

Identity negotiations in narrative accounts about poverty

Dorien Van De Mieroop

Abstract

Focusing on three interviews with people who were in debts and participated in the collective debt mediation program of the Belgian social services, I study the way these interviewees negotiate their identities. In spite of the diversity of their stories, which were framed as accounts, all interviewees shift the blame for their current situation and put forward their membership of an alternative category, namely that of the responsible parent. As such, they – in co-construction with the interviewer – counter the theme of personal blame and construct an identity that is ‘recipient designed’ and acceptable both from a local and a global contextual point of view.

Keywords: identity construction, recipient design, narrative, accounts, categorization, poverty, interviews

Introduction

In spite of the European commitment to fight poverty as it was decided in 2000 in Lisbon by the European council (Raad van Europese Unie 2010), who set the year 2010 as the ‘European Year for combating poverty and social exclusion’, not much progress has been made in this fight against relative income poverty in Europe and it is even a fact that ‘social policies and, more generally, social redistribution became less pro-poor’ (Cantillon 2010: 23). In Belgium 15,2% of the population lives in poverty (CSB 2010), which is defined as ‘a network of social exclusions that expands itself over several areas of one’s individual and collective existence’ (Vranken and De Boyser 2003: 36). This definition is also officially accepted by the Belgian government as a correct characterization of the phenomenon since it does not draw exclusive attention to the material aspect of poverty, but instead it highlights the social consequences of being poor. In particular, this definition draws attention to the aspect of social exclusion, which is typically something that is not only related to financial reasons (e.g. not having the money to participate in group activities), but it is also something that is constructed by means of interhuman behavior. For example, in a recent book which collects nine stories of poor people in Antwerp, one interviewee says that it is as if other people have a GPS in their heads that leads them away from ‘problematic cases’ such as poor people (Naegels and Blomme, 2010), which is quite an explicit and literal demonstration of exclusion. But social exclusion is also created in more implicit ways, and in this sense, it is often a typically linguistic construction: it is talked into being by means of the discursive negotiation of ingroup and outgroup identities. Identities are viewed from a social constructionist perspective, because within discourse studies: ‘It is by now a truism [...] that identities are neither fixed nor categorical properties residing in people's minds’ (Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou, 2003: 1). This has led to viewing identity as ‘a process’ (De Fina et al., 2006: 2) that is discursively constructed over and over again in particular interactions, which implies that one can not at all view an identity as typical of a person, but instead, ‘individuals have multiple identities’ (Verschuere, 2008: 26) because of their evolving and contextually bound nature. From this perspective it is particularly interesting to investigate how poor people, who are – by definition – characterized by social exclusion, negotiate their group membership, which has implications for the way they construct their identities in a particular

situation. These identities can thus be regarded as 'deficit identities' (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005), since they are 'defined by lack' (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005: 198), in this case of money, of an own house, of a job, of control of their income (see data description below), but also of membership of social groups, except for the group of poor people.

Since 'it is precisely in narrative that people's individuality is expressed most obviously' (Johnstone, 1996: 56), narrative data are especially interesting from an identity perspective. This article thus also focuses on interviews with poor people, because these offer an in-depth view on a topic which these people are not prone to talk about spontaneously. However, because 'narrative functions as the glue that enables human life to transcend the natural incoherence and discontinuity of the unruly everyday' (Bamberg et al., 2007: 5), one has to take into account that to a certain degree the typical fleeting nature of identities in ongoing interactions is lost in 'big story'-narratives, as 'narratives, often derived from interviews [...], that entail a significant measure of reflection on either an event or experience, a significant portion of a life, or the whole of it' (Freeman, 2006: 132) are often called. This significant measure of reflection implies 'a distinction between the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative' (Linde 1993: 105), which can have important implications for the kind of identities that are typically constructed in such narratives. As Georgakopoulou observed, more stable identity constructions are to be expected, which shift less on a turn-by-turn basis than what is expected in everyday interaction (Georgakopoulou, 2006: 128). Furthermore, these identities are typically connected to a moral value, in the sense that 'people do not want just any objectifiable self; they want a good self, and a self that is perceived as good by others' (Linde, 1993: 122). However, one can question the intentionality of this previous quote, since, as Bamberg notes, people do not 'have a sense of self as first located in the person and subsequently locatable in their stories' (Bamberg, 2008: 184). Indeed, the construction of identity emerges at the time of speaking and it is not some kind of pre-existing resource that is explicitly crafted beforehand and that is then copied in the interview afterwards. Rather, it is in the narrative performance itself that identities are negotiated with their interlocutors, in this case thus with the interviewer who takes on an active role in the construction of identities. As demonstrated in previous studies on interviews (see e.g. Van De Mierop, 2009a; Van De Mierop and Bruyninckx, 2009), the interaction with the interviewer can have an important influence on the way interviewees construct and shift their alignments. Including the interviewer's turns in the analyses and looking at the way identities are negotiated on a turn-by-turn basis is thus not only crucial for a solid interview analysis, but it also explicitly draws attention to the interactional nature of interviews, which are constructed and negotiated during that particular interaction. It is thus essential to include this perspective and look at the 'interactional dynamics of narrative emergence' (De Fina, 2009: 254) to overcome the criticism¹ on interviews as a data source for the study of identity construction.

Furthermore, as De Fina (2009) illustrates, attention must be paid to the type of narrative that is told. The genre that occurs in these interviews is that of accounts. I first clarify what I understand by means of accounts, before going into the reason why these interviews were framed as accounts. Accounts have been discussed extensively from a conversation analytic point of view (for an overview, see Morris et al., 1994: 123-124) and can be generally characterized as 'descriptions reporting trouble' that 'pertain to a rule or normative assumption about how social interaction normally unfolds' (Morris et al., 1994: 130-131). However, as De Fina observes, this definition does not entirely hold for narrative accounts, since these 'do not need to be seen as justifications of "untoward behavior" and do not seem to necessarily involve a breach of expectation about what is normal behavior, although they often do address implied interlocutors' expectations' (De Fina, 2009: 239-240). De Fina provides the following characterization of accounts:

- They are recapitulations of past experience constructed as responses to explicit or implicit interviewers' evaluative inquiries about how or why those experiences took place
- They involve explanations

- They are recipient designed
- They are generally oriented towards factuality
- Their structure varies a great deal as it is the emergent result of the specific questions asked and the relationships established between interlocutors. (De Fina, 2009: 253)

This article discusses the accounts of three poor people in Belgium (see data description for more details). The reason why the interviewees framed their narratives as accounts in the first place, can be related to the third element in De Fina's characterization, namely recipient design. This is of particular importance here, since in the given data set of interviews, the interviewer is the only interlocutor and thus he/she is the primary evaluator of the account (De Fina, 2009: 240). Like in De Fina's dataset, also in this case the interviewer is a member of the outgroup and was probably perceived by the interviewees as a potential representative of negative, mainstream opinions (De Fina, 2009: 253-254), in this case about poverty. These mainstream opinions are fairly harsh, since Cozzarelli et al. (2001) concluded from their relatively large scale perception survey that people are most likely to blame poor people themselves for their poverty (2001: 225). Of course this attribution of blame is related to the specific American context in which the study took placeⁱⁱ. Studies have indicated that in Europe these perceptions are related to several different elements, of which the general economic situation is a very important one: whenever the economy is doing well, people are more likely to blame poor people themselves for their problems. This perception changes when the economy is in crisis: during these periods, people are more likely to take contextual factors into account as reasons for poverty (Vranken 2004: 45-46). The latter point of view depicts poor people as victims of the system, instead of as lazy people. The former approach is quite generally adopted in the media in Belgium, although the latter also occurs (Van De Velde et al. 2004: 203). However, regarding the general perception in Belgium, the personal blame depiction still appears to be widely adopted by most politicians and people in Belgium (Vranken in Krols 2004ⁱⁱⁱ). So it is clear that personal blame is an important theme in lay people's causal attributions of poverty, and particularly, of poor people, since the latter is typically prejudice related, while the former is more value related (Loix and Pepermans, 2009: 398). It can thus be assumed that these opinions together with the interviewer's outgroup position and a certain degree of insecurity about the interviewer's objectives (cf De Fina, 2009: 241), explains to a certain extent the fact that the narratives are framed as accounts. Furthermore, when looking at these accounts in more detail, it is clear that they are quite diverse and this, together with the aspect of recipient design, further underlines the importance of viewing interviews as interactions in which the role of the interviewer and its influence on the way the interviewees formulate their stories, should not be underestimated.

Data description and social background

In Belgium, one out of seven people is poor. In comparison with previous years, there has even been an increase in poverty. Furthermore, there are indications that women have a higher risk of becoming poor than men (Van Hootegem 2002). This can be related to their weaker position on the job market and the fact that women often end up in one-income families which are more likely to end up in poverty (Van Hootegem 2002). On the other hand, Belgium has generous social welfare programs (concerning family allowance, medical and unemployment insurance and retirement) and 'consistently ranks among the top nations in its human development index that measures the quality of life in countries' (Encyclopedia of the Nations, 2009). This implies that poor people receive a significant amount of help (both financially and in other forms such as access to low-income housing) from the government in order to survive.

More specifically, this article focuses on three interviews with people who were enrolled in the collective debt mediation program of the Belgian social services, called OCMW (*Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn*, 'Public Center for Social Wellbeing') in Dutch. For this program, the OCMW employs people who have received special training in being intermediaries in debt

negotiation and who, to a greater or lesser extent, control their clients' income and expenses. Depending on the amount of debts the clients have, they are enrolled in one of the supporting programs of the OCMW, as described in table 1.

Type of debt mediation	Description
<i>Budgetbegeleiding</i> ('Budget counseling')	The social worker helps clients to spend their money wisely and not get into any more debts. The social worker only has an advisory role: the clients can thus still handle their money independently.
<i>Budgetbeheer</i> ('Budget supervision')	The social worker controls the entire budget of the clients, who only receive a small amount of their own money to survive (<i>Leefgeld</i>), while the rest is used to pay for expenses, such as the rent of their houses, and to pay off debts.
<i>Collectieve schuldbemiddeling</i> ('Collective debt mediation')	The court decides that the clients' debts are so high that they have to be controlled by a social worker, who negotiates with the creditors on the amount of money that has to be paid off within a time span of five to ten years. All interests on the debts are erased and other consequences of the debts (for instance potential evictions by a bailiff) are warded off as well. Due to the negotiations, the amount of money that is actually paid off can be substantially lower than the original amount of debts. In this case, the social worker has full control over the clients' budget.

Table 1: Overview of the different types of debt mediation by the OCMW in Belgium based on an interview with an official debt intermediary of the OCMW^{iv}

The data were collected in 2008 and 2009 in a village in Belgium. The local debt intermediary had selected the interviewees, who were her clients and who were in very serious debts and thus enrolled in the collective debt mediation program. They all agreed to be interviewed about their life, living conditions, financial problems, future plans and so on. All the interviewees were aware of the fact that they were chosen on the basis of their financial problems, which, given the dominant societal views on poverty as discussed in the introduction, probably resulted in them coming to the interview with certain presuppositions regarding the interviewer's views on them (see analyses and discussion section). Furthermore, the interviewees did not know the interviewer in advance. So on the one hand, there was a certain distance between the interviewer and the interviewees, also because the latter were aware of the fact that the former conducted the interviews as a research project as a part of her studies. But on the other hand, the interviewer was an inhabitant of the same village, which enabled her to speak the local dialect with the interviewees and easily understand geographical references throughout the interaction.

I now give an overview of some of the characteristics of the interviewees, without specifying too much for reasons of anonymity.

Interview number	Interview length (in minutes)	Description of the interviewee's situation
1	26	The interviewee is a 34 year old woman who takes care of her two children. These are 11 and 14 years old. She had been enrolled in the program for four years at the time of the interview and still had to pay off her debts for the next five years.
2	30	The interviewee is a 44 year old woman who takes care of her 21 year old son, who was present during the interview but did not interrupt at any point during the interaction. She had been enrolled in the program for five years at the time of the interview

		and still had to pay off her debts for the next five years.
3	11	The interviewee is a 39 year old woman who takes care of her 19 year old daughter, who is mentally handicapped. She was enrolled in the program for seven years, which was just finished at the time of the interview. She then still had to await the court's decision regarding the status of her debts.

Table 2: overview of the interviewees' situations

An additional remark regarding the data concerns the way the interviews were conducted. The interviewer brought a list of ten questions to the interviews and used these to loosely structure the interviews. However, she allowed topical deviations from these themes and further questioned additional topics raised by the interviewees. Furthermore, she took on a very empathizing attitude towards the interviewees and this sometimes resulted in her providing additional justifications for the interviewees' situations, of which examples are provided below (see e.g. fragment 3). We can thus speak of a truly 'active interview', in the sense as described by Holstein and Gubrium (2003).

Research focus and methodological remarks

The focus of this article is on how the interviewees negotiate their identities when the issue of how they ended up in this particular situation is discussed. This issue entails a clear categorization of the interviewees as socially stigmatized people, because they are poor (in the case of interviewees 1 and 3) or because they are poor and committed crimes (in the case of interviewee 2). This categorization is of course face threatening and I will particularly look at the way the interviewees and the interviewer negotiate this rather unfavorable identity both on a micro and a macro level.

Regarding the method of analysis, I focus on a number of linguistic markers of identity which are situated on three levels of analysis as defined by De Fina (2003: 23), namely the lexical, the textual pragmatic, and the interactional level:

The lexical level refers to the use of specific words or expressions. The textual pragmatic level refers to textual logical and argumentative relationships both explicit and implicit. The interactional level refers to the devices and strategies used by narrators to index their stances and attitudes both towards their own texts and other interlocutors. (De Fina, 2003: 23)

For example, in my analyses I focus on the use of the diminutive form (lexical level), the construction of the causal link between ending up in debts and having a family (textual pragmatic level) and topic-initiation by the interviewer that supports the interviewee's self-categorization (interactional level)^v. These elements from the three different levels are then integrated in the discussion in order to provide a holistic insight in the construction and negotiation of identity and as such, the analysis aims to 'reveal[s] how narrators' local displays of identity relate to more global conceptualizations about the self and its membership into groups' (De Fina, 2006: 374).

Furthermore, I would like to draw specific attention to three analytical devices that are of particular importance here, namely the interactional aspect, categorization and indexes of agency. These are of course strongly interrelated, but I will briefly introduce them separately here. First of all, as was discussed in the theoretical introduction, it is important to look at the interactional nature of interview data and to look at the interviewer as an 'active co-teller' (Ochs and Capps, 2001: 23) who is involved in the construction of meaning (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). Therefore, I always incorporate the interviewer's questions and turns in the analyses, since these form an equally important part of the data. This is crucial so that for example the way topics are initiated in the interview can be analyzed and the influence of the interviewer's formulation of her questions can be

related to the particular accounts that the interviewees voice as responses to these questions. These may all have implications for the construction of identities, since interviewees may mirror the interviewer's identity projection, or they may resist it and instead self-initiate topics that may construct an alternative identity. As such, the analyses focus on the negotiation of identities as it occurs in interaction with the interviewer, who has an important contribution to the construction of identities (see discussion in the introduction).

Secondly, drawing on ethnomethodological research on membership categories, which was inspired by Sacks' observations (1992) and further developed in for example Hester and Eglin (1997), many researchers have linked identity construction to the way people construct and negotiate their membership of particular social groups. Of course, the starting point of analysis is social constructionist in that the aim is not 'applying pre-established categorizations' (De Fina et al., 2006: 3), but instead looking at categorizations as 'situated accomplishments' (Schubert et al., 2009: 501) and focus on 'the locally occasioned, fluid and ever-changing nature of identity claims' (De Fina et al., 2006: 3). First, these locally constructed categorizations imply a number of predicates and actions associated with them. Second, such categorizations entail certain moral characteristics (Jayyusi, 1984). For example, the category of a good mother in our modern day Western society implies certain predicates such as being 'self sacrificing, nurturing, selfless, emotional, compassionate' and 'assuming complete responsibility' for her children (Austin and Carpenter, 2008: 380). Finally, these self-categorizations, entailing properties and associated actions, also work the other way around: 'accounts of actions and properties may be used to suggest an inference to the relevance of the associated identity-categories' (Depperman, 2007: 276). These categorizations are a focal point of my analyses as well since group membership and categorization are closely linked elements which on the one hand may be emblematic for an individual's inclusion/exclusion in social groups, which is an essential characteristic of people in poverty (see discussion in introduction), but on the other hand, it is also a powerful resource to complement and/or substitute the category of poor people with an alternative category, of which the moral characteristics may complement – or even contradict – those of the poor people category. So in particular for this article, it is interesting to look at the way such categorizations may contribute to complementing, or maybe resisting, identities that may be projected upon the interviewees by the interviewer.

A third focus is the way the speaker indexes agency. This is mainly investigated by looking at the way pronouns are used as an indication of the speaker's footings, which may shift rapidly. Taking pronouns as one of the focal points of the analysis of identity is widely accepted: 'Both linguists and anthropologists recognized the importance of pronouns in anchoring language to specific speakers in specific contexts [...]' (De Fina et al., 2006: 4). This importance has been underlined by many researchers, who state that pronouns not only 'directly mark interlocutory identities', but also 'indirectly mark social identity' (Ochs, 1993: 302) and that pronominal choice is regarded 'not so much as a variable related to speaker's style, but as a coherent indication of the speaker's presentation of self' (De Fina, 1995: 382). The use of pronouns is then combined with the analysis of their directly surrounding elements such as modal verbs, hedges and boosters, and with the analysis of their *alternatives*, such as the use of depersonalized passive verbs, in order to provide a multi-faceted insight into the way agency is being constructed or avoided in the accounts. Since pronouns are of course crucial markers of group membership which can typically construct ingroups and outgroups (us versus them; cf. Leudar et al., 2004), this marker is of course closely related to the study of membership categorization and its relevance for marking social ex/inclusion is beyond all doubt.

Analyses

Before going into the analysis of the interviews, a brief note on how the fragments were selected is necessary. From each interview, two to three fragments were chosen that explicitly deal with the

reasons for being and/or remaining poor. First of all, a fragment was extracted from the beginning of each interview, since each interview started with the interviewer asking how the interviewees ended up with the social services. Since the interviewees' poverty was communicated to them as the selection criterion beforehand (see data description above), this topic, of course, does not come as a surprise. So the interviewees respond to this question quite directly, as can be seen in fragments 1+2^{vi}, 4 and 6. Then one additional fragment was selected per interview (respectively fragments 3, 5 and 7) in which the topic of the interviewees' living conditions (regarding food and housing) emerged in the interviews (either initiated by the interviewer or the interviewee). These topics are directly related to the interviewees' unfavorable financial situation (regarding paying for food or for the rent) and are sometimes directly linked to the interviewees' inability to get out of their situation. In order to give an idea of the identity negotiations in each interview, the interviews are discussed consecutively, after which I go into a comparison of the findings in the discussion section.

Interview 1

The first interviewee immediately starts relating her story after the interviewer's initial question, but she does so very hesitantly, as the many pauses, hesitations and reformulations in this fragment show.

(1) Fragment from interview 1

1 IR *Mevrouw, hoe bent u eigenlijk bij het OCMW terechtgekomen ?*
 2 IE *Euhm (3.3) Euhm (1.0) dat is euhm eigenlijk geweest omdat*
 3 *ik euhm financieel vree veel problemen gehad ↑heb.*
 4 *Euhm ik ben van een werkongeval naar- (.) euh dingen gegaan. (3.0)*
 5 *Euhm ik ben van een werkongeval euhm ben ik dan*
 6 *>naar het OCMW moeten gaan omdat mijnen werkgever*
 7 *mijn papieren niet invulde van- de ziekenkas< (1.3)*
 8 *Euhm ik heb dan zes maand zonder inkomen gezeten met t*
 9 *gevolg van da 'k >uit mijn huis gezet geweest ben<*
 10 *omdat ik zes maand achterstond met de huishuur.*

1 IR Madam, how did you actually end up with the OCMW?
 2 IE Erm (3.3) Erm (1.0) that has erm actually been because
 3 I erm had ↑had a whole lot of problems financially.
 4 Erm I have gone from a work accident to- (.) erm things (3.0)
 5 Erm I have from a work accident erm I then
 6 >had to go to the OCMW because my employer
 7 did not fill out my papers of- the health insurance< (1.3)
 8 Erm I have then been without an income for six months with the
 9 consequence that I >have been thrown out of my house<
 10 because I was six months late with the rent.^{vii}

The interviewer directly addresses the interviewee (*mevrouw*, 'madam' and the second person pronoun *u*, 'you', line 1) in her introductory question, which is neutrally formulated^{viii}. After a few hesitations and pauses and an impersonally formulated introductory sentence to her answer (line 2), the interviewee mirrors this personal footing and uses the first person pronoun throughout the fragment. So she speaks from a personal footing and does this while constructing her identity as a victim which is directly related to the kind of reason she gives. In this respect, two main types of causal attributions for poverty can be discerned, namely internal and external attributions. The former are 'those who see outcomes as function of what they themselves do', whereas the latter are

perceived as the result of ‘forces beyond their control’ (Nasser and Abouchedid, 2001). Loix and Pepermans give the following examples of internal reasons: ‘lack of thrift and proper money management by poor people, lack of effort by the poor themselves’ (Loix and Pepermans, 2009: 385). External reasons can be further divided into ‘structuralistic (e.g. low wages in some businesses and industries, being taken advantage of by rich people), fatalistic (e.g. sickness and physical handicaps, just bad luck), and cultural causal attributions (e.g. the poor do not accept rules)’, as summarized by Loix and Pepermans (2009: 386). Since the interviewee’s reason for being poor (namely a work accident) can be characterized as ‘external’ and ‘fatalistic’ (Loix and Pepermans, 2009: 385-386), the attribution of blame is intrinsically countered since it obviously does not concern an ‘internal’ – and thus personal blame-related – reason and as such the interviewee constructs her identity as a victim of the situation who is exonerated from all blame.

When discussing the decision to go to the social services however, the interviewee is less direct in her formulations. First, she pauses, hesitates and then avoids naming the social services (*dingen*, ‘things’, line 4). Second, in her reformulation, she not only provides the name of the social services (OCMW, line 6), but she adds a modal verb expressing obligation as well (*moeten gaan*, ‘had to go’, line 6) thus underlining her lack of choice, and causally links another antagonist (*mijnen werkgever*, ‘my employer’, line 6) as an important reason for going to the social services. The story then further unfolds and implicitly illustrates the interviewee’s lack of blame which is implied in the parallel formulation ‘six months’ in lines 8 and 10, underlining that she did not have any problems before the accident, and in the passive formulation in line 9 (‘I have been thrown out of my house’). The story is then abruptly interrupted because of a phone call, but continues as follows:

(2) Fragment from interview 1

- | | | |
|-------|----|--|
| 11 | IE | <i>Dus euhm (.) Dan ben ik naar het OCMW gegaan</i> |
| 12 -> | | <i>omdat ik met een gezin zat en er alleen voorstond</i> |
| 13 | | <i>en ik heb hulp moeten vragen om een leefloon te krijgen</i> |
| 14 | | <i>in afwachting van mijn ziekengeld.</i> |
| | | [...] |
| 21 | IR | <i>Ja, en was dat een moeilijke stap voor u om te zetten naar het OCMW?</i> |
| 22 | IE | <i>Eigenlijk niet, want ja, ge wordt met de rug op allé</i> |
| 23 | | <i>met de rug tegen de muur geduwd, dus:</i> |
| 24 | IR | <i>Ja, u had eigenlijk geen andere keu[ze</i> |
| 25 | IE | <i>[‘k heb geen andere</i> |
| 26 | | <i>‘k had geen andere keuze, mijn spaargeld, allé ja,</i> |
| 27 | | <i>het beetje dat ik nog had was op dus (.) ja (.) dan:</i> |
| 28 -> | | <i>En voor de kinderen ook, euhm, als ik (.) bijna geen eten meer kunt kopen</i> |
| 29 | | <i>dan euh[m::</i> |
| 30 | IR | <i>[Ja</i> |
| 31 | IE | <i>Dan is de keuze rap gemaakt ↑he</i> |
| | | |
| 11 | IE | So erm (.) Then I went to the OCMW |
| 12 -> | | because I had a family and was there on my own |
| 13 | | and I had to ask for help to get a minimum wage |
| 14 | | in expectation of my sickpay. |
| | | [...] |
| 21 | IR | Yes, and was that a difficult step for you to make to the OCMW? |
| 22 | IE | No actually, because yes, you are with the back on well |
| 23 | | pushed with the back against the wall, so: |
| 24 | IR | Yes, you actually had not other choi[ce |
| 25 | IE | [I have no other |

26 I had not other choice, my savings, well yes,
 27 the little that I had left was gone so (.) yes (.) then:
 28 -> And also for the children, erm, if I (.) can almost not buy any food anymore
 29 then er[m::
 30 IR [Yes
 31 IE Then the choice is made quickly ↑hey

After the phone call, the interviewee continues her initial story without any further prompts by the interviewer. She picks up the thread where she left it before the phone call (namely the reason for going to the social services), but in the following causal subordinate clause (line 12) she now introduces her family as the reason for turning to the social services. In line 13-14 she further specifies the situation, in which the modal verb (*moeten*, 'had to', line 13) indicates her lack of choice again. She gives more details of the exact places she went to get help in the following seven lines, which are omitted here for reasons of anonymity, but which clearly support the factuality of her story, as is one of the typical features of accounts (De Fina, 2009: 253).

After this detailed description, the interviewer further probes for the interviewee's feelings regarding the situation in line 21. The formulation of this question is rather evaluative and it projects certain presuppositions upon the interviewee: the interviewer uses the words *moeilijke stap* ('difficult step'), which not only makes explicit that it must have been something the interviewee was reluctant to do, but also that it marks an important transition from the ingroup of financially stable people to the outgroup of poor people. After this point, the interviewee's account changes: while the former account was an answer to the interviewer's fairly neutral question in line 1 and was characterized by the interviewee's identity construction as a victim of the situation, this account is an answer to an evaluative inquiry and it is more argumentative in that it resists the interviewer's projection of social exclusion.

The interviewee first resists this projection in a general sense, as is indicated by a number of different elements. First of all, she uses the impersonal second person pronoun (*ge*, 'you' in line 22) which gives her words a more general scope than purely applicable to the interviewee, since 'it also involves the addressee, the interviewer, in the situation, thereby implying that in the same circumstances he or she too would live and behave similarly' (Timor and Landau, 1998: 368) and as such this pronoun usage clearly resists social exclusion since everybody is potentially included in this statement. Secondly, she vaguely refers to her situation by means of a proverb ('pushed with your back against the wall'), which also suggests general applicability. This is then further specified after another prompt by the interviewer which endorses the interviewee's actions (line 24). Interesting in this specification is that, as a second element, the interviewer again initiates the topic of her children as an explanatory factor for making the decision to ask for help. In line 28, she first continues to speak from a personal footing, as in the previous lines (25-27), but after a brief pause, she implicitly shifts this footing to a more impersonal verb form (*kunt*, translated as 'can', in Dutch is only used for the second and third person singular form) and she retains this footing in the next turn, which is formulated in an impersonal way as well. By shifting footing, a more general perspective is taken again and as such, it is suggested that anybody would make such a choice in that situation. The concrete formulation in line 28 (*eten kopen*, 'buy food') makes this image more vivid and as such, it potentially increases a listener's empathy.

Thus by initiating the family topic in this fragment, the interviewee counters the interviewer's projection of an important transition from ingroup to outgroup (line 21) by invoking an alternative category, namely that of a mother, which transcends group membership based on a person's financial situation. Looking at it from an emic perspective, it is also a successful alternative since it elicits an affirmative response by the interviewer (line 30) which results in topic closure and it even proves to be a productive categorization which is picked up by the interviewer and projected upon

the interviewee when they are discussing the interviewee's living situation in a fairly big and expensive house much further in the interview:

(3) Fragment from interview 1

232 IE *En ondertussen ja, zit ge hier he (.) in een huis*
 233 *dat bijna onbetaalbaar wordt he, maar verhuizen*
 234 *brengt niet op want als ik naar de huishuren allemaal kijk=*
 235 IR *=ja*
 236 IE *het is allemaal even veel=*
 237 IR *=ja*
 238 IE *En zeker [met drie slaap[kamers*
 239 IR *[ja [ja*
 240 IE *Dus eu::h ge zijt verplicht allé ja=*
 241 IR *=↑Ja*
 242 IE *Dus ja, da's eigenlijk mijnen das dat het mij hier*
 243 *omdoet he, da's mijnen huishuur he.*
 244 -> IR *Maja u hebt drie, u hebt twee kinderen,*
 245 *dus u moet wel drie slaapkamers hebben*
 246 IE *Ja, dus ja*
 247 *(0.8)*
 248 -> IR *Het is ook nog een jongen en een meisje,*
 249 *dus u kan ze nie samenleggen.*
 250 IE *Nee, da's het nadeel geweest.*

232 IE And in the meantime, yes, you are here hey (.) in a house
 233 that almost becomes impossibly dear hey, but moving
 234 doesn't bring in much because if I look at all the rents =
 235 IR =yes
 236 IE it is all just as much=
 237 IR =yes
 238 IE And certainly [with three bed[rooms
 239 IR [yes [yes
 240 IE So e::rm you are obliged well yes=
 241 IR =↑Yes
 242 IE So yes, that's actually that does it for me here
 243 hey, that's my rent hey.
 244 -> IR But yes, you have three, you have two children,
 245 so you have to have three bedrooms
 246 IE Yes, so yes
 247 *(0.8)*
 248 -> IR It is also a boy and a girl,
 249 so you can't put them together.
 250 IE No, that has been the disadvantage.

In the fragment above, the interviewee discusses her living conditions in an impersonal way, as is shown by the use of the impersonal second person pronoun *ge* ('you', line 232 and 240) and the impersonal formulations in lines 236 and 238. This impersonal footing again suggests that the interviewee's words are general observations instead of personal choices. She concludes this topic first by framing it as a – hedged (*allé ja*, 'well yes') – obligation in line 240, thus indicating her lack of choice and second by putting it in the bigger picture of her debts again. Throughout this part of the fragment, the interviewer latches on or overlaps her affirmative responses (lines 235, 237, 239, 241)

and then, after the interviewee's topical conclusion, the interviewer takes over the floor and provides two additional justifications (lines 244-245 and 248-249) for the interviewee's choice to rent a relatively expensive house. She addresses the interviewee directly (*u*, 'you' in lines 244-245 and 249), mirrors the interviewee's lack of choice by means of the modal verbs *moeten* ('have to', line 245) and *niet kunnen* ('cannot', line 249) and refers to the interviewee's maternal responsibility to be a good mother who gives her children the necessary space, even though it gets her into even further problems, as was concluded by the interviewee in line 242-243.

So after the interviewee's initial counter of the internal blame attribution by an external reason, she constructs her identity as a victim of the situation. When the interviewer probes for her feelings when she 'became poor' and projects a transition upon the interviewee, the latter resists this and introduces her children as an additional reason for being poor. By means of this self-categorization as a parent, she demonstrates that she takes on responsibility for her children, as such illustrating her membership of the overarching category of a mother. This is not only confirmed by the interviewer, but the latter also self-initiates it as a reason (fragment 3) and as such this alternative categorization as a parent is explicitly co-constructed by both interlocutors.

Interview 2

The second interviewee refers to her criminal past, her subsequent stay in prison and her inability to pay off her debts as a cause for her current situation. After having stated this, the interviewee is then questioned regarding the reason for her stay in prison. It is highly likely that such a topic elicits an account, since a stay in prison is inherently guilt-ridden. The interviewer's question also suggests that the topic is tainted, which becomes most clear from the option not to go into this topic she offers in line 10.

Of course, this is a different type of account than the previous one, since elements such as guilt and conscious choice have entirely different implications when discussing poverty versus crime. Interestingly, the interviewee minimizes the discussion of the actual crime and focuses in her account on the role of others, as such shifting the blame for her actions. Her son and the social services play a particularly important role and as such poverty, motherhood and committing crimes are all constructed as inextricably linked aspects of her story.

(4) Fragment from interview 2

- | | | |
|----|----|---|
| 9 | IR | <i>En- hoe bent in de gevangenis terechtgekomen of</i> |
| 10 | | <i>vertelt u daar liever niets over of-?</i> |
| 11 | IE | <i>Euhm- geweld</i> |
| 12 | IR | <i>°Geweld°</i> |
| 13 | IE | <i>↑Ja. (.) Dus ja, > allé ik moet zeggen< overvallen plegen-</i> |
| 14 | | <i>veur euhm- mijn zeuntjen, mijne zoon ondertussen=</i> |
| 15 | IR | <i>=↑Ja=</i> |
| 16 | IE | <i>=eten te kunnen geven. (.) Ik was in den tijd,</i> |
| 17 | | <i>in '98 ne keer naar 't OCMW geweest, want mijn vriendin werkte</i> |
| 18 | | <i>en ik stempelde en mijn vriendin had mij dan laten zitten.</i> |
| 19 | | <i>En- > 'k ben dan naar het OCMW geweest voor een voedsel↑pakket <</i> |
| 20 | | <i>(.) en > da was allemaal ↑goed <</i> |
| 21 | | <i>en daar kreeg ik dan een brief van het OCMW</i> |
| 22 | | <i>'n paar dagen nadien dat ik achter spaarlampen moest gaan. (.)</i> |
| 23 | | <i>Maar met een spaarlamp kanne kik mijn- mijne kleine</i> |
| 24 | | <i>zijn mond niet vullen=</i> |
| 25 | IR | <i>= nee</i> |
| 26 | IE | <i>En ja, (.) dan >benne ki- ik weer naar het OCMW geweest en</i> |

27 'k heb gezegd van: < 'Kijk, als ik hier nou niks heb, doe ik nen
28 overval' (.) en `s avonds, ja
29 IR Ja
30 IE Was 't zover hè.

9 IR And- how did you end up in prison or
10 do you rather not say anything about that or-?
11 IE Erm- violence
12 IR °violence°
13 IE ↑ Yes (.) So yes, > well I have to say< committing robberies-
14 for erm- my little son, my son in the meanwhile=
15 IR =↑Yes=
16 IE to be able to feed [him](.) I had been at the time,
17 in '98 to the OCMW once, because my girlfriend worked
18 and I was on welfare and my girlfriend had left me then.
19 And- >I have then been to the OCMW for a food↑parcel<
20 and >that was all ↑good<
21 and there I then got a letter from the OCMW
22 a few days later that I had to go for low energy light bulbs. (.)
23 But with a low energy light bulb I cannot fill my- my little one's
24 mouth=
25 IR =no
26 IE And yes, (.) then > I- I have been to the OCMW again and
27 I have said: < 'Look, if I don't have anything now here, I will commit a
28 robbery' (.) and in the evening, yes
29 IR Yes
30 IE That was it hey.

The interviewee's answer refers in quite an agentless way to the crimes she committed. First of all, she answers by using a single, fairly general, term (*geweld*, 'violence', line 11). By not putting it in a sentence, all agency is avoided. Secondly, the interviewee continues and immediately distances herself by adding a preliminary to her answer (*ik moet zeggen*, 'I have to say', line 13), in which the modal verb of obligation expresses her lack of choice, and by formulating the actual answer (*overvallen plegen*, 'committing robberies', line 13) without an agent as well. She then introduces a first antagonist (her son, line 14) and links the robberies to her maternal responsibility. Again, the modal verb (*eten te kunnen geven*, 'to be able to feed', line 16) underlines the difficulty of the interviewee's situation and her initial reference to her son in the diminutive in line 14 – which the interviewee then self-corrects and puts in a contemporary frame – makes the story more vivid and her maternal responsibility even more compelling. So the interviewee's guilt-ridden membership of the category of criminals is countered by means of her self-initiated categorization as a mother, which is then further elaborated upon (from line 16 onwards). Two additional antagonists are added as causal factors for the course of events, namely the interviewee's girlfriend and the social services. The latter are explicitly evaluated negatively in a vivid way in lines 23-24 by linking them again to the interviewee's maternal responsibility, as is shown by the reference to her son as *mijne kleine* ('my little one', line 23). This reference to her identity as a mother elicits a preferred minimal response by the interviewer (line 24), which was preceded by an affirmative particle as a response to the previous reference to motherhood (line 15). This illustrates the potency of this categorization that involves the interviewer in the story and elicits preferred responses.

Contrary to the initial agentless part of the answer (line 11-14), the interviewee talks from a personal perspective and uses explicit agency in the second part of her story (line 19-27). These utterances

describe the interviewee's steps in attempting to avoid committing a crime, which culminates in her explicit announcement of the robbery to the social services beforehand, formulated as a direct quote, which 'add[s] verisimilitude to the narrated event' (Moita-Lopes, 2006: 301). Directly after the quote, when the topic moves to the robbery, the utterances become impersonal again and the actual crime is not even mentioned but merely implied in the embryonic description of the setting of the crime ('s *avonds*, 'in the evening', line 28) and the affirmative particle *ja* ('yes', line 28). These shifts in perspective are emblematic for the interviewee's negotiation of her categorization (1) as a criminal who is also a victim of the situation, and (2) as a mother, who has to take up her responsibility: while the beginning and the end of the story avoid personal footing, and thus also personal blame, the middle is formulated from a personal perspective and this is precisely the part in which the blame is explicitly shifted to others and emphasis is put on the interviewee's efforts to avoid the particular criminal outcome of the course of events. As such, a blameless identity is constructed and complemented by means of the interviewee's self-categorization as a mother.

Interviewee 2 further elaborates on this categorization, and more particularly on the topic of feeding her son (that was initiated in fragment 4, lines 23-24) in the fragment below. This fragment is framed as an account of why the interviewee evaluates the situation (and the service by the OCMW) negatively. This is then quickly narrowed down to an account of why she is not able to survive with the weekly allowance she receives from the OCMW, which is personalized in this story by means of a reference to the particular OCMW employee (referred to as X in line 84). So she starts her response by evaluating her current (financial) situation negatively (cf. negative particles and modality of obligation (*moet*, 'have to' in line 77) and links it to the presence of her son (*hem*, 'him', line 77).

(5) Fragment from interview 2

75 IR *Euhm en hoe ziet u nu uw eigen situatie? Denkt u dat euhm*
 76 *door toedoen van het OCMW, de situatie op 't moment positief verloopt?*
 77 IE *↓Nee. (1.1) Nee. (Want ik moet leven me) 75 euro in de week. Ik me hem.*
 78 *(1.2)*
 79 IR *°Ja°*
 80 IE *En (.) allé ja.*
 81 IR *Ja nee, da lukt nie.*
 82 IE *Da lukt nie.*
 83 IR *Nee.*
 84 IE *Maar voor X moet da wel lukken.*
 85 IR *Ja*
 86 IE *allé [ja*
 87 IR *[ja ↑ja*
 88 -> IE *Daar zijn meer dagen da kik niet eet, (.)*
 89 *da 't naar mijnen zoon gaat en naar mijn beestjen*
 90 IR *↑Ja*
 91 IE *Ik zie gè- vree gère mijnen zoon en vree gère mijn beest (dus)*
 92 *'k ben deruit gekomen uit de gevangenis op 63 kilo*
 93 *en ik weeg er nu 48 dus:*
 94 IR *Ja*
 95 IE *En drie jaar thuis*
 96 IR *Ja*

75 IR *Erm and how do you see your own situation now? Do you think that erm*
 76 *due to the OCMW, the situation evolves positively at the moment?*
 77 IE *↓No. (1.1) No. (Because I have to live with) 75 euro in a week. I with him.*
 78 *(1.2)*

79 IR °Yes°
80 IE And (.) well yes.
81 IR Yes no, that does not work.
82 IE That does not work.
83 IR No.
84 IE But for X^{ix} that does have to work.
85 IR Yes
86 IE Well [yes
87 IR [yes ↑yes
88 -> IE There are more days that I don't eat (.)
89 that it goes to my son and to my little animal
90 IR ↑Yes
91 IE I lo- love my son very much and [love] my animal very much (so)
92 I came out of it of the prison at 63 kilos
93 and I weigh 48 now so:
94 IR Yes
95 IE And three years at home
96 IR Yes

After the initial negative evaluation of her situation (line 77), the interviewee is not very talkative anymore. After a few turns in which the interviewer demonstrates her understanding of the situation (line 81), which is mirrored by the interviewee (line 82) and put in contrast (cf. introductory *maar* ('but') in line 84) with the expectations of the social services employee, voiced in an affirmative way (*wel* in line 84, translated as 'does (have to work)') and stressed by means of the modal verb *moeten* ('to have to'). After a few more affirmative turns, the interviewee accounts for the impossibility of improving her situation by self-initiating the topic of food (line 88) which she discusses from a personal footing (lines 88-93). Here she constructs her identity as a mother again, and more specifically as a self-sacrificing person, which is one of the typical characteristics of being a good mother (Austin and Carpenter, 2008: 380), who prefers to be hungry so that she can feed her son and her pet. The interviewer's rising intonation in her affirmative response in line 90 invites the interviewee to elaborate on this topic, which she does by stating her love for her two housemates and by providing further proof for her words by giving the numbers of her current versus her old weight. The consecutive conjunction *dus* ('so' in line 93) invites the interviewer to draw her own conclusions. The latter only responds affirmatively, and so the interviewee goes on with an 'and'-prefaced continuation which further illustrates the problematic nature of this weight loss (line 95).

Thus this fragment started with a discussion of the interviewee's inability to survive with the money she is allocated by the social services and this topic is then linked to the theme of food and the interviewee's family. By initiating this family topic, the interviewee not only self-categorizes as a mother again, but adds the characteristic of self-sacrifice to it by illustrating that she puts her son (and even her pet) first. As such, the interviewee's motherhood is causally linked to her poverty. This was the case in fragment 4 as well, in which the interviewee causally linked her crimes to the presence of her son for whom she had to take responsibility. The two accounts that are discussed here differ quite strongly since the former focuses on the interviewee's criminal past, while the latter focuses on a financial aspect of her current situation. However, in both accounts the interviewee's categorization as a mother takes a central role and contributes to the interviewee's identity construction as a good person who on the one hand was forced into making particular choices and who on the other hand consciously took matters into her own hands to prevent her family from being hungry. By the former, the interviewee demonstrates her identity as a victim of the situation, while by the latter, she presents herself as a responsible and self-sacrificing mother.

Interview 3

The third interview is significantly shorter than the other interviews because of the interviewee's frequent use of minimal responses and of mere reports of events, but such formal differences do not imply one has to speak of a different genre here (De Fina, 2009: 250). Especially given the face threatening nature of the initial question which entails a presumption of personal blame (cf introduction), it is not surprising that the answer is relatively brief. In spite of its brevity, it immediately shifts the blame to others (lines 10-11: friends) and presents the interviewee as a humane person who helps other people in need, as such constructing the identity of a socially involved person.

(6) Fragment from interview 3

7	IR	En- (.) hoe komt het eigenlijk dat u in schulden gekomen bent?
8		(1.0)
9	IR	Wilt u dat [vertellen of-
10	IE	[Door- door vrienden te helpen ↑he. (.)
11		°Door vrienden te ↓helpen°
12	IR	↑Ja. En dan zelf (.) in de problemen terechtgekomen?
13	IE	[Aah ↓ja.
7	IR	And- (.) actually how come that you ended up in debts?
8		(1.0)
9	IR	Do you want to [tell that or-
10	IE	[By- by helping friends ↑hey. (.)
11		°By helping ↓friends°
12	IR	↑Yes. And then [you your]self (.) ended up in troubl[e?
13	IE	[Aah ↓yes.

After the interviewer's initial question in line 7, there is no immediate response by the interviewee. So the interviewer questions the interviewee's will to answer the question, but before she can fully offer the option of not answering the question (*of-*, 'or-', line 9) which implicitly marks the topic as unfavorable, the interviewee overlaps and provides an agentless response which ends with the involvement marker *he* ('hey', line 10) with a rising intonation. After a micropause, she quietly repeats her answer, this time with a falling intonation marking the end of the turn. The interviewer responds affirmatively to this answer and further probes for the interviewee's story by negatively describing her situation as *in de problemen* ('in trouble'). As such, she rephrases her initial, relatively neutral, question into a more evaluative inquiry. This is only answered by an affirmative response, which is again given in overlap and with a falling intonation (line 13). So in spite of the lack of an elaborate answer, it can be observed that this interviewee formulates her answers from an impersonal perspective and that she counters the attribution of blame by introducing antagonists as a cause for her problems and by presenting herself as a social person.

When discussing her current housing situation, which is directly related to the inability to improve her financial situation (cf fragment 3), interviewee 3 links this to her choice to take care of her mentally handicapped daughter herself, as she self-initiates this topic in line 50-51:

(7) Fragment from interview 3

42	IR	En in in, uw partner hoe denkt- denkt u dat hij de situatie ziet?
43		(2.7)

- 44 IE Hij ↑wilt (.) dat ik mijn sociale woning opzeg
45 da 'k bij hem kom gaan wonen. (.)
46 Ik zie dat niet zitten.
- 47 IR Nee.
48 (1.5)
- 49 IE Nee. (Hetzelfde gedacht as) mijnen ex-man.
50 -> Mijn dochterke zou 'k in een instelling moeten steken
51 °omda ze gehandicapt is° (.) 'Nee dank u'
52 IR Ja.
53 (2.3)
- 54 IR En euh u- uw dochter is gehandicapt.=
55 IE =Allé.
56 (1.5)
57 Geestelijk.
- 42 IR And in in, your partner, how do you think- think that he sees the situation?
43 (2.7)
- 44 IE He ↑wants (.) me to give up my social house
45 that I come [and] go live with him. (.)
46 I don't like the sound of that.
- 47 IR No.
48 (1.5)
- 49 IE No. (The same idea as) my ex-husband.
50 -> I would have to put my little daughter in an institution
51 °because she is handicapped° (.) 'No thank you'
52 IR Yes.
53 (2.3)
- 54 IR And erm you- your daughter is handicapped.=
55 IE =Well.
56 (1.5)
57 Mentally.

After the interviewer's general question about the views of the interviewee's partner on the current situation, the interviewee voices her partner's wishes (line 44-45) which may be regarded as a potential partial solution to the interviewee's problems. She then immediately contrasts these wishes with her own, vaguely formulated, negative views on these (line 46). The interviewer responds fairly neutrally with a negative particle (line 47) and after a pause, the interviewee then self-initiates an account that clarifies the reason for her refusal to live with her partner. Even though the way the account was elicited differed significantly from the accounts in the other fragments, the focus of this account is also on the interviewee's self-categorization as a mother who takes responsibility for her daughter (line 49-51). For this interviewee, who chooses her words very sparingly and responds minimally in most parts of the interview, this self-initiated elaboration, voiced from a personal perspective, is exceptional. In this elaboration, the interviewee on the one hand stresses the lack of choice offered by her partners by the use of the modal verb of obligation *moeten* ('to have to', line 50), while on the other hand the use of the diminutive *dochterke* ('little daughter') emphasizes the helplessness of her daughter, instead of her age^x. The interviewee then briefly explains her daughter's condition in line 51 in a silent voice and closes this topic by directly quoting her negative answer to her partners' proposal. The interviewer responds affirmatively to this explanation and after a pause re-introduces this topic by referring to the interviewee's daughter's

condition. The interviewee then latches on a softener *allé* (translated as 'well', line 55) and after a pause specifies the kind of handicap her daughter has, which then closes this topic.

Most remarkable in this fragment is thus the fact that the interviewee self-initiates an account that clarifies the reasons for not giving in to her partner's wishes. This is exceptional since in the rest of the interview the interviewee's turns are mostly constituted by very short, or even minimal, responses and factual sounding, very brief accounts. By providing this reason in fragment 7, she categorizes herself as a mother who takes responsibility for her daughter and who gives priority to her daughter's happiness. Together with her response to the initial question, the interviewee as such demonstrates her self-effacing character and constructs her identity mainly as somebody who ended up and stayed in debts because of her social involvement, either regarding her friends or her mentally handicapped daughter.

Discussion

To sum up, when looking at the interviewees' accounts, we notice that there is quite some variation. This is of course not surprising, since their individual stories and reasons for being poor differ significantly. Furthermore, the fragments come from different parts of their stories and so the accounts were embedded quite differently in their local interview contexts. Interestingly, in spite of these differences, there are two general tendencies. (1) All the interviewees shift between footings and demonstrate – with different levels of explicitness – that they are not to be blamed for the situation, as such implicitly disclosing their presumption of personal blame that they perceive to be imbedded in the interviewer's questions. (2) They all invoke their children as one of the reasons why they are in their current situation and they – explicitly or implicitly – relate that taking responsibility for their families prevented them from solving their problems or from improving their living conditions at one point or another in their lives. Since these individual stories differ quite a lot, I briefly summarize them here:

- Interviewee 1 had a work accident. She explains that she went to the social services because she needed to be able to buy food for her children.
- Interviewee 2 committed a robbery. She presents her son as a direct cause for committing this crime, which is then linked to the provision of food.
- Interviewee 3 says she got into debts because she helped her friends. She decides not to move in with her (previous and current) partner because she wants to take care of her handicapped daughter herself.

Despite the individual differences, we can conclude that all the interviewees self-initiate the topic of their parenthood, either as a second (in the case of interview 1) or a circumstantial (in the case of interview 2) reason for committing a crime and ending up in debts, or as a circumstantial reason for not being able to improve living conditions (in the case of interview 3). So in spite of the variety in the stories and what they account for, and the diversity in the ways in which the topic of motherhood enters the interviews, it is used in each interview to justify some specific aspect related to the interviewee's identity that involves blame, related to poverty or, in the case of interviewee 2, related to poverty and crime.

Conclusions

This article demonstrated that the interviewees negotiate their identities by complementing their categorization as poor people, or in the case of interviewee 2 poor people who committed a crime,

with self-categorizations as mothers. On the one hand, the former category was almost pre-established because of the specific way the interviews were organized and executed. First of all, the interviewees were well aware of the fact that they were specifically selected by the social worker of the OCMW because of their debts. Of course, they participated in the interview project on a voluntary basis, but still this has certain implications regarding the way they viewed the interviewer and the project, but more importantly for this study, the way they expected the interviewer to view them. They were selected *because* they were in debts, and this – together with other factors related to recipient design as discussed in the introduction – contributed to the fact that the narratives were framed as accounts. In spite of the diversity between the accounts, as discussed in the analyses, they all contain justifications and explanations that shift the blame. Secondly, the interviewees' categorization as 'poor people', which is of course a socially stigmatized and face threatening category, is not only made relevant to the interview before it actually started, but its relevance is immediately talked into being by the interviewer in her opening question of the interaction, as such directly putting this unfavorable categorization to the fore in the interaction. On the other hand, the mother-category was self-initiated by the interviewees and then further co-constructed by the interviewer, as for example fragment 3 explicitly demonstrated. This self-categorization is an important means to justify and explain how the interviewees ended up – and still are – in debts. Furthermore, this category is universally relevant and it transcends the projected group membership of poor people. As such, ingroup/outgroup membership boundaries on a financial basis are transcended. Finally, members of this category typically are responsible people, and thus the potential predicate of the poor people category (namely that it is their own fault because of irresponsible behavior, cf. Cozzarelli et al., 2001) is, in a way, countered as such. As in Schubert et al.'s analyses, these two categories are made 'equivalently locally relevant' and they are almost 'morally opposite' (Schubert et al., 2009: 501), which is especially important here because of its justifying nature, typical of accounts, and its implications for the construction and negotiation of identity in the interviews.

Interestingly, these two categories entail different ways of dealing with agency: on the one hand, the interviewees predominantly speak from a personal footing and use a lot of active verbs in the fragments in which they self-categorize as mothers. This personal footing is emblematic for this category's predicate of responsibility, since the interviewees verbally demonstrate that they take matters into their own hands while taking care of their children. On the other hand, the fragments in which the categorization of poor people is relevant, are mostly characterized by a depersonalized style and/or shifts in agency. I argue that these footing shifts are related to the interviewees' reasons for being poor, which are quite diverse since they range from being the victim of a work accident to committing a robbery or giving money to friends. These are characterized as different types of causes: the former is a typical external cause for which the narrator cannot be blamed, while the latter two are internal causes which entail personal blame (Loix and Pepermans, 2009: 385-386). These of course have quite diverse general perceptions and blame implications, which can be linked to the different ways in which the interviewees deal with agency. Interviewee 1 uses explicit agency and formulates her initial story from a personal perspective, while the other two interviewees shift footing quite a lot: they usually start relating from an impersonal perspective, using a range of different devices such as nominalization, passivization and the use of the second person singular which all have been described to lessen responsibility (Timor and Landau, 1998: 368-369). Furthermore, these often also widen the scope of the statements so that no ingroup-outgroup boundaries are drawn, which demonstrates the interviewees' resistance to positioning themselves in the outgroup of poor people. Thus in these data, as in many previous studies, indexes of agency demonstrate to be interesting markers of identity, both in demonstrating responsibility, as in negotiating or avoiding blame and constructing and resisting group membership.

So on a 'content' level, it can be concluded that these interviewees first of all resisted the construction of their 'deficit identities' of poor people, and secondly that they countered these by

complementing this categorization by the mother-categorization. The latter is not only a category that transcends group membership on a financial basis, but it also entails certain predicates, of which one (namely responsibility) undermines the personal blame-related predicate of the poor people category. As such, this identity becomes more acceptable and the narrator is characterized as 'a good person who behave[d] correctly' (Linde, 1993: 31). As Linde observes, 'all personal narratives are shaped to make some version of this point' (Linde, 1993: 31) which thus supports the thesis of the 'reflected upon' self (Georgakopoulou, 2006: 128). However, this 'reflected upon' self is negotiated with the interviewer, who, in this case, clearly co-constructs this 'good version' of the self.

This leads us to a methodological conclusion, namely the importance of looking at interviews as interactional accomplishments, which are, of course, governed by typical conversational features such as the general avoidance of dispreferred turns, like for example disagreeing with the interviewee's statements, and the tendency to save face. The fact that not only these conversational tendencies are valid in interviews, but also that the interviewers are most often members of the outgroup who are thus not in a good position to make explicit judgments about the interviewees' words (cf Van De Mierop, 2009b: 737), results in the fact that interviewers are often not likely to challenge their interviewees' statements. Instead of challenging the 'reflected upon' self, they rather actively contribute to its construction (as was explicitly the case in fragment 3), and this may then, in turn, lead to negotiated co-constructions or even additional stories or categorizations which makes the identity construction less 'rehearsed' (Georgakopoulou, 2006: 128) and more of an interactional accomplishment that is characterized by recipient design or the 'awareness of and sensitivity to the perspective of "the other"' (Malone, 1995: 148).

Thus it is crucial for the study of identity in narratives obtained through interviews to incorporate an emic perspective and analyze the interviewers' contributions to the data, both on a textual level, as described above, as on a contextual level. The latter has to be viewed on two dimensions: on the one hand, the local context of the interview, and more particularly in this case the fact that the selection of the interviewees was based on their unfavorable financial situation as a criterion, was already referred to as having a guiding influence on the interviewees' categorization as poor people, which was actually pre-established in a way. It is thus important not only to give a good description of why and how the interviews took place, but also to look at the potential implications of these conditions on the data as well. Of course, for discourse analysts, the focus remains on where such conditions are made relevant in the interviews themselves and how they are 'talked into being' on a turn-by-turn basis, but these conditions can then serve as explanatory factors that deserve attention in the analyses. On the other hand, the influence of the global context in which the interview takes place and which is symbolically brought in by the interviewer who is viewed 'as a possible representative of mainstream opinions' (De Fina, 2009: 254), should not be disregarded either. In this respect, I referred to sociological studies regarding the causal attributions of blame on poverty. However, even though such studies are highly relevant to gain insight into the general perceptions on a particular topic, they cannot encompass the 'global' context that is relevant on a 'local' level. As Van Dijk (2008, 2009) observed, the global context is subjective rather than objective, in the sense that it is 'personally variable' (Van Dijk, 2008: 119) and 'always minimally different' (Van Dijk, 2009: 248). So instead of claiming that both the interviewer and the three interviewees have the same perceptions regarding this topic, one has to start from the premise that there are differences between the interlocutors. However, such sociological studies can serve as a general backdrop against which the local situation of personal stories can then be critically analyzed.

By integrating these different elements, a more contextualized and interactionally oriented analysis of identity in narrative accounts is provided. In this perspective, it can be concluded that the interlocutors' identity co-construction of the interviewees as poor mothers is acceptable on the two contextual dimensions mentioned earlier: on the one hand, the interviewer's expectations regarding the local interview context *about* poverty are met, while on the other hand, the mother self-

categorization counters ingroup-outgroup boundaries and minimizes the potential irresponsibility predicate of the poor people's category which makes the interviewees' identities more acceptable from a societal point of view that is implicitly represented by the interviewer (cf De Fina, 2009: 253-254). Thus these accounts are indeed characterized by recipient design. This not only works in two directions (from interviewee to interviewer, but vice versa as well), but the identities within them are also recipient designed on two levels, namely both on a local and a global contextual level.

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Biography

Dorien Van De Mieroop is an assistant professor at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium). Her research focuses mainly on identity construction, both in institutional contexts (e.g. speeches, social work interactions, meetings) and in narratives and life stories. She has published a number of articles on this topic (e.g. in *Discourse Studies*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Narrative Inquiry*, *Research on Language and Social Interaction* and *Journal of Sociolinguistics*).

Notes

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- ⁱ The criticism on interviews as a data source that I discuss here deals only with the influence of the data type on the construction of identity, since this is the focus of the article.

However, other types of criticism have been voiced on interview as data as well (see De Fina (2009) for a discussion), but these are not focused on here.

ⁱⁱ In Cozzarelli et al.'s (2001) study the participants were students at a Midwestern University in the United States. Since the causal attributions of poverty differ quite a lot depending on societal changes (cf. Nasser and Khashan, 2002) and in different cultures, as a comparison with for example Nasser et al.'s (2005) study based on Indian participants clearly demonstrates, one has to be careful with drawing links between Cozzarelli et al.'s study and the Belgian context (which has not yet been studied regarding this topic).

ⁱⁱⁱ The original quote by Jan Vrancken in the interview was: 'De simplistische, maar heersende redenering bij het gros van de politici en in de samenleving is dat armen het zelf gezocht hebben.' [*The simplistic, but governing reasoning by most politicians and in the society in general is that the poor have brought their problems upon themselves.*] (Krols 2004: 5)

^{iv} The interviewee also introduced us to the interviewees, who were all clients of her. In order to guarantee full anonymity of the three interviewees, the social worker's name is not revealed here.

^v These examples are found respectively in fragments 4 and 7 (the use of the diminutive form), fragments 2 and 4 (the causal link between ending up in debts and having a family) and fragment 3 (topic-initiation by the interviewer).

^{vi} Fragments 1 and 2 are taken together here because these are actually part of one long fragment, as is shown by the line numbers which succeed each other. The fragments were segmented so that the discussion would be easier to follow for the readers.

^{vii} The fragments were transcribed using the Jefferson transcription system as explained in Antaki (2002). The translation is as literal as possible and it is usually the case that odd sentences in English are based on strange formulations in Dutch.

^{viii} The verb *terechtkomen* ('to end up') suggests the unpremeditated nature of the place where one finds oneself, but it does not carry a specific negative connotation.

^{ix} X refers to the name of the interviewee's contact at the social services.

^x The interviewee's daughter was 19 at the time of the interview.