feel like there are some industry norms out there that get
2 spoken about, that get oriented to, that.
3 […]
4 Employer04: In terms of, in terms of things like vacation, I think we just agreed to it
5 too quickly honestly I don’t think it’s reasonable to expect that all of your
6 vacation would be-. I mean I don’t really care what the industry norm is
honestly there. It’s not **reasonable**. I mean. So we should have but at this point we’ve been working together for five years and it seems I don’t know how you would change something like that. But.

Naomi: Yeah. You really so you wouldn’t be willing to try to go and renegotiate that.

Employer04: I yeah I think that honestly since this year it became problematic because she **basically just announced** that she was going to she said, my dad bought me tickets for the Philippines over the Christmas break at a time that corresponded to Teresa’s vacation as well. And I **could have said no** but that would be **pretty nasty** so I. But in the future I think I could say if you’re planning on taking three weeks off and your vacation is only two weeks long, **you need to give us some more advanced warning.** And if this is how it’s going to happen then **we have to say** that at least one week of your vacations has to come out of time that we’re on vacation as well because it’s **not appropriate.** Or you **have to give us five months warning** or something like that I don’t know. But eh, yeah, but it’s hard. I’m not, we’re not very good at those kinds of discussions, my husband and I.

Naomi: How so?

Employer04: We’re just not.

Naomi: How do you judge that though?
Employer04: Because there have been. Because pretty much every time there’s been an issue it’s been extremely hard for us to address it with her I think in part because we worry that she might quit.

Naomi: Yeah.

Employer04: And now that we’re getting to the point where our kids are getting older enough and the two older ones are in school all day and the younger one will be in school at least five mornings next week we’re beginning to feel like if she quit it wouldn’t be the end of the world.

But uhm.

Three storylines emerge in the above extract. From one perspective, the employers are depicted as at the mercy of the nanny’s demands because they need her to care for their children. According to this reversal of master-and-servant storyline, the employer is pre-positioned as dependent on a powerful nanny, vulnerable to her whims, and suffering. For instance, in stating that the vacation scheduling practices she agreed to five years ago are not ‘reasonable’ (lines 5 and 7) the employer issues a complaint about the nanny’s power to disrupt her employers’ lives. The validity of her complaint is reinforced by her use of a non-modalized assertion (‘It’s not reasonable’) that represents the employer’s opinion as a fact (Latour & Woolgar 1986, Potter 1996). Furthermore, her appeal to rationality has rhetorical force that a more emotion-laden complaint (e.g. ‘It
makes me mad’) would not have. In characterizing that her nanny ‘basically just announced’ (line 12) her vacation arrangements, ‘just’ constructs the nanny as falling short of behavioral rules that apply regardless of the nanny’s contractual rights. Additionally, the employer pre-positions herself as relatively powerless to renegotiate better terms with her nanny (‘I don’t know how you would change something like that’ (line 9), where ‘you’ casts her powerlessness as something anybody would experience in her situation (Sacks, 1992, Part II, Lecture 6). Collectively, the employer’s complaints indirectly position the nanny as neglecting her duty to protect her vulnerable employers, who rely on her for year-round childcare. The reversal of master-and-servant storyline functions in the interview context as an appeal to my compassion.

However, a second storyline is braided into the first, whereby the employer positions herself as having the right to enforce the master-and-servant storyline as the ‘reasonable’ and ‘appropriate’ manner of solving conflicts of interest. In saying ‘I could have said no’ (line 15), the employer claims to have abdicated her right to control her nanny’s vacation plans, an act that might solicit my praise. Yet she goes on to position herself as having the right to command her nanny in the future (e.g. ‘you need to give us some more advanced warning,’ ‘at least one of your vacations has to come out of time that we’re on vacation’, ‘you have to give us five months warning’). Her statement ‘because it’s not appropriate’ (line 20) reiterates the non-modalized assertion she made earlier (‘It’s not reasonable,’ line 7) and again constructs the nanny’s actions as
impermissible according to taken-for-granted rules that operate independently of their
work contract.

A third, rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline (beginning in line 31) presents the logic that because the children are growing older, the nanny’s labor is becoming superfluous. This storyline pre-positions the nanny as providing diminishing value to the family and thus losing her power to dictate the terms of their transactions. The storyline also provides for a speech act of mitigation (‘if she quit it wouldn’t be the end of the world’, line 34). Implicitly, the employers are pre-positioned as having decreasing need for the nanny’s services and having incipient powers (and rights) to forfeit their contract with the nanny.

Although we do not have direct access to the nanny’s perspective, the employer’s talk could be heard as indirectly representing and oriented to her nanny’s storyline. The employer provides reported speech of the nanny’s ‘announcement’: ‘she said, my dad bought me tickets for the Philippines over the Christmas break.’ We could hypothesize that the nanny would pursue a rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline and uphold the original work contract as establishing her only binding commitments to her employers. Accordingly, the nanny could self-position as having every right to take her vacation when it suits her family’s schedule, regardless of her employers’ needs. The employers would be infringing on her right and overstepping their own were they to intervene.
Extract 2 - Employer04.507

1 Employer04: Yeah, I mean I don’t. I mean I feel like, if I could have said (...) uhm
2 (..) well I don’t know, maybe just if we could have had more frank talks
3 about the terms of repaying the money that we lent her, or, saying to
4 her instead of sort of sitting here sort of having this whole issue
5 percolating about the vacation that she’s taking, saying, I don’t even
6 know what to say. But uhm.

7 Naomi: [sigh]

8 Employer04: I feel like she knows that our instinct is pretty much going to be to
9 say ‘yes’ even if we don’t really like it.
10 Naomi: Yeah.
11 Employer04: And she banks on that.

12 Naomi: Yeah. It seems like there is quite a power inequality -

13 Employer04: Mmm-hmm.

14 Naomi: In the sense that, for day-to-day, getting along with your lives,
15 you need her. And she knows that.

16 Employer04: Mmm-hmm.

17 Naomi: Because she’s doing the work. And so, yeah, I can see how it would be so
18 difficult to risk, to pushing back
and potentially pushing her out the door.

Employer04: Yeah. I think it’s hard, especially when you’re trying hard to,

trying hard to. I mean, we have to acknowledge that ultimately is really,
you know we’re very lucky to have what we have,

and we’re lucky to be able to have a nanny.

And her situation is not anywhere near as stable. Uhm, I mean I don’t
know what it’s. There are other nannies who I’m certain have sort of
more stable home lives, and better financial straights, but hers is not.

And so, ultimately.

Employer04: I mean very early on after we first basically made it so she can buy the
house that she lives in, uhm, I said something like you know what
I don’t even, we don’t even know her that well.

I mean I’ve never even given this kind of money to a relative,

and some-, and one of my bosses said to me, ‘It’s better to be made a
fool of a thousand times over

for being too generous than to be too stingy.’

And I thought you know that’s sort of the approach we’re taking, really

which is. And. But that’s patronizing really.

I mean it’s like she’s our charity, you know. So that the way we can

rationalize it is that we’re trying to help her, but that is is it’s not.
That’s not an egalitarian relationship at all.

Three storylines emerge in this portion of the interview. On the one hand, the employer and I co-construct the reversal of master-and-servant storyline (see lines 8-19). The employer attributes to her nanny a knowledge of her employers’ instincts to acquiesce to things they would prefer not to (‘I feel like she knows that our instinct is pretty much going to be to say “yes” even if we don’t really like it’). In the employer’s next utterance, ‘And she banks on that’ (line 11), the use of present tense indicates that the nanny routinely uses her insight to actively profit from her employers. I suggest that a ‘power inequality’ exists and build upon the employer’s reversal of master-and-servant storyline in mentioning the employers’ dependence on the nanny and her awareness of this dependence. Through these utterances, the employers are pre-positioned as dependent on the nanny and powerless to refuse her demands lest she quit. The nanny, in turn, is pre-positioned as having power over her employers. As part of this storyline, the employer can be interpreted as expressing resentment at her nanny for ‘banking on’ the employers’ ‘instinct’ to honor the nanny’s requests even if they ‘don’t really like it’ (lines 8-9, 11). Again, as in Extract 1, the reversal-of-master-and-servant storyline functions in a manner that elicits my empathy.

However, the employer introduces a second storyline, the patron-benefactor storyline, which pre-positions her and her husband as generously caring for the needs of
those less fortunate than themselves. In lines 21-26, the employer compares her financial situation to her nanny’s, pre-positioning her and her husband as ‘lucky’ and their nanny as less stable, even compared to other nannies. These pre-positions can be heard as variations on the culturally recognizable ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ In response to her own self-reported doubts about having helped her nanny purchase a home, the employer shifts footing (Goffman, 1981) and reports her boss’s utterance: “It’s better to be made a fool of a thousand times over for being too generous than to be too stingy,” (lines 31-33). The use of present tense (“It’s better to…”) and lack of ‘principal’ (Goffman, 1981) gives this assertion the quality of an enduring truth. Her next utterance (‘that’s sort of the approach we’re taking, really’ line 34) has the illocutionary force of claiming to be ‘too generous’, a pre-positioning move that may elicit positive regard but may also be heard as boastful.

Yet, the patron-benefactor storyline, which ensnares the ‘have’ employers in helping their ‘have-not’ nanny is challenged by an idealized third storyline, that of the ‘egalitarian relationship.’ In the utterance, ‘That’s not an egalitarian relationship at all’ (line 8), ‘that’ is an ambiguous referent but could anaphorically refer to: the employers ‘rationalizing’, treating the nanny like a charity (line 36), taking the approach of being ‘too generous’ (line 34), and helping the nanny buy her home (lines 27-28). The utterance has the illocutionary force of representing those acts as morally suspect for violating assumed rules of egalitarian relationships. Thus, according to the egalitarian relationship storyline, the helping acts this employer and her husband perform are not
commendable but rather to be criticized; they are not helping their nanny but rather
imposing a hierarchical, patron-benefactor relationship on one that is between equals.
She presents the egalitarian ideal in a way that constructs giving her nanny money as a
condescending act that creates inequalities between them. The implicit positions made
available here are that employers have a duty to treat nannies as equals and nannies have
a right to be treated as equals. Ironically, this third storyline uses a key principle of
democracy, the equality of all people, in a way that renders unacceptable her efforts to
narrow the economic gap between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ By introducing the
egalitarian relationship storyline, the employer protects herself from the charge of
condescension made available in the patron-benefactor storyline she previously pursued.
She also protects herself from charges of stinginess for not helping or regretting helping
her nanny financially.

Again, while we do not have direct access to the nanny’s perspective on the
events this employer relates, we can attempt to derive her perspective through the
employer’s discourse. The nanny’s perspective might be voiced in the employer’s
second storyline, **patron-benefactor**, where the ‘haves’ (employers) ought to recognize
their obvious good fortune and transfer a portion of their resources to the less fortunate
‘have-nots’ (the nanny), not out of condescension, but out of good moral character.
Earlier in the interview, the following employer positioned herself as dependent on her nanny and at the mercy of her demands, which led me to ask her what measures she takes to secure her nanny’s loyalty. Following is her response.

**Extract 3 - Employer 022.247**

1. Employer022: So I. One thing is I think **you have to be really good to them** I mean and. I think I try to recognize from their point of view how difficult it must be coming into a family and a home and. You know it’s such a unique job in that respect. And to **try to really respect them** and.
2. Frankly I think **even with salary**-. I think it’s sort of taken me years to kind of just embrace the notion, especially working part-time in this whole thing, where you know where, how do you, how do you find the line (.) to pay them- ((kids interrupt)).
3. Naomi: You were mentioning salary.
4. Employer022: Salary to me has been-. And maybe it’s just me struggling with this notion of you know you’re sort of paying to- and this is their livelihood.
5. And I think to just embrace the notion that you ab-,
6. you know **you have to pay them ( ) fair for sure** and
7. Naomi: Mhmmm
8. Employer022: And they have to be happy with that, I mean there’s such a line.
9. I mean of course it’s all negotiated
Naomi: Yeah

Employer022: But to **not take advantage** at all, and if

Naomi: Hm:

Employer022: And if she works any overtime you know

Naomi: Oh:

Employer022: -to be aware **not to push the boundaries** and not to just recognize, you know if we take time off, she still expects a salary, you know and that type of thing

Naomi: Yeah

Employer022: It really. You have to be really aware of that and I think for them to know that you’re not going to pull the wool out from under their feet either helps to build that, from their point of view

Employer022: Um so anyway you know I think it just takes time to build the trust from both sides and you know, hopefully you reach it um. And if not, I mean the other thing I think that ex-, from experience. I mean things work out too but I think when it’s more of a new experience you’re so, especially the first couple you feel like **this is the person**, you know **there’s no one else who can take their their place** and once you’ve developed this rapport and this this uh relationship. But you know what,
there are a lot of great people and I think you know it’s ok.

The employer initially upholds my pre-positioning of her as dependent on the nanny by listing a number of ways she attempts to instill loyalty in her nannies. Many of these acts are externalized (Woolgar, 1988) as general rules rather than acknowledged as the employer’s own commitments (‘you have to be really good to them’ [line 1], ‘try to really respect them’ [line 4], ‘you have to pay them ( ) fair,’ [line 12], ‘not to take advantage’ [line 17], ‘not to push the boundaries’ [line 21]). The implicit storyline to emerge is one of the trust-based, ‘I take care of you, you take care of me’ relationship, whereby the nanny is implicitly positioned as having the duty to reciprocate the employers’ ‘good’ acts and trust by continuing to work for the family, perhaps even if better opportunities arise. I refer to this as the mutual dependence storyline. In the local context of the interview, the employer’s use of this storyline functions to present herself to me as aware of her powers to exploit her nanny but conscientious not to do so.

However, the employer introduces an optional second storyline, that of rational-actors-in-a-free-market, where good nannies are replaceable, interchangeable parts (pre-positions). The employer introduces this storyline as one she learned through ‘experience’ (line 32), which helps construct her opinions as empirically verified facts (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). Contrary to the belief that inexperienced employers may have (that ‘there’s no one else’ who could ever replace their good nanny’, line 35), this employer asserts that ‘there are a lot of great people’ (line 37). Following the logic of
this storyline, employers, as rational actors, have little reason to manage their nannies in ways that assure her loyalty, so long as there is a ready supply of workers willing to agree to the employer’s terms. Implicitly, both the employer and the nanny have rights to pursue their self-interests in an open marketplace where duties to reciprocal care vanish. This storyline excuses the employer from having to following all the ‘rules’ she previously enumerated as part of the mutual dependence storyline.

The employer mentions the nanny’s point of view twice in this short extract, which evinces her orientation to the nanny’s storyline. Indirectly, we can hear the voice of the nanny, who complains that this employer does not appreciate how hard the job is and that it is the nanny’s livelihood, not supplemental income (as is the employer’s part-time job). She can also be heard complaining that she cannot trust her employers or that they take advantage of her by failing to compensate for overtime or unrequested time off. These complaints might reflect the nanny’s assumption that she and the employer ought to engage in some combination of a mutually dependent and contractually-based, rational-actors-in-a-free-market relationship.

**Extract 4- Employer022.186**

1 Employer022: I did get the word out quickly to a bunch of friends and, as it

2 happened, about three weeks later a good friend contacted me and said

3 I now someone and you’ve got, you know you’ve got to talk to her
and. That’s uh Nilda who we have now, and it’s been two years and I have to say she I think has been the best fit of all. She’s just a great, wonderful person. She particularly focuses on Jacob.

7 Naomi: Oh:

8 Employer022: But just good hard-working you know we just mesh. But there again it’s so interesting because she and her husband are trying to buy a house and there are so many ups and downs. And I think too to be in that sort of, you know, where they’ve, are very recent immigrants most of them, and they did have a totally different life back in the country they came from.

9 Naomi: Mm-hmm

10 Employer022: And so we’ve been sort of embroiled in the angst that they’ve been going through just with the house and the-. It always seems like they can’t get ahead.

11 Naomi: Aw:

12 Employer022: And it’s a shame to kind of watch it and you know you care about them

13 Naomi: Yeah:

14 Employer022: But yet you don’t want to cross the line where you’re sort of you
know, your impulse is to constantly want to help, help, help

Naomi: Yeah

Employer022: but you sort of can’t

Naomi: Yeah

Employer022: Or at least that’s been my philosophy anyway.

At some point, you know it is an employee-employer relationship, and so it’s, it’s a hard one though.

Naomi: Yeah

The employer pre-positions her nanny and the nanny’s husband into a familiar ‘hard-working immigrant family’ storyline, where recent immigrants come to America and face ‘ups and downs’ as try to ‘get ahead.’ The employer and her husband are pre-positioned as standing outside this storyline, having neither rights nor duties to intervene. They ‘watch’ from the sidelines (line 20). The employer switches pronouns in line 21 from ‘we’ to ‘you,’ which represents the events she relates as typical of employers in general. Although they ‘care’ and have the ‘impulse’ to help, they ‘sort of can’t’ (line 26). These pre-positions accord with the American ideology of self-reliance and individual responsibility, whereby each family must fend for itself. However, the employer represents the prohibition on helping as reflecting her personal ‘philosophy’ (line 28) and not a general rule.

Yet, the employer could be heard invoking a general rule in line 29 (‘At some
point, you know it is an employee-employer relationship’). This utterance provides for the logical inference that professional relationships entail rights and duties to non-interference and rights to protect and pursue one’s interests (time, money, etc.); thus, the utterance also has the illocutionary force of a justification for not helping the nanny. These pre-positions and positions accord with the rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline, wherein the employers and the nanny are rational actors engaged in wage-for-labor transactions, and their commitments to each other are specified in contractual agreements rather than driven by emotions and impulses. The free market is a compelling storyline because it upholds a centrally valued institution in Western democracies. As such, it can powerfully counter both the nanny’s requests for help and my criticisms of the employer’s inaction.

A possible nanny’s storyline might be the mutual dependence storyline, which pre-position the employer and nanny as engaged in a reciprocally caring relationship: the nanny actively ‘cares’ for the employers’ children, and in turn the employers ought to actively care about the nanny’s family’s welfare, beyond providing a paycheck.

The following employer is a mother of two girls and recently separated from her husband. I interviewed her at her newly opened law firm in Washington, D.C. In an earlier portion of the interview she pursued the familiar storyline of the ‘haves’ helping the ‘have-nots.’ Below, she relates events surrounding her nanny’s unexpected pregnancy.
Employer018: I mean we actually put a nanny agreement together which we hadn’t
done with our first nanny. Went back and forth a little bit on that, but
in the big scheme of things it wasn’t too difficult. Now since then our
nanny got uh, she got pregnant. We kept her during the pregnancy.
I don’t mean we kept her, I mean we didn’t-. We allowed her to stay
on, and she now has a 1 and a half-year-old boy who comes to my
house every day and she worked right through.
So, it’s worked out pretty well for her.

Naomi: So, how did that work out? I don’t know if that’s terribly common for
employers to allow their employees to bring their children?

Employer018: Um it worked out pretty well. It’s probably not ideal but, you know
she’s like family. And I um, I didn’t know what else she would be
able to do. She wasn’t in a situation [.] I couldn’t see how she could
make ends meet by putting her son in day care. Um and then
working. I just felt like it would be very hard on her. She’s single;
this wasn’t something that she’s a little older. I think it totally took
her by surprise. And um in fact it was pretty late in the pregnancy
when she actually really realized that she was pregnant. And the
health care system wasn’t very helpful in helping her come to that
The contravention of the right to education is not necessarily a direct consequence of the government's policies. The lack of resources and the lack of qualified teachers are significant contributing factors. The government has been known to allocate funds to higher education institutions, resulting in a shortage of funds for elementary and secondary schools. This leads to overcrowded classrooms and a lack of qualified teachers. These factors, in turn, lead to a decrease in the quality of education and an increase in dropout rates. Consequently, the government should consider increasing funding for elementary and secondary schools and implementing policies that support the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers.
Employer018: It’s not that she doesn’t deserve it, she does deserve it. She works hard and she um, she treats the house like it’s her house and she treats the girls like they’re her girls. And they respect her and love her. So it’s worth it to keep that going and not have to go through any other changes. And obviously with my husband and I separating it makes it more important to have the continuity of her every day and that kind of thing. I wouldn’t wanna, I think it would be very hard on them if we changed what the situation was.

The employer rejects my pre-positioning of the nanny as appreciative of her employer’s additional payments, which the employer interprets as implying that the additional pay was not earned and therefore not deserved (‘It’s not that she doesn’t deserve it, she does deserve it’, line 2). The employer’s repair in line 2 has the illocutionary force of deflecting the charge that she treats her nanny with condescension by expecting her to ‘appreciate’ the additional pay. She then enumerates a list of activities the nanny performs (‘she works hard’, ‘treats the house like it’s her hour’, ‘treats the kids like they’re her girls’), which can be interpreted as ways the nanny deserves and has earned the additional pay. This rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline confers both rights on the nanny to be compensated as she is and duties on the employer to pay her as she has been. It can also be heard as the nanny’s storyline in that it insures the nanny’s right
to be compensated for every task she performs beyond those contractually linked to her salary.

Yet, the employer introduces an additional set of reasons for compensating her nanny with additional cash, and those reasons deviate from the rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline. In mentioning her children’s emotional attachment to the nanny and the hardship the children would suffer were they to ‘go through any other changes’ (lines 5-6), the employer illicit my sympathy and draws on the storyline of the dependent, vulnerable employers (and children) and the powerful nanny. Implicitly, we understand that the employer views the nanny’s additional compensation not exclusively as ‘deserved’ or rightfully ‘earned’ but also a means of insuring the nanny’s loyalty and protecting the employer’s children from further emotional harm, above and beyond what they have already experienced through their parents’ separation. The employer can be heard acknowledging that there is a strong element of the reversal-of-master-and-servant storyline in her compensation practices.

Although throughout the interview the employer tends to pre-positions herself as promoting the interests of her nanny, in the following extract we witness quite a different aspect of the relationship.

Extract 7- Employer018.473

1 Naomi: Do you get the sense that she has ambitions to do anything else in the future?
2 Employer018: Heh. I don’t, really. I know that my friend’s wife was trying to, really
was pushing her to go back to school and take some courses and things like that. I think she may have actually was looking into starting something like that, but now that she has the baby I just can’t see her (. ) I think it would be hard for her to try and do school, ‘cause at least every other Saturday I know that she cleans, and so that really only leaves the one day. She has her mornings to some extent open, but really she has to be on (. ) Even though her work hours most days are shorter, I kind of expect her to be on-call during that other time, and that’s part of her, part of the idea of her being on a full-time salary.

The employer offers two explanations for why her nanny unlikely aspires to work in a different occupation. The first explanation appears in lines 5-8 and excludes the employer: the nanny does not have time because she has a child and works every other Saturday at a second job. The second job is treated as a non-negotiable commitment, one that leaves the nanny with only ‘one day’ (line 8). The second explanation appears in lines 9-12 and involves the employer: although the nanny ‘has her mornings to some extent open’ (line 8), the employer expects her to be ‘on-call’ at those times. Both explanations follow a master-and-servant storyline, which pre-positions the nanny as passive, one whose schedule and possibility for educational and professional advancement is dictated by others, the wife of an employer’s friend, the nanny’s son, her
Saturday cleaning job employers, and her full-time employer. It is taken for granted that
the employers have a right to use the nanny to pursue their own self-interests and that the
nanny does not have the right to expect that her employer make compromises. The
master-and-servant storyline is a radical departure from the patron-benefactor and mutual
dependence storylines the employer deployed in prior talk, which underscores the value
of analyzing storylines and their functions rather than attempting to create a typology of
employers.

In focusing attention on the nanny’s time constraints, the employer leaves
unmentioned the nanny’s weak financial position, which is arguably a major reason why
she works a second job and needs this employer’s full-time salary and daycare benefit.
This omission may have been intentional or not. In either case, the omission protects the
employer from criticisms I and others might make that she prevents her nanny’s
educational and financial advancement by keeping her ‘on call’ or paying her a salary
that appears not to meet the nanny’s basic needs. The question does not even arise why
the nanny’s mornings could not be used to do coursework, perhaps through an online
program.

We could hypothesize that the nanny would express a strong desire to have a
higher paying job and provide a better future for her son; however, as a low-skilled,
single mother with limited English skills, she is financially unable to give up work hours
to attend school. The nanny might even attempt to pre-position her employers into a
**patron-benefactor storyline**, which would impose a duty on her employers to promote her educational and financial advancement.

**Extract 8 - Employer002.463**

1. Employer002: So I probably am. I’m not at the **lowest** of the low scale
2. Naomi: Yeah
3. Employer002: But I’m not way up there.
4. Naomi: Does that make you feel, ok?
5. Employer002: You know I, I’m a little concerned with Rose and her negotiating skills ((laughing)). I mean I’ve never really tried to **give** money to
6. people before((laughing))
7. Naomi: Yeah
8. Employer002: But um, you know if she’s comfortable with it and we’re comfortable
9. with it. And I’ll give her whatever else she wants, I mean. It’s gotten to the
10. point now where, she feels pretty comfortable bringing her laundry here. I
11. love that. That’s great
12. Naomi: Yeah
13. Employer002: She can do her laundry here. She loves to iron. She picks up my
14. blouses and irons them because she wants to iron ((chuckle))
15. Naomi: ((laugh))

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Employer002: If she’s ironing my stuff, she should iron her stuff ((laugh)).

That’s fine.

Naomi: ((laugh))

Employer002: Billy takes a two hour nap every afternoon. She first of all doesn’t have to iron my stuff. She could sit on the couch and watch soaps for all I care, because she probably needs a little bit of a break.

Naomi: She enjoys being a hard worker

Employer002: She enjoys doing things.

And if I could make her take more money if I thought I could, I would.

Naomi: Mm-hmm, yeah

Employer002: But ((chuckle)) I have trouble getting it to stick and not literally come back to me

Naomi: Yeah, sounds like it. I mean it’s, I don’t know it’s kind of interesting like what money really signifies and how sometimes the most a person can do is to not accept more money.

And that, there’s a source of happiness in that.

This employer pre-positions herself as conscientiously trying to compensate her nanny fairly. In line 10 she claims to be willing to ‘give her whatever else she wants,’ which functions to ward off any negative inferences I might make about her admission in line 3 that her nanny’s pay is ‘not way up there.’ In line 25, she claims: ‘if I could make her
take more money if I thought I could I would.’ According to this rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline, the employer has a duty to pay, and the nanny has a right to be paid, for each unit of labor she performs. However, as told by this employer, the nanny refuses to accept additional pay for additional labor. In other words, she refuses to be positioned into the rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline. Further evidence of the nanny’s refusal was provided earlier in the interview, where the employer stated that when the nanny does accept additional pay, she appears the next day with gifts for the employer’s child.

The employer offers two different explanations for the nanny’s actions. On the one hand, she pre-positions the nanny as a ‘happy worker’ (‘She loves to iron,’ line 14) and one who is irresponsible with money (‘I’m a little concerned with Rose and her negotiating skills,’ line 5). The second explanation in particular can be interpreted as an act of condescension. Both explanations invoke a patron-benefactor storyline, according to which the naïve nanny needs and deserves protection and guidance from a benevolent and wise employer. I pick up this storyline and propose that the nanny may refuse extra pay not because she is naïve but in order to challenge her employer’s condescension and display her own powers (‘sometimes the most a person can do is to not accept more money’, line 31).

The following extract picks up from the previous one.

Extract 9 - Employer 002.491
Employer002: I think she also. She’s one of those nannies who wants to feel like
she’s part of a family. As opposed to feeling like she’s an employee. And
the other family we shared with, I think, I know she felt like an employee.

Naomi: Oh, yeah

Employer002: She didn’t think they were a nice. They just weren’t quite as warm.

Naomi: Yeah.

Employer002: Um. And they were. They had more supervisory roles at work, in
terms of head honcho, peon type of people. And I think it showed in kind
of the relationship with the nanny

Naomi: Yeah

Employer002: But I think she feels like she’s part of our family, so I think she almost
feels like she’s taking money from family in a way, but not really. It’s.

Naomi: Yeah

Employer002: I’ve tried a lot to. (Bob) and I have tried to discuss it and figure it out
((laugh)). But we can’t. We can’t get inside her head.

Naomi: ((laugh)) Well. I’m sure she really enjoys being appreciated.

Employer002: She loves Billy, and Billy loves her.

It is unclear from the interviewee’s response whether she understood my
interpretation of the nanny’s refusal to accept additional money (see Extract 8, lines29-
In any case, she offers an alternative explanation that pre-positions the nanny as rejecting an impersonal, hierarchical *rational-actors-in-a-free-market* arrangement and embracing a *mutual dependence storyline*. The mutual dependence storyline is invoked in lines 1-2 (‘She’s one of those nannies who wants to feel like she’s part of the family’) and lines 11-12 (But I think she feels like she’s part of our family, so I think she almost feels like she’s taking money from family’). According to this second storyline, the nanny refuses additional pay from her employers in order to uphold the relationship as kin-like. The employer expresses some doubts about this interpretation of the nanny’s motives (‘We can’t get inside her head,’ line 15), to which I respond by assuring the employer that the nanny must derive intrinsic value from feeling ‘appreciated’ by her employers, an assertion that might imply that the employers treat their nanny with condescension, as one who ought to ‘appreciate’ her employers. The interviewee responds to me by shifting attention to the mutually caring relationship the nanny has with her son (‘She loves Billy, and Billy loves her’), which partly pre-positions the nanny as a ‘happy’ (if naïve) worker and partly locates her into the *mutual dependence* storyline that the employer assumes the nanny lives by. This storyline no doubt offers more comfort to the employer than a picture of the nanny as a rational actor motivated merely by money, and it also mitigates the condescension I had insinuated might be felt by the nanny and motivate her to refuse extra pay.
While the employer could be heard criticizing her nanny for refusing additional pay it is interesting that she overlooks (in our discussion) how the nanny may one day benefit from this mutual dependence. Perhaps the nanny is fostering a sense of indebtedness in her employers, upon which she can later capitalize. If this is the case, then the nanny may understand (pre-position) herself as clever and her employers as naïve for not recognizing her plot to ensnare them in a reversal of the master-servant storyline.

The potential for nanny’s to capitalize on their dependent positions vis-à-vis employers appears more clearly in an interview with a different employer.

**Extract 10 - Employer024.241**

1. Employer024: I don’t know how many hours a week we spend together, but there is a fair amount of interaction. I mean, I like her a lot, and she makes a big deal, always, to say I’m her boss and she introduces me to other people as her boss, but we’re exactly the same age.
2. I don’t feel like it’s a very patronizing or hierarchical relationship.
3. But maybe it’s because we sort of both treat each other in a respectful way.
4. And so I think that also makes the relationship work pretty well.
5. We never talk, we rarely talk about money. We set a deal at the beginning.
6. We set a salary. We negotiated a teeny, tiny bit at the beginning.
And we’ve virtually never talked about it again.

So when we decided at a year that she needs a raise, we’ll tell her what we’re giving her and she says, “Fine.”

When she takes the kids overnight, occasionally I’ll say, “I don't know what, I’m not exactly sure what to pay you.”

And she says, “Just pay me whatever you want.”

And I have to sort of figure it out and decide.

Sometimes she’ll say, “I don’t want you to pay me this time because this is a gift” or whatever. Or she'll say, “I’m taking the kids overnight.” But she won’t.

It’s just this bizarre sort of. Um, she just doesn’t really want to talk about it.

I must be giving her enough otherwise she would bring it up or she’d be unhappy or I could pick up cues or whatever. But it’s all those after hours things and stuff like that that I haven’t quite figured out.

Which is a weird relationship, you know.

The employer initially relates to me how she disagrees with her nanny’s pre-positioning of her as the ‘boss’, which the employer portrays as indicating they engage in a ‘patronizing or hierarchical relationship’ (line 5). The employer rejects these categorizations (pre-positions) and asserts an egalitarian storyline in stating that she and her nanny are ‘exactly the same age’ (line 4), the relationship does not ‘feel like it’s a
very patronizing or hierarchical relationship’ (line 5), and they ‘treat each other in a respectful way’ (line 6). In line 7, she asserts: ‘I think that also makes the relationships work pretty well’, where ‘that’ can be interpreted as referencing their mutual respect, and ‘also’ indicates that other factors also contribute to their well-functioning relationship. On the whole, the egalitarian storyline portrays the employer in a positive light in the context of the interview.

In line 8, the employer asserts that money is not or is rarely a topic of discussion. Because she makes this assertion immediately after representing her relationship with her nanny as egalitarian and harmonious, the assertion can be heard as providing further evidence of their egalitarian relationship. However, as her narrative continues, this evidence becomes ever more dubious.

The employer recounts recurrent occasions (indicated by her use of present tense) on which money was indeed a topic of discussion. On the first two occasions (annual raise and overnight babysitting), the nanny is pre-positioned as either passive and indifferent to money or refusing money. She does not protest the amount of her annual raise (‘she says, “Fine,” line 12). In the case of overnight babysitting, either she relinquishes all power to her employers to decide her rate of pay for overnights (‘Just pay me whatever you want,’ line 15) or she refuses compensation, even constructing her refusal as a ‘gift’ to her employers. In these recounted events, the employer pre-positions herself and her husband as attempting to negotiate a wage with their nanny, which
corresponds to a **rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline**. The employer prepositions her nanny as evasive and infers that she ‘just doesn’t really want to talk about it.’ The employer does not (with me) speculate on the nanny’s motives for avoiding the topic of money, and she positions herself in front of me as having done her duty (‘I must be giving her enough’) as an employer.

We might speculate on the nanny’s storyline and its perlocutionary force, based on the employer’s narrative. It appears that the nanny, by invoking a **master-and-servant storyline**, places her employers in the predicament of trying to determine how much remuneration would keep their employee, presumably a rational actor in a free market, loyal. It is not unlikely that the employers error on the side of overestimating their nanny’s market price. The employer’s defense that she ‘must be giving enough otherwise she would bring it up or she’d be unhappy or I could pick up cues’ indirectly demonstrates that the employers do not know for certain whether their compensation is adequate. Furthermore, by occasionally refusing compensation, the nanny briefly reverses the master-and-servant storyline in a manner that may induce indebtedness and guilt on her employers that can be capitalized upon later.

**Discussion**
This analysis demonstrates how employer-nanny relationships are complex sites of shifting power, where each party’s rights and duties are oriented to as highly relevant matters for discussion and debate.

Employers used six distinct storylines (see Figure 1) that corresponded with associated employer and nanny pre-positions and positions. Of these six storylines, only three (patron-benefactor, mutual dependence, and rational-actors-in-a-free-market) were used by employers in ways that made them duty-bound to transfer a portion of their wealth to their nanny. The patron-benefactor storyline might have the greatest potential for shifting wealth from the employers to the nanny because the employers are positioned as having duties to assist the nanny on the basis of their wealth disparity alone. In the mutual dependence storyline, employers’ assistance to their nanny is contingent on the nanny’s reciprocation in the form of loyalty, respect, kindness, performing additional chores, etc. In the rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline, employers’ duties to transfer wealth to their nanny are limited to the contractual agreement; the wealth disparity between employers and nannies is irrelevant.

It is unlikely that a campaign designed to promote the patron-benefactor storyline would successfully induce employers to regularly donate money to their nannies. As the analysis showed, employers can skillfully invoke multiple, interacting storylines in ways that justify not meeting the nanny’s financial needs. The egalitarian storyline, for instance, was used in ways that rendered patron-benefactor dynamics morally suspect
The rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline was also used to justify refraining from meeting the nanny’s financial needs (see Extract 4). The master-and-servant storyline also powerfully positions the nanny as consigned to her disadvantaged position (see Extract 7). Nonetheless, it does not appear that power resides exclusively in the hands of the employers. Nannies’ can also invoke storylines that distribute power in ways that benefit them.

Implicit in employers’ talk were also four storylines that I hypothesize are invoked by nannies (see Figure 2), and these overlap with employers’ storylines. These four storylines are polysemous in that they may distribute power differently, depending on whether the employer or the nanny invokes them. For instance, while employers can invoke the rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline to justify not carrying out acts that benefit their nanny, the nanny can invoke this same storyline to defend herself from her employers’ demands that she accommodate them in ways that depart from their contractual agreement (see Extract 1). Likewise, the patron-benefactor storyline can be used by employers in a way that treats the nanny as condescending and affords employers the power to direct her life. Yet this same storyline could be used by nannies to argue for why her wealthy employers should assist the nanny financially. The nanny’s use of this storyline might emphasize her cleverness and power over her employers. The mutual dependence storyline could also be used by the employer to justify demanding extra labor from the nanny, above and beyond their agreement, while the nanny may invoke this
storyline to garner additional compensation or other forms of out-right assistance. Future research could investigate what storylines nannies actually use and whether overlapping storylines (between employers and nannies) indeed distribute power in asymmetrical ways.

In Positioning Theory, storylines are conceived of as normative conventions. They do not appear out of nowhere but have a cultural history. The storylines I identified in my sample of employers are certainly the products of cultural processes and not the local inventions of the employers. The reversal-of-master-and-servant storyline, for instance, can be seen in P.G. Wodehouse’s famous stories of the clever servant Jeeves and his gullible master Bertie Wooster. The patron-benefactor storyline can be seen in such stories as Charles Dicken’s *Great Expectations* and Robin Hood, whose origins reach back to the Middle Ages. The rational-actors-in-a-free-market storyline borrows from Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. A genealogy of employers’ and nannies’ storylines could be the subject of future research, as could a comparative study in another cultural context where other storylines may be relevant.

An important feature of storylines that is brought out in the analysis of this study is that while they may be ‘culturally available’ resources, their meaning is immanent (emerges) in the local contexts in which they are invoked. Employers could be heard skillfully drawing on multiple storylines in the course of narrating their experiences with nannies. Rather than interpreting their actions as guided by causally powerful rules for
reasoning about rights and duties, employers can be heard acting in accordance with normative ways of explaining and justifying their management practices in specific contexts. This interpretation makes use of Wittgenstein’s view of people as ‘acting in accordance with rules’ when they display orderly performances. By this account, employers’ positioning moves in the interviews are normative actions, learned through prior ‘training’ in the form of prior conversations with others, or exposure to others’ dialogues, where the question of what distinguishes ‘good’ from ‘bad’ employers was relevant. It is not necessary to treat employers as conscientiously designing their responses to be convincing or to offer particular presentations of self. The interpretation that employers act in accordance with rules leaves open the possibility that they are simply ‘saying what comes naturally,’ based on their prior experiences and interpretations of the current (interview) situation.

In this way, a positioning analysis finds common ground with the discursive psychological concept of ‘accountability,’ which is the notion that when people recount events of the past, they display an orientation to questions of 1) agency and 2) norms (Edwards and Potter, 1992). In other words, they express a concern with what responsibilities they have, both in the narrated event and in the act of narrating. Second, people address concerns about what is normal, expected and appropriate in the context of both the past event and in recounting that event. Edwards and Potter stress that their concept of ‘accountability’ is displayed in talk and not part of a motivational theory.
Since accountability concerns are displayed, they are available for interlocutors, who interpret the speaker’s meaning and act accordingly. They are also available to analysts.

Bringing the concept of accountability into contact with Positioning Theory, employers could be heard positioning themselves and their nanny in ways that managed employer’s responsibilities to their nanny, both in the events they narrated and in the interview context. Furthermore, employers used culturally available storylines in ways that displayed and managed their concerns with having their thoughts, feelings, and actions understood as normal and appropriate by their nannies, by me, and by relevant others. In other words, storylines afforded employers and nannies ways of negotiating power that could be represented as simply ‘how things are done’ according to this or that storyline.
Chapter Four

Theoretical Implications

This dissertation used two discursive psychological approaches. Study 1 made use of the concept of interpretative repertoires and Study 2 used positioning theory. This section considers these two approaches in relation to each other.

Interpretative repertoires as a concept for social psychological analysis was developed in what could be referred to as the ‘Loughborough School’ of discourse-oriented psychology (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Billig 1987/1996; Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton & Radley, 1988; Middleton & Edwards, 1990; Edwards & Potter, 1992). Potter and Wetherell (1987) borrowed the term interpretative repertoires from work in the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK), specifically Gilbert and Mulkay’s (1984) studies of how scientists in the ‘hard’ sciences use particular discursive forms to undermine rivals’ theories and advance their own as ‘the truth.’

Interpretative repertoires have been put forth as an alternative to Foucaultian discourses, which Wetherell and Potter (1992) criticize for neglecting discourse as a social practice, which results in granting discourses meaning and effects that are independent of their use in particular contexts. By shifting attention to discourse as a social practice, the authors highlight the way the meaning of any patch of discourse is actively achieved by people in specific, actually occurring episodes of use. In other words, people may use an interpretative repertoire to construct a variety of ‘factual’
versions and perform a multitude of social acts. Thus everyday practical affairs become
an indispensible site of investigation, and any claims about the meaning or effects of
repertoires must be grounded in an analysis of concrete use. In sum, interpretative
repertoires are offered as a grounded and more immanentist alternative to the presumably
reified concept of Foucaultian discourses.

Positioning theory also presents an immanentist alternative to reified discourses,
although its initial target of criticism was the transcendentalist notion of ‘roles’ (Davies
& Harré, 1990/1999), which have been treated in the social sciences as causally powerful
determinants of human thought and action. ‘Positions,’ as used by Hollway (1984), was
appropriated and further developed by Davies and Harré as an immanentist alternative to
roles. Hollway’s (1984) well-cited paper developed Foucualt’s discourse in an
immanentist direction. She proposed an answer to the question of how discourses evolve:
each time we engage in a meaning-making practice, we use discourses in ways that can
either maintain or modify discourses and their corresponding subject positions.

Positioning theory is part of a larger movement in psychology that includes not
only discursive psychology but also cultural psychology, narrative psychology, and
narratology. Operating in an explicitly immanentist framework, positioning theory has
been less concerned with extracting content-specific patterns from a collection of un-
related, situated practices than in analyzing the dynamic manner in which participants to
a social episode jointly negotiate a ‘local moral order’ (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), a distribution of rights and duties to act and be understood in particular ways.

Interpretative repertoires and positioning theory’s concepts of pre-positions, storylines, acts, and positions share a view of the person as actively using culturally-available resources to serve local social purposes. Those purposes are differently expressed in the two theoretical approaches. The Loughborough School tends to give primacy to a concept of the person as oriented to a rhetorical context and displaying ‘accountability’ concerns (Edwards & Potter, 1992), what one’s responsibilities are and what normative expectations are relevant to the situation. Analysis focuses on how people use rhetorical means (such as fact construction devices) to manage their accountability concerns. Positioning theory takes people as foremost concerned with moral status, both their own and that of others. Moral status refers to the cluster of rights and duties (positions) that are claimed by or assigned to a person by invoking particular arrays of pre-positions and storylines. Both approaches thus make assumptions about the general motives people enact when they engage in meaning-making practices. From a positioning theory perspective, we use rhetorical and other means to dialogically establish our own and others specific rights and duties. The moral orientation of human beings is contained too in the concept of ‘accountability’ but is less explicit. It is also less dialogical in that less attention is paid to how one person’s accountability concerns may impact on another’s.
Furthermore, positioning theory makes the moral context itself an object of study, as something jointly produced by participants to a social episode. A positioning analysis reveals the dynamic way people distribute rights and duties in an on-going interaction through acts of pre-positioning, positioning, and the invocation of storylines. The analysis is a diachronic one. In contrast, an analysis of interpretative repertoires is less explicitly concerned with how the local rhetorical context is maintained or reconfigured through particular speech acts. The analysis tends to be more synchronic, pulling together instances where interpretative repertoires are used in order to make some claims about the ideological effects of discursive practice.

The synchronic approach is reflected in my study of Venezuelan discourse on beauty. I collected instances women using each of four interpretative repertoires across 17 separate research interviews. From a positioning theory perspective, the interpretative repertoires of mere differences, deficiency, compensation, and exceptions could be heard as different storylines. In the latter three storylines, lower class women were pre-positioned as generally inferior to women of other classes in terms of beauty. All four storylines accord women the duty to care about their personal appearance. Had I looked at longer stretches of dialogue, I could have added a diachronic component to the analysis and perhaps would have seen the kind of shifts in meaning that were so apparent in my study of employers’ discourse on relations with their nannies.
In my study of employers of nannies, I combined diachronic and synchronic approaches by examining both the dynamic and shifting constellation of pre-positions-storylines-acts-positions within a stretch of interview dialogue and the collection of these constellations across discrete interviews. This study helped to develop positioning theory as an analytical framework equipped to both understand the particulars of single cases (unique employer-nanny dyadic relationships) and the exemplary aspects of these single cases. The collection of pre-positions-storylines-positions-acts I identified (see Tables 1 and 2) could themselves be understood as repertoires that employers and nannies use to interpret the meaning of their interactions.

Both interpretative repertoires and positioning theory acknowledge the role of the past in our present use of discourse, even while retaining an immanentist perspective. The content of interpretative repertoires is repeated across time and speakers, although the social functions and ideological effects can differ. Likewise, storylines that emerge in any social episode may be looked upon as pre-existing cultural resources. In this respect, positioning theory makes contact with narratology and narrative psychology. Nonetheless, the social acts one performs in using one storyline over another can vary across contexts, as was shown in the way employers and nannies could use the same storyline to distribute rights and duties in very different ways.

In what form do interpretative repertoires and pre-positions-storylines-positions exist? In positioning theory regularities of all kinds exist only as concrete occurrences in
the past and our memories and understanding of past occurrences and the present situation. There are no repositories ‘out there’ in culture that store such things as social norms, rules, or master narratives. Likewise, interpretative repertoires are acknowledged as social scientists’ abstractions from situated acts of meaning-making.

Both positioning analyses and analysis of interpretative repertoires are concerned with possible perlocutionary effects of discursive acts. That is, both approaches ask what is achieved by saying something. The central concern in studies on interpretative repertoires is with the possible ideological effects of their use, for instance how racist and sexist practices are legitimated. Positioning theory does not limit itself to questions of ideological practice. For instance, it has proven beneficial in analyses of conflicts at all levels, from intrapersonal to interpersonal, intergroup and international (Moghaddam, Harré, & Lee, 2008). Both approaches thus link certain forms of meaning-making with certain social outcomes, although both challenge the dichotomy between talk and action. Future work in this area could develop a more detailed theoretical position and analytical guidelines on how to assess the perlocutionary force of our discursive practices.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

This dissertation was concerned with examining power relations as accomplished in the way ordinary people give meaning to their everyday practices. Studies 1 and 2 showed how people draw on culturally-available symbolic tools (interpretative repertoires, carriers, and storylines) in creative and dynamic ways, thus demonstrating the need for research approaches that are sensitive to the ebb and flow of human meaning-making.

The empirical studies reported here also highlight some advantages of a discourse- and narrative-based approach to power relations that uses people’s actual talk as data. Traditional experimental methods might be used to specify conditions under which certain configurations of power are likely to arise and be endorsed, but those methods do not provide insight into the creative, action-oriented manner by which people use storylines to give meaning to their actual experiences. By examining the local interactional functions to which people put various storylines and interpretative repertoires, psychologists can derive the culturally-situated logic people use to justify some ways of being and sanctioning other ways of being. The storylines and interpretative repertoires that people take for granted as independently existing truths are, through analyses such as the ones performed here, shown for what they are, cultural resources that are sustained through the normative activities of intentional human actors.
Acquiring this knowledge is a first step towards a more open and critical dialogue about how we want to deal with social and economic inequalities.

In the studies reported here I refrained from challenging or criticizing interviewees’ versions of events and forms of reasoning. Hence, participants may not have displayed the full range of ways they give meaning to their experiences and the social world. Future research should explore more contentious contexts and also a greater range of contexts than a research interview provides so as to derive a more complete understanding of how people use cultural resources to sustain or challenge unequal social arrangements in everyday life.
Figure 1. Employers’ representations of the local moral order of employer-nanny relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employers’ Storylines</th>
<th>Employer’s pre-position (relative to nanny)</th>
<th>Employer’s position</th>
<th>Nanny’s pre-position (relative to employer)</th>
<th>Nanny’s position</th>
<th>Employers’ acts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Master and Servant</td>
<td>Powerful master</td>
<td>Right to use nanny to pursue self-interest</td>
<td>Passive servant</td>
<td>No rights to pursue her own interests</td>
<td>Justify demands placed on nanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patron-Benefactor</td>
<td>‘Haves’</td>
<td>Duty to give to the ‘have-nots’</td>
<td>‘Have-nots’</td>
<td>Rights to expect help from the ‘haves’</td>
<td>Condescend; brag about helping nanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual dependence (communitarian)</td>
<td>Dependent, trusting</td>
<td>Duties to actively care for nanny beyond contractual agreement</td>
<td>Dependent, trusting</td>
<td>Duties to actively care for employers beyond contractual agreement</td>
<td>Explain helping nanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational-actors-in-a-free market</td>
<td>Professional, employer</td>
<td>Right to pursue self-interest, Right to non-interference, Duty to fulfill contractual obligations</td>
<td>Replaceable, interchangeable laborer</td>
<td>Duty to fulfill contractual obligations. Lacking rights to employers’ assistance</td>
<td>Excuse not helping nanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>Co-equal; Condescending if ‘helping’</td>
<td>Duties to refrain from offering resources to nanny</td>
<td>Co-equal</td>
<td>Right to be treated as an ‘equal’</td>
<td>Excuse not helping nanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reversal of ‘Master and Servant’</td>
<td>Vulnerable, dependent on nanny, potential victims</td>
<td>Right to protection from nanny, sympathy from others</td>
<td>Powerful</td>
<td>Duty to protect vulnerable employers</td>
<td>Complain about nanny; express resentment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2. Hypothesized nannies’ representations of the local moral order of employer-nanny relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nanny’s Storylines (hypothesized)</th>
<th>Employer’s pre-position (relative to nanny)</th>
<th>Employer’s position</th>
<th>Nanny’s pre-position (relative to employer)</th>
<th>Nanny’s position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patron-benefactor</td>
<td>‘Haves’</td>
<td>Duty to give to the ‘have-nots’</td>
<td>‘Have-nots’</td>
<td>Rights to expect help from the ‘haves’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual dependence</td>
<td>Dependent, trusting</td>
<td>Duties to actively care, beyond work contract</td>
<td>Dependent, trusting</td>
<td>Duties to actively care, beyond work contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational actors carrying out transactions in a free market economy</td>
<td>Wage provider. Good if they adhere to contract, bad if they demand more of the nanny</td>
<td>Duty to compensate for services rendered, at agreed rate. No right to demand more of nanny than originally agreement specifies</td>
<td>Laborer. A ‘good’ employee if she fulfills duties specified in original agreement</td>
<td>Right to payment for services rendered, at agreed rate. Rights to demand additional compensation for labor that exceeds original agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reversal of ‘Master and Servant’</td>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Rights are subordinate to nanny’s desires</td>
<td>Powerful</td>
<td>Rights to use employers to pursue self-interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix: Transcription Notation

[ Overlapping speech
(.) Pause
( ) Inaudible
((clap)) Double parentheses transcriber’s comments

Always Underlining indicates stress or emphasis in the speech
Yes:: Colons indicate drawn-out speech
barrio Italics indicates original Spanish word used
It’s mostly from the –? Hyphen indicates cut off word or phrase
[...] Omitted talk
**You can’t do that** Bold indicates author’s analytical focus
References


http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/council/pdf/agenda/cm/2006/060516/20060516_hhs01.pdf


