THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF IN SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

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Aims

❑ To study the discursive process of Self (re)-construction in socio-cultural context through the analysis of autobiographical narratives. Two main topics:

▪ Studies about formal education, autobiographical memory and self

▪ Studies about identity reconstruction in cultural context

o Identity construction of lesbian women

o Identity reconstruction of women after suffering gender violence. Two analyses:

• Bruner's (1996, 1997) indicators of selfhood.

• Voices and positionings in identity reconstruction.

Theoretical-methodological framework

- Rejection of a notion of the self as homogeneous and stable, considered as an unified support of individual's acts.

- Characteristics of the self:

  - **Distributed** and **dialogical**. The self as "swarm of participations" (Bruner, 1995).

  - **Storied** (narrative) self. Self as a narrative (Bruner) Identity as a **life-story** (McAdams, 1996, 2001).

  - It takes the meaning from the historical circumstances of the culture where it participates. It is supported on meanings, languages and narratives which are culturally and historically specific (Bruner, 1996; 2003).

  - Personal identity (self) as **acts of identification** performed through discourse in socio-cultural settings.

Notion of Narrative

❑ Narratives are acquired in discursive practices about past experiences.

❑ Narrative as a discourse genre and as way of organizing experience (thinking).

❑ The narrative form incorporates the structure of events and perspectives, goals, temporal context, causal structure (landscape of action, Bruner, 1986) and motivations, mental states, etc. (landscape of consciousness).

AM & Narrative

- Autobiographical Memory is memory for information related to the self.

- Self-making as a narrative art (Bruner 1995).

- As any narrative, the life-story is mediated by semiotic tools that the individuals appropriate along their life.

- The appropriation of these tools is related to participation in different socio-cultural activities.

AM, Self & Narrative

- AM as a *narrative about one`s life*.

- *Self* as central *protagonist* and *story teller*.

- Self-narratives and memories of personal events emerge from social interactions.

- Narratives are rooted in implicit cultural models about what a person should be.

- These models provide guidelines for the construction of the self (*cultural self-construal*).

Cultural Self-construal
(Markus & Kitayama, 1991)

Western cultures: the Self is viewed as :

Autonomous.

Independent.

Defined by a unique repertoire of internal attributes, thoughts, feelings, etc.

Eastern cultures: the Self is viewed as :

Interdependent.

In continuous relation with others.

Part of a social web.

Cultural Self-construal & AM

❑ Differences in self-construal are related to differences in AM:

- ▪ Age at the earliest memory.
- ▪ Memory volume & Elaboration.
- ▪ Emotionality.
- ▪ Specificity.
- ▪ Themes (e.g. agency vs. relation).

Cultural Self-construal & AM (2)

a) Few studies about self-construal and autobiographical memories in other cultures, like Mexico.

Generally considered a collectivistic culture
(Hofstede, 1984, 2001; Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002)

(more interdependent self)

b) No studies about the influence of **specific cultural practices** on earliest personal memories and narratives (e.g. schooling practices).

Cultural Pathways to Development
(Greenfield, Keller Fuligni & Maynard, 2003, Greenfield 2009)

- Cultural forms of solving some universal tasks in human development (relationship formation, knowledge acquisition and the balance between autonomy-relation at adolescence):
  - Independence:
  - Interdependence.

# Socio-Demographic Ecologies & Cultural Pathways (Greenfield, 2009)

Socio-Demographic Ecologies & Cultural Pathways (Greenfield, 2009)

- Two socio-demographic models (ecologies):
  - *Gemeinshaft* ("community" Tönnies, 1887): rural residence, informal education at home, subsistence economy, and low-technology environments.
  - *Gesellschaft* ("society" Tönnies, 1887), : urban residence, **formal schooling**, commerce, and high-technology environments.
- Greenfield postulates that the movement of any ecological variable in a *Gesellschaft* direction shifts cultural values in an individualistic direction and developmental pathways toward more independent

Aims

❑ To analyse the relationship between formal schooling experience and autobiographical memories in Mexican men and women.

❑ To analyse some narrative aspects (i.e. the use of action & mental verbs and metacognitive evaluations) of the autobiographical narratives.

Method: Participants (96)
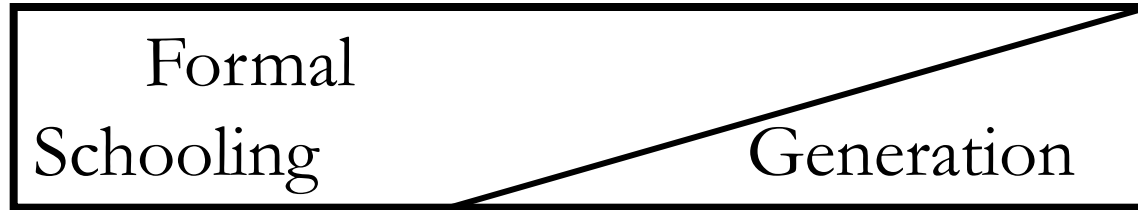
Formal Schooling	Generation	
	30/35	50/55
Literacy	8	8
	8	8
Primary Education	8	8
	8	8
University.	8	8
	8	8

Gender

Men
Women

Tamaulipas

Instrument

- Oral interviews:

  - Earliest memory

  - Three memories from different life-periods (childhood, adolescence-youth & adulthood).

Analysis: Categories

Characteristics of AM

- Volume
- Specificity (specific/general)
- Emotionality
- Themes (individual/social)

SELF in memories

- Autonomous orientation
- Social orientation (ratio others/self)
- Self descriptions (agency index)

Wang (2001, 2004)

Narrative Analysis

- Action verb-units

- Internal states verb-units:
    Cognitive
    Intentional
    Emotional

- Evaluation
    Metacognitive
    Meta-emotional

- Self and others

Smorti, A. (2004). Narrative strategies among early adolescents involved in bully-victim relationships. *Journal of School Violence, 4(1)*, 5-27

Summary of results

- Autobiographical memory narratives of participants from the literacy and the primary education groups:

  - More general.

  - Focused on the others (rather than on the self).

  - Relatively lower agency index (compared to the university group).

Summary of results (2)

Autobiographical memory narratives of participants from the university education group:

- More extended and specific.

- Focused on the self.

- Higher agency index.

Summary of results: Narrative analysis

- University group: predominance of the "*landscape of consciousness*" (Bruner, 1986), with references to mental states and a high degree of reflexivity about their own memories, with frequent use of metacognitive evaluations.

- Literacy group: predominance of the "*landscape of action*" (Bruner, 1986)", with fewer references to mental states and metacognitive evaluations.

- Primary education group: located in an intermediate position.

Conclusions

- Formal schooling, as a socio-cultural activity, influenced the characteristics of autobiographical memory, self and the narrative organization of the memories.

- Our results may support the role of formal education as an activity that promotes forms of remembering and self-construction associated to the cultures of independence.

Conclusions (2)

- These results may also support Greenfield's (2009) theory about the relationship between socio-demographic factors (e.g. formal schooling) and a trend towards more independent social behavior and more abstract cognition (evidenced in the characteristics of the autobiographical memories of the university group).

General Aims

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Identity and narrative (1)

- Identity as a **life-story** (McAdams, 2003, 2006).

  - Identity takes the form of a complete story, with scenario, scenes, characters, plot and themes.

  - In "modern" societies people begin to reconstruct their past, perceive the present and anticipate the future in terms of a story of the evolving self, an integrated narrative.

  - This life-story starts in adolescence and the beginnings of adult age.

  - The life-story is based on autobiographical facts, but goes beyond them (by selecting, integrating, creating a plot).

Identity and narrative (2)

- The life of a person becomes a story with a great cast of self-characters that take different positions, adopt different voices, represent different aspects of the self, personify different trends during different life chapters, all within the same identity.

Indicators of selfhood (Bruner, 1997)

- Presence and level of "self-construction" in autobiographical narratives.

- Critical nodes for the construction of autobiographical narratives.

- The indicators of selfhood proposed by Bruner (1997) are Agency, Commitment, Resources, Social Reference, Evaluation, Reflection, Qualia Coherence and Position.

Analysis

- Re-conceptualization of the indicators of selfhood (Bruner, 1997; Sala, 2008)

- Transcription of the interviews.

- Division of the interview in three phases :

  1) Phase **before** taking the decision to break up with the offender.

  2) Phase of **taking the decision**.

  3) Phase **after** taking the decision.
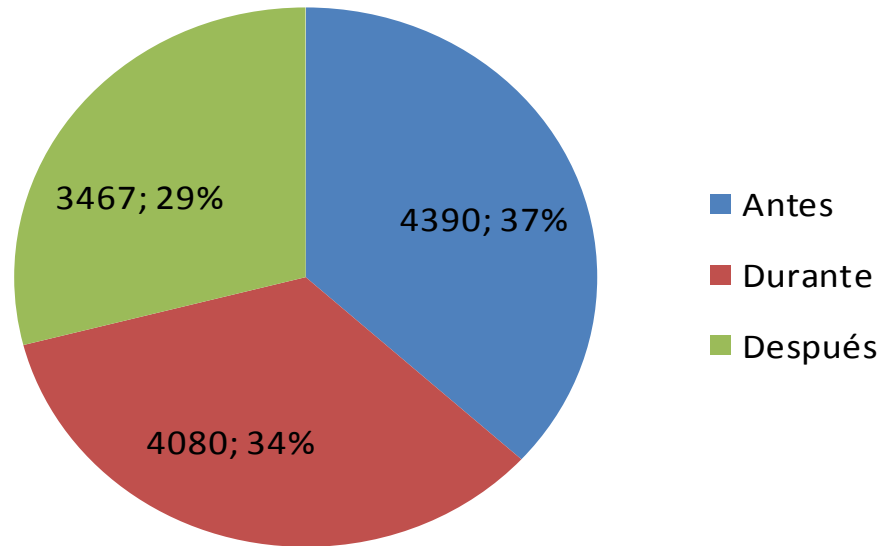
Results: Before taking the decision

❑ High consistency with traditional cultural discourses about what is it to be a woman and about romantic love (**Congruence+**).

❑ They describe themselves as completely devoted to take care of other people (**husbands, children**) and almost insensible to their own needs (**Commitment+**).

❑ High proportion of **negative evaluations** (self and others).

❑ **High + & - Agency** (they describe themselves as doing many things).

❑ Lack of **Resources** and **Social Reference.**

Results: Taking the decision

❑ Questioning of **traditional cultural discourses** about how a woman should be and about romantic love (**Congruence-**).

❑ Reference to negative emotional states (**Qualia -**): anxiety, guild, shame, anger…

❑ High proportion of **Negative Evaluations** (self and other-evaluations).

❑ Lack of **Resources**.

❑ Increase of **Social Reference +**

Results: After taking the decision

❑ Critique and resistance to traditional cultural discourses (**Congruence-**).

❑ Reference to **positive emotional states** (**Qualia +**): serenity, happiness, self valuation and love…together with negative feelings: **loneliness, fear, helplessness...**

❑ Increase of **positive Self-Evaluations**.

❑ Higher presence of **Reflexivity** (very present in the whole narrative).
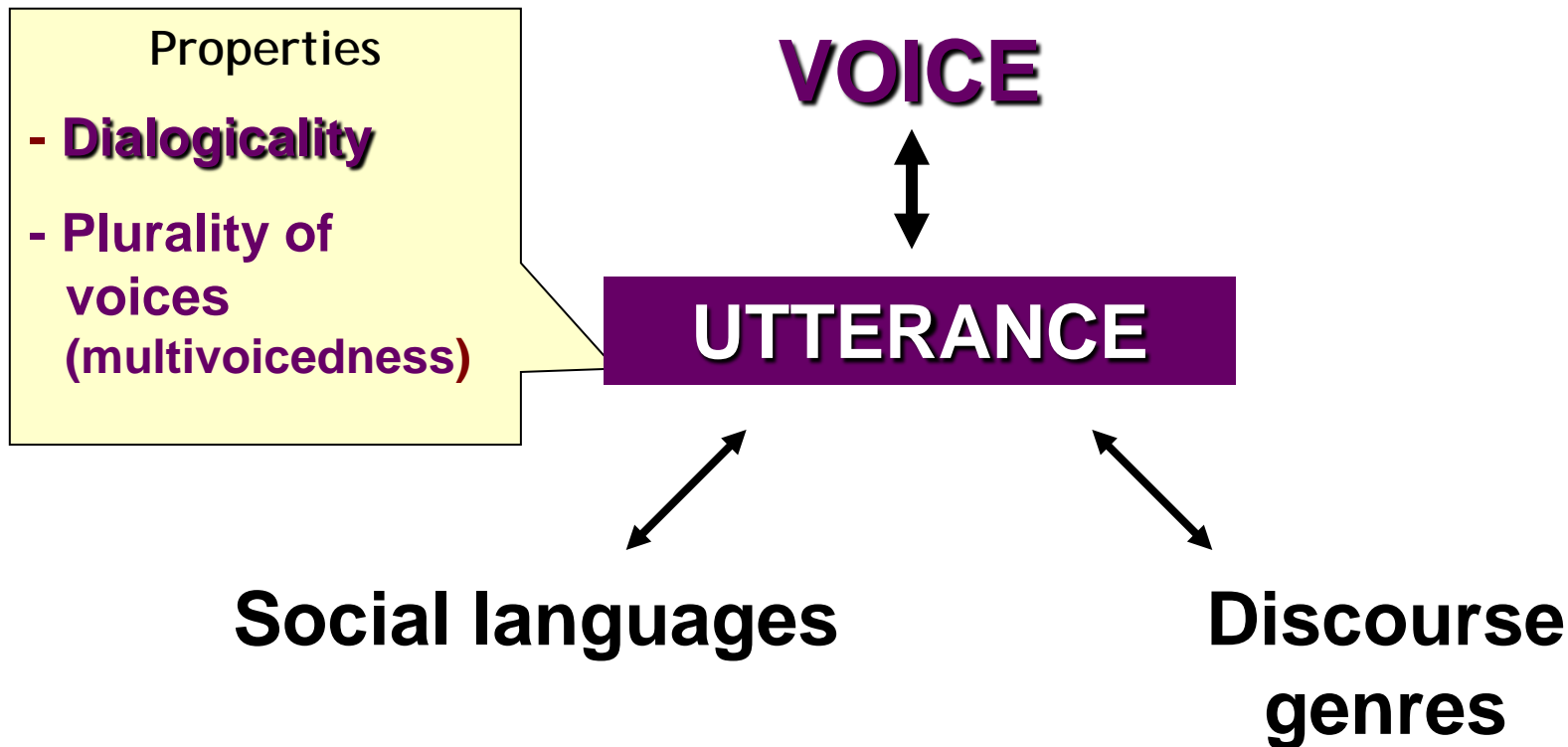
Some conclusions

❑ Sketch of the empowerment process of the women through the indicators of selfhood (Bruner, 1997).

❑ Increase of women`s concern about caring themselves: autonomy together with communion (McAdams, 1996, 2001).

❑ Reconstruction of the life-story (identity) to integrate the experience suffered. Two fundamental steps (Pals & McAdams, 2004):

   o To analyze and recognize the personal impact of the traumatic experience.

   o To construct a positive ending (continuation) in their life-story: how the self is transformed in a positive way.

Identity in socio-cultural context (1)

- Notions of voice, social language and speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986; Wertsch, 1991).

- Privileging.

- Internalization: appropriation and mastery.

Identity in socio-cultural context (2)

Basic notions in Bakhtin's theory

Properties

- **Dialogicality**

- **Plurality of voices (multivoicedness)**

VOICE

UTTERANCE

Social languages

Discourse genres

Voice

❑ The "speaking personality, the speaking consciousness".

❑ Any utterance may only exist if its produced by a voice (it always "belongs" to someone).

❑ Any oral or written utterance is expressed from a point of view [a voice]".

❑ Any utterance is dialogical (multi-voiced)

Social languages

• **Form of discourse that is characteristic of a specific group in society (profession, age, etc.) in a given social system in a particular moment** (Bakhtin, Wertsch, 1991).

• Examples: social dialects, professional jargon, age groups languages …

• Different to national language.

• This concept permits to recognize the systematic character of utterance.

Discourse genres

❑ **Not a form of language, but a typical form (a type) of utterance. A typical form of expression that is associated to a typical situation of verbal communication.**

❑ **Types of utterances that are repeated in certain social situations.**

Analytical tools of the analysis of identity in relation to gender violence

❏ **Positioning or the micro plane of analysis**

- Process of construction and negotiation of versions about ourselves.

- The way the individual positions and is positioned by others in concrete dialogical situations (Davies & Harré,1990).

❏ **Voices or the "macro" plane of analysis**

- Analysis of the social, cultural, historical and institutional contextualization of those positions.

- Discourse is polyphonic, is populated with others' voices, as internalized dialogues, so that the voices of others are incorporated to individual's discourse (Bakhtin, 1983, 1986, 1999).

- Voices "reflect" (echo) the main characters in every life-story and articulate those positionings.

# Analysis: Positionings & Voices

- **Analysis of the personal narratives of four battered women to identify:**

  - Self *positionings* (Bamberg, 2004; Korobov 2001):
    - Self-positionings (how the person positions herself) and hetero-positionings (how the person is positioned by others).
    - Explicit and implicit positionings.
    - Reflexive and lived positionings.

  - The *Voices* that articulate these positioning
    - Particular (personal) voices : women's, ex-partners'.
    - Generic voices: "the voice of women", friends…
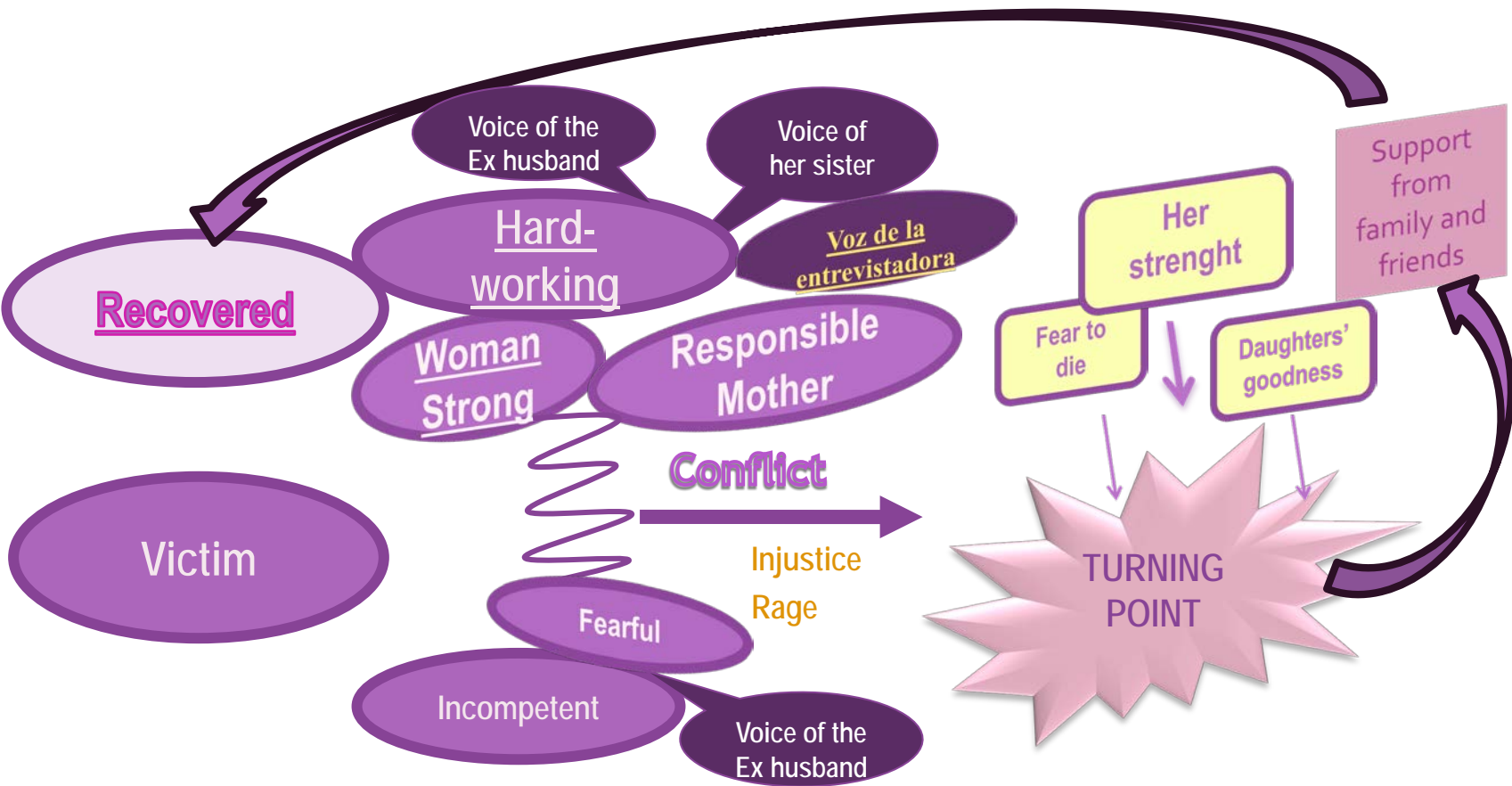   - Institutional voices: religion, family...

The "journey" from "victim" to "recovered woman"
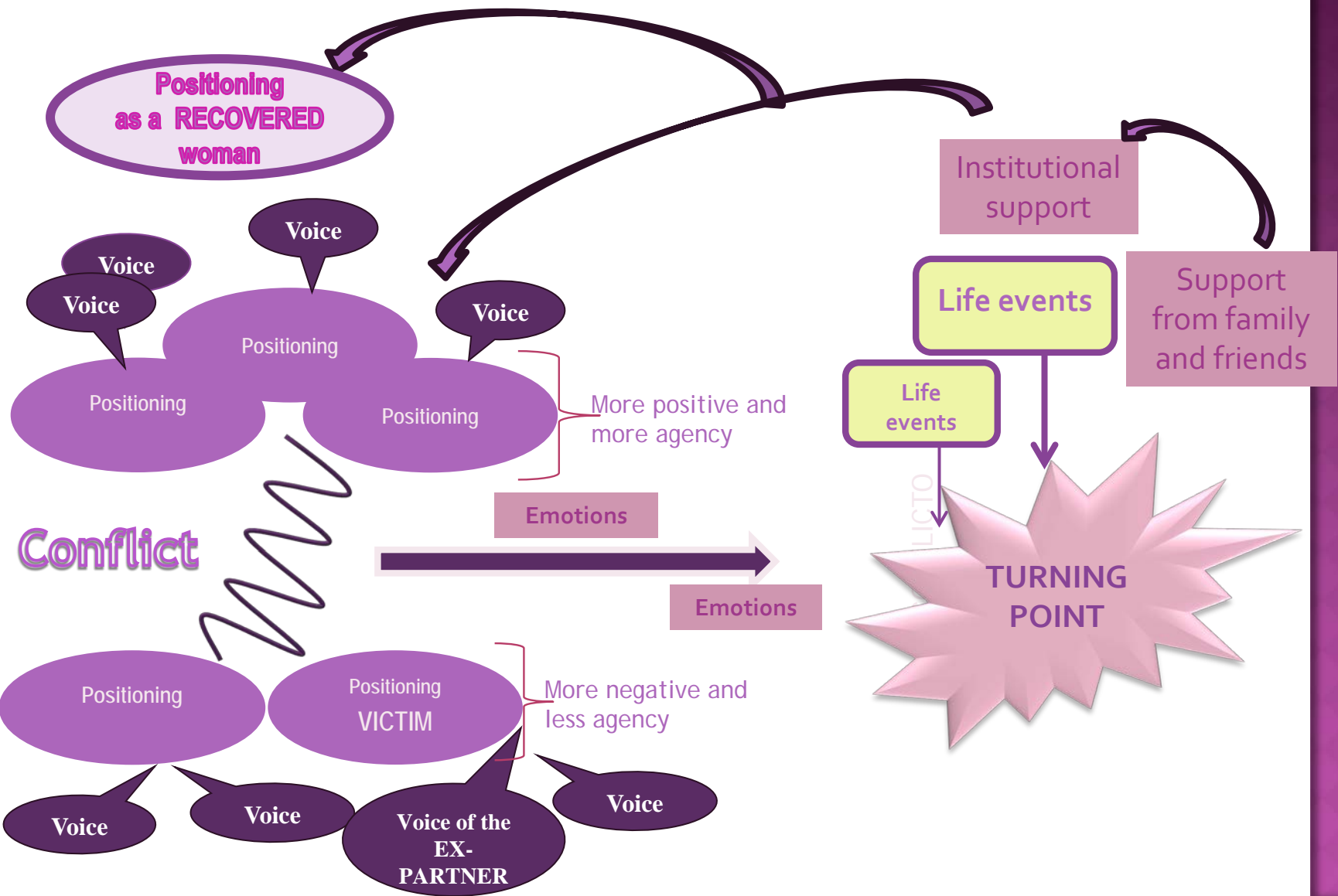
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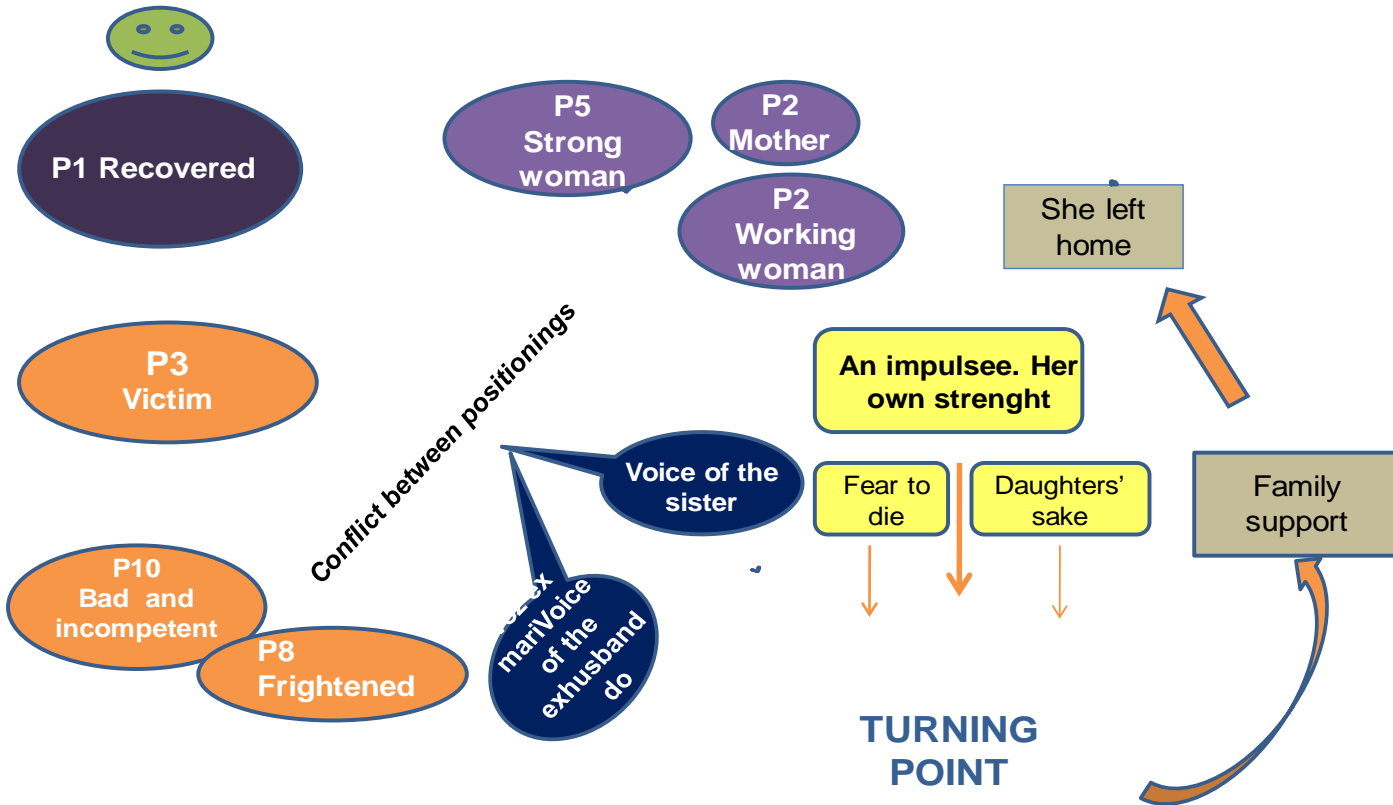
Rafaela: Interview and "Journey"

Rafaela self-positions as a recovered woman. Before that she has lived a conflict between her self-image as an incompetent and scared/fearful woman, positionings articulated by the voice of her ex-husband, and her consideration of herself as a strong, working woman and mother, positionings articulated by the voice of her sister, in contrast with hers ex-husband's. The conflict comes into a turning point when she was strongly fraid to die and had to take care of herself, mostñly because of her daughters . Thi turning point was solved thanks to her great strength. With her family support, she see herself as a women in the process of recovery.

Preliminary conclusions (1)

- The positionings adopted by the women in their narratives are presented in the form of conflicts between :
  - **Negative positionings**: victims, responsible, guilty of the situation. Hetero-positionings.
  - **Positive positionings:** empowered women, strong, hard-working, mothers overcoming the situation of violence. Self-positioning.

- Conflicts are in the core of identity construction

- Complex interplay of **inter-animation of voices** (Werstch, 1991) involved in the dialogical reconstruction of identity

Preliminary conclusions (2)

- **Close relationship between positionings and voices :**
  - **Positionings that reflect a higher agency** are articulated by their own voices, the voices of friends colleagues, family, and political institutiions.
  - **Positionings that reflect a lower agency agency** are articulated by the voices of the ex-husband (offender), people, religion and tradition.

- The capacity to resist and respond to these voices with a "**counter-word**" (Bajtín, 1986, Wertsch, 1991) seems to be essential for identity reconstruction.

Preliminary conclusions (3)

- **Existence of a strong emotional load associated to identity conflicts:**
  - **Inhibitors of identity reconstruction**: guilt, shame loneliness.
  - **Activators of identity reconstruction**: anger, injustice, rebellion.

- Existence of **turning points** (McAdams, 1999, 2002; McAdams and Olson, 2010) triggered by **life events,** which signal changes in life trajectory.
  - **The events**: situations in which the women (or her children) felt especially humiliated and threatened.
  - **The social network**: the existence of family, friends institutional support are critical for them to break up with the offender.
  - **Internal state that moves to action:** they tell a sudden necessity to acto.
  - **Activating feelings:** strength, braveness, fear, empowerment and control.

What's next?

- To analyze the narratives of women in their process of recovery.

- To deepen into the specificity of the relationship between positionings and voices.

- To detect the elements that inhibit and promote identity reconstruction in terms of recovering the control of their lives-Empowerment-.

- Relationship between discourse strategies employed in the process of recovering the control of their lives and the educational background.

Thank you very much!!

Before self-definition: Lack

- In the first phase the tone is negative: negative emotions linked to the discovery of one's own inadequacy to the heterosexual model socially prescribed are told mostly, accompanied at a cognitive level by negative self-assessments of experience and *some agreement with stigmatizing discourses*.

- The narrative describes a situation of lack: lack of resources able to offer a symbolic significance of the experience, a lack of models, places of socialization, and a social network of support can help the subject.