

Understanding Participatory Policymaking Processes: Discourse Analysis in Psychosociological Action Research

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Abstract Worldwide participatory policymaking with civil society has become a case in point for new patterns of governance at different levels. The enhancement of public services' quality compels intertwined challenges to participants, be they citizens, politicians, or civil servants. Given the limited attention that scientific literature has paid to understanding how roles and functions of civil servants are demanded to change through participatory processes, an exploratory action research was run in 2012 with 29 civil servants of the Municipality of Lisbon. Civil servants were all engaged in—at least—one of the four participatory processes run by the administration at that time: Participatory Budget; Bip/Zip; Local Agenda 21; Simplis. The action research was aimed at grasping the psychological change-driven dynamics played between these subjects, with the support of psychosociological theories and methods. Focusing on the analysis of the discourse, as one of the methods employed towards this end, this text focuses on the specific methodological apparatus of the discourse analysis approach. This contribution will hopefully open to further studies on discourse analysis in action research, and enhance the overall debate on the employment of qualitative methods in participatory policymaking studies.

Keywords Participation • Civil servants • Action research • Discourse analysis • Psycho-sociology

1 Introduction

Participatory policymaking processes with civil society were first experienced to reform political systems in Latin America, in the end of 1980s (Avritzer and Navarro 2003; Sousa Santos 2003). The perception of enlarged participation of civil society in decision-making aimed to effectively unfold social inequalities and economic redistribution. Inspired by some first successful experiences, several

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countries in Europe have assumed in the last two decades the opportunity to make participation a device for—inter alia—citizenry trust recovery, less electoral abstention, and new solutions before increasing complexity of transnational and multi-scale economic, financial and political networks. Saying so, the diffusion of participatory mechanisms cannot be understood by merely looking at political intentions. Participation also compels understanding about inherent organizational challenges for policymaking changes.

The reconfiguration of democratic goals and governance instruments, aimed to pursue effective policies, has largely challenged the bureaucratic rationale of public administration functioning (Denhardt and Denhardt 2007). Participatory processes demand the (re)organization of administrative levels, systems and connections in order to sustain the effective impact of policies. Together with the more “structural” dimension, the engagement of civil servants in such processes creates new forms of interactions that need to be further analyzed. Civil servants’ symbolical representations and acting strategies construct new change-driven “semantics” of governance from within the organizational context (Falanga 2013).

The question is crucial, in as much as one of the critical points of participatory policymaking hitherto has entailed the narrow application of bureaucratic logics to the problems affecting society. The segmentation of administrative responses has often carried to “sectorialized” policymaking processes, less effective in a growingly complex scenario. As such, one of the most challenging effort of participatory processes, and more broadly of new governance models, has been that of promoting new integrated visions of social problems (Peters and Pierre 2007).

We decided to explore this topic by looking at the change from within: how do civil servants symbolically represent participation in a changing organizational context? The action research run in 2012 was based on a qualitative approach which included the discourse analysis of 29 individual interviews with the civil servants engaged in four participatory processes, run at that time by the Municipality of Lisbon. The text pretends to synthetically frame the qualitative approach to the case study and put the emphasis on the discourse analysis method. Towards the aim we will not provide deep information about the outcomes of the action research, which are retrievable in other publications of the author of this text Falanga (2013, 2014).

2 Making Sense the of Action Research

The “generative” function of the action research implies helping the subjects involved in the research to reflect and self-reflect on specific occurring changes, and possibly act within them. Such a perspective is consistent with Kurt Lewin’s proposal, when referring to action research as both an instrument to better understand the changes going on in a system, and a way to perturb the system itself (Lewin 1948). The design of an action research should then be pursued according to the characteristics of specific contexts and be set in dialogical connection with the subjects, rather than provide a predefined set of methodological tools to be applied

to “objects” of analysis (Scott 1965). Moreover, the action research should identify the set of scientific issues to be explored throughout the field-study itself. The identification should be open enough to conceive areas of research where the recognition of main theories should match provisory relations with progressive findings (Pagés et al. 1998).

Due to these appealing characteristics, social and political sciences have extensively debated about the adoption of new qualitative methods in the past few decades. In this vein, some scholars from the public policy analysis field have had a pervasive reaction to neo-positivist approaches Yanow (2000) and Fisher (2003) has clearly stated that:

[...] the interpretive orientation on meaning requires the social scientist to pursue the unobservable as well. Because language is able to carry and transmit meanings among people, access to the realm of meaning often can be gained through the study of communication, both spoken and written. But such meanings are generally only indirectly made available through such communications. Thus it is necessary for the analyst to move beyond empirical methods – such as content analysis – to an interpretive reconstruction of the situational logic of social action (ibidem, pp. 139-140).

Inspired by this statement, we wonder how can we make sense of the logic(s) that construct communication? Narrative-in-making permits to better understand the ways policies can comprise a sequence of ambiguous claims (Czarniawska-Joerges 1997). However, narratives are neither all the same nor serve the same purpose. Storytelling, for instance, is likely to grasp a variety of information and thoughts by weaving them into a plot-making sense of complex situations (Bruner 1986). Kykryi et al. (2010) argue the central role of daily conversations in producing and managing organizational changes. Heracleous and Marshak (2004) further state that “organisational discourse analysis is not simply an intellectual luxury but can have pragmatic, relevant implications” (ibidem, p. 113). Likewise, Argyris (1991) makes an argumentative link between thought and action in opposition to the sharp differentiation between scientific and useable knowledge. In line with this, the author Argyris (1994) highlights the importance of enabling subjects with emerging knowledge, as a potential factor of change when considering the role of feelings. “Progress toward change requires expressing those feelings as well as respecting them. It is important for organisational participants to explore the reasons for their feelings” (ibidem, p. 353). The author further points out the critical task of interrupting the “closed cycle” of defensive reasoning and behavior in order to learn from and reflect on the meanings of change (ibidem).

Understanding discourse-making is key to intervene over social relationships and contexts. In these terms, rather than approaching change as radical shifting from one stable state to another, discourse-oriented methods applied within an action research can have the potential to both grasp and generate change.

Acknowledging the role of psychology in understanding symbolical representation and signification of the reality, as well as intervening towards goals of change, psychosociological approaches have especially contributed to new discourses and actions’ analysis models (Carli and Paniccia 2003). These models have argued—alike the action research—the scientific necessity to progressively monitor

and prove scientific outcomes concerning symbolical representations through the reiteration of interactive processes with the involved subjects (Carli and Paniccia 2003; Olivetti Manoukian 2007).

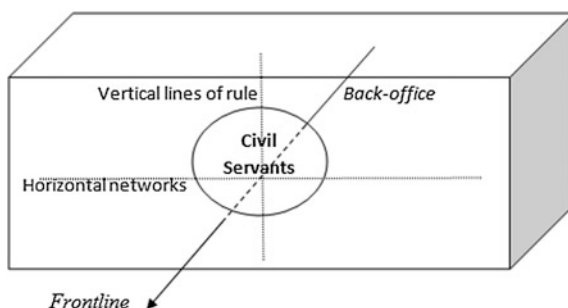
3 Case-Studying the Municipality of Lisbon

Case-studies can increase knowledge around a specific scientific issue and/or improve a scientific theory. In this sense, there can be either an explorative or descriptive purpose when choosing the case-study. In the first case, researchers can undertake pivotal studies to test new hypotheses with no strict demands on statistical relevance of their study samples. In the second case, neither predictions nor prescriptions are given, rather comprehensive descriptions of the case (Yin 2003).

The explorative purpose of our case-study was to understand the ways civil servants engaged with four participatory processes in the Municipality of Lisbon were symbolically representing participation within a driven-change organizational context (Falanga 2013). The four analyzed processes were: Participatory Budgeting (participatory allocation of a predefined public pot of money); Bip/Zip (financial and logistic support to local partnership-making for community-based intervention in priority areas); Local Agenda 21 (participatory consultation concerning urban sustainable goals); Simplis (participatory consultation concerning bureaucratic simplification of the local administration).

Regarding the transformative nature of participatory policymaking processes, we identified four intertwining organizational factors: (i) vertical lines of rules (internal hierarchy and distribution of roles between top-level, middle-level and street-level bureaucrats); (ii) Horizontal networks (intra-administrative relationships between former and new administrative units); (iii) Back-office functions (formulation and articulation of policy innovations at the institutional level); (iv) Frontline interaction with civil society (formulation and articulation of policy innovations at the “street” level) (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 (Civil servants producing change, figure of the author of this text)



The four identified factors highlight the structural dimension of the changes that civil servants are demanded to approach somehow in their daily organizational life. Considering the transformative nature of participatory processes, civil servants cannot help but being at the heart of our attention on change-driven symbolical representations of participation. Furthermore, the variability of these representations can be understood by looking at the ways they are shared between the civil servants, rather than approaching their analysis as incommensurably idiosyncratic to individuals.

The design of the action research was a participatory step of our approach. We negotiated the meaning of the proposed methods and goal with political representatives, administrative managers, and the 29 civil servants engaged with the four participatory processes. The resulting methodological plan was composed of five steps and was run between January and December 2012 (and adapted to each one of the four participatory processes' scheduling):

1. Understanding the context, focusing on local administration and the administrative teams demanded to manage participatory initiatives;
2. Collecting quantitative data regarding the four participatory processes in 2012, such as budgetary incomes and outputs, people involved, etc.;
3. Observing on the field the implementation of the four participatory processes, as regards both internal meetings between civil servants and assemblies with citizens;
4. Interviewing the 29 identified civil servants engaged with the processes in order to analyze their discourse about participation;
5. Planning regular follow-ups with the civil servants involved in the action research.

We will focus on the fourth step in the next section. Before that, it is worth underlining that the action research has undertaken systematic self-reflection on the observed relationships and shared reflection on emerging evidence with the involved subject. This psychosociological task is based on the psychoanalytical "contra-transfer" function in that it compels self-observing, reflecting on, and making sense of the emotions generated by and through our relationships. This task led us to formulate two main questions which introduce the discourse analysis. Firstly, interviews helped to make the interviewees feel they were the owners of key knowledge about participation. Such acknowledgment accomplishes the symbolical legitimization purpose of the civil servants' "experiential knowledge". Secondly, interviews helped to make interviewees aware about their key contribution to participatory studies. Such awareness can be considered as the result of the scientific legitimization purpose of the action research.

4 Focusing on the Discourse Analysis of Civil Servants

The analysis of the discourse can be approached from different theoretical and methodological frameworks. Some frameworks are aimed to understanding the common language adopted by a community (e.g. ethno-methodology concerning the social knowledge of subjects); others the illustration of the content by either decomposing the text into micro-units or analyzing its passages concerning the theme of investigation; some others the interpersonal construction of a theory, by matching sociolinguistic and rhetorical components (Pagés et al. 1998). The psychosociological perspective on communication concerns the ways it is produced as an action. Such an assumption compels understanding the interplay between unconscious and conscious sets of mind behind the production of discourses (Fornari 1979).

By adopting the psychosociological theoretical perspective, we established the methodological tools through which we wanted to address the shared symbolical dimensions of driven-change discourses (Falanga 2014). Towards this end we decided to cluster the different patterns characterizing the common symbolical object “participation” by following Carli and Panicia’s guidelines (2002). We proposed semi-structured interviews to each one of the 29 civil servants. Planned as one-hour interviews, interviewees variably employed from 40 min up to 1 h and 40 min to develop their discourses concerning participation. The initial question of the interview was: “What do you think about participation?”. The purpose of such open and broad question was to give support to emotional self-exploration of the issue. Such goal is consistent with the exploratory purpose of the action research. Interviews have been conducted so as to let emotions and thoughts flow without a pre-determined script, even when it was perceived as confusing or too demanding (Goffman 1988). On basing their answer by making reference to both work and life experiences, civil servants were introduced to a profound and unexpected experience of “sense making” (Weick 1997).

The progressive engagement of civil servants to the interview was characterized by some common elements:

1. At the beginning, all interviewees felt fairly constrained in answering the question. The initial impasse was interpreted as a form to express two typologies of psychological “conflict”:
 - a. The question is planned to generate some anxiety which stems from its character of openness supposed to let the narrative flow into the topic.
 - b. The question is received as a surprising demonstration of interest when not feeling they have often been asked about their vision of the tasks.
2. In the course of the process, we adopted different strategies in order to facilitate interviewees’ narratives, and the interviewees themselves have generally taken possession of their arguments as time went on. Initial hesitancy has in almost all cases “thawed” into curiosity, possibly stemming from:

- a. Progressive word of mouth among colleagues about the occasion of being spokesmen and spokeswomanes of their own job experiences.
 - b. Progressive trust in the researcher due to the encouraging emotional tone of the interview aimed at neither “invading” interviewee with lots of questions, nor evaluating his/her job performance.
3. At the end of the interviews, three general recurring items have emerged at the content-level:
 - a. The variety of participatory processes implemented by the Municipality of Lisbon, possibly relating to their overall context of belonging.
 - b. The participatory processes as phenomena impacting both internal and external actors, possibly referring to their direct experience with participation.
 - c. The significance of participation in terms of one’s own career, possibly referring to their investment in terms of a lifelong career.

Once we interviewed the civil servants, we proceeded to the analysis. The analysis of the discourse aimed at catching the deep emotional and psychological dynamics behind and beyond discourse production by deconstructing the intentional connections among the words (Carli and Paniccia 2002, 2003; Battisti and Dolcetti 2012). The analysis of the discourse was finally complemented by observation and data collection (Carli 2006).

Towards the aim, we first created a sole corpus of transcribed text and identified five independent variables aimed at characterizing the results related to our case-study. The function of independent variables is to show their relevance in the formation of clusters, i.e. after the clusterization is run. The variables were: (1) sex; (2) function; (3) participatory process; (4) years of work for the Municipality; (5) years of experience in participation. It is worthy to clarify that the fourth variable served to specify possible differences resulting from the status of lifelong career that all the civil servants taking part to the action research were carrying on. Also, the fifth variable was conceived as a way to differentiate years of engagement in participatory processes and see possible effects on the process of clusterization.

The sole corpus of text was secondly processed through the text analysis software Alceste, standing for “Analysis of Lexemes Co-occurring within Simply Textual Enunciations” (Reinert 1995). This software works through segmenting the corpus of text into Unities of Elementary Context (UCE), which are statements or paragraphs, and the definition of categories of words with their lexemes. After obtaining the complete set of words present in the corpus of text, we checked the whole vocabulary in order to clean it from non-relevant words and keep the key ones. The elimination of the non-relevant words implied defining criteria consistent with the whole design of the action research. Moreover, we also eliminated words holding pure syntactical functions, such as articles, prepositions, etc. Finally, we eliminated the words sharing the lexeme referring to “participation”, for it was used as focus of the question. Indeed, the invitation to talk about participation implies considering the speech originated by this stimulus—rather than including the stimulus itself—and identifying multiple ways of perceiving it.

As regards the selection of keywords, we created lexemes aimed at joining words referring to the same headwords (e.g. “to serve”, “service”, “servant” merged into one headword: “serv_”). In doing so, we also identified ambiguous acceptations of some words in the written forms or in the cultural use, as well as detected words that when joined together express precise concepts (e.g. the two concurrent words “sem abrigo” transformed into one “sem_abrigo”, meaning “homeless”). Finally, we checked the emotional “density” of the words in order to make a final decision on the relevant ones.

This preparatory phase was necessary to work two statistical operations out through a second use of the software Alceste: multiple correspondences and cluster analysis of the keywords. The clusterization of the UCE into groups of co-occurring keywords listed the frequency of words in relation to one another within UCE (multiple correspondences) as well as proximity and distance between UCE (cluster analysis).

According to our psychosociological approach, the clusters enlighten about different modalities through which the subjects symbolically represent the object of analysis, in this case participation. The crossed detection of multiple correspondences among the UCE and the clusterization of the co-occurring words within the text respond to phenomena related to “free associations” outputs derived from the evocative stimulus provided by the question (Carli and Panicia 2002).

Four clusters emerged by the discourse analysis. The clusters neither match the discourse of individuals or groups nor identify specific participatory processes. It is a mere coincidence that the outcome was of four clusters for four participatory processes. The clusters characterize cross-cutting psychological dimensions at the heart of civil servants’ symbolical representations of participation. The spatial organization of the clusters within one factorial space and their relationship to the factorial axes represents a further source of information on the inner diversity of representations (Fig. 2).

At the statistical level, the relation among clusters is read by taking into account the distance from the factorial axes (Table 1). In psychosociological terms it means considering axes as social factors which condense the key instances emerging from the clusters.

The UCE have different statistical weight in each Cluster, what means that the frequency of co-occurring keywords is variably distributed within the clusters (Table 2). In psychological terms, it means considering how specific symbolical dynamics prevail in each clusters, in detriment of others.

As regards the interpretation of the co-occurring keywords in each cluster, we first made reference to the etymology of each keyword, as a way to provide our analysis with an historical and cultural background on the use of Portuguese language. We developed a deep reflection concerning the resources and limits of cultural translation that characterized the whole process of the action research, which was especially evident in this phase due to our linguistic limits and resources. The multiple levels of translation including the different steps of the research represented a highly challenging issue that we sought to experience by guaranteeing

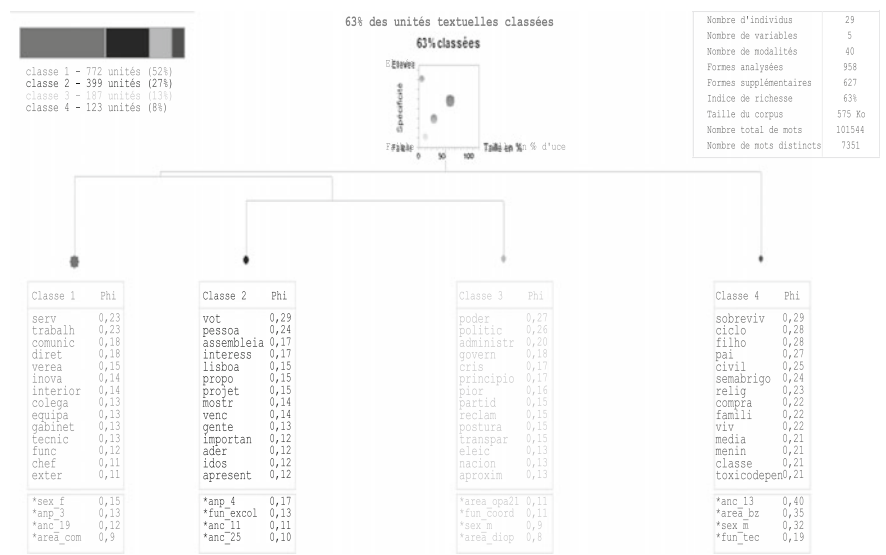


Fig. 2 (Factorial space, output of the discourse analysis run by the author of this text)

Table 1 Factorial axes and clusters

First factorial axis	Polarization between the Cluster I (+0.314) and the Cluster IV (−1.532)
Second factorial axis	Polarization between the group of Clusters I/IV (−0.313/−0.600) and the group of Clusters II/III (+0.571/+0.534)
Third factorial axis	Polarization between the Cluster II (−0.414) and the Cluster III (+0.917)

Table 2 Clusters and classified UCE

Cluster	Classified UCE (%)
I	772 (52)
II	399 (27)
III	187 (13)
IV	123 (8)

the quality of the outcomes. Said so, we took benefit from plural etymological sources to better reduce the psychological polysemy of the emerging keywords.

Semantic polysemy corresponds to infinity sets of meanings that the unconscious state of mind produces underneath our understandings. Polysemy is not a “mere” multiplicity of meanings, it is rather the simultaneous “sense making” of our rational understanding of the world (Matte Blanco 2000). Said so, our interpretation involved focusing not only on the multiple intended meanings of the keywords, but

rather looking at their co-occurrence in order to grasp emerging emotional dynamics.

The purpose was that of providing the subjects with access to the symbolical sense at the heart of their own discourses, by revealing the shared dimensions beyond their individual experience with participatory processes. The impact of this type of knowledge is evident on the improvement of both individual and social awareness, as well as on the potential for action.

Being the purpose of the action research expressly exploratory, the external validity of this discourse analysis was ensured by: (i) the triangulation within a set of qualitative methods—data collection and observation—both converging and improving the discourse analysis' results; (ii) the positive feedback of the civil servants in the regular follow-ups, who affirmed to assume the emerging cultural patterns as their own expression. Finally, the internal validity of this method has been comprehensively proved by, *inter alia*, Carli and Paniccia (2002), Battisti and Dolcetti (2012), and Falanga (2013).

5 Conclusive Reflections

Participation of civil society in policymaking processes encourages the adoption of a complex set of changes within organizational contexts. Along with structural changes, new governance equilibriums generate ambivalent emotions, desires and fears by the involved subjects, be they politicians, citizens, or civil servants. Supported by psychosociological theories and methods, our framework intended to give voice to what is often kept unexpressed—or what is looking for words to be expressed—in participatory processes. The generation of different symbolical representations of change and the observed impact of these representations on the daily performance with policymaking processes, compelled us to explore the ways civil servants represent participation.

Towards the aim, we focused on four participatory processes developed by the Municipality of Lisbon in 2012. Our action research included the adoption of a discourse analysis method, which was applied along with 29 civil servants engaged in the four processes. Our goal was to explore their profound experience with participation. From the analysis of four clusters of co-occurring keywords we picked out four different patterns of symbolical representation. By sharing the outcomes with the civil servants, we not only negotiated new meanings, but also and mainly set specific setting for shared reflection on the ways change can be produced, improved, or contrasted. In doing so, we elicited a shared self-reflexive setting with civil servants who had the opportunity to get aware of “new” meanings about their profound connection with the participatory processes, and also to inspire new steps for action research.

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