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NARRATIVE ACTIVITY WITHIN AN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK. HOW A REHABILITATION TEAM CONSTRUCTS PROBLEMS THAT CAN BE SOLVED

This paper presents a study about discursive practices of collaborative problem solving; the context of the study is a team of professionals who rehabilitate people with psycho-social problems.

In our approach, we stress the role played by institutional framework in practice generation; in other words, social and institutional facts shape working activities, including talking work. The need to take institutional order into consideration has implied to combine ethnographic study with narrative analysis on team meetings.

Through the research, five discursive practices have been identified. The paper presents one of them, namely "Centralization of the interaction". This practice has been assessed as dysfunctional by the team's director, who has introduced organizational changes on the basis of our research results.

Keywords: team meetings, discursive practices, collaborative problem solving, ethnography of communication, institutional reality.

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Object of research

This paper presents a study about work and in particular work accomplished through talk within a team of professionals who rehabilitate people with psycho-social problems (Piccini, 2005). The study was aimed at identifying discursive practices of work, which are developed and displayed by team members during their weekly meetings.

Scholars interested in the life of working groups have given enormous emphasis to the importance of practices (Engeström & Middleton 1996; Wenger 1998; Zucchermaglio 2002). As they have acknowledged, working communities develop peculiar ways of doing things and create their own patterns of actions. Those patterns result from a history of learning and organize working life.

In our approach, we stress the role played by institutional framework in practice generation. In fact, working activities occur within a framework of institutional elements that implement operational models, profession related theories, and definition of intents. People who engage in working activities within such a framework develop practices reflecting features of the institution in which they work together with their own personal features. Also talking work is shaped by and slowly brings changes to the institutional framework.

The need to take institutional order into consideration in studying talking work has been widely acknowledged, although it is not easy to find studies in which institutional framework understanding is used to interpret discursive practices of work (Sarangi & Roberts 1999). We want to give a contribution in this direction.

Context of the study

The study community is a health care institution, Centro al Dragonato. It provides rehabilitative services for people with psychiatric and relational problems. The focal point of rehabilitation at Centro a.D. is training: removing, as much as possible, settings which induce people to play the patient role and introducing learning settings.

Learning settings are prepared in order to have people face the same norms they will find in the social and professional settings that represent the target of the rehabilitation (Rezzonico & Meier 1995; Meier 1995; Rezzonico1996). Most important rehabilitation settings are workplaces, where clients – under the guidance of team members – learn a job and

learn to follow common norms of working life such as precision, punctuality, concentration.

In particular, the center runs six workplaces managed by professionals of the specified field, i.e. a typographer, a silk-screen printer, two cooks, a waitress, and a secretary. Those professionals – core members of the team – are trained to learn the rehabilitation paradigm and become able to conduct workplaces activities as part of rehabilitative activities. In fact, their job is complementary with the job of other team members: a case manager, two psychotherapists, and a responsible for free time activities.

Weekly meetings we have analyzed have the function of reviewing clients' cases, helping team members to solve problems, and planning future works. Team members commonly refer to the meeting activity as problem solving.

Methodology and theoretical standpoint

The research combines ethnographic study with narrative analysis of team meetings. The ethnographic study[1] has been conducted all over 10 months (February-November 2002). During that time, we achieved an understanding of the rehabilitation paradigm and analyzed the institutional framework that implements it. Such analysis illuminates social and institutional facts that shape the activity of rehabilitation at Centro a.D., including talking work. The choice to conduct such analysis is grounded on a theoretical assumption, since we ascribe strong power to the institutional framework in shaping work practices (Piccini, Carassa & Colombetti 2005). Primary attention has been paid to one component of social reality, i.e. the workplaces that the institution creates and manages as a rehabilitation instrument.

Knowledge about the rehabilitation paradigm and its concrete implementation through institutional facts has been used to uncover what team members locally accomplish in the joint activities during team meetings. The qualitative examination of recorded talk has focused on problem solving activity that is the main contribution of team meetings to the whole rehabilitative work. Discursive operations through which the activity of problem solving is locally sustained have been singled out.

Meeting participants are mainly engaged in reporting occurred episodes. For this reason, the choice of analytical foci was grounded on a

[1] The ethnographic study has implied our participation to the community life, the reading of documents, and the conduction of interviews.

theory about narratives, namely Ochs & Capps' dimensional approach to conversational narratives (Ochs & Capps 2001).

An extensive history of team meetings has been considered; it was possible to recognize that some operations systematically occur in problem solving. The set of these operations is the corpus of Centro a.D's working practices in relation to problem solving activity.

Analysis of problem solving practices

Our focus is on situated practices of problem solving that team members develop and implement while they discuss the situation of their clients with the aim to plan future developments of rehabilitation projects. A prominent feature of Centro a.D. team meetings is that a central issue seems to be the ability of seeing the problem, and team members spend most of the meeting time engaged in a joint construction of it.

The study sheds light on discursive practices through which team members jointly achieve an institutional problem construction. Problem construction is institutional when it is functional to the planning of viable solutions, i.e. solutions that team members can implement within the organization in which they work. In fact, any institution allows for specific operations and not for others. In this sense, institutional reality implements operational models, profession related theories, and definition of intents.

Workplaces are a complex object from the point of view of social reality construction. Complexity becomes evident through the analysis of workplace norms and role related powers specified for Centro a.D.'s employers and employees.

Actions of employers and employees at Centro a.D., viewed from the inside of the workplace, are analogous to those of ordinary employers and employees. However, analogous actions have different meanings. According to Bateson terminology (1972) the same actions performed in the same first order context (work) give different effects if that context is inserted in a particular second order context (rehabilitation for us). Effect of actions – for example punishments that can be applied when employees violate a workplace norm – are specified by the institution, and they depend on second order context, rehabilitation. A certain behavior that in an outside workplace might result in the firing of an employee, at Centro a.D. negative behavior results in the rearrangement of his or her rehabilitation project. It is a consequence of the fact that workplaces at Centro a.D. are framed in a second order context that is different from the context in which ordinary workplaces are framed.

It is not easy to achieve the complex role of a workplace employer who must mediate between the need to act as a real employer (following rules imposed by the context of a workplace) and the need to act as an educator (following rehabilitation extents).

Team meetings facilitate mediation between first order context (work) and second order context (rehabilitation). In fact, during team meetings everyday activities taking place within workplaces are interpreted and evaluated in terms of their therapeutic function and new working activities are planned as tools for rehabilitation.

Developed discursive practices is the way they have learned to achieve such mediation.

During the meeting team members discuss about each client enrolled in the rehabilitation program. Discussion about each client begins – according to meeting protocol – with a turn of the team member who plays the role of employer for that client. Client employer reports an event, an action, or an attitude of the client. The opening statement of client employer usually does not include any reference to the rehabilitation project. On the base of this opening statement team members jointly develop a narrative until they are able to set a plan for future rehabilitative work with the client.

Five analytical foci apt to capture features of narrative activity have been applied (Piccini 2005). The analysis allows seeing meeting activity as the construction of institutional narratives, i.e. narratives including the description of problems that can be solved with possible interventions enabled by the institution. Transforming an opening statement into an institutional narrative requires expertise and team members have developed specific discursive practices through which they can accomplish this operation. We present now one practice, centralization of the interaction, among the five identified (Piccini 2005).

Centralization of the interaction

Every team member participates to the meeting discussion about each client. The first who speaks is the client's employer who has most of the information to share.

Then, other members give their contribution. Team members' participation is solicited by the coordinator through questions and through multiple linguistic devices.

The coordinator's turns display a participation framework (Goodwin & Goodwin 2004) in which all of a meeting's participants are represented as responsible of the situation under discussion: she commonly uses the *we-form* and animates team members in the narrative both when her interlocutors are actual agents in the narrated episode and when they are not.

COORDINATOR: *if you remember*, it was part of the goal *we gave to* Lucia. from the moment that her goal is to be ready for working in offices, she lacks some skills, etc, *we have sad*, it's fine, in order for her to stay here, from the moment she is perfect in what she is doing the call center and everything else, and she could go working outside here, she prefers to stay here another while, *we told her we give you* the opportunity to stay here if you take advantage of it by acquiring skills you lack, otherwise *let's change* your project because.

The coordinator's discourse is also rich in references to other cases, to past decisions jointly taken by the team and to old stories in which team members played an active role.

COORDINATOR: but that dietician *with some clients worked well*, because Sandro for example it was the first time that he had lost a lot of weight.

The coordinator's interventions carry the memory of client history and make it available for discussion during the meeting through an intensive use of contextualization practices.

In this way the coordinator provides interpretive resources and at the same time performs a rhetorical move that leads the audience towards a more participative attitude: team members are invited to evaluate the situation under discussion by using their own memory along with information made available in the current conversation.

However, team members often give information about the client without interpreting it. They do not display awareness about what such information could mean in relation to the planning of client's rehabilitation. The role that an individual contribution has in narrative development is an interactional outcome and the meeting coordinator plays a key role. This process is displayed for example when the waitress tells about her dialogue with a client at the restaurant. In the joint construction of the narrative the episode recounted by the waitress affords the construction of a problem concerning client's misunderstanding of roles,

requiring ad hoc educational interventions. The waitress had no intention of doing that and she even resists this interpretation of her account fostered by the meeting coordinator.

WAITRESS: *May I say something about Ida*? when she came today — right - at lunchtime she tells me hi how are you? I'm fine thank you and what about you? well I'm a little bit tired. It is Tuesday and you are already tired? and so on but she was just telling me you know I'm just doing the cards. [......]

COORDINATOR: no well it is really important that we maintain that position, the other issue that Rob is mentioning, and she probably was doing that also before and now that she is in a critical phase because she is starting in Gerrapiano those things, *it can be that she starts going around among us again speaking about things that have nothing to do with people.*

WAITRESS: *no it was within a discussion, she did not intend.*

The work of weaving together individual contributions in the plot of an institutional narrative is accomplished by the coordinator, and most of the meeting interaction shows a coordinator-centered structure.

The coordinator takes care that every aspect of client behavior are considered in the discussion. Moreover, she connects problem description to the history of the client and to the goals included in clients' rehabilitation projects.

COORDINATOR: *because she had this problem of being scared* of people, of going out alone, she was anxious, she had insomnia, *this was one of the problems because of which she came here* instead of looking for a job outside. But *they asked us most of all about professional skills.*

She investigates client's conduct with the clear intention to find out something that can be improved through those educational interventions that team members are enable to implement.

The person who plays the role of a coordinator during the meetings also plays the role of case manager for the rehabilitation project as a whole. This is a key aspect of meeting interaction, because the overall knowledge of the multilevel rehabilitation project that only a case manager has is the condition enabling the work of coordinating the discussion.

The case manager has the task of designing the rehabilitation project during individual encounters with clients. Moreover, she has the task of coordinating specialized interventions carried out by team members

toward clients. In particular the case manager is responsible for assuring that the multiple interventions are consistent with each other and with project goals. Mediation does not occur only at the conversational level: conversation is coordinated by someone who coordinates the remainder of work activities as well and who is more aware than others of how individual work is part of the whole rehabilitative work. In evaluating a reported episode she has sometimes more elements than the teller, who may be directly involved. The coordinator provides a specific contribution: the kind of knowledge that is based on her work with clients and that typically concerns overarching project goals, resources and limitations.

Conclusions

Our analysis of discursive practices of problem solving at Centro a.D. has revealed that the core of problem solving is problem construction. Problem construction must allow the planning of educational interventions within the range of possibilities offered by the institution. The minute examination of talk-in-interaction has identified five discursive practices that enable team members to accomplish problem construction efficiently and to be consistent with the institutional framework. One of them is centralization of interaction.

The case of Centro a.D. illustrates how conversational integration and efficiency in discursive activity is the result of a design that is embodied in a fragment of social reality.

Such a relationship – between the institutional framework and discursive activity – becomes visible only if a systematic analysis of social reality is dragged into the minute study of local conversational accomplishments. Moreover, since the local conversational accomplishments have been considered over a long history of interactions, it is possible to identify discursive practices. In this way, researchers can see – out of the conversational flow – the employment of specific professional practices through which team members work during the meetings.

This kind of analysis is useful for the study community. As it happened at Centro a.D., team members confronted with an outside view of their own work are stimulated to modify features of the institutional framework in order to change specific discursive practices they can acknowledge as non compliant with their operational model, theories, and intents.

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