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## Co-constructing identities and ideological positions in conversational storytelling among friends

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**Abstract:** Research has shown that identities and ideologies result from a complex interplay between various social, cultural and psychological factors, such as socialisation, shared experiences, cultural backgrounds and institutional practices in media, education and family. However, due to this tendency to focus on macro identity categories and macro-level ideological processes, more research is needed on how these categories and ideologies are co-constructed and operationalised within micro contexts, such as between friends. In doing so, we can explore the malleability of ideologies and identities as individuals (re)negotiate their beliefs and affiliations over time, often within micro, everyday activities. Using ethnographic methods and a practice approach to narrative, this paper shows how the analysis of conversational practices, specifically storytelling, can provide a window into the granular semiotic and discursive processes through which group identities and ideologies are (re)negotiated in mundane everyday discourse. The analyses of naturally occurring conversations between friends in Cape Town, South Africa, show that, through the use of constructed dialogue and other evaluative devices, interlocutors jointly negotiate complex alignments and positions in relation to a variety of social issues and ordinary occurrences, simultaneously and implicitly (re)establishing or (re)defining their group positionalities and ideologies.

### Introduction

This study seeks to add to the rich and growing body of work aimed at furthering our understanding of the relationship between narrative discourse as a social practice and group identity negotiation and ideological positioning. The study of narratives has often focused on the structural configurations of narratives (Labov and Waletzky 1967; Eggins and Slade 2004), their conversational turn-by-turn unfolding (Sacks 1992; Ochs and Capps 2001) and autobiographical accounts (Linde 1993). However, there has been a turn to studying the situatedness of storytelling and how stories are embedded in social life (De Fina 2008, 2021; Georgakopoulou 2008). These studies have revealed the complex relationships between narratives and the interactional and larger sociocultural contexts within which they are told.

Researchers in multiple fields, such as sociolinguistics, psychology and anthropology, have studied narratives that emerge in different contexts, such as family dinners, conversations among friends, therapeutic sessions and so on (Goodwin 1980; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008). This work has made significant contributions to the understanding that narrative form and function are context-dependent and that storytelling is also a type of social practice (De Fina 2003, 2021). These scholars also explore the connections between the local contexts of storytelling and the broader sociocultural contexts, or 'social roles and relationships which transcend the immediate concerns of the interactants' (De Fina 2008: 422) in the here and now. It is within the latter research framework that this present study is situated.

However, it is important to note that much of the work on the discursive construction of identities and ideologies from a practice perspective has predominantly taken place in the Global North, with few or no contributions from the Global South, particularly from African scholars. A secondary goal of this paper is, therefore, to address this imbalance and contribute to the discourse of African scholars such as Egbe (2004), Ogbulogo (2004), Antia and Dyers (2019), Odoemenan et al. (2021)

and Ngonso et al. (2023), who look at the role of language in various macro contexts, by examining micro-narratives and identity negotiation practices and highlighting often underrepresented perspectives in the existing literature.

Drawing on ethnographic principles (Blommaert and Jie 2020) and a practice approach to narrative studies, this paper shows how the analysis of conversational practices, specifically storytelling in context, can provide a window into the granular semiotic and discursive processes through which group identities and ideologies are realised and (re)negotiated in the mundanity of everyday discourse. I analyse naturally occurring conversations between a group of female friends in Cape Town to which I belong to show how through storytelling, specifically, and the use of constructed dialogue and other types of evaluative devices, interlocutors are able to jointly make sense of their experiences and negotiate complex alignments and positions in relation to a variety of social issues and ordinary occurrences. I argue that, through these storytelling practices, individuals simultaneously and implicitly (re)establish or (re)define their individual and group positionalities and ideologies.

## Theoretical framework

### *Everyday life*

The study of everyday life and mundane activities, which constitute a significant part of our daily lives and include friendship, has been relegated to a residual position in the study of social reality (Highmore 2002, 2011). Lefebvre (1991) greatly influenced scholarly interest in the study of the everyday and acknowledged that, although the everyday often seemed readily accessible and self-evident, it was, in fact, one of the most fundamental yet least researched or understood facets of our social lives. This approach centres on the largely taken-for-granted meanings that underpin human thought and experiences, which are not always open to direct observation (Berger and Luckmann 1966). As De Certeau (1984), Gardiner (2000) and Highmore (2002) argue, the so-called 'higher' activities of human beings, such as abstract cognition and practical objectification, are built on and tend to 'make sense' only against the backdrop of everyday life. Gardiner (2000: 2) describes everyday life as 'fertile humus, which is a source of life-enhancing power as we walk over it unnoticed', echoing Lefebvre's (1991) metaphor for everyday life as 'fertile soil'. It is within the richness of our everyday processes and practices that we develop our multidimensional capacities as individuals and as collectives to become 'fully integrated and truly human persons' (Gardiner 2000: 2). With this problematised view of the everyday and the mundanities that pervade it as the foundation for more sophisticated and abstract theorisation, this study explores the discursive negotiation of group identities and ideological positions in everyday talk.

### *Narrative as practice*

The narrative as practice approach, developed by De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2008), is the primary framework used to analyse the data in this study. The approach views narratives as talk-in-interaction and social practice, drawing on ideas from conversation analysis (Sacks 1972, 1992; Jefferson 1978) and concepts such as social practice, genre and communities of practice. Within this framework, the situatedness of narratives in various macro processes and the importance of considering the contexts within which narratives emerge are emphasised (De Fina 2021; De Fina et al. 2022).

A notable contribution of this approach is its inclusion of *small stories*, a term encompassing a range of narrative activities often underrepresented in traditional narrative analyses (Georgakopoulou 2006, 2008; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008). Small stories are shorter and less structured than canonical stories; they may be about something other than past events and may not have a clear beginning, middle and end. The study of small stories offers a deeper understanding of how different levels of context shape conversational structure and the role that smaller narratives play in the constitution and (re)production of everyday reality.

Furthermore, the notion of positioning (Bamberg 1997, 2004; Georgakopoulou and Goutsos 2000) is employed within this framework. According to Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008: 380), 'positioning affords us with the possibility to view identity constructions as two-fold...the way the

referential world is constructed with characters in time and space [and] the function of the interactive engagement'. That is, positioning allows us to analyse how the construction of the story world points to the way the teller wants to be understood and the sense of self this construction indexes. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) propose three levels of positioning within storytelling events: (1) who the characters in the story are and how they are positioned in relation to each other, (2) how the teller positions herself and is positioned by others in the interactive situation and (3) how the narrator positions herself in relation to master narratives or broader socio-cultural big 'D' *Discourses* defined as linguistic expressions of ideological positions or 'ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking...and writing' (Gee 2015: 3) that express particular positions and roles (e.g. economic, religious, political or racialised discourses). This grounding of the concept of self and identities in social interaction and how larger social discourses are exploited within these micro-interactional contexts is a major contribution of the practice approach used within this study.

The narrative as practice approach is part of a broader critique of Labov and Waletzky's (1967) structural approach, which suggests a six-part structure for narratives: the abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda. In contrast to conversational small stories, the stories in Labov's approach were extensive and monological in nature. Researchers working with conversational data quickly found that stories emerged within highly interactive settings and could not always fit neatly into Labov's six-stage model (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012, 2015). In addition, structural approaches pay little attention to the multiple layers of context that often influence the semiotic choices that individuals make in telling their stories. In Labovian approaches, stories are often detached from the interview settings they were told in and analysed as objective texts, whereas the researchers' aims, the interview setting and institutional and societal norms are usually at play in determining how participants frame their stories. Critics argue that, by decontextualising the story and analysing it without also analysing the researcher's role in the production of that story, Labovian-type structural approaches tend to miss the mainly implicit ways through which stories are constituted by and constitutive of the social worlds in which they emerge.

The narrative as practice approach thus moves away from trying to define the internal basic structure of narrative to an understanding of genre as 'the routine and repeated ways of acting and expressing orders of knowledge and experience' (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008: 383), where the physical structure of the stories in the data is seen as a fluid and evolving response to recurring situations that the participants actively exploit, negotiate and reconstruct at micro levels of interaction. This theoretical position provides fertile ground for understanding how everyday conversations are implicated in the (re/de)construction of ideologies and the world around us. This view of narrative as practice allows for an exploration of how, through the telling of seemingly meaningless stories, individuals simultaneously produce a world in which their stories can be told, a world in which their stories, their sense of self, their way of life and their values, beliefs and experiences 'make sense'.

### ***Reported speech as constructed dialogue and other evaluative devices***

The stories in this study were mainly small stories that revolved around a 'he/she said...and I said...' narrative clause, sometimes supported by external evaluations of the characters involved in this dialogue. This pattern inspired an examination of the role of these narrative practices in the emergence and maintenance of the group's identity and ideological positioning as empowered, agentic and feminist persons socialised into and now navigating their own path within patriarchal societies.

Within Labov's (1972: 366) pioneering work on narratives, evaluations are considered to be 'the most important element [in a story] in addition to the basic narrative clause'. Evaluations express the point the narrator is 'getting at' or the 'raison d'être' of a narrative. Labov suggests four main types of evaluations: *external evaluation*, *embedded evaluation*, *evaluative action* and *evaluation by suspension of action*. For this paper, I look specifically at embedded and external evaluation.

*Embedded evaluation* occurs when tellers embed their evaluations without pausing or interrupting the action. This often takes the form of reported speech. The teller may quote how they felt at the time of the action ('I said, "Oh God, here it is!"), they may quote what they said to another character in the story or they might attribute the evaluative comment to a character in the story. Most of the

stories in this study centre around reported dialogue between the participants and the characters in their stories. Reported speech is an important strategy in structural and interactional narrative approaches.

Tellers often negotiate authorship and responsibility by incorporating other voices into the telling. This brings to mind Goffman's (1967) work, where he differentiates between the author (or the person who selects the belief, opinion or attitude being expressed in the utterance), the animator (the person who reports or reproduces the utterance) and the principal (the person responsible for the ideas being expressed). By animating the author's utterances, the narrator (and consequently the audience) goes back and forth between the story world and the present interaction. Reported speech, thus, heightens double chronology, where the teller can make multiple associations between themselves in the interaction world (now) and in the story world (then) (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012, 2015).

Furthermore, reported speech is evaluative as it is unlikely to reproduce the actual speech event verbatim. It is usually a fictional construction by tellers used to propel the point of their story. This is why direct reported speech is often called constructed dialogue (Ochs and Capps 2001; Norrick 2007; Tannen 2008). (From here on, I shall be using the terms reported speech and constructed dialogue interchangeably.) Dialogue is thus one type of an embedded evaluative device that helps create drama (Labov 1972). The fictional quality of reported speech is even more visible in instances where the speech that is quoted could not, in reality, have been uttered. For example, 'And all the students said, "We are going to burn down the university"'. The students could not have all said the same thing simultaneously. In some cases, the audience may co-construct parts of the dialogue with the teller even though they are not characters in the story and were not present when said dialogue occurred. Thus, the study of the fictional and, therefore, evaluative nature of dialogue in storytelling allows a point from which we may observe how tellers express their beliefs and attitudes implicitly within the story world, embedding their evaluations of the events within the story.

*External evaluations*, in contrast, refer to when the narrator suspends the action and goes outside the boundaries of the narrative to explicitly evaluate parts of the story instead of letting the narrative 'speak for itself' (see the section on evaluation for an example). Labov (1972) claims this type of evaluation is common among middle-class speakers (within his research context) and in therapeutic interviews, where the story itself is only a framework for the evaluations. However, such evaluations can be found in different narrative contexts, including conversational storytelling, where they work with implicit or embedded evaluations to realise the story's point.

Attention to how dialogue is constructed and how the audience responds to the implicit and explicit evaluations and meanings in the story allows us to observe the social discourses used to make sense of the story and the positioning and ideological work the story is doing in the here and now of interaction.

## Methods

### *Data collection*

This paper is based on an ethnographic study conducted in 2017 with ethics approval (see Appendix 1 for the complete ethics statement) as part of an MA project. The data consists of naturally occurring conversations between five female friends in Cape Town, of which I was one of the participants. There were five participants in the main MA project. However, only three participants are active in the extracts presented in this paper, namely Ajoh (myself), Bella and Thandi (see Appendix 1 for a description of the participants). I used the shortened version of my name (Ajoh) instead of a pseudonym in the extracts so that you, the reader, can easily remember which of the participants is also the author. All other participant names are pseudonyms.

Furthermore, the participants worked together on our YouTube channel, which I have dubbed Girl Chat. The channel was created to 'change the narrative of the African woman through real, informative and entertaining conversation', as seen in Girl Chat's About section. Girl Chat was six months old at the start of data collection, and our casual conversations often revolved around the work we were doing on the channel. Although I do not analyse any of the Girl Chat content here, the

channel's existence formed a significant part of our lives and relationships with each other at the time and is crucial for making sense of the storytelling dynamics and the emergent ideological and identity positions constructed therein (see the background on Girl Chat in Appendix 1).

A total of 15 recordings comprised of over 40 hours of conversational activity between the participants in Bella's room were collected, but only five recordings were analysed, given the limited scope of my MA project. The five audio recordings ranged from two to five hours each. The conversations were recorded as the participants went about their daily activities at home and as YouTube content creators. Thus, conversations mainly revolved around programmes they were watching on TV, meals and topics prompted by Girl Chat activities (such as filming, photoshoots and planning meetings).

Ethnographic research is a qualitative research approach where researchers observe and/or interact with a study's participants in their real-life environment (Blommaert and Jie 2020) to arrive at conclusions about how societies and individuals function from the participants' perspective. As such, being a part of the group or an insider researcher had several implications for the project as a whole. During the recording process, I refrained from taking notes or directing the ongoing conversation in any way. I primarily existed in this space as a group member, which gave me access to conversations that the participants may not have had in the presence of an outsider. In some instances, the participants would switch on the recorder in my absence to assist with my data-collection process, demonstrating the trust and rapport already established due to the nature of our relationship.

Given that the conversations I was interested in were private 'unfiltered' conversations captured in real time, this pre-established trust and rapport were crucial for gaining access to such data. Thus, my role as a participant and member of the group, rather than solely as a researcher, allowed for a more natural and authentic capturing of private offline conversations. My ethnographic knowledge as a group member was equally important in helping me make sense of the conversation in a way that an outsider may not be able to. Personally knowing the participants and the background behind the recorded conversations was indispensable, as some of the extracts would make little sense to a person who was not a part of the group. This facilitated a rich analysis of the discourse practices in the data.

Although I draw heavily from Labovian terminology, the stories in this study fit better within the small stories paradigm (Georgakopoulou 2008). This paradigm allows for the analysis of shared highly interactive stories with multiple active (co)tellers that are not easily detachable from surrounding talk. These stories are not always about past events and are not always narrated from start to finish (Ochs and Capps 2001; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2008). With this in mind, 36 small stories were identified in the five recorded conversations used in this study. After the initial stage of labelling the different story parts, these stories were further grouped into stories about *recent past events*, *hypothetical events* (narratives about hypothetical alternative courses of events) and *projections* (narratives about future events). This paper will focus on stories about recent past events as they made up 60% of the stories collected.

Recent past event stories portrayed events that took place in the recent past ('just now', 'yesterday'). The stories are told not to demonstrate how a complication is resolved (Labov 1972) but to *report* on a past conversation, often between the teller and one or more characters in the story. These stories have a similar structural pattern as Eggins and Slade's (1997) *recount*. According to these authors, recounts are stories about how events relate to each other rather than how problems or crises are resolved (Labov and Waletzky 1967). The stages of a recount, as identified by Eggins and Slade (1997, 2004), include an optional *abstract* and *orientation*, followed by a *record of events*, a *reorientation stage* in which the narrator provides their appraisal or evaluation of the record of events and an optional *coda*. The stories in this study share similar physical characteristics as recounts, except that the defining stage of the recount (the record of events) is replaced by a dialogue or a *record of conversation* that took place, typically in the recent past. Once I grouped the extracts into types of stories, I transcribed the stories and the conversations that preceded and followed each extract so as to analyse each story within its conversational context (see transcription key in Appendix 2).

In the following section, I present my analysis of small stories from the data, specifically how they are negotiated and evaluated in interactional contexts and the conversations that immediately follow their telling. I argue that, through the (discourse) analysis of relationships between the emergent form of conversational stories, the immediate interactional and relational functions they serve and the larger sociocultural contexts in which they are told, we may be able to define how group ideologies (the macro) are co-constructed and how they determine and are determined by everyday mundane talk-in-interaction (the micro).

### **Constructed dialogue and evaluations as tools for the implicit negotiation of group and individual ideological positions**

Given the previously established idea that reported speech or constructed dialogue is partially fictitious (in the sense that the reported words may have never been uttered by the principal), constructed dialogue therefore comes embedded with the narrator's (or animator's) own evaluations of what was said. This makes constructed dialogue instrumental in the typically implicit or tacit negotiation of group and individual identities and ideologies in conversation.

Consider the story below in which, through storytelling and the process of making sense of the events narrated, the participants jointly make sense of the idea of success and how they might become successful. During this conversation, Thandi mentions Toke Makinwa, a Nigerian celebrity whose success escalated after she publicly shared her divorce story on her YouTube channel. At this time, Makinwa also happened to be giving a talk at a university in the USA on personal branding, based on the success of her controversial YouTube channel. These events lead up to the story that I (Ajoh) share in this extract. My analysis shall illustrate how the emergent story structure and evaluations are exploited to negotiate particular ideological and identity positions in the interaction.

In the story, I narrate my reflections from watching a music video earlier in the day as a small story. Some turns of this conversation have been omitted for ease of analysis as they contain parallel conversation about shopping for new clothes, which is not directly relevant to the story.

#### **Extract 1:**

1. Ajoh: See I was looking at this uhm I was watching a music video just now and women were bouncing their booties do you understand like way it's always right and then I'm thinking, 'why would...' (*Omitted turns: parallel unrelated conversation related to doing shopping for a photoshoot. After brief deliberation, they decide they have no money for shopping and return to the story.*)
2. Ajoh:...so in my mind I'm like 'I'm sure you (the women on TV) have a talent right'. I'm thinking about the girls because I'm a judgmental bitch (laughter) that 'I'm sure you have a talent right and you can use it the ee-effort that you're putting into this (.) uhm video hoeing you can put in something else and still blow' but then I'm thinking 'if every route lead to the same destination you can start out as a video hoe'
3. Thandi: why are you even (.) and do whatever the fuck
4. Ajoh: 'and then when you are famous you build your brand'
5. Thandi: you see what my problem is my problem is I was raised in a fucking small town and so I have like things in my head that I'm just like 'oh my God I have to do things'
6. Bella: is that why you stood up
7. Thandi: like this and I have to do things like this ↑it's fucking stupid (.) ↓cuz look at me now I'm 25 years old I got no money (claps hands) no money and no career ↓well I have Girl Chat but ↑no career other than that.
8. Bella: (laughing) I love – I swear I love the way we rant at Girl Chat (all laugh) we are (.)
9. Thandi: Bella this is my real life
10. Bella: we are our own [like the way we judge ourselves at Girl Chat (laughter)]
11. Thandi: [our own worst enemies]
12. Ajoh: [we rant man]

13. Thandi: [and then we have conversations about ‘society’ (styling Girl Chat conversations in a caricature fashion) ↑‘society doesn’t want us to go out of the house society doesn’t want us to wear clothes society society’ (Bella laughing in the background)]
14. Bella: (still laughing) yoh yoh yoh
15. Ajoh: I’m telling you

In my work, I have referred to the turn in which the narrative is introduced into the conversation as the *story launcher*. Conversational stories are told over several turns (Sacks 1992). The start of the narrative, which typically consists of the abstract (Labov and Waletzky 1967) or preface (Sacks 1992) and the orientation (Labov 1972), may be realised in multiple turns. Thus, the story launcher may incorporate the optional abstract, the orientation and/or the record of events/conversation. The story launcher in this story (turn 1) describes the event or act which sparks the dialogue: ‘I was looking at this uhm I was watching a music video’. The orientation is also developed in this turn. The ‘who’ and the ‘when’ of the story are shared. I describe a scene in which I am watching TV, specifically a music video with women who are ‘bouncing their booties’. I also indicate when this happened: ‘just now’, and that this is a conversation I had with myself. In addition, the depiction of women dancing in music videos in a way that is perceived to be vulgar or inappropriate by more conservative individuals is presented in the story as something normal and common knowledge (‘like the way it is always right’). This provides context for what happened next, which is the dialogue that I claim to have had with myself as I watched the music video (turns 2 and 4).

I start sharing the dialogue in the story launcher, which is signalled to be an internal dialogue, ‘and then I’m thinking, “why would...”’, but I am interrupted by an unrelated conversation. Once the dialogical space is free again, I continue with the telling (turn 2). Here, we see the verb of saying replaced by a quotative: ‘I’m like’ instead of ‘I said’, for instance. I use two dialogue turns to represent two opposing views or ideological positions:

(A) ‘I’m sure you (the women on TV) have a talent right...I’m sure you have a talent right and you can use it the ee-effort that you’re putting into this (.) uhm video hoeing you can put in something else and still blow’

(B) but then I’m thinking ‘if every route lead to the same destination you can start out as a video hoe... and then when you are famous you build your brand’

(A) presents the ideal scenario in which one ought to use their talent, time and energy for work that is considered respectable to become successful, and (B) presents the perceived reality in which one can do anything, even less respectable work (such as being a ‘video hoe’ on television or being a woman who speaks of her divorce on YouTube, like Toke Makinwa), and still end up in a respectable place (such as giving a lecture at a university abroad, or using one’s fame to build a more respected brand). Being a ‘video hoe’ could easily fall within the same category as other work that is perceived as less respectable, such as being a prostitute, a stripper or a porn star, given that the women in the videos often dress and dance in ways that are sexualised. These are ways of life that have to do with using one’s body and sexuality to earn a living, which are often morally condemned and/or illegal. Hence the use of the derogatory term ‘hoe’, which is a colloquial expression for a sex worker. The question the participants are thus grappling with is: can one do such work and still build a respectable life? Could they (the participants) be able to turn such a story into a success like Makinwa did by turning her divorce (something that is frowned upon in most West and South African societies) into a successful YouTube business that now grants her access to socially respectable institutions such as a university?

Two opposing dialogue turns represent the tension between the two positions in the narrative structure. We can argue that the dialogue is a depiction of a version of the dialogue I might have had with myself, evidenced by the difference between the dialogue I started constructing at the end of turn 1 (‘why would you...’) and the dialogue I eventually construct in turn 2 (‘I’m sure you have talent...’). This shows that the dialogue in the story is a reconstruction of the actual conversation that was had, influenced by or shaped by the interactional and conversational dynamics and goals. As a result, we

can gain insight into the positioning work the narrator is doing through the telling of the story. The two turns of constructed dialogue hold the tension between what I perceive to be an acceptable and respectable route to success and what I perceive not to be, without any easy resolution.

Both embedded and external evaluations are usually present in any given story. The dialogue (internal evaluation) in this story is reinforced by the external evaluation that comes with it – ‘I’m thinking about the girls because I’m a judgmental bitch (laughter)’ (turn 2). As women who are concerned with empowering other women, evidenced by the content on Girl Chat, the external evaluation does the work of showing that, although I may be judging the women in the video negatively (e.g. people who dance on TV do not have real talent or dancing on TV is not respectable), I do not think I am better than them since I am also a ‘judgemental bitch’. The tension expressed through the dialogue and the self-deprecating comment work together to *position* me as someone whose mind is not yet made up about what path one must take to achieve success.

In line with research on conversational stories, the resolution is not always the goal of the story, given that there is not always a complicating action or crisis in everyday stories. Instead, we might have what Eggins and Slade (1997, 2004) call the *reorientation* stage or what I call the *interpretation* stage. This is the point in the telling when both the teller and audience work out the meaning of the story that has been narrated. The conversation following the telling contains the *next-turn proof procedure* (Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008) as to whether or not the audience understood the story and the teller’s emergent point. It is also within this preceding conversation that the audience demonstrates their (dis)alignment with the teller’s point, and new social discourses may be introduced into the telling by the audience to provide alternative interpretations of the narrated events. In this case, I do not state how I resolved the conflicting thoughts in my mind; instead, Thandi, who has been signalling that she is following the story with backchanneling cues and that she can anticipate where I am going with the story (see turn 3), shows alignment with my dilemma by sharing her own in turns 5, 7 and 9:

5. you see what my problem is my problem is I was raised in a fucking small town and so I have like things in my head that I’m just like ‘oh my God I have to do things’
7. like this and I have to do things like this it’s fucking stupid (.) cuz look at me now I’m 25 years old I got no money (claps hands) no money and no career well I have Girl Chat but no career other than that.
9. Bella this is my real life

Thandi uses her utterances to show that she too has this internal conflict, therefore aligning herself towards my position and moral dilemma. The constructed dialogue in turns 5 and 7 reveals her own internal conflict about how to become successful, which she attributes to the way she was raised. In other words, she carries the voices of those who raised and taught her what was right from wrong even though she no longer lives in the small town. It is implied that what they taught her was limited due to the town’s smallness, and, even now that she lives in ‘the big city’, this perceived narrow-mindedness is partly why she has no money or career. Thandi can be heard saying that it is ‘stupid’ to keep doing the things that have led her (them) to ‘no money and no career’, even if they are deemed more respectable, as opposed to the ‘video hoes’ and Toke Makinwa, the YouTuber, who have done less conventional work (regardless of the potential negative consequences) and somehow achieved success.

Bella, who has been silent for most of the telling, offers an alternative interpretation of the narrative by evaluating the ongoing conversation as a ‘rant’ (turn 8–12). A rant is a colloquial expression used mainly on social media to refer to an empty verbal expression of frustration, with no action to match and which also seldom resolves any problems. Thandi challenges the description of the talk as a rant. She can be heard saying, ‘this is not just a rant; this is my real life’. In response to this claim, Bella provides an alternative by stating that the interlocutors judge themselves too harshly and, in this way, they are their ‘own worst enemies’, as Thandi puts it. Thandi further reinforces this idea when she comically styles Girl Chat conversations.

13. Thandi: and then we have conversations about 'society' (styling Girl Chat conversations in a caricature fashion) ↑'society doesn't want us to go out of the house society doesn't want us to wear clothes society society' (Bella laughing in the background)

Bella and I agree with Thandi in turns 14 and 15. Bella's intervention in turns 8 and 10 effectively shifts the group's emerging positionality from an outward look towards social norms and their socialisation towards an inward look at how they may be the ones limiting themselves. Thandi's stylisation of Girl Chat conversation supports Bella's point as she pokes fun at how they tend to blame 'society' when, in fact, they are their 'own worst enemies'. This shifts their emerging position from being mere victims of 'society' to being complicit in what they perceive to be stagnation in their career paths.

The analyses above show that the story and the conversation that follows the telling become avenues for the group to jointly make sense of their experiences. In this process, various ideological or identity positions may be realised by both the teller and audience through various discourse strategies – in this case, constructed dialogue (embedded evaluation) and other kinds of external evaluations. Although the story is about something that happened in the past, it is discursively linked to what they are currently experiencing (i.e. being 'broke'), who they want to be in the future (successful women) and the larger sociocultural context in which they must inevitably live their lives. The emergent narrative structure allows for this collapse in time, where the experiences, identities and ideologies from their past, present and future are at least discursively available for (de/re) construction.

Furthermore, what is simultaneously taking place in this storytelling event, albeit implicitly, is the reinforcement of the ideologies that bind them together as a group of like-minded friends with like-minded goals. This specific interaction highlights that they all want to be successful, and they are still figuring out how to make their personal and shared dreams (such as Girl Chat's success) a reality. I argue that the recurrence of such storytelling events is one of the practices through which the group is able to get a sense of who they are and how they relate to each other, as well as their individual and group ideological positions in relation to different macro issues such as, in this case, success and respectability from their position as women.

In this particular story then, the discourse and narrative choices made by the participants reveal the anxiety of the Girl Chat team, who themselves work on an unconventional platform (YouTube) having unconventional conversations about taboo topics such as sex, and questioning age-old African practices such as lobola (bride price), like Toke Makinwa did about her divorce. The anxiety and restlessness are nonverbally demonstrated by Thandi standing up from her seat just so she can express herself (see Bella's turn 6: 'is that why you stood up'). Although they consider themselves liberated women who have reclaimed their bodies and power, they still feel trapped by the social norms they have internalised regarding morality and respectability. This conflict is captured in my story through the structure of the two turns of constructed dialogue, which stand in opposition to each other and in the audience's contributions thereafter.

What we see here is the interactional accomplishment of positions and alignments in relation to discourses around success and respectability for women. By the end of the telling, there is no resolution in terms of whether or not they will follow in the footsteps of the women dancing on TV. However, there is an acknowledgement that multiple paths can lead to success and that factors both in society and within oneself might hinder or encourage success. It is also (re)established that they are all ambitious and are, in their own individual way, interested in achieving career success and being respectable, hence reaffirming some of the core values of their community of practice. I argue that the participants do not share every last detail of their lives at all times; they only share those which they can intuit, from their past interactions, will hold some value for their audience as members of a community of practice. This is why observing the kinds of stories told in the group's conversations, the themes they cover and the conclusions (or lack thereof) they draw from both the narrated experiences and the telling can reveal some of the core ideological and interpretive frames along which group values and beliefs are defined and how these qualities are reinforced or contested. We can see these negotiations taking place in the following extract as well, where the participants jointly negotiate the acceptance of a compliment that may be based on sexist discourse.

This extract takes place in Bella's room as the participants prepare for a photoshoot for Girl Chat. Before this extract, Thandi, Bella and I (Ajoh) discuss the recent activity on our Girl Chat social media pages. At this time, the level of activity on our channel has been very low, and we have been working on a campaign and a photoshoot for South African Women's Month (which takes place annually in August) to help increase traffic on our social media pages. We are also planning a campus tour during which we will go to different university campuses to hand out flyers and put up posters advertising our channel. We were optimistic that this campaign and tour would change things and make Girl Chat more visible online. Uche (pseudonym) is a cinematographer we hired to film our women's month campaign. Thandi's mention of Uche and his feedback about our projects triggers Bella's narration of her conversation with David (pseudonym) in turn 17. David is the manager of a venue that Girl Chat is looking to hire for our music event, which will happen in that same month.

**Extract 2:**

1. Bella: I sent the – I sent the whole thing to that eh (.) his name is David let me not call him 'the Dining guy' his name is David
2. Ajoh: mhm
3. Bella: yoh he is like 'wo::w you guys can think?' (laughs)
4. Thandi: yes motherfucker = (styling a black American accent)
5. Bella: = he said he wants his girlfriend to be like friends because he said the girlfriend is so::
6. Ajoh: (laughs)
7. Bella: yoh that guy is so stupid I don't know do you know what he said he said the only reason why he is still dating that girl [is because like
8. Ajoh: [laughs
9. Bella: he knows his children are going to have like a a very good mother (laughs)
10. Thandi: wow
11. Bella: I'm like 'that's a very stu-' he's like 'yes I know with the mindset that you have you'll be like "that's a very stupid thing to say" but like that's the benefit which I can get from this girl' (all laugh)
12. Thandi: [yoh babes
13. Bella: [the guy is so real man
14. Thandi: Yoh he – he has such focus imagine sitting with ev- someone every day and you're like 'yoh you're so stupid but you will be a good mother' (Ajoh and Bella laugh)
15. Bella: he says he has tried to to put business like he has given that girl money he has opened the business like he's tried everything for this girl to do something he's just said that you know what this it's not working for this woman
16. Thandi: yoh [babes
17. Bella: [so he has seen that the only thing which is good is that he knows that his kids
18. Ajoh: are sorted because =
19. Bella: =are sorted [(laughs)
20. Ajoh: [since she can't go out of the house at least she will stay in the house with them
21. Bella: yes he's like (sucks teeth) yoh I laughed I'm like – he's like 'she needs to spend time with you guys because [I don't know
22. Ajoh: [Quinta is on her way (unrelated comment)
23. Bella: because I don't know like you guys (sucks teeth) ah like yeah you need to think [like'
24. Thandi: [yoh
25. Bella: (laughs)
26. Thandi: yoh babes yeah wow what a *wowment*
27. Bella: like everyone has their own reasons why they are dating this person

The story launcher here (turn 1) consists of the action that triggers the dialogue (sending the email). This turn acts as a bid to tell a story as well. If Bella left the story at that point, the interlocutors might ask, 'And what happened?', which would lead to a narration of the dialogue. The orientation is also

fused within this turn as Bella names the other character in the story ‘David...the dining guy’. In turn 2, I (Ajoh) signal to Bella that I am listening with ‘mhm’, and this functions as permission for Bella to carry on (request to hear the story) (Sacks 1992).

In this story, the constructed dialogue stage consists of direct and indirect reporting of the conversation between Bella and David. Bella uses this dialogue from the onset to establish an ‘us’ vs ‘other’ discourse: ‘us’ being the Girl Chat members who are described as entrepreneurial: ‘you guys can think’ (in turn 3), while David’s girlfriend is positioned as the ‘other’ who is not, which is why David wants her to befriend the Girl Chat team (turn 5). Bella uses the dialogue to negotiate a position where she can accept David’s compliment while resisting his potentially sexist ideas that emerge in turns 7, 9 and 11. Bella reports that David said his only reason for dating his girlfriend is that she will make a good mother to his children. This perspective, which emphasises women’s childbearing and caregiving roles, indexes or points to sexist views on women, which goes against the feminist ideals of the group. So Bella is faced with the task of accepting David’s compliment without taking responsibility for the problematic undertones in how he talks about his girlfriend. She employs distancing techniques, first by describing David as ‘stupid’ and then by presenting his views as surprising: ‘do you know what he said’. Bella also distances herself from David’s view by showing through the dialogue in turn 11 that David is aware of her alternative (feminist) interpretation of his position, given that he knows the purpose of Girl Chat and the feminist ideals they stand for. Bella ends her story with the use of external evaluation, where she describes David as someone who is being ‘so real’ (turn 13). ‘Real’ describes someone who tells it as it is and carries positive connotations.

The other participants then draw on the ideologies embedded within the dialogue, as well as others they deem relevant, to work out their positions in relation to the teller’s story. In turn 14, we see Thandi rejecting both David’s views of his girlfriend as well as Bella’s evaluation of him as ‘real’ by using imagined dialogue within a hypothetical scenario as a narrative strategy.

14. ‘Yoh he – he has such focus imagine sitting with ev- someone every day and you’re like “yoh you’re so stupid but you will be a good mother”’

She is rejecting the idea of remaining in a relationship with someone just because they will make a good mother.

In an attempt to defend her position towards David – that is, why she evaluated him positively, Bella provides more information through more direct and indirect reporting in turns 16 and 18 about David’s failed attempts to open a business for his girlfriend. Bella’s provision of new information at this stage of the telling is a strategy that provides mitigating factors, which justifies why her final assessment of David is of someone who deals with the reality he is faced with. The information Bella provides depicts David as someone who has chosen to remain in a relationship with his girlfriend even if she does not have all the qualities he desires. In turns 19 and 21, I (Ajoh) provide what I anticipate is the point Bella wants to make, demonstrating my understanding of Bella’s interpretation of David within her story.

We can thus see the joint negotiation of meaning taking place and the negotiation of positions in relation to relevant discourses such as gender roles. On the one hand, there is David’s potentially sexist position of being with a woman for her childbearing and caregiving abilities. On the other hand, Bella and Thandi distance themselves from David’s position in their own ways. Thandi rejects the idea, Bella thinks he is making the best of his situation, while I signal that I see both points of view by laughing at Thandi’s comment and completing Bella’s utterances.

Small stories made up of mainly reported conversation, like the ones analysed here, allow the participants to draw other voices and ideologies into their conversations. This creates a space for negotiating group and individual positions in relation to these external voices and the ideologies and social discourses they may point to. In the case of this particular story, David’s competing discourses about women – his admiration for entrepreneurial women (‘wow you guys can think’) on the one hand, and his potentially sexist reasons for being with his girlfriend on the other – are the ‘external discourses’ that are introduced into the conversation. Through storytelling in everyday conversations,

the group negotiates the complex alignments and positions they take up concerning these ideologies and discourses. After all, the participants were seeking to 'change the narrative of the African woman' through their online conversations on their YouTube channel, and it is stories just like these that get retold online, opening up debate on different ways of being a woman. However, they are also at the beginning stages of what they hope will be their journey to fame and fortune, seeking affirmation and public acknowledgement, while struggling to make ends meet, and thus David's 'compliment' to them is something to bask in ('at least we can "think"'). Hence the telling, interpretation and evaluation of this incident enables them to negotiate this difficult terrain: to acknowledge and claim the compliment, even as they reject the discourses and ideologies which may have shaped it.

As with many conversational stories, there is no separate evaluation stage in small stories (as in Labov's narratives of personal experiences), but the evaluation runs throughout the narration and interpretation of the story. Like other small stories, where there is no crisis or unusual event, the evaluation sustains the reports and makes them tellable. It is in the evaluation and the turn-by-turn unfolding of the conversation that the ideological or identity work the participants are engaged in becomes noticeable. Thandi's backchanneling throughout the story ('wow' and 'yoh babes') indicate that Thandi does not align with David's views even before she explicitly makes fun of him in turn 14. Other evaluative devices such as laughter, particularly Bella's laughter and her external evaluations (Labov, 1972) of David, such as 'that guy is so stupid' and 'he is so real', play a crucial role in softening how David is presented to the rest of the group.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I looked at the negotiation of group and individual identities and ideological alignments in the storytelling practices of a group of three female friends. I look closely at the dialogue and the key role it plays in drawing in 'voices' other than the teller's and meaning frames that the audience will use to make sense of the story. Evaluative devices, specifically dialogue, make these meaning frames relevant to the present activity and, in so doing, open them up for negotiation. Through the recurrence of such negotiations in everyday conversations and interactions, individuals jointly construct a sense of what they consider appropriate ways of being, thinking and speaking, which influences how they perceive and relate with each other in the moment of interaction and at the macro level of their relationship as friends.

I show how a story about 'nothing' may indeed be a story about everything. This is due to the larger discourses indexed by the (co)tellers, and how the stories and the way they are told and received point to different aspects of their lives (e.g. career aspirations, gender and childhood socialisation), which intersect at various levels to produce their everyday experiences. Thus, this study highlights the fluidity and intersection of identities and ideologies within everyday discursive practices. It offers insights into what lies underneath macro identity categories and macro-level ideological processes, showcasing how ideologies are transformed, shaped or refashioned as part of the nuanced patterning of relational dynamics.

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**Appendix 1: Participant biographies and background on Girl Chat**

- Ajoh:** Ajoh is the researcher and also one of the main participants in the study. I was a 25-year-old Master's student at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) at the time of data collection in 2017. Bella and I have the longest-standing relationship in the group. We met during our undergraduate studies. I am originally from Cameroon and speak mainly English, though I can also speak Pidgin English and have a fair understanding of French and my mother tongue, Nweh. I moved to Cape Town to pursue my studies and had been living in Cape Town for six years at the time of data collection
- Bella:** Bella is also Cameroonian, and she was a 27-year-old during data collection. She had been living in Cape Town for six years. She and I had been friends since our studies at UWC. At the time of this project, Bella was pursuing a second undergraduate degree from the University of South Africa. She speaks mainly English but also speaks Pidgin English and French and has a fair understanding of her mother tongue, Bakweri.
- Thandi:** Thandi is a South African female originally from the Northern Cape. In 2017, she was 24 years old and a Master's student at UWC. She and I had met a year earlier, in 2016, when we worked together on a project at the university. Thandi and Bella eventually met and also struck up a friendship. Thandi mainly speaks in English in Cape Town though her home language is Afrikaans, with a limited understanding of isiXhosa and isiZulu.
- Girl Chat:** Girl Chat played a defining role in the nature of the relationship between the participants. As such, it is important to elaborate on what the platform was about. Girl Chat was an online platform consisting mainly of a YouTube Channel, but it also had an Instagram, Facebook and Twitter page to support and promote the YouTube Channel. Girl Chat's goal was to 'change the narrative of the African woman through generative dialogue'. Eventually, this was rephrased to 'changing the narrative of the African woman through real, informative and entertaining conversation'. Our primary content included 10–20-minute conversations around issues that we felt were relevant for us as black African women from our own lived experiences. Our topics ranged from issues of culture such as lobola/ bride price practice, the implications of taking a man's surname at marriage, sex, social media, parenting, relationship advice and feminism, among others. These conversations were filmed, edited and uploaded to YouTube, first weekly and then biweekly. To support the channel we also created content such as photos, captions and visuals for our other social media platforms that reflected the conversations on YouTube and helped to drive traffic to the YouTube page. We also brought in guests, other women of colour as well as men we considered to be allies, and attended and organised events and workshops on women's empowerment to learn and further market our platform.

**Appendix 2: Transcription key**

=	latching
-	false starts, hesitations
/?/	inaudible utterances
/text/	guesses on unclear or inaudible utterances
Text [aligned at the point of overlap [text	overlapping speech
(text)	nonverbal aspects, author's comments
(.), (.2)	noticeable pause, duration of a pause in seconds
:	prolonged sound (0.5 seconds per column)
CAPS	higher volume than surrounding talk
underlined words	emphasis
"text"	made up words, colloquial expressions or slang
'text'	Reported speech
?	raised intonation at the end of an utterance
[italicized texts in square brackets]	translation
Bold italics	High pitch and/or sing song voice
↑syllable (upward arrow next to specific syllable in bold)	Rising intonation
syllable↓ (downward arrow next to specific syllable)	Falling intonation