Analyzing Meaning-Making in Network Ties—A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract
How to understand meaning-making in social relations has long been a key issue in sociological network thinking and research and has been addressed by an impressive body of research, most with either a theory-oriented or a method-oriented focus. This article argues for the value of strengthening the links between both approaches to meaning-making in networks. From an empirical perspective, this article draws on small story research and combines it with recent advances in network theory led by Harrison C. White. People relate to one another by telling small stories that engage positioned identities in story lines. Meaning-making in social relations builds on and continues this shared storytelling history. I suggest two basic analytical operations to reconstruct meaning-making in social ties from textual data. The first basic operation disentangles small story sequences from a text and investigates their identity positionings (small story level). The second basic operation integrates all small stories about a tie and teases out varieties of identity positionings, their patterning, and their inner logic (tie level). This article presents a practical procedure to analyze meaning-making in network ties that is simultaneously combined with qualitative research principles and consistent with recent developments in sociological network thinking.

Keywords
relational sociology, social network analysis (SNA), positioning analysis, qualitative social network analysis, social ties, identity

What is Already Known?
Social relations or ties (“social capital”) are key factors in all types of social processes. It has long been central to social network analysis to understand the meaning of social ties. The assumption is that people jointly define the general nature of a relationship (as friends, neighbors, etc.) as well as its scope and limits.

What This Paper Adds?
With regard to empirical analysis, there are theory-oriented and method-oriented approaches to understanding such meaning-making processes. The present article bridges these approaches by (a) introducing the concepts of small stories and identity positionings and (b) suggesting a hands-on procedure for empirical analysis.

Introduction
Structural social network analysis (SNA) has been rapidly developing as a research method since the 1950s and 1960s. Key factors in this evolution were the advent of computer technologies and mathematical models that together enrich the quantitative toolbox of structural network analysis (Carrington & Scott, 2011; Scott, 1988). Quantitative approaches capture the complexities of social relations (or ties) in numerical values (Edwards & Crossley, 2009). Such quantitative measuring and processing of relational data has many advantages. For example, it enables an overview of complex network structures and actors’ positions within them, facilitates cross-case comparisons, and allows diffusion processes to be traced (Burt, 1992; Crossley, 2010; Valente, 1995). However, quantitative analysis also has a downside: It reduces “relationships to numbers” (Crossley, 2010, p. 8), thereby bracketing much of its complex and contextual essence and neglecting that they are “lived histories of iterated interaction which constantly evolve as a function of continued interaction between parties” (Crossley, 2010, p. 8). Therefore, studies that adopt quantitative and structural network techniques are frequently confronted with the task of...
“adding” meaning to their reductive measurements. In other words, they need to re-embed abstract information in social practices of meaning-making in social relations (Belotti, 2015).

Against this background, this article qualitatively examines how to reconstruct meaning-making in social ties. The focus lies on practical techniques for empirical analysis. The analysis of meaning-making in social ties must rest on a thorough understanding of what constitutes such ties and how they interlink with other ties to form larger social formations. This article is based on the network theoretical tenets that networks come from storytellings and that storytellings constitute identities (Mische, 2003; White, 2008). Drawing on the small story concept (Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008), I argue that people interact by telling small stories that engage positioned identities through story lines. Meaning-making in social relations builds on and continues shared lived histories of storytellings. From an empirical perspective, I suggest two basic analytical operations to reconstruct meaning-making in social ties from text data: one that separates small story sequences from texts and investigates their identity positionings and ties (small story level) and another that integrates the small stories of a tie and teases out varieties of identity positionings and ties within a dyad, their patterning, and their inner logic (tie level). This approach is simultaneously in line with qualitative research principles and consistent with recent developments in sociological network thinking.

**Meaning-Making in Social Ties: Two Approaches**

In network research, many studies have examined meaning-making and analysis in relations and networks. These studies can be roughly divided into method-oriented and theory-oriented approaches. Although both approaches provide important insights independently, I argue that they are not sufficiently linked conceptually or empirically. To make this point, I first present these approaches before discussing an integrative practical procedure for empirical research in the following sections.

**Method-Oriented Approaches**

Method-oriented (qualitative) approaches rely on qualitative methods to understand meaning-making processes in social relations. They often use qualitative methods in combination with quantitative structural network measures. This mixing of methods has consistently been a constitutive feature of network analysis (Fuhse & Mützel, 2011). Indeed, classical studies in network analysis, such as those on personal communities (Wellman, 1979; Wellman & Wortley, 1990) or inter-firm networks (Uzzi, 1996), apply both qualitative and quantitative methods to address their research questions. Recently, however, there has been a reflexive turn in network analysis that emphasizes the added value of qualitative methods along with standardized measures (Belotti, 2016; Heath, Fuller, & Johnston, 2009). This reflexive turn is heralded as the advent of mixed methods in SNA (Bolivar, 2016; Hollstein & Dominguez, 2014) or as qualitative network analysis (Altissimo, 2016; Belotti, 2015; Herz, Peters, & Truschkat, 2015; Hollstein, 2011). In either case, authors address the limitations that come with measuring relations in numerical representations of network ties. A benefit of this research is that questions about combining different types of data (numerical and narrative) and analytical strategies are moved from shady study rooms to public scrutiny, including reflections on (mixed methods) data collection, data processing, visualization, and analysis (Armitage, 2016; Contandriopoulos, Larouche, Betrone, & Brouselle, 2017; Molina, Jariego, & McCarty, 2014; Tubaro, Ryan, & D’Angelo, 2016; Verd & Lozares, 2014).

**Theory-Oriented Approaches**

Theory-oriented scholars build their research in systematic ways from a set of assumptions, definitions, and propositions. Theory-oriented approaches to social relations come from different theoretical directions: Some researchers apply canonical social theories to network phenomena (e.g., Fine & Kleinman, 1983; Lazega, 1997), whereas others use genuine network theoretical approaches (Fuhse, 2009, 2015). Harrison C. White’s “Identity and Control” (2008) is by far the most influential work on social theorizing within SNA (Godart & White, 2010; Kirchner & Mohr, 2010). His thinking has inspired a productive research strand that combines an interest in the meaning of social ties with rigorous quantitative modeling and analysis (Mohr, 1994, 1998; Mützel, 2009; Padgett & Ansell, 1993; Yeung, 2005). The common theoretical background allows for a systematic investigation of meaning-making in social relations and networks. Many studies in this strand of network research feature elaborate quantitative analysis (McLean, 1998). Indeed, for many authors, the methodological ideal is (implicitly or explicitly) a “systematic quantitative analysis” (Gondal & McLean, 2013, p. 123). In this vein, qualitative data—such as narratives (Bearman & Stovel, 2000; Franzosi, 1997)—are regularly converted in quantitative data, sometimes with the explicit aim of avoiding “interpretation” (Mohr, 1994, p. 354) or at least making it more reliable, whereas qualitative data are often less explicitly developed. As Mische (2003) puts it, there is a “strong tension between mathematical mapping techniques and ethnographic or textual analysis” (p. 266). Nevertheless, the phenomenological turn has addressed widespread critiques of earlier network research, indicating a lack of interest in culture and agency and the dangers of simplistic numeric measurements (Brint, 1992; Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994). This marks a decisive step forward since within this line of phenomenological network research, it is no longer acceptable to consider networks without including constitutive meaning-making processes.

Despite their common interests in meaning-making within social relations, method-oriented and theory-oriented approaches do not engage in a systematic dialogue. On one
hand, method-oriented studies do not systematically engage with recent progress in network-theoretical thinking. In contrast, theory-oriented approaches inspired by Harrison C. White rarely refer to qualitative network analysis or to the growing methods discourse but rather focus their methodological ambition on the quantitative areas of their studies. The benefits of interlinking both research strands, however, are obvious: Theory-oriented researchers could profit from a rich pool of exemplary studies and reflections on the use of qualitative methods in combination with SNA, and method-oriented researchers could draw on network-relational theory to guide, integrate, and reinterpret their studies. The present article attempts to promote dialogue between method-oriented and theory-oriented approaches on meaning-making in social relations by introducing the concept of small stories to the debate. In network conceptual terms, this article aims to bridge two largely disconnected components of a research network.

Phenomenological Network Theory and Small Storytelling

Networks From Stories

The analysis of meaning-making in social ties must rest upon an understanding of what constitutes social ties and networks. The most influential and genuine approach to this challenge comes from Harrison C. White and his phenomenological network theory (White, 2000, 2008). He assumes that social phenomena are realized in networks and network-like relational formations and become integral parts of everyday life. “To generate social action, events must be perceived and interpreted by identities” (Godart & White, 2010, p. 570). Networks take the form of stories and emerge from stories whereby each story defines the two constitutive elements of networks, that is, the nodes (or identities, e.g., persons) and the ties (relations) between them.

How do stories shape identities? Interactionism has long dealt with the constitution and management of identities in situations of co-presence (Goffman, 1986; Strauss, 2009). Small story research builds on interactionism. It stresses that identities emerge from interactional storytelling that is creatively adopted to different situations, social contexts, and interlocutors. In other words, small stories and identities are situational (i.e., potentially contingent, fluent, inconsistent, and ephemeral), interactive constructions and have both representational aspects (story level) and functional aspects (interactional level). Stories are not (only) considered as a “tool for reflecting on (chunks of) lives but as constructive means that are functional in the creation of characters in space and time, which in turn are instrumental for the creation of positions vis-à-vis co-conversationals” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 379). Thus, storytelling gains an aspect in addition to its representational aspect (the “content” at the story level): It facilitates the interactive construction of identities.

Positioning analysis addresses how we analyze identities in the context of small storytelling (Deppermann, 2013; Harré & Longenhove, 1999). It offers a set of dimensions of positioning that bring about identities and orient their analysis. These dimensions identify a positioning’s origins (self or other), level (story or interactional level), style (emotional vs. nonemotional, implicit vs. explicit), degree of voluntariness (forced vs. voluntary), or the temporal ordering of positioning (prepositioning or repositioning; Bernhard, 2015). These positionings can be identified in three steps of identity analysis: first, analysis on the story level (or textual level); second, analysis on the interactional level; and third, analysis of the question of how someone positions herself or himself with respect to master narratives or discourses on identities (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). On the story level and on the interactional level, participants make use of, refer to, adopt, mold, and reproduce cultural elements in their positioning activities, such as identity and role scripts, social categories, types of relations, or commonly shared story lines. Therefore, positioning and analysis are local in the sense that they build from talk-in-interaction while linking to and reproducing more enduring and widespread social phenomena.

Two Basic Analytical Operations

I suggest two basic procedures for textual analysis. The first brings the researcher from texts to small tie stories (analysis at the small story level), and the second takes the researcher from small tie stories to everyday social relations (analysis at the tie level).

1. In qualitative analysis, data often take the form of texts, which may be derived from transcripts from interviews, audio, or videotapes of interactions or may “naturally” occur, as is the case for documents and Internet chat protocols. The first analytical task is to determine from such texts the traces of social relations and involved identities, which is achieved by decomposing the text into a series of small stories. Small story sequences may contain fully fledged storytelling with typical interactional keys at the beginning (“I have to tell you what happened last week . . .”) and end (“I will never have a barbeque night like this again”). However, there are also much more fragmented, incomplete, and subtle instances of storytelling. Such fragments nevertheless position story characters with respect to one another and thus inform us about identities and their ties.

To analytically access these aspects, there are three helpful procedures: (a) determine the context of the positioning (story level or interactional level, e.g., within an interview), (b) define the type of positioning (e.g., active emotional self-positioning, the forced positioning of others), and (c) look for references to and (idiosyncratic) adaptations of cultural scripts (e.g., types of ties, gender, and role scripts or stereotypes). These analytical procedures go hand in hand with microtextual strategies of text analysis that draw on conversation analysis, narrative analysis, linguistics, among others,
to identify how positioning in a small story arises, such as from the organization of turn-taking or voice modulations (Lucius-Hoene, 2000; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). The result of this first analytical step is a decomposition of the original text into a set of small story segments that clarify relational and identity positioning. To keep the results manageable, these lists can be organized in tables (cf. empirical example, Table 1, rows 1 and 2, as explained in “Empirical Example” section).

2. The second basic operation moves from (sets of) small tie stories to (multifaceted) ties between identities. Hence, it shifts the focus from the decomposition of texts to the recomposition of everyday relations and identities as documented in a respective text. At this level of analysis, one must bring together all small story segments (and their detailed analysis) that address a particular relation between two identities. The analysis at the tie level then proceeds by using two concepts as heuristics: tie-story repertoires and relational rules (cf. Table 1, rows 3 and 4).

The first heuristic concept addresses the multiplexity of relations. Examining small stories shows the repertoire of (forms of) identity positioning and ties between them. For example, a narrative interview might reveal a multifaceted bond between the narrator and someone in her network. In that case, her narrative might include small stories on how the two met as friends in situations of sociability, how they cooperated as work colleagues on a common project, and how they lived together in a shared apartment. This approach considers the multiplexity of a tie, its variability, and thus the history of a relation’s identity positioning by building on the analysis of references to and (idiiosyncratic) adaptations of cultural scripts (Point c, see above).

The second heuristic concept is that of relational rules. Participants in a relation (and, to varying degrees, observers) not only have common memories (narratives) of past positioning and story lines, they also share a feeling for what has been, what is, and what might be possible within a particular relation. Such rules are generative structures that produce—among other things—the characteristic repertoire of positionings within a tie. They allow for creativity and adaptations in contextualized situations of interactions and they orient expectations, which together produce the consistency of a relation over time. Relational rules can be identified by determining the inner logic that allows for the observed variety of identities documented in the sets of small stories.

Empirical Example

The following analysis exemplifies how meaning-making in social relations can be analyzed by reconstructing the history of positioned identities in storytelling. The empirical example is an interview from a study on subsidized self-employment as a way out of unemployment in Germany (the so-called Einstiegs geld). With regard to the recipients of the subsidy, the main interest was to investigate what inspired their self-employment and how they managed the transition from the state of unemployment to self-employment. Particular attention was given to the role of networks in these processes. To address these research questions, a total of 40 interviews were conducted with nascent entrepreneurs in winter 2011/2012 (Pongratz, Bernhard, Wolff, & Promberger, 2013). The interviews contained a narrative section on the employment biography and a narrative section on personal networks, which used the so-called network maps. This design provided encompassing data on the interviewee’s biography and on his or her relations to others in the personal network in the form of audio transcripts. The interviews were analyzed in several steps. First, all interviews were subjected to a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000). Second, they were summarized along different categories (such as “motivation to become self-employed”) to facilitate cross-case comparisons. Third, I conducted detailed biographic case studies for nine anchor cases (Bernhard, 2016). Finally, the cases were distinguished into four types of transitions into self-employment.

The text excerpt below is found in an interview with Ms. Robert (pseudonym). Ms. Robert is one of the most pronounced examples of the “personal development type” of transition into self-employment. This type is characterized by a strong link between, on the one hand, professional goals that relate to the success of the self-employment project and, on the other hand, personal objectives, such as overcoming a biographic crisis (e.g., illness, depression). The personal development type relies heavily on networks to seek resources, motivation, and reinforcements. Ms. Robert is a Polish migrant in her 30s and has a varied employment history. After finishing secondary school (“Mittlere Reife”), she began an apprenticeship in the medical sector, but after some time, she doubted that choice. She eventually decided to reorient herself to the industry sector, where she began a second apprenticeship that she again aborted—this time, however, after a very short period of time. Ms. Robert decided to go back to school and finish her A-levels to continue her studies. She began a major in natural science but switched to sport science, where she completed a bachelor’s degree. She had trouble finding adequate employment and worked in the leisure sector in a job for which she considered herself overqualified. Since she also felt underpaid and treated unfairly, she quit and began a long, unsuccessful search for a new job. Frustrated by the experience, Ms. Robert became depressive but recovered after a couple of months; she then began to nurture the idea of becoming self-employed. By the time of the interview, she had been self-employed for 9 months as a sport and health trainer for private and firm customers.

The text excerpt presents a turning point in Ms. Robert’s biographical trajectory. The passage refers to a “massive” (Line 5772) depressive phase. She had the feeling of drifting “from one disappointment to the next” (Line 579), and she began to question herself (“Is my nose crooked? Do I look stupid?”), Lines 592–593). She had thought about...
| Tie to Title | Small Story | Tie-Story Repertoire | Relational Rules |
|--------------|-------------|----------------------|------------------|
| (e.g., to aunt or best friend) | (Summarizing Paraphrase) | (Quintessential Description of [Varieties of] Characters, Relations, and Adaptations of Cultural Scripts) | (Patterns and Logics of Positioning, Developments Over Time) |
| Lisa | Flat | Ms. Roberts moves temporarily to flat in house of boyfriend’s mother in times of financial need and “big life crisis” to finish her studies; after a test phase, she moves in permanently | Ms. Robert occurs as girlfriend, tenant, student (grant recipient), support recipient, and in a desperate soliloquy; Lisa is introduced as mother of boyfriend (triadic constellation) and described as owner of a large house; relation between the two remains vague. Changing embedding of relation to Lisa as bilateral, trilateral (with boyfriend) or multilateral (with Lisa’s son and her partner) constellation; within foundational relation (“mother-in-law” and “daughter-in-law”), an asymmetric support relation develops; Lisa and Ms. Robert invest considerable energy in dealing with the asymmetry of that relation; support is predominantly financial in form but is known to be multifunctional for Ms. Robert (material and psychological dimensions). |
| 2 | Life coach advice | Lisa advises her to see a life coach in a situation of personal crisis | Mother of boyfriend is introduced as “Lisa” and “going-to-be mother-in-law”; bilateral relation explicated and laden with trust, familial context (implicit triad); well-timed and well-received advice. |
| 3 | Pilates trainer qualification I | Ms. Robert narrates how she completed a Pilates trainer qualification “to build up a little more [qualification]”; Lisa pays the bill | Accordance of Lisa’s and Ms. Robert’s motivation for the qualification; they have a common agenda. |
| 4 | Pilates trainer qualification II | Ms. Robert states that she always knew that Lisa would financially support her; Pilates trainer qualification is the case in point here—it was a “present”; she never could have afforded it | Relation to Lisa is one of constant financial support; reciprocity is not expected (“present”); the relation is qualified as essential for her (transition to) self-employment. |
| 5 | Sri Lanka holiday | Lisa gives Ms. Robert a 3-week holiday in Sri Lanka; she concludes that self-employment would not have been possible without Lisa’s (and her boyfriend’s) financial and emotional support. | Lisa’s support is general and not confined to the development of her professional career; she cares for overall (psychic) situation of Ms. Robert and her son (triad). |
| 6 | Financial background | Ms. Robert ranks her “mother-in-law” and her boyfriend as most important contacts; Lisa gave a “financial background” | Lisa’s support is directed toward “us” (Ms. Robert and boyfriend, triad); financial aspect evaluated as the most important support dimension. |
| 7 | Lisa’s generosity | Lisa is characterized as “uncomplicated and generous”; she offers help to an extent that makes Ms. Robert feel awkward; re-narration of Pilates trainer qualification story: Lisa made a “big inheritance” and likes to “pass it on as help” | Ms. Robert struggles with asymmetric helping relationship; Lisa is characterized as generous, attentive, uncomplicated, and wealthy; self-positioning as reluctant recipient of that help (against the negative counterimage of a needy supplicant). |
| 8 | Rental agreement | Lisa’s partner draws up a rental agreement for Ms. Robert’s time in Lisa’s flat; no rent is paid, and no reimbursement conditions established | Relation codified in hybrid (credit) contract that combines market and gift logics; it is Lisa’s partner’s idea (“a financial professional”). |
| 9 | “Without breathing down my neck” | Ms. Robert considers herself happy to have met such nice people as Lisa; without Lisa’s money, self-employment probably would not have been possible; she gives the money “without breathing down my neck” to repay the ‘credit’ | Relation to Lisa temporarily but explicitly separated from relation to boyfriend (bilateral) and charged with friend-like sympathy and gratitude (emotional self-positioning). |
| 10 | Entrepreneurial loan | | |
| Tie to     | Title     | Small Story                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Tie-Story Repertoire                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Relational Rules                                                                                     |
|-----------|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|           | Ms. Robert took an entrepreneurial loan to “repay at least a bit” on her own; if Ms. Robert, however, could not repay that loan, Lisa would help her out; that “makes the nights more relaxed” | Deliberate self-positioning as entrepreneur by choice of credit relation to bank (according to market conditions) as opposed to further reliance on Lisa’s support; this market relation is embedded, however, in an implicit reliance on Lisa |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                       |
| 11        | Daughter  | Ms. Robert never had a “good relation” with her parents, but with Lisa she feels “at home”; for Lisa, she is the “daughter she never had”                                                                   | Sets relation to Lisa in a familial setting of mother–daughter; she is the daughter Lisa never had, Lisa is the mother she wanted to have                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                       |
| 12        | Good consciousness | Lisa finds pleasure in making “gifts” and enjoys when “something good comes out of it”; knowing that Ms. Robert can receive the presents with “good consciousness” | Self-positioning as hesitant recipient of Lisa’s support; Lisa’s pure intentions make her accept it                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                       |
| 13        | Grandchildren | Lisa wants grandchildren; Ms. Robert speculates whether “speeding things up” is another reason for her support                                                                                          | Attribution of long-term selfish motive for support (though laughingly and speculatively); reiteration of implicit self-positioning within boyfriend’s family                                                                 |                                                                                                       |
self-employment but refrained since she felt she had insufficient work experience. During that time, she lived with the mother of her boyfriend, who approached her with advice:

[581] And then I kept
[582] going on like this [depressive] for a couple of months until
I then . . . It was around that time
[583] roughly a year ago. (I: mhm) Then [I went to] a – what
was that woman’s name again?—That was
[584] an acquaintance of the mother of my boyfriend. She does
these coachings, so a
[585] little self-reflection and stuff like that, life coaching. And
so a little
[586] targeting [finding one’s goals], blah blah, that, too. But (I: mhm) not not knick-knacks, but
[587] you know really decent, respectable. And that was when
Lisa—Lisa is
[588] my going-to-be mother-in-law, she recommended that,
whether I would not probably
[589] sometime like to talk to her. Because I also doubted
myself:
[590] (I: mhm) Why can’t I in a job interview
[591] convince [an employer to hire me]. (Ms. Robert, Lines
581–591)

The following analysis concentrates on the passage about Lisa, the mother of her boyfriend (Lines 587–589). It first focuses on what we learn about Ms. Robert’s relation to Lisa from the small story (Basic analytical operation 1) and then includes pertinent stories told elsewhere in the interview (Basic analytical operation 2).

Basic Analytical Operation 1: Analysis at the Small Story Level

The passage (Lines 581–591) is the beginning of a comprehensive story of her experience with the life coach (until Line 606). It contains a small story on Ms. Robert’s relation to Lisa from Line 587–589, which basically states that it was Lisa who gave her the advice to see the life coach (life coach advice small story, see Table 1, Story 2). Until this point in the interview, there was only one reference to Lisa in a small story about Ms. Robert moving into a flat in Lisa’s house. Hence, we know little about Lisa’s character and Ms. Robert’s relation to it. Since the life coach advice story remains largely implicit, we must first explicate and paraphrase the references Ms. Robert makes in the three lines. The passage contains two references that need extrapolation. The first reference is “that was when” (Line 587). Here, Ms. Robert indexes the difficult personal situation in which she found herself and that she had described previously (the repeated disappointments on the labor market, the depression; Lines 541–582) and that yields the expression that she “kept going on like this for a couple of months” (Lines 581–582). The second reference—“her” (Line 589)—specifies the person to whom she is referred. That person “does these coachings” (Line 584) (“but not not knick-knacks,” Line 586) and is an “acquaintance of the mother of her boyfriend” (Line 584). Furthermore, Ms. Robert intuitively calls the “mother of her boyfriend” the name she uses in conversations—that is, “Lisa” (Line 587). Using the first name instead of the surname to address the partner’s parents is common in Germany but is not self-evident. It indicates a certain level of intimacy between the two. To explain Lisa’s role to the interviewer (on the interaction level), Ms. Robert quickly goes on to relabel Lisa as her “going-to-be mother-in-law” (Line 588). On the story level, this prepositioning anticipates a marriage between Ms. Robert and her boyfriend. By calling upon the role set of “husband” and “mother-in-law,” she puts both in a familial frame, which implies expectations of enduring relations between this triad.

We can derive further information about Ms. Robert’s relation to Lisa by looking at the story line of the narrated interaction within the familial role frame. In the paraphrased form, the small story tells us that Lisa approached Ms. Robert in a difficult personal situation and suggested that she talk to a life coach. Thus, Lisa took an active role and positioned Ms. Robert as someone in need of some sort of counseling. This is an active positioning of Ms. Robert’s narrated identity by a narrated other (cf. Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2004). Ms. Robert accepted this positioning by following up on the advice. This story line has two implications that qualify the underlying relation between the two. First, the timing of Lisa’s initiative shows that she knew about Ms. Robert’s difficult personal situation and that this knowledge was legitimate. Second, Lisa’s advance was deemed appropriate within their relationship. It might have helped that Lisa’s wording was obviously very careful: Ms. Robert began her reproduction of Lisa’s words in indirect speech with “she recommended that” (Line 588) but then stopped and chose a softer formulation of Lisa’s advice in form of a hypothetical question (“whether . . . ,” Lines 588–589) that left open if (“probably,” Line 588) and when (“sometime,” Line 589) Ms. Robert decided to follow that advice. Thus, the life coach advice small story implies that the tie between Ms. Robert and Lisa fills the familial triangular role frame in an amicable and approachable manner. Furthermore, the story line unfolds between the two women and omits Ms. Robert’s boyfriend. We do not know whether he was present in the advice interaction simply because he was not relevant. Apparently, a bilateral bond had emerged between Lisa and Ms. Robert.

Step 2: Analysis at the Tie Level

What does this bilateral bond between the two women look like? What else does Ms. Robert tell us throughout the interview interaction? These questions bring us to the tie level of analysis. Regarding her personal network, Ms. Robert mentions Lisa as the most important contact for her transition to self-employment. This assessment is supported by the fact that she mentions Lisa more often than any other contact. Overall, Lisa appears in 12 text passages that constitute 13 small stories, which involve a variety of themes (from qualification to holidays) and a repertoire of characters (from daughter to tenant) and relations (from hybrid contracts to asymmetric helping dyads; for an overview, see Table 1). What do these
positionings in the small stories tell us about the common experiences of Ms. Robert and Lisa and their lived tie history? What orient their mutual expectations, interactions, and their sedimentation in common stories? What are, in other words, their relational rules and routines?

Relational rule 1: Transcending the family triad. Because Lisa was the mother of Ms. Robert’s boyfriend, this tie forms part of a familial role triad of mother-son-daughter-in-law. Ms. Robert made explicit and anticipatory reference to that frame (going-to-be mother-in-law, Lines 587–588). Time and again, however, Ms. Robert revived dyadic situations with Lisa, as shown in the life coach advice story. Elsewhere, Ms. Robert recounted (repeatedly) how Lisa offered to finance a Pilates trainer qualification program (Stories 3, 4, and 7 in Table 1) or reflected on what the relation to Lisa meant to her and Lisa (Stories 9 and 11). These stories demonstrate that the bilateral tie between Lisa and Ms. Robert is not exclusively and strictly derived from the triadic role frame. The variety of mutual references, the identities insinuated, the expectations, and routines lived are all specific to their shared tie-story history. The stories told in the interview indicate that, over time, the tie transcended the triadic role frame in which it originated. Lisa and Ms. Robert maintained a bilateral tie that—at least occasionally—excluded Ms. Robert’s boyfriend. However, their dyadic bond never fully left behind the triadic frame. Rather, in many stories, there remains a (faint) reference to Lisa’s son, such as when Ms. Robert and her boyfriend become aligned in a subset (“us”) that receives attention and support from Lisa (see, for instance, Stories 5 and 13). A first relational rule, hence, is that Ms. Robert’s tie to Lisa, on one hand, is embedded in a triad with her boyfriend and, on the other hand, oscillates between this triad and a dyad that (tentatively) exceeds what one could expect from a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relation.

Relational rule 2: Reassuring one another of the purity of their intentions. The second relational rule indicates that the two women entertain a supportive relationship that is largely asymmetric and enduring and features a substantial flow of (mone-
mark the presence or absence of a tie and sometimes also its strength. They can capture Ms. Robert’s relation with Lisa as several types of ties that each measure different dimensions of their interactions. Therefore, the dynamic relation between the two women as a complex tie becomes a set of numbers qualify-
ing for example, the presence of financial, emotional, or prac-
tical support. Although this procedure is adequate to address the many facets of Ms. Robert’s and Lisa’s interactions, it does not indicate anything about their understandings of these dimensions, their intertwining, or the relation’s overall dynamics. The detailed qualitative analysis shows that the two women’s relation is something more and something else than an agglomeration of different types of ties and that this differ-
ence is significant: The semantic reference to the family frame (going-to-be mother-in-law) looks ahead to Ms. Robert’s and

generalized these experiences as character traits and described Lisa as uncomplicated, generous, pleasant, and “lovely” (Line 1158, Story 12) person (Stories 7, 11, and 12). Together, Ms. Robert and Lisa distinguished their transactions from rational exchanges with their associations of strategic, profit-
maximizing behavior: They framed it as help (story 7 and 11) and as gift-giving (“present,” Stories 4 and 5). The two relational rules work hand in hand, and this asymmetric help relationship (Relational rule 2) is the participants’ way of transc-
cending the familial triad (Relational rule 1).

Ms. Robert is a pronounced example of the personal develop-
ment type of transition into self-employment. For this type, self-
employment is not just a professional issue of placing products on markets and making profit. Rather, self-
employment becomes part of an encompassing reorientation in life in times of biographical crisis. Self-employment is at the same time a vision and a practical test for a new (happier, healthier) version of the hitherto damaged self. In comparison with other types of transitions, there is more at stake for the personal development type and, partly as a consequence of this, the transitions to self-employment are more fragile. In a typical manner, Ms. Robert uses personal contacts to counter that fra-
gility, and of all contacts, it is her mother-in-law who proves to be most helpful—in terms of resources as well as with regard to generating and maintaining the new identity as self-employed entrepreneur. In fact, the small story analyzed above proves to be a turning point in her life since the life coach gives her an important impetus to think about self-employment in the first place. Moreover, Ms. Robert is paradigmatic in that she is a very active networker relying on relational rules that evoke long-term, emotionally close relations (family, “old” friends) to realize her plans. What is idiosyncratic about her, however, is that the familial support comes from her boyfriend’s side of the family (mother-in-law) and that it is a relatively recent contact whose continuity is, to some extent, anticipated (going-to-be mother-in-law).

Discussion and Conclusion

How can we understand meaning-making in social relations? Quantitative approaches represent relations as numbers that mark the presence or absence of a tie and sometimes also its strength. They can capture Ms. Robert’s relation with Lisa as several types of ties that each measure different dimensions of their interactions. Therefore, the dynamic relation between the two women as a complex tie becomes a set of numbers qualify-
ing, for example, the presence of financial, emotional, or prac-
tical support. Although this procedure is adequate to address the many facets of Ms. Robert’s and Lisa’s interactions, it does not indicate anything about their understandings of these dimensions, their intertwining, or the relation’s overall dynamics. The detailed qualitative analysis shows that the two women’s relation is something more and something else than an agglomeration of different types of ties and that this differ-
ence is significant: The semantic reference to the family frame (going-to-be mother-in-law) looks ahead to Ms. Robert’s and
her boyfriend’s future, substantially reframing their relation in the present. They were not married, but Ms. Robert acted as if they could and very likely would be. Quantitative analysis codes this in-betweenness either as a family tie or as an acquaintance without grasping the essence of Ms. Robert’s positioning in either case. Likewise, numeric representations could measure the dimensions and direction of the flow of resources from Lisa to Ms. Robert, but this approach does not observe how fragile the relation is and why, nor does it reveal what efforts the two women make to stabilize it by reassuring one another of the purity of their intentions. Finally, multiplex numeric representations of the tie overlook dynamic aspects, such as the fact that the participants oscillate between different identities. In a nutshell, numeric representations need to be complemented by qualitative understandings of identity repertoires and relational rules that orient the meaning-making in social relations.

This article offered a practical procedure for empirical research that combined two research strands. Drawing on network and positioning theory, it conceptualized social ties as a complex web of relational and identity positionings with specific relational rules that are continued through storytelling. Drawing on qualitative research techniques, it suggested two basic analytic procedures to reconstruct meaning-making in such ties. The first basic analytical operation disentangles segments of small storytelling and detects the positionings of identities, how they relate to one another and common cultural scripts when set in motion in story lines (small story level). The second basic analytical operation moves from that small story level to the level of social ties to reach structurations at higher levels of social organization. These procedures investigate and thus highlight how social ties emerge from patterns of positioning varieties and relational rules that are enshrined in sedimented histories of iterated interactive storytelling. Further research could clarify how the analysis of such tie-level processes of meaning-making coincides with meaning-making in higher level units of analysis, such as personal networks or organizational networks. It is at this network level of analysis that a combination with quantitative network analysis will be most fruitful. The analytical routines developed in this article could include mixed-method designs (Hollstein & Dominguez, 2014) in several ways. For example, in complementary research designs, the qualitative analysis of storytellings could add in-depth understandings of social relations to more numerical approaches. Alternatively, one could transform qualitative accounts of various identity positionings into multidimensional (multiplex) numerical representations of social ties. It is important, however, that such enhancements with standardized methods remain linked to theoretical insights on meaning-making in social ties.

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Notes
1. Other approaches that deal with meaning-making in social relations lie outside the realm of social network analysis (SNA) as understood here, for example, anthropological and ethnographic studies (Knox, Savage, & Harvey, 2006; Zelizer, 2011).
2. Numbers in brackets refer to line numbers in the transcript of the audio-tape. My translation, transcribed text, was smoothed for better reading comprehension.

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