

Maneuvering between the individual and the social dimensions of narratives in a poor man's discursive negotiation of stigmaⁱ

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Abstract

In current Western consumer societies, the poor are excluded and occupy stigmatized positions. By analyzing an interview with a poor man, I look at how stigma is discursively negotiated through the interplay between individual and social dimensions of narratives. First, the interviewee resists the interviewer's 'poor man'-category projection by setting up alternative groups. Second, he invokes and aligns with dominant discourses regarding the necessity to own consumer goods and find a work-life balance, by which he constructs the identity of an empowered "*bricoleur*" (cf Gabriel et al., 2010). These findings are then related to Goffman's theory of stigma and information control (1963) and to the inextricable link between the performed nature of narratives, their individual and social dimensions and their local and global contexts.

Keywords: stigma, dominant discourses, interview, categorization, identity

Introduction

Being poor in a welfare state such as Belgium may, at first sight, be considered not so bad. Not only has the implementation of welfare states led to a general reduction of poverty,

with Belgium having one of the lowest rates of absolute poverty in a study on 15 affluent industrialized nations (Kenworthy, 1999), but it also resulted in generous social welfare programs (concerning family allowance, medical and unemployment insurance and retirement). Belgium “consistently ranks among the top nations in its human development index that measures the quality of life in countries” (Encyclopedia of the Nations, 2012). There is a significant amount of help provided to poor people by the government, both on a financial level and by means of other supporting programs such as access to low-income housing. In particular, this article focuses on an interview with a man who is in serious debts and who receives help from the social services by means of a ‘Collective debt mediation’ program (see more information in the data description). Through this program, the participants are not only protected, but their debts are also negotiated – and often reduced – and a minimal income is assured, thus rendering these people’s situation relatively financially secure.

However, this is just one side of the coin of poverty, since it cannot simply be regarded as a matter of material and financial deficit. This is also acknowledged by the Belgian government, that accepted the following definition as its official characterization of poverty, namely as “a network of social exclusions that expands itself over several areas of one’s individual and collective existence” (Vranken and De Boyser, 2003, p.36). By putting so much emphasis on exclusion, this definition highlights the socially stigmatized aspect of poverty. Drawing on Goffman, stigmatization can be characterized as the reduction “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (1963, p.11). Importantly, stigma is regarded here not as a ‘property’ of a person, but rather as something that is in-situ negotiated with others and of which the relevance varies greatly depending on how it is talked into being from one context to another. Stigma is closely related to membership of particular social

groups, and thus also to a person's identity construction, which, following Kroskrity, can be defined as "the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories" (Kroskrity, 2000, p.111). Also in this definition, we need to emphasize the constructive nature of identity, since, as Bucholtz notes, "although identities link individuals to particular social groups, such links are not predetermined" (Bucholtz, 1999, p.209), but instead, they are talked into being and negotiated, often interactively by several interlocutors, through language. Furthermore, identities are multiple and fluid, potentially resulting in individuals shifting from one identity to another over the course of a few turns, thus making them quite complex to grasp and to analyze. This is especially so since there is not a single way to express identity, rather it is the result of a combination of a number of linguistic markers. These are situated on different levels of analysis, namely lexical, textual/pragmatic, and interactional levels (De Fina, 2003, p.15) and it is only by the integration of the findings on all these levels, that the many-sidedness of identity construction is done justice to.

Given the fact that my aim is to investigate a poor man's construction of identity and its relation to social groups, it is fairly logical to investigate narratives elicited through interviews since poverty is a face threatening topic (Brown and Levinson, 1987) people are usually not prone to talk about spontaneously. Furthermore, interviews typically generate narratives, of which the purpose has been described as "the creation of an autonomous, unique self in discourse" (Johnstone, 1996, p.56) and which are intended "to claim or negotiate group membership and to demonstrate that we are in fact worthy members of those groups" (Linde, 1993, p.3). This potential construction of a collective identity as a member of a group as opposed to a more individually oriented identity is explored in this article by relating it to the balancing between the social and the personal dimensions of

narratives (cf De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012, p.149), in the sense that on the one hand stories need to be “culture conforming”, thus drawing on dominant discourses, but that on the other hand they also have to violate canonical expectancy in order to be tellable (Bruner, 1991, p.71-72). It is precisely this interaction between these – sometimes conflicting – demands of the social and the personal dimension of narratives and how it affects the interviewee’s identity construction that will be focused on in the analysis of this interview.

Of course, the use of interviews as data has been criticized, but, as it has been argued extensively by now (see e.g. De Fina, 2009, 2011) this can be overcome by looking at the interactional nature of these interviews as discursive practices, taking into account their contexts and the importance of the interviewer’s contributions and category projections (see e.g. Bartesaghi and Perlmutter Bowen, 2009; Van De Mieroop and Clifton, 2012) as a guiding element in the way meaning is collaboratively constructed (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). Hence I will investigate how the interviewee constructs his identity in a context that, both situationally and through the contributions of the interviewer, as will be discussed below, projects the category ‘poor man’ upon him.

This category projection not only highlights the topic of poverty as central in the interaction, but it also makes relevant the “field of economy”, since, as Bourdieu notes, the poor “stand in a relation of marginal exclusion” to this field (Bourdieu, 1993; cited in Hanks, 2005, p.74). Because of the centrality of this field in our current societies, it is quite logical that exclusion from it implies stigmatization. Since this field entails a number of dominant discourses and given the poors’ stigmatized position in relation to this field, these narrators are quite prone to negotiate their position (for another example, see Van De Mieroop, 2011), which may either comply with or alternatively counter these socially shared discourses (Bamberg, 2006a, p.145; De Fina et al., 2006, p.7). As Bamberg demonstrates (see

e.g. 1997; 2003), this position can be uncovered by analyzing (1) how narrators position themselves within the referential world they discursively set up and how they negotiate this position with the characters that are presented as populating these and (2) how they position themselves vis à vis the other interlocutors, in this case thus the interviewer, but potentially also the overhearing audience that is implicitly made present through the use of a tape recorder. Both levels of positioning will be analyzed here with a focus on how the interviewee maneuvers between discursively foregrounding the social or the individual dimension of his stories in relation to the dominant discourses that he invokes while negotiating the (de)construction of a stigmatized identity.

Data description

The interview under study here, comes from a larger corpus of semi-structured research interviews regarding people's lives, careers and personal situations. A small subset of this corpus consisted of interviews with poor peopleⁱⁱ, of which a few interviews were already discussed in Van De Mieroop (2011). This interview took place in 2009 in a village in Belgium. The local debt intermediary had selected the interviewee, who was a client of hers. He agreed to be interviewed about his life, living conditions, financial problems, future plans and so on. The interviewee is a 64 year old man who is in 'Collectieve schuldbemiddeling' (*Collective debt mediation*). This means that the court decides that the clients' debts are so high that they have to be controlled by a social worker of the OCMW ('Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn', *Public Center for Social Wellbeing*). The social worker negotiates with the creditors on the amount of money that can be paid off, usually within a time span of five to ten years. All interests on the debts are erased and other consequences

of the debts (for instance potential evictions by a bailiff) are also warded off. Due to the negotiations, the amount of money that is actually paid off can be substantially lower than the original amount of debts. In this case, the social worker has full control over the clients' budget. In particular, this interviewee receives € 300 per month from the OCMW for his daily expenses.

The interviewee is well aware of the fact that he was chosen on the basis of his financial problems and the reasons for the interviewee's debts are also extensively discussed in the interview. From the interview, the following reasons could be deducted (in chronological order): (1) the bankruptcy of the interviewee's company, (2) a divorce which made the interviewee obliged to pay alimony and (3) the interviewee's health problems, due to a car accident and to the violent behavior of the son of his new partner, which resulted in a high absentee rate at his job. This caused even more financial problems since the interviewee was involved in a self-employed profession at that time. The interviewee says he weighed his options before going to the OCMW, even considering suicide and fleeing from the country. He is very optimistic about his current situation and says to be proud of his recent achievements (e.g. his involvement in a welfare organization and his job as a volunteer at the holiday houses of a Flemish organization abroad).

The interviewee did not know the interviewer in advance. So there was definitely a certain distance between the interviewer and the interviewee, also because the latter was aware of the fact that the former conducted the interviews as part of a research project related to her studies. The interviewer brought a list of questions to the interviews and used these to loosely structure the interviews. However, she allowed topical deviations from these themes and further questioned additional topics raised by the interviewee.

Furthermore, she took on an empathizing attitude towards the interviewee, as was also shown in Van De Mieroop (2011).

Analyses

Throughout the interview, there are a number of instances in which the interviewee explicitly counters the 'poor man'-categorization, which of course already entails a number of culturally shared expectations. This categorization is both implicitly constructed through the context and, more specifically, the stigmatizing process of selecting interviewees for the simple reason of them being in the collective debt mediation program. But the interviewer does a lot of categorization work as well (cf Bartesaghi and Perlmutter Bowen, 2009) which explicitly projects the label of 'poor man' onto the interviewee and highlights the stigmatized nature of this label by linking it to the consumer society (e.g. line 390-391: *And how does it actually feel to be poor in the rather wealthy society?*). Furthermore, she constructs two opposing groups, namely people who need help from the OCMW and people who can manage themselves, e.g. by repeatedly talking about 'crossing the threshold' to the OCMW (line 111 and 564), thus emphatically marking the transition to the group of poor people. However, the interviewee resists these repeated category projections by making an additional division within this group of poor people and as such, he counters the interviewer's construction of a unified social group of the poor. He does this a number of times during the interview, but the following excerpt is one of the most explicit examples of such a counter. It emerges in the middle of a turn by the interviewee, which was initially an answer to a question about what advice he would give to people who are in financial trouble

(line 563). In his answer, the interviewee mainly states that people have to find their own way and then quite abruptly (hence the initial contrastive conjunction *but* in line 597) shifts topic to his personal situation again and continues to initiate a story about other poor people that is framed as contrasting with his own situation (line 606 and following).

Excerpt 1ⁱⁱⁱ

597 IE *But I do have the big advantage, I am glad for that,*

598 *that that I erm*

599 (2.1)

600 IE *I am a a they always used to say: "a new rich" hey, I*

601 *am a new poor*

602 IR *Yes*

603 IE *Erm again also to take of all the negative of being poor.*

604 *But ended up in another corner because of*

605 *circumstances, but thus I don't really feel like a poor man.*

606 *While that people who from generation to generation erm are*

607 *begging or are saying: "hh, shall I t- shall I buy*

608 *a kilo of apples this month or buy a kilo of apples*

609 *next month", year in year out, gene- generation in*

610 *[generation out, that is very bad.*

611 IR *[Yes*

612 IE *Because those will thus nestle themselves in that coc↓oon and those*

613 *thus don't want out of that anymore, because then they face*

He then contrasts this by temporally juxtaposing (cf *while* in line 606) a story in which he describes the lives of 'real' poor people. He enlivens and concretizes this story by inserting a direct quote in which he not only describes these people's doubts about whether or not to buy a kilo of apples, but also mimicks it by the hesitant start of the quote (line 607). By framing the purchase of apples as an issue, the interviewee presents it in sharp contrast with his own considerations when deciding which food to buy, as will be illustrated in excerpt 3. Furthermore, he stresses the cyclic nature of these people's poverty and by repeating the term generation ('generatie' in Dutch) a number of times, he implicitly refers to the Dutch technical term 'generatiearmoede' (*generational poverty*), thus demonstrating his knowledge of social jargon. He closes this initial description by an explicit negative evaluation of the poors' situation (line 610), thus clearly distancing himself from this group and implicitly showing empathy.

After an overlapping affirmation of the interviewer, the interviewee further expands upon this negative evaluation by causally (cf *because*, line 612) linking it to an additional evaluation. However, the interviewee's initial empathy with the group of generational poors is now replaced by a negative evaluation of their behavior, which is constructed as characterized by their reluctance to get a job (lines 613-615) or to mix with other people (lines 612 and 617-618). As such, the interviewee sets up a clear us-versus-them dichotomy and emphasizes the distance between himself and *those* people (cf line 612). The topic is then closed by two mitigating statements: one regarding his knowledge (line 618: *I don't know*) and one regarding the truth value of his statements (line 619). This is acknowledged by the interviewer in line 620, after which the interviewee vaguely concludes by referring to the difference between these two groups, and – assuming that this turn is an on-topic (line 621) – this draws additional attention to the ingroup-outgroup dichotomy. This is

acknowledged again by the interviewer in overlap, after which she switches topic and initiates a new question.

So in this excerpt, the interviewee very explicitly distances himself from the group of generational poors in the beginning, and he demonstrates this distance further implicitly by voicing and aligning with typical dominant discourses about these people, who are presented as a unified group 'nestled in a cocoon' (cf line 612) and as reluctant to get a job (cf line 614-615). By referring to such a dominant discourse about 'the' poor people in his story, the interviewee foregrounds the communal cultural dimension of his story of which the ownership is much more widely shared than would be the case with a narrative of personal experience.

This shared ownership is explicitly interactionally constructed in the following fragment, in which the interviewee again sets up a dichotomy between himself and poor people. Excerpt 2 starts with a reaction of the interviewer to a preceding statement of the interviewee that he is admired by a lot of people, even by those who are financially better off than him. The interviewer confirms this by personally addressing the interviewee and attributing a very positive attitude to him (line 546), which results in positive reactions (lines 547-548). In overlap with this, the interviewee starts his turn and shifts the focus to an impersonal discussion of master narratives of poor people (line 549-550). In a rushthrough, he presents this as a resumption of a previous joint discussion, as shown by the inclusive we-forms which almost imply the interviewer's approval (lines 550-551). As such, the interviewee legitimizes his change in topic, since it is typically not part of the discursive rights of an interviewee to be in control of topic changes, he thus implicitly asks for the interviewer's ratification. This is delivered in line 552 by means of an overlapping affirmative particle.

Excerpt 2

546 IR *E:rm you you radiate precisely a very positive attitude and I think*
547 *that maybe ↑towards the people that they will then also react*
548 *rather positively (.) with [respect to you.*

549 IE *[•hhh Yes. What is what is the image*
550 *erm what is the image of a a poor man? <Like we already said,*
551 *°we started with a [poor man and so on°>*

552 IR *[Yes*

553 IE *What is the image of the poor man? That is the poor soul that is*
554 *begging there at the corner of the street because he doesn't have*
555 *food, dressed in a pair of pants that is torn, with a sweater on from*
556 *where the pieces are hanging, with a little hat on, if he has*
557 *a little hat.*

558 IR *Yes*

559 IE *That is the image of a poor man. He::::*

560 *(1.6)*

561 IE *└ have erm <been to that meeting last week with those people>*
562 *and I was wearing a three-piece suit.*

563 *(2.8)*

564 IR *Yes yes that makes indeed [a (very) big difference.*

565 IE *[That makes that makes a big*

566 *difference=*

After the interviewee's topic change is ratified, he repeats the self-initiated question he is about to answer. In this repetition of the question, the indefinite article of the original question (line 550: *a a poor man*) is changed into a definite article in line 553, which gives the question a more generic status and its scope applicability to the entire group (Haeseryn et al., 1997), thus clearly hinting at the fact that the interviewee is voicing a dominant discourse here. This generic use is maintained in the answer as well, in which also distance from the interviewee is created by a deictic spatial reference (*there*). Again, as in the previous excerpt, the poor are described as beggars who do not have food (lines 554-555), but this time the description itself focuses mainly on clothing. Again, the description is vivid because of its degree of detail and due to the agentless enumeration of potential garments, *the poor man* is depicted as a passive, powerless recipient showing no initiative. This is shown clearly in lines 556-557: the interviewee describes the potential presence of *a little hat* as depending merely on the condition that the poor man owns one or not (line 556-557: *if...*), thus implying that the latter is not able to change the situation if the condition is not met. After an acknowledgement of the interviewer, the interviewee closes this topic by rephrasing his initial question to a statement. He then shifts to the indefinite article and abandons the generic use of the term, as such framing the following as an exemplary single case. He continues with the third person pronoun (line 559: *he:::*), thus initiating an on-topic continuation, but breaks off. Then there is a pause after which the interviewee self-selects and shifts the discussion back to a personal frame and initiates a very brief story, consisting of an orientation (line 561) and a complicating action (line 562), in which he factually states

what he was wearing during a meeting^v he went to the week before. By pronouncing the initial first person pronoun with a higher volume, a contrast is created with the previous third person pronoun that represents the outgroup of poor people. Furthermore, by describing his clothing with the term *three piece suit* (line 562), a detailed and vivid image is created which of course also contrasts strongly with the previous description of the attire of the outgroup. Interestingly, the evaluation of this story is noticeably absent here. After a lengthy pause, which implicitly invites the other interlocutor to take the floor, the interviewer formulates this evaluation by confirming this and the importance of ways of clothing. This is repeated by the interviewee in overlap and the topic is then closed by a latched on affirmative particle by the interviewer. As such, the evaluation is collaboratively constructed by the two interlocutors.

Thus in this excerpt, the interviewee discusses how 'typical' poor people dress and frames it as a culturally shared description before (line 549-553) and after (line 559) this description. He then contrasts this with a brief story of how he was dressed at a very particular moment in the past, thus shifting back to a personal orientation. Instead of evaluating the story himself, there is a pause, which thus implicitly hands over the turn to the interviewer to formulate the evaluation, which is then ratified by the interviewee. As such, the dominant discourse of how poor people are dressed in contrast with the interviewee, ends up to be collaboratively constructed by the interviewee and the interviewer, even though it is the latter who took the initiative for this discussion. As such, poor people are clearly presented as an outgroup in contrast with the interviewee at the story level, while at the interactional level, an ingroup is created consisting of the interviewer aligning with the interviewee through the collaborative construction of the evaluation, and thus taking joint ownership of the interpretation of this short narrative. As

such, the socially shared nature of his words, that is initially invoked through the voicing of this dominant discourse on poor people's attire, is also transferred to the interviewee's individually oriented story through the joint construction of the evaluation which implicitly links this personal story to culturally shared social expectations, thus relating the personal and the social dimensions of a narrative to one another, both on a referential and an interactional level.

That the individual and social dimensions of a narrative are inextricably entwined, is also shown in the following fragment. This fragment occurred after the interviewer asked a quite direct question about buying more expensive types of food (line 427-429: *for example you feel like ((eating)) lamb once, but that that then actually is not possible because of your financial situation*). As such, she also projects the categorization of 'poor man' upon the interviewee. The latter responds affirmatively to this question, thus accepting this categorization projection, and then embarks on a lengthy story about how he compares the prices of the different supermarkets in the region and how he manages to buy inexpensive food. The following excerpt starts in the middle of the complicating action of this story:

Excerpt 3

443 IE *And then I will also I am also willing to say like:*

444 *"Today, there are (.) special offers porc vea-erm*

445 *beef minced meat at 2 euros, 2 euros 50 per kilo", you go and get that.*

446 IR *Yes*

447 IE *And then you take 2 or 3 kilos there and you put that in the freezer.*

448 IR *Yes*

449 IE *So that is my way of living. I have also already gone to get*
450 *steak, second choice, at 5 euros hey, a rump steak hey, while*
451 *that that thirty years ago ago (.) was still a lot more expensive=*
452 IR *=Yes*
453 IE *So that is just watching what you buy, how you buy and then*
454 *every now and then I can afford myself a ↑lobster, but*
455 *you prepare that then yourself.*
456 IR *Yes*
457 IE *Because if you go and eat that in a restaurant, then you have*
458 *lost 50 euros,*
449 IR *[↑Yes, that is in[deed*
460 IE *[and if you go and get that in the Colruyt you have*
461 *lost 7 euros.*
462 IR *Yes*
463 IE *That's the difference.*

In this fragment, the interviewee describes how he manages to buy cheap food that is of high quality and the level of detail adds to the construction of a factual account (cf Edwards and Potter, 1992). This is even underlined by the many repairs, both regarding the kinds of meat he buys (lines 444-445 and 450-451) and the matching price offers, which suggest the importance the interviewee attaches to being accurate. The final example in this list, the lobster (line 454), is especially interesting, and its marked character is also prosodically emphasized by the interviewee who pronounces it with a rising pitch. Since the lobster has a high symbolic value and is almost emblematic for luxury and typical of the well-to do-classes,

the interviewee thus refers to dominant discourses of types of food related to specific social classes. As such, the interviewee aligns with the higher social classes and clearly distances himself from the lower classes, whom, as he described in excerpt 1, even have to struggle to buy a kilo of apples. He then describes in detail how he manages to buy this type of food, again using a high level of detail.

Interestingly, throughout these descriptions, the interviewee switches perspective quite a lot, oscillating between a personal perspective voiced by the first person pronoun (lines 443, 449 and 454) and the impersonal second person pronominal form *you* ('ge' in Dutch, lines 445, 447, 453, 455, 457 and 460), which, as described by Timor and Landau (1998), has a more general applicability and potentially also involves the interviewer and the overhearing audience in the situation. This pronominal oscillation is truly emblematic for this narrative's balancing between its personal and its social dimension, between which the interviewee quite skillfully maneuvers. In this case, through the use of the first person pronominal forms, the interviewee presents himself as the active agent – as opposed to for example the passive poor people of excerpt 2 – who makes his own decisions so that he can even buy a lobster every now and then, thus positioning himself along with the higher social classes on a story level. The use of the impersonal second person pronouns, then, involves the interviewer and the overhearing audience in the interaction, who seem to be positioned as the recipient of information, or even of advice regarding how to spend money wisely on food, since the interviewee's statements resemble instructions in the form of peremptory declaratives (e.g. *you go and get that [...] you take 2 or 3 kilos there and you put that in the freezer*). So this gives the interviewee the superior role of advice giver on an interactional level, while he implicitly stresses the collective dimension of his story on a referential level, thus linking his narrative of personal experience to a more generic, socially shared, narrative.

However, as Bruner (1991) notes, a narrator needs to highlight what makes his story exceptional against the backdrop of everything that is canonically expected. The interviewee does this mainly by disclosing the way he deals with his limited income. In the following excerpt, the interviewee initiates the topic of travelling as a way to raise his income (line 167). This excerpt is part of a lengthy turn by the interviewee in response to the interviewer's question about whether it was difficult to go to the social services in the first place (line 111). In this part, he initiates the story of his travels (lines 170-171) that is framed as an example to support his claim (line 167) that he has an additional income:

Excerpt 4

- 165 IE *So that that financial ((part)) is not a barrier for me, because you then*
166 *also (.) by (.) all sorts of things all sorts of things ((you)) can do*
167 *certain things that raise your income a bit like that. That is erm*
168 *not always, that is indeed legal, but it cannot always be looked*
169 *at as if: "You live only on 300 euros".*
170 *For example erm last year I have (.) 6 or 7 months in a year's*
171 *time, in a year hey, been away, I was abroad.*
172 IR *↑Oh*
173 IE *Have I, I have at a certain mo- about three years ago*
174 *volunteer wi:::th with X. Do you know that?*
175 IR *Yes*
176 IE *X- holidays erm.*
177 IR *Yes ()*

178 IE The division of XX. As a companion and as night watch- watchman and
179 those kinds of things. So my career (.) goes on now actually.

((7 lines omitted))

187 Because of course, you live there for free, you live, everything is paid

188 for. Your journey is paid for, your food is paid for, stay is paid for.

189 And you get paid for that () per day.

190 IR Yes

The first line of this excerpt consists of an evaluation of the interviewee of the preceding discussion in which he talked about his decision to enter the collective debt mediation program. In this evaluation, he seemingly constructs himself as someone who reconciles himself to his limited income, thus resembling the construction of the passive poor people from the previous excerpts. However, he immediately links this to an explanation which refutes this construction of a passive identity and he starts talking about how he deals with this. Again, he shifts to the second person pronoun, which gives his words a more general scope and involves the interviewer on an interactional level (cf discussion above). His initial description is quite vague (line 166-167) and it contains a couple of pauses (line 166), a hesitation (line 167) and a reformulation which explicitly states that it is legal. The affirmative adverb ('wel' in Dutch, translated here as *indeed*, line 168) clearly marks it as a counter to potential misinterpretations. These vague and hesitant references to an additional income are then related to a possible perception of the interviewee's actual income. This perception is voiced as a direct quote, which explicitly addresses the interviewee through the second person pronoun and in which the amount of money is not only explicitly specified, but also marked as very little (*only* in line 169). The quote is not

attributed to any particular speaker, since the agent is omitted through the passivization of the verb (*be looked at*, line 168-169). It is thus constructed as a perception of an unspecified and undefined number of people, and reflects a dominant discourse of which amounts of money a person could possibly live on as a monthly income.

Instead of countering the content of this dominant discourse, he aligns with it by giving an example of how he manages to circumvent this issue. Markedly, he does not directly provide an explanation, but instead, he formulates the abstract of the upcoming story (line 170-171) which not only shifts his words back to the personal level, but which also seems to consist of an abrupt topic shift. In this abstract, he asserts that he was abroad and stresses the relative amount of time (see repetition in line 171: *in a year's time, in a year hey*). This seems contradictory to the preceding discussion, and not an illustration at all, as is also clear from an emic perspective as the interviewer utters the – prosodically marked – news receipt marker *oh* (Heritage, 1984). The interviewee then embarks on the orientation phase of the story (Labov and Waletzky, 1966) which shifts the time perspective a couple of years back and explains how the interviewee got involved in the organization for which he is volunteering. He explicitly and elaborately checks the interviewer's understanding and knowledge of the organization, which is quite well known in Flanders, in the following turns (lines 174-178). Then he lists his tasks as a volunteer by labeling them explicitly by their professional terms (*companion, night watchman*, line 178). He then frames these as his *career* (line 179), which he describes as ongoing in a hedged way (*actually* in line 179). By self-initiating this topic of travelling and by framing his voluntary tasks as a career, he draws on two dominant discourses, namely that one has to be able to travel and that one has to have a career. By combining the two, the interviewee again presents himself as complying

with, but also outsmarting the demands of these dominant discourses, thus endowing his own story with exceptionality against the backdrop of canonicity (Bruner, 1991, p.71).

The story then moves in the complicating action phase, in which the interviewee mainly enumerates the specific place-names he visited and will visit with the organization and the amount of time he spent there. Then finally, the interviewee concludes his story by implicitly linking it to the initial discussion of his income, as the causal conjunction *because* demonstrates. Again, he switches to the second person pronominal form, which he uses consistently here. His evaluation is quite detailed, since after the initial summary (line 187: *you live there for free*), there is not only a paraphrase (line 187: *everything is paid for*), but also an enumeration of what this comprises by means of a three part list (line 188: *journey, food, stay*) which typically implies covering the whole ground (Jefferson, 1990; Potter et al., 1991). This is then contrasted with the pay the interviewee receives for his work through a chiasm underlining the marked nature of the content, which concludes the story (line 189). So in this excerpt, the interviewee again draws on dominant discourses, namely of amounts of money one can live on, the need for a career and for travelling. By framing his volunteering work as a 'career', he positions himself within the group of employed people, as such implicitly opposing his position to that of the unemployed generational poors as the interviewee described in excerpt 1. Also, by aligning with these dominant discourses, the interviewee stresses that he conforms to these cultural expectations, thus constructing his identity as part of the mainstream social group, but since he also describes how he manages to deal with these issues, he demonstrates exceptionality at the same time.

The link between the latter two socially shared discourses (career and travelling) is even further explored in the final excerpt, which focuses on another potential 'career' of the interviewee, namely becoming the chairman of a Flemish welfare organization. The

interviewee self-initiates this topic in a lengthy discussion regarding potential help from his family and friends. This topic was introduced by the interviewer in line 619. After talking about his family, the interviewee states that he has not got many friends in the village he is living in and that his main contacts are people from the welfare organization.

Excerpt 5

- 663 IE *I have contact with that every now and then and that is okay. But I also*
664 *don't want to go tie myself down or go pin myself down. One has also*
665 *asked me: "Do you want to be e:rm chairman of ()". "No, no"*
666 IR *No*
667 IE *Also because I can't do it (.) because me also knows that I will be*
668 *away in a a a day or ten. I am in in the South of F- in:: France*
669 *for a couple of wee[ks*
670 IR *[Yes*
671 IE *Then is that maybe a few weeks later that I will be in Switzerland.*
672 *So I don't know any va- and I will not give that up (.) to to*
673 *do my best because then that is maybe again (), to do my*
674 *best for X. I want to do that, but I will not*
675 *drop my life for that.*
676 IR *Yes*

The interviewee ends the topic of his relatively limited amount of contact with friends by a positive evaluation (line 663: *that's okay*). He then opposes this contact with friends to the

upcoming story, as is shown through the use of the initial contrastive conjunction *but* in the following sentence before voicing the abstract of this story. This abstract concerns the potential threat of these contacts to his freedom, which he describes vividly through the use of two quite expressive verbs, namely *tie oneself down* and *pin oneself down* (line 664). He then explains the relation between these two by voicing a question in direct reported speech containing an offer to assume a function, which is attributed to an impersonal agent, thus very loosely referring back to the people that were mentioned earlier (prior to the excerpt). The function that is being offered, is labeled as *chairman*, which is a category entitlement that implies a certain amount of status (cf Potter, 1996, p.133). The interviewee then immediately voices his negative response, also using direct reported speech, thus “adding verisimilitude to the narrated event” (Moita-Lopes, 2006, p.301). The interviewer mirrors this response, thus ratifying the interviewee’s reasoning. Lines 664-665 are characterized by volitional constructions, stressing that the interviewee does not want to get involved, but he then complements these by a modal verb of inability (line 667) expressing that he is also not able to do it. This is then causally linked to the incompatibility of the interviewee’s career, namely his travel plans, which are enumerated here again, listing the timing, the countries and the length of his stay (quite similar, but less specified than in the omitted lines in excerpt 4). The last travel plan (line 671) is described tentatively (*maybe*) and the interviewee starts to further explore this in line 672, but then breaks of his turn to link the discussion back to his refusal of the position of chairman. In this part, he explicitly marks it as a choice he is obliged to make between careers, namely his travels and his commitment to the organization, even in spite of his willingness to be involved in the latter as well (line 674). His travels, which are initially vaguely described as *that* in line 672, are reformulated in the concluding sentence as *my life* (line 675), thus reframing them as something of central

importance in the interviewee's life. This was also the case in excerpt 4, in which these were described as the interviewee's *career* (line 179). So the interviewee constructs his identity here as a busy man who is obliged to make choices and who has to decide which activities he gives priority to, as the negotiations of modality, namely of volition and (in)ability, demonstrate.

So the initial topic initiated by the interviewer about potential help from family and friends, is changed by means of stepwise topic shifts to a discussion of the interviewee's struggle between his friends, who potentially take up too much of his time, their offer for the job of chairman and his *career* abroad. Such a struggle is in line with dominant discourses of managing careers and personal life, in which people typically oscillate between what they want and what they can and cannot do in combination with their jobs. This is emblematically shown through the interviewee's shifts between modalities of volition and inability. As such, the interviewee's stepwise topic shifts resist the interviewer's other-categorization of 'poor man in need of help' and, by drawing on dominant discourses of busy careers, he replaces this with a self-presentation of a busy man who has to turn down offers. So because of the relation between the interviewee's individual story to "communal plots which have been told before" (Bamberg, 2006b, p.5) in our current day Western society, an alternative group membership is constructed which implicitly counters the interviewer's category projection.

Discussion and conclusions

In this interview, there is a lot of maneuvering between the social and the personal dimensions of narrative. First of all, a number of dominant, socially shared discourses were

being discussed quite explicitly. Firstly, the interviewee initiates the discourse of poor people who are reluctant to get jobs and face their lives. This is in line with internal causal attributions for poverty, for example described by Loix and Pepermans as follows: “lack of thrift and proper money management by poor people, lack of effort by the poor themselves” (Loix and Pepermans, 2009, p.385). Such internal causal attributions imply that one is to blame oneself for one’s poverty, and, according to the Belgian sociologist and poverty expert Jan Vranken, such a personal blame depiction is still widely adopted by most politicians and people in Belgium (Vranken in Krols, 2004)^{vi}. Thus the interviewee’s discussion clearly represents the governing dominant discourse in the Belgian society regarding poverty.

Secondly, and in relation with the previous one, the interviewee stresses the importance of having a career and the need to make choices in his busy life. This links up with discourses on finding a work-life balance and the social status that is related to particular careers. Finally, the interviewee emphasizes his ability to travel, to purchase specific types of food and to own particular types of clothes. This is related to the consumer society, in which status is acquired and social inclusion is achieved through consumer activity (Smart, 2012). Since the symbolic value of consumer goods is linked to social significance (Miles, 1998, p.7), and since the interviewee sometimes refers to objects with high symbolic value (e.g. the poors’ apples in excerpt 1 versus the interviewee’s lobster in excerpt 3), he presents himself as aligning with these discourses and constructs himself as a member of the consumer ingroup, thus resisting the interviewer’s category projections. So by drawing on the social, culturally shared dimension of narratives, the interviewee presents himself “as typical or characteristic or ‘culture confirming’ in some way” (Bruner, 1991, p.71).

However, by presenting the need to own certain goods as problems that can be managed and by describing his busy life with a ‘career’ abroad, the interviewee also makes

his story individual and exceptional, and hence, tellable (Bruner, 1991, p.71). In particular, he presents himself as “making the best out of the resources available, being on the lookout for opportunities, living within their means and, within these terms, feeling in control of their lives” (Gabriel et al., 2010, p.1704). This has been identified by Gabriel et al. in the context of unemployment narratives from an organizational perspective and has been described as an attitude of *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). Interestingly, this “control” is not only shown on a referential level here (as is the case in Gabriel et al., 2010), but also on a linguistic level: first, it was discussed that the interviewee not only constructs himself as an active agent who has to weigh his decisions by oscillating between volition and ability (excerpt 5), but that he also comes to the fore by using the first person pronoun, as such taking ownership for his actions. Second, he sometimes assumes a superior role in the interaction by using second person pronominal forms that not only have a more general scope, but sometimes also put the interviewee in the role of advice giver who formulates peremptory declaratives that seem to give instructions to the interviewer and the overhearing audience. Third, this dominance is also reflected in his control of topics: while it is typical for interviewees in research interviews not to be entitled to the discursive rights of topic initiation and topic closure, this interviewee resists these limited discursive rights quite often, for example by stepwise topic shifts from the topic of the question to a rather different topic (e.g. excerpt 5) and by explicitly accounting for more abrupt topic changes. In these accounts, the interviewee, instead of asking for permission, uses the inclusive we-form to suggest consent regarding this topic change (see excerpt 2). Finally, he sometimes also maneuvers the interviewer into formulating an evaluation (see excerpt 2). As such, the story is constructed as collaboratively generated, which suggests general acceptance of the point that is being made, thus implicitly linking this point of his individually oriented story to socially shared

expectations. As such, the interviewee also displays resistance to the interviewing situation and the category projections that are talked into being through it on an interactional level.

So this article demonstrated that this interviewee interactionally resists the categorization of 'poor man', among others by the explicit construction of a new ingroup-outgroup distinction (see excerpts 1 and 2), and by supporting this alternative social group membership by initiating dominant discourses and aligning with them while maneuvering between the social and the individual dimensions of narratives. When looking at this from Goffman's insights on "stigma" and the management of information as a disclosure avoidance technique (Goffman, 1963), there are quite some interesting tendencies to be observed here. First of all, the interviewing situation made it prediscursively clear that the interviewee is a member of the stigmatized category of poor people and this renders avoidance techniques quite superfluous, as Goffman observed (1963, p. 13). However, by discursively constructing a new ingroup-outgroup distinction and aligning with socially shared discourses, membership of this stigmatized group is denied. So, by initiating and aligning with dominant discourses, membership of the group of mainstream (or 'normal' in Goffman's terms) people is claimed. Having negotiated this group membership, the interviewee becomes liable to avoidance of disclosure of the stigma and "the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self" (Goffman, 1963, p.57) again. This, actually, is quite explicitly voiced by the interviewee near the end of the interview, almost mimicking Goffman's description of information control (1963):

"You can draw a picture a picture <of my course of life> in a very short time, but things most of the things that I don't want to tell, I will not tell and the things that I want to tell differently, I will tell differently. So you never know that, I also don't know that of

someone else. I am now (.) fairly straightforward and erm honest in any case. (.) But (.) erm lying is different is something yes it is different from from not telling everything. There is a big difference. I am also not telling everything but in spite of that I am not lying.” (lines 577-588)^{vii}

By explicitly saying that he carefully managed the information he provided in the interview, the interviewee not only expresses that he did not grant the listener access into ‘the truth’ of his ‘experiences’, thus voicing what many scholars on narrative have already observed (see e.g. Atkinson and Delamont, 2006), but he also implicitly constructs the stigmatized nature of his identity in this particular situation. This can again be linked to the interviewee’s initiation of and alignment with dominant discourses, which, from this perspective, are to be regarded as bids for compliance with *normalness* and as a “culture conforming” construction of the self (Bruner, 1991). The interviewee’s maneuvering between foregrounding either the personal or the social dimensions of his narratives is thus considered here as a way of countering the stigmatizing category projection by the interviewer and by the situation.

Thus these analyses illustrated the inextricable link between the individual and the social dimensions of narratives and their contexts. On a local contextual level, it is not surprising that positions and stories are strongly linked to the fact that we are dealing here with an interaction between two interlocutors who did not know anything of one other in advance, except for the interviewee’s financial predicament. This was immediately made relevant in the interview as well, and this sets certain limitations on what *can* actually be said in such a situation and which topics can be dealt with and which ones cannot.

Importantly, this does not prescribe how topics are voiced and how identities, even when they are stigmatized in a particular situation, are negotiated. In the analyses, it became clear

that this *how* is managed here by bringing in the socially shared, global contextual level through the initiation of dominant discourses. As such, specific aspects from the interlocutors' subjective definitions of the societal context (Van Dijk, 2009) are made relevant through the in-situ performance of the narratives and this has important repercussions for the identity work and – in this case – stigma negotiation that is done through them.

Appendix: Original fragments

Excerpt 1

- 597 IE Maar ik heb wel het grote voordeel, daar ben ik dan blij om,
598 dat dat ik euh
599 (2.1)
600 IE Ik ben een ne ze zeiden altijd: “ne nieuwe rijke” vroeger he, ik
601 ben ne nieuwen arme
602 IR Ja
603 IE Euh ook weer al het negatieve d'eraf halen van het arm zijn.
604 Maar in een andere hoek terechtgekomen door
605 omstandigheden, maar ik voel me dan ook niet echt nen arme.
606 Terwijl dat mensen die van generatie op generatie euh zitten

607 te bedelen of zitten te zeggen van: “hh, ga ik d- ga ik deze
608 maand ne kilo appelen kopen of volgende maand ne kilo
609 appelen kopen”, jaar in jaar uit, gene- generatie in
610 [generatie uit, da's heel erg.
611 IR [Ja
612 IE Want die gaan zich dan ook nestelen in dieje coc↓on en die
613 willen daar dan ook niet meer uit, want dan staan ze tegenover
614 een andere waarheid, de andere waarheid van te moeten gaan
615 werken
616 IR Ja
617 IE Of te moeten gaan participeren aan het sociale leven of te
618 moeten gaan tonen in een bepaalde leefgroep, ik weet het
619 niet. Ik zeg nu maar iets
620 IR Ja
621 IE Dat is weer heel an[ders.
622 IR [Ja

Excerpt 2

546 IR Eu:h u u straalt juist een zeer positieve houding uit en ik denk
547 dat misschien naar de mensen ↑toe dat ze dan ook eerder
548 positief gaan reageren (.) ten [opzichte van u.
549 IE [•hhh Ja. Wat is, wat is het beeld
550 euh wat is het beeld van een een arme? <Zoals we al zeiden,

551 °we zijn begonnen van een [arme en zo°>
552 IR [Ja
553 IE Wat is het beeld van de arme? Dat is de sukkelaar die daar
554 staat te bedelen op de hoek van de straat omdat hij geen eten
555 heeft, gekleed in een broek die kapot is, met een trui aan waar
556 de stukken vanaf hangen, met een hoedje op, als hem een
557 hoedje heeft.
558 IR Ja
559 IE Dat is het beeld van een arme. Hij::::
560 (1.6)
561 IE Ik ben euh <vorige week naar die vergadering geweest met die
562 mensen> en ik had een driedelig kostuum aan.
563 (2.8)
564 IR Ja ja da maakt inderdaad [een (zeer) groot verschil.
565 IE [Dat maakt da maakt een groot
566 verschil=
567 IR =Ja

Excerpt 3

443 IE En dan ga ik ook niet ik ben ook niet te beroerd om te zeggen
444 van: "Vandaag staat er (.) speciale promoties varkens kal-euh
445 rundsgehakt aan 2 euro, 2 euro 50 de kilo", ga ge dat halen.

446 IR Ja

447 IE En dan neemt ge daar 2 of 3 kilo en steekt ge dat in den diepvries.

448 IR Ja

449 IE Dus dat is mijn manier van leven. Ik heb ook al steak gaan

450 halen, tweede keus, aan 5 euro he, nen biefstuk he, terwijl

451 dat die over over dertig jaar (.) nog veel duurder stond=

452 IR =Ja

453 IE Dat is dus gewoon kijken wat ge koopt, hoe ge koopt en dan

454 kan ik mij af en toe zelf een keer ne ↑kreeft permitteren, maar

455 die maakt ge dan wel zelf klaar.

456 IR Ja

457 IE Want als ge die gaat eten in een restaurant, dan zijde 50 euro

458 kwijt,

459 IR [↑Ja, da's inder[daad

460 IE [en als ge gaat halen in de Colruyt zijde 7

461 euro kwijt.

462 IR Ja

463 IE Dat is het verschil.

Excerpt 4

165 IE Dus dat dat financiële is geen barrière voor mij, omdat ge dan

166 ook (.) door (.) allerhande dingen allerhande dingen bepaalde

167 zaken kunt doen dat uw inkomen iets verhogen zo. Dat is euh
168 niet altijd, dat is wel legaal, maar het kan niet altijd zo bekeken
169 worden als: "Ge leeft maar van 300 euro".
170 Bijvoorbeeld euh vorig jaar ben ik (.) 6 of 7 maand op een jaar
171 tijd, op een jaar he, weggeweest, zat ik in het buitenland.
172 IR ↑Oh
173 IE Heb ik, ik heb op een gegeven oge- over een jaar of drie als
174 vrijwilliger bij::: bij X. Kent ge dat?
175 IR Ja
176 IE X-vakantie euh.
177 IR Ja ()
178 IE De afdeling van XX. Als begeleider en als nachtwach- waker en
179 dergelijke dingen. Dus mijn carrière (.) gaat nu eigenlijk verder.
((7 lines omitted))
187 Want natuurlijk, ge leeft daar gratis, ge leeft, alles is betaald.
188 Uw reis is betaald, uw eten is betaald, verblijf is betaald.
189 En ge wordt daar () per dag voor betaald.
190 IR Ja

Excerpt 5

663 IE Ik heb daar wel eens contact mee en da's goed. Maar ik wil mij
664 ook niet gaan vastzetten of gaan vastpinnen. Men heeft mij ook

665 gevraagd: "Wilt gij eu:h voorzitter zijn van ()". "Nee, nee"

666 IR Nee

667 IE Ook omdat ik het niet kan (.) omdat mij ook weet dat ik binnen n

668 n een dag of tien ben ik weg. Voor een paar weken in zit ik in

669 Zuid-F- in:: Frankrij[k

670 IR [Ja

671 IE Dan is dat misschien een paar weken daarna zit ik in Zwitserland.

672 Ik ken dus geen enkele va- en ik ga dat niet opgeven (.) om om

673 mij in te zetten want dan is da misschien weer (), om mij

674 in te zetten voor X. Ik wil dat wel doen, maar ik ga daarvoor

675 mijn leven niet laten vallen.

676 IR Ja

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Notes

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ⁱⁱⁱ The language of the interviews was Dutch. The original Dutch fragments were translated into English as literally as possible, which sometimes results in odd sentences. The original fragments are presented in the appendix and the translated fragments are presented in the text.

^{iv} The notation symbols are based on the 'Jefferson system' as for example explained in Antaki (2002).

^v This meeting had been extensively discussed prior to this excerpt and its importance had been stressed emphatically (lines 502-522).

^{vi} The original quote by Jan Vrancken in the interview was: 'De simplistische, maar heersende redenering bij het gros van de politici en in de samenleving is dat armen het zelf gezocht hebben.' [*The simplistic, but governing reasoning by most politicians and in the society in general is that the poor have brought their problems upon themselves.*] (p5)

^{vii} This fragment contained three affirmative particles by the interviewer, but these were deleted here since this fragment is not meant for analysis, but merely serves illustrative purposes.