

Original article

# The three subjects of intra-discourse dialogue in social studies on the attribution of meaning: consequences for evaluation

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## Abstract

The current article discusses the relationship that basic communication presents in empirical social research presenting the attribution of meaning to significant events in which social actors are involved. It postulates the existence of three subjects in action in this relationship: the subject of collective thought, the subject of researcher and author of the empirical study and the subject of the reader of this research. The second and third are classical subjects of study, where the first is a novelty introduced by the Discourse of the Collective Subject method.

No doubt, what is generally seen as a result of research and the fruit of the work of the researcher/author, the collective thought reconstituted for the current study is granted, in this methodology, the statute of subject of the research.

Beginning with this idea of three subjects and their complex relationships must be perfectly clear in these studies so that criticism and quality evaluation can take place to an adequate degree.

## Keywords

public opinion polls; relation of communication; quality evaluation; discourse of the collective subject; subjects of discourse

## The thesis

It is postulated that:

1. In the elementary network of communication present in the reading of an applied social science text, which has as its base, an empirical study of the attribution of meaning, we must have three subjects: reality expressing itself; the researcher/author commenting or interpreting or discussing, this reality meta-discursively; the reader of the text processing (cognitively) these two isolated subjects, as well as relationship between the two.

2. The indistinction between these three subjects makes critical exercise more difficult, the search for the truth and the possibility of an evaluation of the quality of studies about the attribution of social meaning.

Let us go by parts:

## The elementary chain of communication

We begin with the idea that a text of an empirical study of the attribution of meaning in social science only begins to exist as a communicative fact when the research data (previously planned, obviously) is collected and processed. When this data is analyzed and when the work is published, or somehow becomes public, it can then be accessed by a reader.

This is the foundation, where the elementary communicative fact can be outlined from and put into practice; or to put it another way, the study in question is not only read by any reader, but more than this, it can be commented by a specialized reader who decides to write another article to criticize the study in question etc., which gives way to an infinite number of semiotic processes (VERON, 1980)

consisting of action of an interpretive nature (PEIRCE, 1975) about the other article.

Below or beside this dialogue of the three subjects we are in an infra-communicative regime; above or beyond it, we are in a supra-communicative regime.

An empirical study only produces (and not in few cases), for example, a master's dissertation or a doctorate thesis that no one, except for the examining bench, has read, generating therefore only a bureaucratic fact (an acquired academic degree) and not a communicative fact.

On the other extreme, an empirical study published in a magazine of ample scope or in a book which is read and commented by a vast audience, and that had been the object of critical publications written by renowned specialists in the area (not including all of the current polemics on bibliometry or the so called "impact factors") generates, evidently, a mega-communicative fact.

### Empirical research of public opinion in applied social science

In this paper, we are defending a thesis relative to our area of study, applied social sciences, not because this thesis can be applied only to this area, but because we prudently should (or must) always speak (write, comment, criticize) only about what is part of our most immediate existence.

It is even probable that a lot of what is said applies to other areas beyond that suggested here and, in a certain way, to every and all areas; but at the moment it seems that to generalize the arguments that have been laid down here could weaken them through lack of experience and practical examples.

### The subjects

It is evident that there can be no human communication without communicative social actors or, better yet, without subjects motivated by the intention of communicating or capable of saying something to somebody.

Defining clearly who the subjects in question in communicative processes are and what their social, personal, epistemological, institutional, political and circumstantial attributes are is fundamental for understanding their communicative processes.

Basic, but not always easy, as the subjects are not always physical, visible, elementary (for example, those in action in a conversation between two people, face to face in a bar) and, in some cases, it is necessary to formulate a hypothesis about the nature and the attributes of the agents or actors involved in communication.

In the case discussed here, it is certainly necessary to formulate a hypothesis about the subjects involved as they are far from being self-evident.

### Three basic, distinct subjects

In the current study – elementary communication in relation to the empirical study of the attribution of meaning in applied social sciences – it is easy to understand the presence of two subjects communicating: the author and the reader of the article or book, as aforementioned, there are not two, but three subjects in action, the third being reality expressing itself. We must now be precise when using the term subject and the possible qualifications of this term.

The first subject is the actual subject of collective thought and is not important that, for its subject status, that he or she is "physically" in the same text, which is "under the control" of the second subject, the author. It is necessary to know that if the second subject, the author, reconstructs the collective thought to an adequate degree, he or she institutes, in the same movement, the first subject, that of collective thought, who is granted autonomy as a subject.

The second subject - the author – is a social *actor* who is a subject only as he institutes him or herself and is instituted as a responsible authority (in the sense which Bourdieu (1982) gives to the term) by the text and his or her statements.

The third subject is equally a social actor, in this case the *social actor/reader* who in some circumstances (for example when he or she acts as a 'partner' in a specialized publication) also receives a social delegation for the exercise of critical-analytical-evaluative reading.

It is curious, but the difficulty that exists to admit the first subject of a human collectivity self-expressing does not seem to be of an ontological order but of a linguistic one.

Certainly, everyone admits that thoughts, opinions, social or collective representations exist; they are, according to Durkheim (1996), existing social facts or realities. Why then don't these representations appear as such in studies which seek to rescue them? Why do they appear as mathematical reification (such as "30% of young people in Brazil think that...") or as a "third person", of whom they speak ("the words of the speaker\* reveal that...") and not in the "first person" who speaks, directly?

The hypothesis is that this negativity stems from a conflict between substance and expression: we must, substantively, admit, even without difficulty, that collective thought or opinion exists, but as the (prime) material of thought is the statement – linguistic speech of opinion announced in the first person of the singular – it is difficult, due to a lack of an

adequate “verbal person”, to aggregate these statements so that the collective thought can express itself.

Some “basic solutions” have been tried, to face this issue on the form of expression, in empirical studies, of the thoughts of the collectives. The quantitative “solution”, which consists of isolating collective thought through a form of pre-made answer alternatives, permits aggregation but violates the eminently discursive nature of opinion and, moreover, removes the freedom of the respondent to express him or herself openly without being embarrassed (by the pre-made answers).

The “solution” of the pure and simple categorization of the responses of open questions re-establishes the freedom in making statements but re-imprisons the results in the form of categories. This allows for the aggregation of the answers but only in as much the elements or, better yet, the different contents present in the answers grouped in the same category are made even, and this eliminates internal variability, and consequently the richness, the eventualities and the argumentative chain of collective opinion itself, transforming a social and discursive fact into mathematical one.

The “solution” of using groups (group focus etc.) is artificial for it creates, through reduction into groups, a social micro-cosmos, a “small society” that can be handed by the researcher (the groups are formed generally by selecting members based on social, demographic, cultural variables etc.), constituting a space where the members “exchange” ideas about a topic, while allegedly reconstructing opinions “quality”, which is incorrectly associated to its or profound investigation.

A variation of this “solution” consists of starting with a large sample base, and when applying the individual interviews, using a smaller number of candidates but greater depth, seeking to investigate more “profoundly”, and to re-establish “quality” of opinion. Or inversely, carrying out a qualitative study initially with a small number of interviews, but again seeking to investigate the data in more depth with the intention of generating data for a later, quantitative study which uses the data from the qualitative study to “tailor” alternatives for a more extensive study.

And the meta-linguistic “solution”, where one “assumes” collective thought veiled by a third person discourse, that, from the very Olympus of science or theory, can speak about “them” (the social actors) and their thoughts.

It can be easily seen that none of these “solutions” allow for the emergence of collective thought as a social fact capable expressing itself.

## Opinion as a statement

So that collective thought can express itself in an empirical study it would be necessary – which is not guaranteed by any of the “solutions” mentioned above – that the nature of discursive opinion and its “collective” attribute remains preserved at the end of the study, accepting the presumption that opinion as an empiric variable necessarily has the form of a statement.

We must therefore re-establish, on a collective scale, opinion in the form of a statement. That is sought using the Discourse of the Collective Subject technique (2005) or DSC, which consists of composing collective statements written from individual statements’ material which present similar meaning.

The DSC was therefore constructed to allow for direct expression of collective thought constituting subjects that carry the collective opinion.

## The semiotic chain desired for empirical research of opinion

Returning to our thesis, it is clear that the reconstruction of these three subjects is necessary to establish a desirable semiotic chain in a scientific enterprise which seeks the truth about collective thought.

In this sense, it is worth stating that collective thought needs to express itself in an empirical study in the clearest way possible so one can guarantee that what is being described is effectively the thought of the collective and not that which the researcher, institutes as being the collective thought.

To achieve that it is necessary to be aware of the seductive maneuvers of all kinds committed by the author/researcher (numerous quotes, citations of authorities in the area, rhetorical-literary maneuvers such as strong metaphors, discourse logic that seems to be true but begins from false premises, etc.) and which are present in the public opinion research or social representation. When they are successful, they “involve” the reader making him or her believe that what is being reconstructed is the thought of the collective, while what we do have is the somewhat literary or fictional piece created by a researcher.

In this way, the collective subject that directly expresses collective thought must be clearly distinguished from the subject/researcher that reconstructed it and that speaks about this speech, so that the two discourses do not become confused, as often occurs in the human social sciences.

## An example of a study with the identification of the subject of collective thought and the subject of researcher

As an example of some aspects relevant to our study, we will present the study "Representations about dengue, its vector and actions for control by residents of the neighborhood of São Sebastião, Northern coast, São Paulo, Brazil" carried out by the researchers Ana Maria Cavalcanti Lefèvre, Andressa Francisca Ribeiro, Gisela Rita de Alvarenga Monteiro Marques, Lígia Leandro Nunes Serpa and Fernando Lefèvre, published in the Journal of Public Health (LEFEVRE et al., 2007).

They sought, in that study, to use the Discourse of the Collective Subject method to identify what the population in the neighborhood of São Sebastião, SP, knew about dengue and its vector's biology, with the intention of establishing, through this knowledge, a dialogue between technical and layman logic to permit real advances in the participation and control of dengue and its vector.

In this example, the subject of collective thought and the subject of researcher can be clearly seen; the procedures for reconstruction, realized by the researcher subject about the subject of collective thought and his or her discourse, are also explicit, as well as interpretative considerations of the subject of researcher about the described collective thought.

### *Procedures adopted by the researcher subject to choose the population to be studied*

Sampling by conglomeration in two stages was adopted for this study: first, per street block; then by building per block. The chosen area was considered to have an old infestation of *Aedes aegypti* and dengue fever transmission in the last 5 years. Currently, it contains 502 city blocks and 17,535 buildings.

The domiciles where the interviews took place were defined using a numeric lottery. For this, the amount of houses per block was considered, an information available in function of dengue fever control activity carried out in the neighborhood.

For the exact location of the building on the block, the door number was selected randomly after the interviewer was positioned on the corner, more to the north of the sample block to await for the picked number. Next, with the number in hand, the interviewer started to count the number of houses in a clockwise direction until reaching the generated number. When the interview was refused, or the resident absent, the next house in line was used.

### *Procedures adopted by the researcher subject for the reconstruction of collective thought*

Qualitatively, collective thought was reconstructed in the following way: based upon the principals of the DSC, each response to each question of the study was analyzed by selecting literally its Key Expressions, that is to say, the most significant segments of the answer that reveal the content of the emitted thought. Next, from each of these segments, relevant content was selected to be associated with a synthetic expression – the Central Idea – which announces the meaning present in the responses. Later, the Central Ideas were identified and those presenting similar meanings were brought together into a generic Category which denominates that similar meaning. Finally, the key expressions of the responses present in the same category were brought together in the Discourse of the Collective Subject and written in the first person of the singular, each one expressing a position present in the studied population about the topic in question.

Quantitatively, the distinct collective thoughts were distributed into blocks, which reveal the quantity of responses that were grouped into a response category divided by the total number of responses presented in that question.

It should be remarked here that, currently, the quantitative procedures were altered in the DSC methodology, abandoning the calculation of the total number of responses and adapting the total number of interviews.

### *Example of the subject of collective thought and his or her discourse; quantitative and qualitative results*

All the central ideas of question 1 are presented in the Table, but only the DSC of the most shared central idea; in the research which uses the DSC, however, all discourses of the collective subject of all central ideas are presented.

*It's dangerous! My, it can really mess you up! It is dangerous because it can cause diseases. That disease, dengue fever, I know it's a dangerous disease. If you don't cure it in time, it can kill a person. According to what I heard, in view of what has been on the television, in view of what we all know, I heard it can even kill you, if someone catches dengue fever, they can even die; they say it can even kill you if you don't get the person to the doctor in time, if it is not diagnosed at first. The people, they know about it, it's just that they still 'abuse' it a little.*

**Table – Have you ever heard of dengue fever? Is it a dangerous disease or not?**

Central ideas	% of responses
Central idea A - Yes, because it can kill a person	22.48%
Central idea B – Thinks that it is dangerous because he/she has seen, heard of or lived the experience	17.05%
Central idea C – Yes, because it produces serious symptoms which damage the health	14.73%
Central idea D - Yes, depends on the type	10.85%
Central idea E – It is dangerous and it is necessary to control the environment and make people aware	10.85%
Central idea F - Yes, because it is contagious, and can cause epidemics	8.53%
Central idea G – Yes, when the person has dengue fever more than once	5.43%
Central Idea H – It is more dangerous for the young and elderly	3.88%
Central idea I – Yes, the person must take care	2.33%
Central idea J – Does not know or is not sure that it is dangerous	2.33%
Central idea K – Yes, it is dangerous	1.55%
11 central ideas	100%

DSC of central idea A - Yes, because it can kill a person

### Some interpretation elements of the researcher subject about collective thought

From the quantitative and qualitative reconstruction of the discourses being analyzed in this paper, the presence of the first subject - collective thought and discourses – is revealed, the second subject can enter into action, developing, meta-discursively, some major lines of interpretation.

Therefore, it can be said that knowledge on various aspects of dengue fever, mentioned by the respondents, as it is characteristic of the social representations of scientific or technical topics, reveals itself as:

- *Incomplete and sometimes incorrect*, notably as in the relationship between clean water and disease, which collides with the classical social representation where disease has to do with being “dirty”, and healthy has to do with being “clean”. It should also be remarked that disease is seen as dangerous but there is no mention of an imminent epidemic; another equivocal idea that is still present is that trash itself creates disease; there is also great ignorance about the egg phase of the development of the vector.

- *Fragmented*, with low degrees of integration between the parts: it can be identified that dengue fever has to do with recipients, water, mosquitoes, larva, eggs, virus(es), trash, and the integration of both the state’s and the population’s efforts, but the adequate consciousness about the relationship between these elements is weak or almost null.

The *attitudes*, at their turn, reveal some degree of *decrease* in participation on the part of the state, attributed to an innate tendency of this population towards relaxation;

When covering behavior, it is seen with frequency that *adhesion is in many situations external*, formal, “well behaved” (“*in my house, we do things properly, it’s all nice and clean and organized*”) and therefore affects adhesion to state recommendations or directives.

We suggest, therefore, on the part of the state, efficient and effective actions of IEC are necessary, which means it is necessary to Inform, Educate, and Communicate.

*Inform* – to keep the population up-to-date with clear and understandable data on the evolution of the disease in the country, in the state and especially in the location,

with the intention that the use of information might induce participation.

*Educate* – seeking, above all, to clarify the relationship amidst the parts of the dengue fever phenomenon as a transmittable illness for the population.

*Communicate* - seeking the relationship between the technical actor and the citizen by establishing contact through an interactive educational dialogue, with the use of adequate techniques, instruments, “languages” so that dengue can make sense, not in theory (logic of collective health experts) but in the day-to-day life (logic of common sense) of the population, who are real and potential victims of the disease, from a critical point of view.

Continuing from the above example, we can say that the article in question, published in a specialized magazine – *Cadernos de Saúde Pública* (The Journal of Public Health) - allows the presence of the third subject: readers of the article who read it and approved it for publication, permitting it to be accessed by other examples of the third subject. Among the readers of this volume of The Journal of Public Health, some may be able to add another link to the semiotic chain in as much as they use the article as a reference for another article relating to this matter.

## Conclusion

The clear distinction between the two subjects, the subject of collective thought and the subject of researcher, is fundamental so the third subject, one who reads and consumes a study published in a book or magazine, can exercise criticism.

This means that when the third subject/researcher exercises criticism about a given study on the attribution of meaning, it must remain clear that the criticism should focus on the reconstruction of the empirical fact itself or, better yet, on the “genesis” and the description of collective thought and about the interpretation/discussion about the empirical fact at hand.

Now, in a given study, when (which happens very often) one cannot clearly distinguish the basic social fact – the collective thought – from its interpretation, it is impossible for the third subject to exercise full criticism and evaluation, because the process lacks a minimum agreement on what is being talked about a basic condition for the existence of an authentic communicative process, which objective is to seek for the truth.

When a study aims to find out what a given society thinks, what meanings are related to a given fact or group of facts or

phenomena, that study must ‘give birth’ to a reconstructed social fact – the thought of collective  $x$  about event  $y$  – which must have the same clarity as in a description of the objective attributes of that population: sex, age, level of education etc.

Why is it so difficult for this to happen?

The hypothesis developed for this study states that this happens because the variable in question – the meaning attributed to significant events by a collective – has, empirically, the form of a statement, that is: of an individual discourse spoken in the first person of the singular; a condition to overcome for the collective thought to emerge from the study.

To find viability, collective thought must either become a mathematical variable or an object – and therefore not a subject – of discourse or meta-discourse of a subject – the researcher. \*\*

Leaving mathematization to the side, that clearly violates the discursive nature of thought, here the meta-linguistic discourse of the researcher, it becomes impossible to separate one from the other; we cannot know what the community thinks, since that thought, as a social fact, became inextricably blended or mixed with the thoughts of the researcher.

That is why, to allow for desirable critical exercises and an unbiased evaluation over studies dealing with material so rich in subjectivity - such as the attribution of meaning as a social act - it is necessary that these two discourses are “untied” from each other.

Once the discourse of collective thought is disconnected from the discourse of the researcher, it is possible to know, in the evaluated study, how the collective thought was reconstructed and how the product from this reconstruction was obtained. That allows the critic about both the process and the product, and, consequently, to judge to which level an adequate reconstruction of collective thought was achieved.

Supposing that the reconstruction was well done, it is now possible to pass onto the second stage of criticism, when the evaluating subject will be able to judge the interpretation offered by the researcher about collective thought that he or she reconstructed.

The conclusion we can draw from this is that, when we seek to evaluate the quality of a study, of an article, of a book in which subjective material is involved, such as the attribution of meaning to relevant events by social actors, or better yet, when we are in the presence of a qualified reader (socially and institutionally) and necessarily critical of the published study, there are, as the bard would say, many more things between heaven and earth than our vain philosophy dreams of.

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