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Discourse, meaning, and political participation

Ana Inés Heras Monner Sans[a,b*] and María del Socorro Foio[c,d]

[a]National Council for Scientific Research; [b]Institute for Social Inclusion and Human Development, Área Investigación; [c]Interdisciplinary Center for Studies of the Territory; [d]National University of the Northeast, Buenos Aires

We present an analysis of part of a data-set from a three-year study called 'Work, Development and Diversity' conducted by a network of Argentinean public and private research institutions. We sought to analyze the different ways in which strategic planning for local development, with a participatory approach, had been implemented in four geographic regions of Argentina. In this article we analyze how (1) participants in a given field of practice build strategic discursive actions and orient their interactions guided by their perception of who is included, and in what aspects of the process at stake; (2) participants build discourses that shape what counts as reality. Our analysis shows what happens when participants come together, since they dispute what counts as true, valid or even *real*, and these disputes can be analyzed through discourse; what may appear to be a linguistic detail is loaded with meaning due to the historical context in which the specific cultural terms are produced (e.g. participant, neighbor, and activist). We also show that in calls for participatory action, any specific community of participants may impose what they determine to be true over the others. When this is achieved, one may say that they have managed to impose a certain simplifying operation over the other participants, thus making it possible for their logic to prevail, and to *reduce a certain amount of complexity at play*.

Keywords: discourse analysis; participatory policies; meaning construction

Contextualizing our study

In the recent past in Latin America, strategic planning for local development (LD) has been considered one of those stereotypical '*musts*' that policy makers, government officers, and NGOs should address. Proof of it is the considerable amount of state resources that have been, and currently are, invested in Plans and Programs devoted to support LD policies with a participatory approach. However, an important question remains un-answered, namely whether participatory strategic planning is, indeed, *participatory*, and who are the social actors called for, and involved in, these processes. Thus, one of the over-arching themes across our three-year study has been to pose the question about inclusion/exclusion, by asking who is included, and in what aspects of the call for participation, and how is inclusion/exclusion perceived by participants in each of these situations.

During the 1990s, a process of administrative and political de-centralizing took place at the national state level in Argentina (what has been known as the State

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*Corresponding author. Email: aninesheras@fibertel.com.ar

Reform) during President Menem's government (1989–1999). A consequence of this process is that the municipal and provincial administrations perform now functions that were not traditionally their responsibility, and they have to do so with limited resources. It was assessed that a state–civil society partnership to conduct governmental actions was needed. This alliance was mostly called by the state, and the state used several different models (e.g. a model known as partnership management, *gestión asociada*, or else, participatory strategic planning, as noted above; for a description of these differences, see Heras Monner Sans, De la Riestra, and Burin in press).

Simultaneously, a theoretical and methodological orientation on these ways of government was being conceptualized as *self-sustained development* (Di Pietro 2001); as a result, a repertoire of participatory techniques was developed. The underlying assumptions are that LD had to be put at the center of local policy; that strategic planning should be conducted, and that this planning should involve civil society. This orientation toward government is widely known as *self-sustained strategic planning for local development*.

Related to this way of conceiving government was the imperative that productive diversification be achieved, in particular in municipalities and regions where a mono-productive approach had dominated the economy. It must be noted that traditionally, in Argentina, several geographic regions and provinces based their growth upon mono-productive, extractive economic strategies, oriented toward maximum profit by their owners, and characterized by an authoritarian approach. Examples are the steel industry (Palpalá, Province of Jujuy); the extraction and processing of crude oil in the Patagonia Region (in places such as Cutral Có, Pico Truncado, and Caleta Olivia) and in the North West Region (Gral. Mosconi Province of Salta); the exploitation of cotton in the North East Region (Provinces of Chaco and Formosa), or sugarcane and tobacco plantations in the North West Region (Provinces of Jujuy, Salta, and Tucumán).

However, other types of economic development patterns have coexisted all along, for example, what has been known as *Modelo de Desarrollo Autosustentable* in Spanish, which is claimed to have been in place at least since 1870 (Barreto 2001). It is characterized as an economic model based on positively integrating the human experience with the environment, and of creating value chains for producing social and economic goods. A core issue underlying this mode of relating to nature and society is that resources are carefully relied upon, that are not depredated or intensively exploited, and that the organizational patterns are less authoritarian among people (Rofman 2003).

It must be also recalled that in 1983, Argentina had restored a democratic way of government, after several years of a cruel, genocide dictatorship that killed thousands of people, and pushed several hundreds of thousand to migrate to other countries. In this context, the wave of strategic planning and local governmental strategies was interpreted, at least in part, as a return to democratic practices, and social and political participatory strategies were at the core of these ways of organizing administrative and governmental policies. Thus, during the past 10 years, whether they were *partnership management* or *participatory strategic planning*, these joint state and civil society experiences were systematically supported by the state, so that participatory development actions could be designed and implemented locally, and conformed a line of public policy in itself. These policies sought to become more efficient in local administrative governmental strategies (Smulovitz and Clemente 2004). Political and administrative de-centralizing policies did indeed take place,

and these kinds of orientations have placed a high demand on different levels of the administration (cities, provinces, regional administrative networks, etc.), and have put at the center of discussion new issues, such as what counts as civil society participation, and how is participation to be called upon and achieved (Heras and Burin 2001). However, looking back at recent historical times, specifically during the 1990s, one can identify other patterns in these kinds of LD, strategic planning frameworks (Bertolotto and Clemente 2006). Some scholars (for example, Poggiese 2006) argue that strategic planning is a manipulative political maneuver that empties the very idea of what a direct decision-making and participatory strategy for local government should be. Other studies (for example, the collection of works edited by Heras Monner Sans and Burin 2008) show that when examined in detail, the call for participatory involvement of civil society stands as a cover-up for decision processes that take place somewhere else, and not precisely in the meetings supposedly called upon to do this (see, for example, Díaz and Villarreal 2008; Miano and Presman 2008; Pérez and Foio 2008).

Presentation of data analysis

Given the context presented in the prior section, our research project sought to identify and analyze the places and social actors that had implemented a participatory strategic planning approach among Argentinean municipalities and regions, describing their recent and past experience, and critically examining their results.[1] Findings from all four regions can be found at www.trabajoydiversidad.com.ar and have also been published in Heras Monner Sans and Burin (2008).

In this paper, we present findings from two case studies of two distinctive regions (North East and Central) in order to present two different, yet complementary ways, of understanding analysis of discursive patterns. For the Central Region (City of Buenos Aires) we documented and analyzed direct discourse, that is, face-to-face interactions among participants, in meetings where civil society organizations and state representatives gathered together during 2005, 2006, and 2007. These meetings were taking place due to a political and administrative reform in the City of Buenos Aires, where the 1996 City Constitution created new ways of governing the city (called Communal Government), in line with the strategic participatory planning and form of government. Our analysis shows that participants created and sustained specific speech genre and functions of language (Bahktin 1986; Hymes 1974) from where, and with which, they disputed meaning with others. A key aspect identified was the dispute over *who is* (*and qualifies as*) *a participant*. An ethnographic approach (Rockwell 1987) was used to identify and analyze meetings taking place among civil society and state representatives, during the process of transition from centralized to de-centralized government in the City of Buenos Aires. We assumed that agency, discourse, and social practice are dialectically interrelated (Arendt 1957; Bourdieu 1990; Giddens 1979). In turn, we assumed also that the use of grammar (whether it follows a standard versus a non-standard pattern, and for what purposes, for example); the creation of newly coined terms; the use of space and time in building interaction among participants are all factors that contribute to establishing patterns in discourse (Gumperz 1982a).

For the North East Region we analyzed discourse-based data (i.e. the discourses produced by participants *about* their actions and perceptions) by documenting and interpreting discursive accounts for several different communities of practice who are

participating in LD processes, seeking to understand the ways in which each create and sustain collective imagery and representations of who they are, what they seek to achieve, and how they relate to others participating in the social and political processes under way.[2] We analyzed the several logics of practice at play using Niklas Luhmann's theory to identify inclusion/exclusion processes that defined what counted as LD for the participants in that given space (Luhman 1997, 1998).

We see these as complementary, discursive-based analyses; we present them in the sections that follow.

Central region. Autonomous City of Buenos Aires' de-centralizing governmental policies

In the City of Buenos Aires a drastic change took place in 1996 when the City Constitution for an Autonomous City State was legislated; additionally, a new form of government (de-centralized in *Comunas*) was set, oriented by the assumption that smaller districts could (and would) allow for more direct participation of civil society. In this section we first describe briefly what the process of de-centralizing policies (also referred to as '*transition process*' by their participants) in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires entailed; we then turn into an analysis of who is considered a participant and how is this acknowledged in and through discourse.

Transition process

In 1994, the Argentine Constitution was amended. Among other changes, the City of Buenos Aires was declared autonomous. In 1996, in turn, the City of Buenos Aires called for a City Constitutional Convention in order to pass its own constitution. This new normative framework is considered cutting-edge in that it established direct participatory practices to govern the city; however, some researchers have stated that, even if the written norm is indeed cutting-edge, its implementation is at least delayed, or, worst, will never take place (Des Plats 2006; Rabey and Martínez 2006). As an example, the *Comunas* have not been established for 12 years now, and during the transition process, several difficulties have arisen, for example, that there are contradictions between the City Constitution and other Decrees and Laws regulating the so-called transition process. At the end of year 2006, the *Programa de Transición* officially started. The transition process refers to the ways in which the centralized Buenos Aires city government is being transformed into 'Communal-Based Government,' that is a de-centralized way by which each *Comuna* will elect their Communal Board. A Comuna is an area of the city composed of two to five neighborhoods; there are a total of 15 Comunas (it must be noted that there are approximately 50 neighborhoods in Buenos Aires). Throughout the years 2005–2006, when the limits of each Comuna were being defined, several arguments were held between civil society and governmental representatives on the number of Comunas and their geographic limits. Finally, when an agreement was reached, several participants still disagreed (for example, because each Comuna had to accept a grouping of neighborhoods that traditionally have not networked amongst them).

One of the mechanisms established by Law #1777, and other concurrent Decrees and Regulations (e.g. Decrees #350 and #248) is that all citizens could participate in what the City Executive Chief has called Forums and Participatory Spaces; these norms have also regulated the frequency of the meetings, the ways in which the

meetings should occur, and other related aspects. The fact that the transition has been so closely and specifically regulated by the Ministry of De-Centralization has been resisted, since many a participant, or civil society organization, would not think these are the best ways to invite participatory practices (i.e. to impose participation, and in which specific ways, is contradictory to the concept of participatory democracy itself). It should also be noted that during the 10-year period running from 1996 to 2006, several civil society organizations and individuals had been meeting to discuss these issues, make public statements, and propose lines of action to the government elected and to the different political parties representatives. Moreover, they had been taking action to solve common problems related to their neighborhoods, such as street violence, floods, communal food care for homeless people, and the sort. Thus, these people, organizations, and civil society representatives wanted their participatory history to be acknowledged.

Research questions and methods

Given the context described above, our research focus was on the ways in which the transition would take place. We conducted ethnographic fieldwork, including participant and non-participant observation, individual and group interviews, and artifact analysis. We also explored our ideas with other researchers and specialists who are studying related social and political phenomena. We constructed fieldwork logs as a team (five of us conducted participant and non-participant observation since 2005; two of those five are still documenting the process). Additionally, our data corpus is composed of other sources, such as newspaper clipping (covering the 1996–2008 period); normative corpus (laws, decrees, rules, and regulations), archival resources (i.e. bibliographical and related sources, e.g. civil society's organizations' archives), pamphlets, pictures, videos, and photos. We conducted fieldwork in several different phases (e.g. the first phase ran from July 2005 to March 2006; the second phase took place from April to October 2006; another phase took place from November 2006 to June 2007; the fourth phase was extended until July 2008, when elections and change of administration took place). These phases were defined by changes in political events, such as, for example, a change of City Executive Chief (March 2006); the start of the Transition Program (officially set in motion by the newly appointed City Ministry of De-Centralization in November 2007); etc. During April to October 2006 we examined meetings where participants gathered to discuss topics, and plan actions, toward constructing a political agenda that would allow the inclusion of neighbors and civil society in the process of constituting the City De-centralized Governmental System, even if there was not an official program for the transition to Communal Boards in place. We interrogated data from the point of view of who was addressed, by whom, for what, and, thus, we ultimately looked for a preliminary answer to who–how questions (i.e. who is a participant, and how is participation being defined). In what follows we present our analysis of data gathered during phase two (April–October 2006). Data from other phases have been analyzed and presented in other pieces of writing (e.g. Heras Monner Sans, Córdova, and Burin 2007; Heras Monner Sans et al. 2008).

In our analytic process, we identified that PARTICIPANTS was an over-arching category, allowing for several different types of participants to be called so. Thus it also became a focus of our analysis, since we identified that disputes and tensions around who counted as a participant were constantly held. *Participants*, *participation*,

participatory, *and to participate* were terms commonly used by people gathered at the meetings we observed. Thus, we conducted a domain analysis (Spradley 1980) in order to understand webs of cultural meaning around who counted as a participant in the spaces we observed, and what counted as participation. We posed a descriptive and exploratory general question: Are there different definitions of what counts as participating in the spaces/meetings observed for the transition process? Who is a participant in this space? How is language being used to acknowledge participation?

Domain analysis: who counts as participant

In our research field-notes for the period we closely observed we found recurrently that the terms *participant*, *participation*, *to participate*, *and participatory* were used. We also identified that several other categories were used as well to refer to participants, as synonyms sometimes, and sometimes to establish distinctions among them:

- VECINOS and/or VECINAS (neighbors, originally meaning someone who lives close by);
- MILITANTES (activists);
- AMIGOS o AMIGAS (friends);
- MIEMBROS DE ORGANIZACIONES (members of organizations);
- ORGANIZACIONES (organizations); and
- MILITANTES BARRIALES (neighbor activists).

Of these categories, the most frequently used was that of neighbor. We also found that neighbor was used to accomplish several different purposes in interaction, such as:

- To refer to each other during the meetings, that is, nominal use.
- To invite people to the meetings, in face-to-face interaction or on the phone (it was also found in leaflets and handouts), that is as a vocative.
- To refer to themselves in interactions (i.e. self naming, as in 'I am an active, interested neighbor . . .' or as in 'we all, neighbors of this city . . .'), that is as a qualifying participatory category. Also to refer to themselves and to others when recounting an event publicly in meetings (i.e. as in 'we went to a meeting, us, neighbors, and . . .').

We also found that neighbor also had different possible meanings:

- A person who is not part of any organization (commonly referred to as the 'plain' or 'ordinary' neighbor), and thus lacks knowledge and motivation.
- Someone who is not motivated enough to participate voluntarily in these social processes, unless something is provided in exchange to them.
- A person who was not very well informed, and that did not have significant and specific information needed to participate in these meetings and processes, and would, for these reasons, be easily manipulated by politicians.
- Someone who was a political activist with a known history of participation in a specific geographic area (and whose participation over time could be accounted for by other neighbors).

● An un-corrupted participant, not interested in power struggles in these spaces, and oriented to the common good.

Taking these meanings and uses of the cultural category VECINOS, we explored meaning constructed and acknowledged by the participants in interaction. In reviewing our data records taking these interpretations into account, we identified contradictory uses of the term that we interpreted as an interactional strategy. For example, sometimes, participants would self-describe themselves as VECINOS yet *act* as something else (e.g. militant of a political party, taking explicitly a political party stance). As a result, we concluded that there might be a reason for this apparent double-stance, which we related to an effort to differentiate from the 'ordinary political activist' or the 'politician'. In these cases, we observed that neighborhood was a cultural category that served to legitimate their status as un-corrupted, not interested in power struggles in these spaces, and oriented to the common good. The imagery around neighborhood, in these interactions, was anchored in positive traits, associated also with civil society participatory strategies.

These interpretations must be seen in light of the fact that there has been, and continues to be, an on going dispute about who is a *legitimate* participant of these meetings and of the overall transition process (and later, of the Transition Program), and on what the relationships amongst civil society and political community is. Thus, the fact of finding terms that could stand as appropriate cultural categories to carry out interactions seemed not only important but also needed to construct credible discourse.

The context in which these needs and importance placed on the terms used take meaning is that during the debates over the Law for regulating the Communal Government Process (the one that was finally passed as 1777 Law), a discussion was held about how the wording for *who is a participant* would be written in the Law. Even though it seems a semantic minor fact, it proven to be very important: some political parties, representatives, and community organizations wanted the wording to be ample and to be as most inclusive as possible (e.g. the wording should be close to 'all neighbors and social organizations in any way, shape or form'); others, conversely, wanted the wording to become restrictive and qualified. What ended up being written into the Law was a mix that, indeed, could be interpreted as precluding individual neighbors to participate in Communal Government, since it refers to 'neighbors organized in communal organizations, political parties, civil society groups'. An analysis of the language of the Law and other complementary normative documents provides evidence to support the claim that direct participation of neighbors is not assured, contradicting plainly the more overarching law, that is the City's Constitution (which establishes direct participation as a key, and provides citizens with an ample array of methods to participate, such as becoming part of the Communal Government, passing a plea to conduct a referendum, establishing a petition mechanism to make a specific claim, among others).

In the Communal 1777 Law the only way that a neighbor may become part of the Communal Government is to become part of the Communal Council; yet, in order to do so, they have to belong to an organization. Organizations gathered as the Council could decide to invite individual neighbors to participate … Therefore, it is left to the voluntary decision of the Communal Council to invite individual neighbors to be a part of it.

To complicate matters more, the language used by some politicians conveyed the idea that each (individual) person, if they so wished, could be a participant in governmental matters, but evidence of normative laws, decrees and regulations, and practice itself, is showing that this is not the case.

Additionally, it should be noted that the Law establishes that the Communal Executive Board is to be elected by vote; this election process is to be performed by the rules applied to national elections, thus making it so that only big political parties may be allowed to present their candidates.

Our analysis of field-notes and other sources also showed that other self-coined terms, or terms coined in specific speech communities (for example, in the political party speech community) were used to refer to who is a participant. It became important to us to uncover these terms since some of them were descriptive, some were pejorative, and some may mean either a description or an insult, depending on the context, intonation and addressee.
Such terms are:

- 'ROSQUERO', which in the political party jargon means someone who will impose their agenda, even if in doing so may contradict their own ethical openly stated principles.
- 'PUNTERO', which also comes from the political party jargon to mean someone who is acknowledged as a leader, or as the public relations person.
- 'REPRESENTATIVES OF THE POPULAR SECTOR', to mean participants who attributed to themselves the capacity of interpreting and understanding disenfranchised groups.

What is important to make visible is that these categories are part of these systems of discourse, thought and action, and are used to create and sustain meaning; these categories, just like the one analyzed before (neighbor) are also used by participants to mean differently according to when, who, and why were used. For example, the word ROSQUERO, even if it has a negative connotation, it can also be used to refer descriptively to the person who is in charge of participating in a sustained form to ensure a certain agenda to be discussed. In this case, ROSQUERO or ROSCA are terms used to mean that participants are acknowledging the negotiating process at stake, which is characteristic of political participation. The same can be said about the word/category REPRESENTATIVES of the POPULAR SECTOR, since it is a term usually loaded with positive, democratic meaning, but can also be used ironically to refer to those people who, in name of the PEOPLE, may seek to advance their personal or political party agenda.

Our conclusion is that when analyzing data from the City of Buenos Aires transition process, discursive patterns, and specifically speech genre and functions of speech, are one of the privileged mechanisms by which a very important political process is taking place.

At a first sight, when observing and documenting these meetings, one is left with the impression that a myriad of insignificant interactions, petty disputes, and non-conducive arguments are at stake. However, closer interpretation of these same data are needed, by two complementary processes, which we showed here as an example with the term neighbor: first identifying the frequency, the possible meaning constructed in interaction, and the functions of speech given to it (e.g. Was it a vocative or a nominative?). Second, by restoring the disputes and the contradictory

uses of the word to the larger context, that of the underlying question of 'who counts as a participant in the communal government'.

Such an analysis may lead us to the texture of political and social participatory experiences. We can state that it is not only words, but it is meaning what is at stake (Bakhtin 1986; Gumperz 1982a, 1982b; Hymes 1974), and that the dispute over meaning is what political participatory processes are made of.

North East Region. Social inclusion as a code for bridging difference

We now turn to analyzing data from the North East Region. The corpus is composed of interviews, observations, artifacts, and archives. For these data, however, we performed a different type of analysis, focusing on the ways in which discourse was used to create a distinctive field of social practice, namely that of LD.

Through our analysis we identified the different sets of subsystems that are present in this complex field. Our analysis identified veiled procedures by which meaning is generated. We have also identified ways in which the sets of subsystems, and their participants, defined their relevant fields. We have applied Niklas Luhmann's guiding analytic principles on what counts as a system in order to distinguish sets and sub-sets that we have called communities of distinctive discursive practices (Luhmann, 1997, 1998). Luhman defines a system as a closed, meaning-making field that in turns distinguishes itself from other systems by identifying its differences.

Following this analytic framework we found at least four communities of discursive practice for the process of LD we were seeking to understand as a discursive reality:

1. Epistemic Communities.
2. Professional Collectives.
3. Political Agents.
4. Local Communities.

These communities are distinctive in three ways: (1) by their defined social position (e.g. a professional, a civil servant, and community neighbor); (2) by their discursive patterns (i.e. ways of speaking, lexical choices, and genres called upon to construct meaning; (3) by their references to other communities in their speech or accounts (e.g. a participant of the epistemic community may referrer to a participant of the political community, etc.). A detailed explanation of these categories and distinction is to be found in Pérez and Foio (2008).

These communities are also self-acknowledged, that is, they recognize themselves as a group. We analyzed the discourse produced by members of these communities specifically produced in the context of researching about the meaning of LD, Participatory Policies and Inclusive/non-Inclusive actions. We found that there are significant differences in the meaning attributed to what LD means, and to who is a member of this social, political, and economic process.

For the Epistemic Communities, LD is defined as the capacity for subjects to choose a way of living whereby a set of conditions will act upon them (for example, market economy and its logic), but whereby a set of choices is still available. From their perspective there are several participants that interact in constructing the logic that supports LD processes, and non-state agents play a significant role, be those

NGOs, or others who play an important role in the local economy. From this perspective, LD must manage to coordinate actions at different levels (local, regional, provincial, national, and international), and must be sustained by self-organization over time. For these communities, establishing social networks by more or less freely choosing to participate is crucial.

In contrast and contradiction with the Epistemic Communities, the Professional Collectives (who are local civil servants in their majority) are guided by the logic of state-practice, oriented toward implementing the different Social Programs that are mandated by the state. Specifically, several nationally ran Social Programs are implemented at the local level in order to alleviate situations of extreme poverty. From this perspective, LD does not rest, as for the Epistemic Communities, on freely or willingly associating resources and ideas with one another. Contrastively, it is based on the idea of making Social Programs 'happen' and be effective, knowingly that these resources are not to generate sustained employment or different living conditions, but are a day-to-day resource aimed at reducing poverty. If establishing networks is one of the distinguishing traits identified in the discourse of the Epistemic Communities, it is not to be found in the discourse of the Professional Collectives. These civil servants attribute no associative capacity to beneficiaries of the Social Policies and Programs.

Political Agents' actions are conditioned by the logic of the national Social Programs and Policies. Since they are part of the administration at the local level, they cannot turn their back toward these policy lines; however, their participation in these nationally designed mechanisms is not chosen but imposed by them. Their views of what counts as LD is thus mediated heavily by the fact that they have to implement policies that they have not designed. A by-product of being in such position has been, however, the fact that they are calling for action at the local level, in particular toward Strategic Planning, mounting their call on part of the messages communicated by the National Government: 'work culture', 'inclusion', 'learning', etc. These Agents prioritize these values for their local discourse toward generating LD, and attribute any potential failure to the fact that the National Government does not allow any leeway for local policies to emerge. They identify clearly that participation occurs at the local scene but they refer to it as being always done by the same people or organizations over time.

Local Communities in turn do not seem to have a clear understanding, nor do they identify distinctively what may LD Programs or Plans be, or have to do with their everyday practices. Instead, their discourse is centered on demands for inclusion and participation in the labor market, the culture associated with employment, and schooling. These are seen as opportunities to better their income and to include themselves in the logic of social mobility. Their discourse is built around highlighting the importance of community links, associative strategies, and pointing to the contradictions between the logic of market economy and of LD, community-based logic. Their discourse also points to the fact that participating in community or local planning is reserved to organizations that, in turn, respond to the 'client' logic. They highlight this fact as a contradiction in that not all strategic, community and local-oriented planning is necessarily open, but is closed to some who agree to participate within certain parameters.

Complementary, an analysis of each of the discourses as subsystems allows us to point to the importance of identifying the basic characteristics underlying each of the

subsystems identified. In our data, the basic traits identifying each of them can be summarized as:

1. For the Epistemic Communities, strategic planning is relevant, and so is also social participation, since they orient their action toward bridging globalization and LD, seeking to integrate the market economy logic with that of LD and community integration (establishing this integration as their chosen area of action).
2. For the Professional Collective, a crucial distinction is made amongst those who are actively seeking to integrate themselves to the logic of employment and learning, and those who are oriented to being supported by state subsidiary funds. Their choice is to support those who are active in seeking their inclusion, and not those who orient themselves to welfare funds (their chosen area of action is that of stable employment and ongoing learning processes).
3. Political Agents orient their action towards local autonomy, seeking to participate at the decision table of economic resources and state power. For them, the dispute over national/local resources is crucial.
4. Local Communities in turn orient their area of interest and action toward opportunities for accessing school and income.

From this perspective, we have identified that each of the subsystems is orienting their action toward a distinct social, political and economic area, and that the codes by which they make meaning are not necessarily shared. For each of these subsystems, there's a difference in what counts as 'inclusion' or 'exclusion', since their perceived area of interest is different. However, what is also observed is that these logics seem to interact in a complementary way, establishing consensus as to the ways in which these several different perspectives should not exclude any of the subsystems. What is common to all perspectives is that all of them seek for a way for being included, and that there are several mechanisms by which this inclusion process is being reproduced, as it is seen by participants of each of the subsystems.

As analysts of this situation, we posed questions such as 'What is LD?', 'How is it perceived?' and 'What counts as such for each of the subsystems identified?' In following through the analysis of how participants of the different subsystems are to respond to these questions, we also found that there are veiled, tacit, non-explicitly enunciated statements, for were they made explicit, the risk is that conflictive perspectives may arise. If these conflictive perspectives arose, instead of making it possible to support the discourse of 'inclusion' and 'belonging', the more evident mechanisms of exclusion and power struggles would be in the open. It is known, for example, that LD may not constitute a real option for several regions in Argentina to become included in the market (global) economy, since the ways by which the global economy works may not be controllable by local communities at all. Therefore, welfare and Social Programs become functional since they absorb populations that would otherwise become totally excluded. In turn, these Programs become ways by which their recipients find reasons to continue to be 'included'. They perceive that their inclusion through these Plans or Programs allows them to not become totally excluded. However, a veiled or tacit statement is that there are no real, active Employment/Income Policies at work, nor locally or nationally, and thus, their inclusion to what they expect to participate in (full employment, for example) will not

occur. Implicitly, there seems to be a tacit agreement among all these subsystems in that any individual who seeks to fully participate may be able to achieve full inclusion.

Discussion and conclusions

Our data corpora and combined analyses allow us to discuss some issues related to participation, creation of meaning, and disputes over what counts as LD. Our basic theoretical assumption is that there are semiotic mediations from where we all (as human subjects) construct representations and imagery about our social experience. We claim that all human subjects act taking these representations and realities into account, and that these realities are recreated and sustained by two concurrent processes, namely one based on the face-to-face interactions, and another one based on producing and reproducing discourse as ideology. We call these two concurrent processes a semiotic capacity based on the work of Mandoki (2006) and Tannen (1989), who have shown how us, humans, use several different resources to produce discursive accounts *in* and *of* our lives, based on oral and written words, as well as on kinetic, proxemic, ornamental signs, and systems of signs. Thus, face-to-face interactions, as well as perception of these interactions, create social realities in which participants of any situation display their everyday lives, and strategically interpret their past and orient their actions toward the future.

Additionally, we assume that cultural and social representations are produced and sustained by communicative action, that is, in interaction, and as such, communication is the process by which shared interpretations are made possible by any given community of practice/ideas. It is to be noted, however, that socially shared representations and interpretive frameworks support and constrain specific interpretations of life; frame clashes are to occur when/whether different communities share the same space (Agar 1994; Jodelet and Guerrero Tapia 2000; Shi-xu 1997, 2005).

Everyday discourse is also based on the fact that it does not make explicit its own locus of generation. A certain veiled origin is thus attributed to discourse and as such, the specific ways in which meaning is created tends to remain tacit. It is in this sense that we assume that there are frameworks or contexts created by our discursive practices, which, in turn, provide meaning to our actions, and engender (make possible) specific actions, ways of acting and perceiving, and realities on their own, without necessarily making it explicit. Following this line of thought, one can support the premise that social imagery, discursive practices and interactions, become available to participants of any given community, since they are identified as resources and/or as ways of understanding the world.

In communities where members recognize themselves as such, a specific, contextualized common system of practice and beliefs is at the core of shared interaction, and becomes credible, not to be questioned because it achieves an ordinary (natural) status, most of the time. Once this ordinary and given for granted status is achieved, members of the community do not need to make it explicit, and thus, this set of shared knowledge becomes part of what counts as reality. It is also in this respect that at certain points, veiled or un spoken shared systems of beliefs need to be made explicit; it is also in this respect that social interaction among members of different communities, at some points, do not make these veiled shared systems explicit, yet they impose them over others.

However, in a given situation when participants who belong to different communities come together, they may dispute what counts as true, valid or even *real*; in these situations, as well, any specific community of participants may impose over the others what they determine to be true, valid, or even real. If this is achieved, one may say that they have managed to impose a certain simplifying operation over the other participants, thus making it possible for their logic to prevail, and to *reduce a certain amount of complexity at play* (Pintos 1994).

In our fieldwork and analysis, we have identified such processes taking place both in the Central and the North East Regions.

We conclude that it is relevant and necessary to take a two-way approach to the study of these kinds of processes: on the one hand, first hand, face-to-face interaction data need to be documented and analyzed in order to identify and interpret the situated meaning-making mechanisms that make politics happen. On the other hand, these data should be looked into as part and parcel of larger social, political and recent (and not so recent) historical processes, since the meaning of an event or cultural category may change when looked at from a different perspective, or as part of a larger context. In this respect, our inter disciplinary team is constructing frames for analyzing different, several pieces of data from angles that may provide insights into 'what is happening here'.

By presenting two different, yet complementary ways in which discourse practices are understood and studied, we have shown a fertile approach toward analyzing social and political action in general and what counts as participation when it is oriented to LD in particular. We in turn have shown that what participants in any social process do, say and think, generate realities to which participants orient their actions and interactions. Discursive practices and face-to-face interaction data should also be interpreted in light of larger sociohistorical contexts, so that other layers of meaning can be taken into account.

The analyses presented here have been oriented by prior analysis of empirical data, pertaining mostly to school settings. For example, in our prior work in schools and classrooms we have coined the analytic category of ambiguous zone (Heras, Guerrero, and Martínez 2005); in other pieces of writing, we have also anchored our analysis to a dialectic pair (position/positioning) which proven to be fertile as well (Heras 1993, 1995). Building on these analytic constructs, and establishing interpretive relationships among them, we are now being able to transpose them to analyze a different social setting, namely situations where civil society is called upon to discuss the orientation toward LD with a participatory approach. We are able to conclude that our basic hypothesis holds constant, albeit the setting (be it school settings or other social situations): human interaction is about making meaning, and the meaning-making process guides definitions of who counts as a participant, under what circumstances, and for what purposes. We support the idea that it is relevant to uncover these meaning-making processes built in and through discourse, since making them explicit contributes to amplifying the scope of reflexive action on the part of participants.

Notes

1. This article presents an analysis of data from two of the four regions under study. See http://www.trabajoydiversidad.com.ar/pres_fla.php for locating on a map the four regions where data collection was conducted.

2. Collective imagery and/or representations of the social collective are themes discussed by several different authors, such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, M. Mauss, M. Bloch, L. Dumont, F. Furet, Castoriadis, and Bourdieu.

Notes on contributors

Dr Ana Inés Heras Monner Sans received her MA and Ph.D. degrees at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is specialized in sociolinguistics and ethnography and has published many articles and books on the sociolinguistics and ethnography of bilingual education and interaction.

Dr María del Socorro Foio is Professor of Communication at the National University of the Northeast, Argentina. Specialized in communication and semiotic theories, she has published numerous articles and books on the socio-political processes of communication.

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