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Grouping Processes in a Public Meeting from an Ethnography of Communication and Cultural Discourse Analysis Perspective

Saskia Witteborn
Chinese University of Hong Kong, sawit@cuhk.edu.hk

Leah M. H. Sprain
University of Colorado Boulder, leah.sprain@colorado.edu

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Abstract

This article explicates grouping processes during a public meeting. By applying an Ethnography of Communication and Cultural Discourse Analysis approach, the analysis focuses on ways of place-making and relating as well as enactments of social and racial identities to make empirically grounded claims about grouping processes during the public meeting in question. For most audience members, living in the neighborhood and local knowledge of crime, desperate youth, poverty, and racial discrimination were defining characteristics of being a community member who shared a collective memory of distrust against the local Chamber of Commerce. Some audience members maintained that only neighborhood residents had the right to talk about the neighborhood at the meeting. Chamber of Commerce and affiliated speakers neither shared the premise of residency and right to talk about the neighborhood, nor did they adequately address the distrust. Instead, they promoted community through economic development and collaboration. The tensions during the meeting can be described as differences in notions about what constitutes community, differences which are indicative and constitutive of the divergent approaches to managing problems in the neighborhood. In addition to illustrating that groups don't exist a priori but are enacted through communicative practices, the article makes recommendations for how to improve public meetings.

Keywords

community, Cultural Discourse Analysis, Ethnography of Communication, grouping processes, neighborhood, place, public meeting

Language and social interaction (LSI) approaches are vital for group research as they can show a differentiated picture of how grouping processes occur in situ and how groups are formed and transformed discursively from moment-to-moment. By focusing on the terms that people are using to describe themselves and the meanings that they have for them, a researcher can make empirically based claims about the construction, contestation, and transformation of groups and grouping processes.

From an LSI perspective, local meaning systems, that is, terms for talk, identification, and related meanings, are constitutive of speech situations and the ways in which people construct each other. In particular, we draw from two related approaches to analyzing language and social interaction, the *Ethnography of Communication* and *Cultural Discourse Analysis*, to show how LSI approaches can assist theorizing grouping processes. We will discuss the types of grouping processes that the participants of the meeting engaged in and conclude with some practical recommendations for conducting public meetings.

Ethnography of Communication and Cultural Discourse Analysis

The Ethnography of Communication (or Ethnography of Speaking) is a descriptive approach developed in social anthropology by Dell Hymes (1962) and later made widely known in communication studies by such scholars as Philipsen (1992, 2002), Philipsen and Coutu (2005), Fitch (1998), Carbaugh (1988, 1996, 2005), Katriel (1997), and Covarrubias (2002), amongst others. It focuses on the interconnections between language and social life and how people orient to each other through communicative actions. Local knowledge systems and logics, including values, norms, and beliefs related to communicating, are the focus of an Ethnography of Communication approach (Witteborn, 2005, 2007). Key concepts in the Ethnography of Communication include *speech community*, *means of speaking*, *meanings*, and *situated communicative conduct* (Philipsen & Coutu, 2005).

Speech communities can be described through distinctive ways of verbal and nonverbal interaction and come into being and maintain themselves through those interactions. Means of speaking can include any communicative resources that members of a speech community employ in their social interactions. These include dialects, styles of speaking, genres, metacommunicative terms, and gesture systems, to name just a few (Hymes 1962, 1972; Philipsen, 2002). By

focusing on how people orient to particular means of speaking and how they interpret them, a researcher can observe the meanings related to the situated uses of particular means of speech and interaction (Philipsen & Coudu, 2005). The researcher can also illustrate how interactants position themselves in social places.

Place plays an important role in the Ethnography of Communication and in the analysis of this paper. Philipsen conceptualized *place* as “various ideas of location, such as a position in a social hierarchy, a physical setting, or the niche properly occupied by a thing, person, or idea” (1992, p. 22). He summarized the concept of place as referring to “notions of social, physical, perceptual, and heuristic location” (p. 22). By constructing and engaging in speech events, communicators draw from collectively shared repertoires of communicative conduct and position themselves as social subjects *in relation* to others (Stewart, Zediker, & Witteborn, 2005) and the available repertoire. Symbols, communicative genres, rhetorical strategies, and the orientation of participants to these are thought of as being indexical markings of places and of individual and communal meaning-making. People speak from places in the geographical, sociocultural, linguistic, and political sense. By communicating from those places, people engage in what Philipsen has called “membering” (1992, p. 14).

Based on an Ethnography of Communication approach as well as assumptions about cultural communication (Philipsen, 1987), Carbaugh (2007) formulated premises that capture social interaction processes through which socio-cultural life, grouping, and place-making are created and enacted. Communication is taken to be the lens through which somebody interested in the social life of people can learn about those people by understanding the terms and concepts related to communication that the people use to construct meaning in a conjoint way. Carbaugh provides a framework for analyzing what people accomplish in social interaction, what elements of communicative practices to attend to (e.g., terms for talk and identification), and when and how those practices are used, challenged, or transformed.

Meaning dimensions that might become relevant in daily social interactions include *personhood and identity*, *ways of relating*, and living in a particular *place*. Terms for personal identity description (e.g., an “emotional” or “rational” person) or social identification (e.g., leader, political activist, Chinese American) can be ways of gaining insight into how people engage in grouping processes. Ways of relating in a community, for example through terms of address (“you as African Americans”) or styles of speaking (e.g., formal and informal), can also

provide insights into the socio-cultural life of people. How people feel about social interactions, how they enact them, and clues about which communicative practices are appropriate or inappropriate for expressing particular emotions are other ways of analyzing how people engage in membering processes. Furthermore, a focus on how people relate to the places they inhabit physically and socially (e.g., through place names, reference to “neighborhood” or “community,” or being a man or a woman¹) is another way of understanding what it means being a person in a particular time and location. Based on these meaning dimensions and considering what interlocutors accomplish in particular interactions through particular communicative practices, a researcher can construct cultural propositions and beliefs related to communication that render social life in particular places and times meaningful.

In the following analysis, we will focus on how interlocutors in the North Omaha Development Project meeting engaged in social and physical place-making as the participants oriented to the terms “community” and “neighborhood”² repeatedly. Place-making was one entry point into examining how and why participants constructed different social and racial identities, and oriented to particular means of personhood, relating, and acting in the community and neighborhood in question. One particular phenomenon that interlocutors found meaningful, although contested, was different conceptions about rules for talk, that is, who can speak on behalf of whom and engage in decision-making concerning the neighborhood. The paper will conclude by highlighting how particular ways of communicating and relating constructed groups during the meeting and what could be done to improve public meetings, in general, and the NODP meeting, in particular.

Meanings of Place

In the North Omaha Development Project (NODP) meeting, place was rendered meaningful by the interlocutors through using two interrelated terms: *neighborhood* and *community*. The people on stage (who included the Omaha Chamber of Commerce President, local and non-local consultants, a member of the steering committee, and an Omaha City Council member) used the terms *community* and *neighborhood* in some places interchangeably and in others with meaningful distinctions. In the following quotes, for example, the term “community” could be

¹ See Gerry Philipsen, 1992.

² Words in quotation marks indicate that they are direct quotations of participant speech during the meeting. Longer transcriptions include time marks so that readers can reference the meeting video.

replaced by “neighborhood” and vice versa: “It’s a pleasure to be here, (.) It’s a rare opportunity for me to be back in the heart of North Omaha. I’ve worked (.hhh) in the community with most of you fo:r three decades” (1:38) or “The remnants of those-are those that put the issues that are quite visible throughout the community are at (.) the: various intersections of those lines” (3:44).

In other instances, *neighborhood* was related more to a *geographical* location (39:39 “North Omaha,” 50:23 “north side of the neighborhood”) and to a *territory* (30:04 “area,” 39:40 “target area,” “boundaries”). Geographical location and territory were further indicated through grammatical markers like “inside” or “within” the neighborhood, or terms referring to the mapped evidence of the territory in which people with shared social, racial, and economic concerns live together such as “physical features and layouts” (1:30). Intersections, lines, and street names made up those layouts and physical features of what Mr. Peters, a local consultant who acted as the liaison between the local community and the NODP committee,³ called “neighborhood” in 3:44:

The remnants of those are-those that put the issues that are quite visible throughout the community are at the: the various intersections of those lines, (.) so 24th and Lake↑ 16th and Logan, 24th and Ames↓ 30th and Ames↓ eh: we have .hhh a 30th and Lake, we are here, (points to slides) 33rd and Parker and 40th and Hamilton are probably the most notable in the neighborhood itself.

The physical aspects of the neighborhood are clearly demarcated and can also be mapped visually through a picture on a PowerPoint slide (2:17):

This is an aerial shot of the neighborhood, (.) so it’s not really the neighborhood on the ground (...) this is information that you and I have learned together over the past thirty years (...) please fill out your cards, (.) bring it forward and uh (.) if it presents an opportunity or (.) a gap in services or a threat to this community (.) let’s talk about it tonight.

Visual mapping is about outlining the grid in which social life takes place. Social life of the neighborhood on the ground, according to the speaker, differs from the image presented in an aerial photograph. Acknowledging this difference, meeting attendees are encouraged to contribute to the NODP project and communicate with the NODP committee to foster the

³ If available, we reference the NODP committee and audience members by name to help readers distinguish particular speakers and their roles in the meeting. If there are no names available, we refer to people by their role, e.g. Audience 1.

prosperity of the neighborhood/community (“please fill out your cards, (.) bring it forward and uh (.) if it presents an opportunity or (.) a gap in services or a threat to this community (.) let’s talk about it tonight.”).

Whereas “community” could be replaced by “neighborhood” as in “threat to this community,” “neighborhood” (as in “This is an aerial shot of the neighborhood”) could not be replaced easily by “community.” The semantic difference is that the term “neighborhood” is related to a defined physical entity in the context of the quote, a physical place that also defines the people who live there. “Community” seems to refer more to a social location, a way of being, acting, and relating that can be influenced by physical place and the opportunities presented therein. Moreover, “neighborhood” is presented as a subset of “community” in 12:43:

We were asking for your input tonight, and at the community meetings that will not only be neighborhood-based but the forthcoming eh community-wide meetings so that we can frame what those opportunities and solutions could be.

“Neighborhood-based” is a term indicating physical location again, with “community” indicating a social one. “Community-wide” meetings refer to the coming-together of groups of people, each of which shares ways of being, acting, and relating while the substitution of the term *community* with *neighborhood* as in “neighborhood-wide” meetings would not be meaningful.

The definition of neighborhood by the speaker corresponds to the definition of the concept in the sociological literature: “we can think of neighborhoods as ecological units nested within successively larger communities” (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002, p. 445). Neighborhood is defined as “a subsection of a larger community – a collection of both people and institutions occupying a spatially defined area influenced by ecological, cultural, and sometimes political forces” (Park, 1916, pp. 147-154, in Sampson et. al, 2002, p. 445). People in the neighborhood usually engage in social activities that affirm ways of being, relating, and acting within the boundaries of the area, like working and consuming (12:29): “People who live in this neighborhood (.) who work in this neighborhood, shop in this neighborhood (.) and other neighborhoods.” Overall, the speakers on stage do not address specific characteristics of the social, economic, or cultural make-up of the neighborhood/community in question but discuss activities that generate social life within a designated physical area. Although the speakers on stage talk extensively about the physical features of the neighborhood like street grids and the

physical boundaries like train tracks, the people who live within the neighborhood are not further defined. When the term “community” is used, it tends to refer to a group of people engaging in general social activities like shopping, living, and working.

Moreover, some NODP members use “community” to refer to a group of people that is deficient, that needs to be enhanced and developed. For example, in the first ten minutes of the meeting, Gary, who is an outside consultant, speaks on stage in an appreciative tone about the neighborhood and communicates the idea that the North Omaha community has a lot of potential. But this potential needs development, which is expressed in Gary’s phrasing of the purpose of the NODP project: “How best to either *enhance*, *fill the gap* or *reinforce* uh this rich fabric of the North Omaha community” (9:42, italics indicate our emphasis).

The audience members themselves have a more specific idea about what it means to be a member of their community. They share a sense of the physical definition of the neighborhood with the speakers on stage. In fact, several audience members demand that only those living “in the target area” have a right to speak about the needs of the residents and make decisions. As most of the people on stage and in the audience do not live directly in the designated area, they are implicitly regarded by some audience members as not being qualified to talk and make decisions, as a woman in 39:39 points out:

Audience 1: (...) all of these committees that have been formed? (.) how many of those committees, those committee members (.) live in North Omaha in the defined areas? (...) if you are on a committee and live in North Omaha in the-in the target area, hands,

Audience 2: Ma-am I I live outside of the area=

Audience 1: =ok you’re not in this then=

Audience 2: =wait wait I live

north of the Aurora (.) and a little bit west of it but I am just as much inside because there is not a grocery store within five miles of my house=

Audience 1: =ok but I

am talking about the target area (drawing circles in the air to suggest a boundary)=

policies by businesses in the area. Representatives and affiliates of the Chamber of Commerce on stage did not take up these concerns. Instead, representatives instrumentalized race. Race only mattered if it was a barrier to economic development (28:52):

Audience 3: Is any part of the studies gonna look at racism and its impact on this area?

President of Chamber of Commerce: Ummm (...) to the extent that it has an economic impact I'd say cer|tainly, (.) to the extent that it is a deterrent to economic growth, I'd say cer|tainly, (.) a-as a sub-committee that says, we're gonna look at racism, no, (1) but if it impacts the ability for us to develop this area as an economic force, then it has to be sometn to be dealt↓ with.

This question-answer sequence indicates the divergent interests between African American audience members and the NODP representatives. Whereas being African American and being discriminated against was a fundamental experience for several audience members who had identified as living “in the target area” and therefore being part of the neighborhood and community, the speakers on stage attempted to address community problems only in relation to economic development. It was no secret that economic interests defined the NODP project, especially as it was sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce. One audience member asked about the studies that the advisors to and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce planned to commission (22:24):

Audience 4: So these studies are basically not just for us here but to justify (.) to business investors why they should invest=

Mr. Brown: =that's exactly what we're doing.

The project sought to speak to business investors and cultivate economic growth. This goal is reflected in much of the language used by the speakers on stage to describe their goals and visions for the community. NODP committee members speaking from the stage talked about how “we need to provide increased economic opportunities within the community” (8:25), to “create an opportunity environment in the North Omaha community” (2:13), to “create a self-sustaining (.) retail and development market in the community” (9:59), to “provide features and amenities to attract people (.) to live (.) invest (.) and work in the community” (9:03). In some

instances like the quote “we need to provide increased economic opportunities within the community, “we” was left ambiguous whether it referred to all of the NODP members on stage, the Chamber of Commerce, City Council, local business community, all of the people gathered in the room, or the community at large. Overall, the speakers on stage represented their ideas as a business enterprise.

The identities of being African American and being concerned about economic development were not mutually exclusive. For one member of the steering committee - businessman and self-defined African American, Mr. Davis - race was one shared identity upon which to build a prosperous community (33:37):

(...) But I think the most important concern quite frankly is that as many of you know that ah. we as a we as folks have been meeting on a constant basis over the last seven or eight months, (...) and with that we need to be stepping up ourselves, in terms of commitment to ourselves, (...) we’re basically talking about financing (...) raising our own dollars, African American dollars (...).

By constructing the idea of an inclusive group through the term *folks* and the pronoun *we*, the speaker blurs the Chamber of Commerce, advisory team, City Council, and audience group lines, and constitutes himself as part of the (African American) audience. The speaker relates to the audience by speaking the discourse of trust and expressing a shared African American identity. At the same time, the speaker establishes his ethos for speaking with and for the audience by relating to the people through his place identity: “=let me just say this to you straight up, (.) I don’t live in the area but I am third generation (...) my-my daughter married someone in the area, (1) I have family in the area (...)” (41:14).

By identifying himself as somebody who has family ties to the community in question, he respects the concerns of some audience members that only people who are physically and socially situated in the neighborhood can speak on behalf of its people. At the same time, Mr. Davis points to the limitations of this approach (41:48):

so wha-what I want you to understand is that at some point in time we have to start joining together and say even if I don’t live in the area I am-I am committed to the people who live in the area and I will demonstrate that.

Locality and local understanding of the socioeconomic situation of people in the neighborhood is important, according to the speaker. In order to better the life of the people in

the neighborhood, however, the definition of who can speak and act on behalf of the neighborhood needs to change. The speaker suggests that people who can speak and act on behalf of the neighborhood should include those people who are concerned *and* committed to socioeconomic change—even if they live elsewhere. The speaker is himself an example of such a bridge. He displays a strong sense of locality and commitment to the neighborhood and justifies this commitment with his kinship ties to the neighborhood and his shared sociocultural and racial identity. Moreover, the speaker rejects the claim by Audience member 1 who argued for local residency in order to speak for the community and supports the argument by Audience member 2 who wanted to become involved because she cared. Her argument had not been accepted by Audience member 1 who silenced her by cutting her speech turn off. Mr. Davis takes up the argument of commitment and explicitly seconds it: Anybody who is committed can and should be a change agent for the community. Commitment—not only geographical residency—should be a factor in deciding who can speak for the community.⁴

This discussion replicates the tension between who is allowed to speak for and about the community and neighborhood. For audience members living in the neighborhood, many of them African American, being a person means being from the place in question. Residency becomes a major part of what it means being a person from North Omaha and provides people with the ability and credibility to speak on behalf of the neighborhood. People who do not reside in the area do not have the agency to talk and can neither gain it through status (e.g., being part of the NODP team) nor through well-meaning attitudes. Only those who experience the social and racial realities in the area like poverty, crime, and discrimination on a daily basis can and should have the ability to speak for the needs of the people who live in the area.

This theme is replicated by answers from the audience members. Although some of them bond with Mr. Davis on stage on the basis of an African American identity, they are suspicious of outsiders who claim decision power over the fate of the neighborhood and community, based on their social and economic status: “We don’t have a problem with you, (1) it’s the sy:stem and I think that we are really questioning because (.) the system (.) is always going to take care of the system” (50:58). On the one hand, the speaker affirms a shared African American identity with

⁴ In the meeting transcript, we have no proof that anyone accepted Mr. Davis’ argument that commitment should be enough to advocate for the neighborhood. No one interrupted him while he made the argument nor did anyone argue against him (both of which might indicate that his suggestion was not accepted). The lack of counterarguments may be due to the speaker’s position of being a local business authority. It is impossible to know conclusively from the meeting footage available.

the NODP steering committee member Mr. Davis (“we”). On the other hand, he questions the speaker’s intent and the idea of commitment as systemic problems like profit orientation and racism override personalized efforts to foster solidarity between African Americans.

Ways of Relating

In addition to the different opinions about which people had the right to speak for the community, there were also differences in how people in the meeting created and invoked ways of relating to each other and the community. Here we discuss three ways of relating constituted through the meeting interactions: distrust, working together, and investment.

Distrust

Halfway through the meeting, an African American man named Charles stood up in the back of the room and asked (30:38):

Charles: How many people in this room actually live in the target area? We’re talking about Cummings (.) to Sorenson (.) 52nd street to the river (.) how many people in this room actually live in the target area? (.) Having lived in Omaha all of my life (.) I’m trying to figure out (.) why would I trust the Chamber of Commerce to do this (.) why would I ever trust the Chamber of Commerce (.) to do this (.) anybody who have their hands give me one (soft chuckles from audience members)

Mr. Brown: Why not?

Audience: [Hah]

Charles: [Why not?] because you guys have a history, (.) you have a history of destroying this here community, (.) the Chamber of Commerce has a history in the years I’ve lived in Omaha sixty three of them of destroying this community, (.) why would I now think, (.) why would I now think that something happen in North Omaha.

Charles begins his turn by asking people who live in the target area to raise their hands. He then asks those people with their hands raised to tell him why he should trust the Chamber of Commerce, the institution who sponsored the NODP project. This request creates a visual representation of people who live in the neighborhood as a group, and it then aligns them with a

particular history with the Chamber. Charles is open to hearing reasons to reconsider his stance from other people who live in the area, but when a representative on stage asks him to explain the reason for his distrust, Charles explains that this distrust stems from a history of “destroying this community.” His exasperated tone embodies the distrust for the posturing of the Chamber given their history in the neighborhood.

The fact that audience members address the Chamber of Commerce (instead of the Omaha City Council or outside consultants) explicitly, suggests that there is the expectation that the Chamber of Commerce as an institution should have a positive economic relationship with the community. The problem is that this responsibility has not been upheld, as an African American woman points out (32:33):

Survey the businesses that are already in North Omaha and that are in the city and find out how many of them for years have never even hired a black person don't have any black people employed in any respectable positions (.) and I think that will (.) answer your question about why we distrust an institution that has enabled this situation to exist all of our lives.

The Chamber of Commerce has cultivated distrust in the local community by tolerating discriminatory hiring practices, which is confirmed by audience members through a soft “amen” after the speaking turn of the woman in 32:33. These hiring practices in combination with the distrust have undermined the relationship with the Chamber of Commerce, according to the woman, and might be detrimental to the economic development of the area.

This relationship of distrust is not merely that the residents of the target area have a negative history with the Chamber of Commerce. Audience members also comment that they do not feel NODP representatives trust their local knowledge. Two audience members address the dismissal of local knowledge and point again to distrust as characterizing the ways of relating between the political and economic leadership in the city and the community (40:36):

(...) and why to the gentleman's point about why we don't trust? (.) this goes on every year every year we have a meeting we have all these people and I ask another question, were there not any brains in Omaha that could have work this out that we had to go to Chicago New York or wherever and pay them that astronomical amount of money to study what we already know to be true?

Local knowledge and experience about issues pertaining to economic development do not seem to count from the perspective of this woman. The community that is identified as “we” knows through experience what the issues are in the neighborhood that prevent economic development and prosperity such as crime, poverty, neglect of youth, and racism. The outsourcing of the survey to the centers of financial and political power like Chicago and New York and the abstraction of community experiences and knowledge into statistics are evidence for the audience members that the NODP committee trusts corporations, outside experts, and science more than the experience of the community members.

Working Together

The steering committee speaker and businessman on stage, Mr. Davis, engaged with the distrust of the audience by emphasizing cooperation. In an extended speech (almost ten minutes with minimal interaction with audience members), he moved between giving advice on what audience members should do by addressing them as “you” and speaking as a collective “we” that shared interests and should move forward together. During both of these modes, he stressed the importance of collaborative relationships. He tells the audience (36:52): “You have to (.) make sure you work with everyone you have to do if what we want to do is change those millions of dollars into tens of millions of dollars (.) you have to do that in a collaborative- collaborative way.”

The pronoun “you” addresses audience members, telling them to collaborate to achieve economic goals that “we” all share. Exactly who is included in “we” is left open, likely including the Chamber of Commerce, City Council, residents, and others committed to the community and neighborhood. This ambiguity fits what rhetoricians call strategic ambiguity (Ceccarelli, 1998), intentionally being ambiguous in a way that arguments could be interpreted multiple ways. In this case, Mr. Davis uses the force of a collective “we” to group people together without focusing on differentiating who is and is not part of this group in a way that could alienate potential allies.

In order to get all of the stakeholders to imagine themselves working together, Mr. Davis acknowledges specific concerns raised by audience members. In the previous section on personhood, we showed how he identifies himself as an African American with familial ties to the neighborhood. He also attempts to acknowledge a history of distrust (34:18):

We need to have a philosophy that says (.) we understand what happened in the past but (.) we: also need to focus on the future, (.) and we know as a people (.) that we have the intellectual and financial capital to move forward and we have that (.) and so:: when we are talking about the Chamber we wanna have the Chamber as a partner we wanna have the community as a whole as a partner.

The history of distrust is acknowledged, but the focus is on building partnerships for the future. More broadly, Mr. Davis offers all of the participants an opportunity to relate by working together. This can be achieved “if we (.) all of us together start talking about what we’re going to do individually as a personal situation and as a business situation we’ll be able to build that quilt (.) and come out very well” (36:14). The metaphor of a quilt draws on the tradition of piecing together different material to form a unified object in which distinct fabrics maintain their character but also contribute to a larger whole, the picture of the quilt. This metaphor fits a later statement where Mr. Davis stresses that there may be many African Americans coming together to speak as a unified voice willing to cooperate with the political and economic leadership of Omaha and to contribute to change for the African American community in the area (37:22):

what we have to do we just have to wait see if we can develop those relationships (.) ah with the city government the mayor ah (.) with the Chamber with ah (.) with business-business etc. (.) but I think we have the wherewithal within our- within our community to make- to make a real difference, I am personally committed to that, (.) and I am positive that I will get some of the highest net worth African American (.) and non-African American to be I would say the most socially activist (.) ah state senator and City Council member to join together with all of us together to make things happen, (.) I think we have a unified voice in terms of what we need to do (...).

Investment

Mr. Davis offers a way of relating where people from different racial, economic, and political groups work together by building cooperative and constructive relationships. This differs in important ways from the model of relating promoted by City Council member Mr. Frank Brown, which is captured in the catch phrase: “Chamber-driven, North Omaha-steered.” This phrase is invoked during the meeting and appears on PowerPoint slides. Frank Brown, Omaha City Council member from the North Omaha district, explains:

it's Chamber (.) driven but it's North Omaha steered, (.) and that is very important to remember (.) Chamber-driven North Omaha-steered, it's a process as David Brown said (.) we need your input (.) there's no footprint here↑ (1) this is just information, (1) you build on this↑ (.) it's gonna be built upon by talking to all of you and we can change these bad perceptions (.) if we work together (17:43).

This too is a relationship of working together. But unlike Mr. Davis who focused on how audience members can and should choose to develop partnerships, the metaphor of “Chamber-driven, North Omaha-steered” puts the Chamber in charge of determining both economic development and interaction within meetings. The image of the Chamber driving the process overshadows the request from the audience to be the engine.

The repetition of the slogan “Chamber-driven, North Omaha-steered” can be interpreted as the motto of the City Council's and possibly the Chamber of Commerce's construction of the idea of community. While the community can decide in which direction to go, it is the institution that drives the process. This description is a metaphor that affirms and mimics the use of speech genres during the meeting (monologic PowerPoint-presentations and anonymous question cards) to steer and control the communicative interaction. Without an engine, the steering wheel becomes superfluous, which implies a power position on the side of the Chamber of Commerce.

As the NODP committee engineers investment opportunities through studies, reports, and finding appropriate business partners, the purpose of the speech event (to develop a thriving market in North Omaha) drives the definition of who (North Omaha Development Project members, sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce) can speak (presentation of ideas) about what (business development). This explains why the NODP committee was able to structure the meeting in ways that benefited the speakers on stage but were criticized by audience members as not being transparent and neglecting the needs of the community. Institutionalized identities and power positions dominated racial alliances with local residents, particularly the Black community, only appearing as the drivers but not the vital engine of the system. In this relationship, investors are not community members nor are investors primarily concerned with the local history of inequality and neighborhood businesses. The main task of investors is to create profitable businesses and address community concerns only insofar as they interfere with business success (e.g., racial discrimination).

Grouping Processes

In this analysis, we focused on meanings of place, personhood, and relating that contribute to how grouping is accomplished in a public meeting. The analysis has illustrated how a Cultural Discourse Analysis approach, which draws from the Ethnography of Communication, can provide detailed and empirically grounded insights into the communicative repertoire that enables people to engage in and make sense of particular ways of being, acting, and relating. Those ways are indicative of and reconfirm localized ways of belonging, identity enactment, and place-making, community needs, interest-driven actions, and approaches to problem-solving. By analyzing how interlocutors orient to each other and how they interpret their situated communicative conduct, a researcher can create important linkages between communicative practices and grouping processes. The analysis highlighted that groups do not exist a priori but are constituted, shift, and reconstitute in situ. The tensions between the audience and the North Omaha Development Project committee members can partially be described as differences in ideas about communicative interactions, specifically who can speak on behalf of whom and for which purposes.

Territory was one important marker for belonging for audience members. People grouped around an identity related to living in a bounded physical place. Place identity was a precursor to ways of acting, that is, being allowed to speak for the community. Social identity or being a member of the community in question was strongly related to race and structural discrimination. Audience members rallied around the topic of race and deliberate discriminatory hiring practices and thereby engaged in grouping based on a shared African American identity and collective memory of social injustice in the neighborhood. Moreover, there was a moment of membering in which African Americans in the audience and one African American speaker on stage enacted a shared African American identity that shifted group boundaries from the local community members in the audience to include an NODP steering committee member on stage. This shift in grouping was brief as audience members started to question efforts of committed individuals and foregrounded the defining power of the sociocultural, racialized, and economic status quo which would regulate ways of relating and acting in the neighborhood in question. As the African American steering committee speaker presented himself visually (suit) and physically (on stage) as part of this status quo, economic interests seemed to override shared racial identities for the

audience, which affirmed the distrust of the audience members in the political and economic leadership of North Omaha.

Participants grouped around different models of relating in a community that pointed to different ideas about what it means being a resident of the neighborhood. The NODP members promoted a pragmatic consumer-producer model that was grounded in the ideas of neighborhood as a place of investment and community as social relationships, driven by economic concerns. In order to implement this model, the speakers prescribed cooperation and investment as the main ways of relating between the residents of the area, the Chamber of Commerce, and City Council.

Audience members challenged that view as they wanted their local knowledge and problems to be recognized. Instead of prioritizing economic development, the audience grouped around experiences of social problems like crime, neglect of youth, and discrimination, which it wanted the NODP members to take seriously. For the audience members and residents of the area, discrimination against African Americans was one fundamental way of experiencing everyday social reality in the neighborhood, which was an experience that could not be addressed or solved by economic development alone. By dismissing the issue of fundamental importance to community members and pushing the power of the market, the speakers on stage also largely dismissed what it means to be African American in the neighborhood. Previous relationships of distrust were enacted and affirmed. Overall, grouping occurred between audience and NODP members around differing ideas about what it means being a person in the neighborhood and how to relate to others.

Despite goals of working together, expectations and perceptions from participants can result in competitive encounters, where participants hold different goals and expectations for communication (Kelshaw & Gastil, 2007). Our approach highlights how these differences—and attempts to negotiate and change them—are constituted throughout the meeting through grouping processes. This approach reveals nuanced attempts to forge new alliances through the rhetoric of “working together” and identification through a shared African American identity. It also highlights barriers to these attempts, including perceptions of distrust and lack of respect for local knowledge.

Recommendations

With insights from LSI, this analysis can form the basis for suggestions to NODP members. As the history of the interactions between Chamber, City Council, and audience are not known, this article restricts itself to suggestions for NODP members. One basic suggestion would be selecting a public meeting space that is not restrained by seating arrangements that impose a monologic way of communicating, as audience members could not face each other easily. Grouping NODP representatives and audience members around tables in small groups would be one way of creating an atmosphere that signals willingness to dialogue, which is necessary given the lack of trust between the Chamber of Commerce and the audience.

A second suggestion would be being reflective about the importance of local knowledge to the community and the ways in which this local knowledge becomes relevant on a daily basis for the community members. Structural discrimination, related crime, poverty, and negative imaging of the neighborhood are particular concerns that need to be addressed and taken seriously. As the community members have their own local knowledge and meanings, one way of engaging the people would be to let them do the business survey and not outsource it. By outsourcing the survey, the NODP committee dismisses local knowledge as irrelevant, folksy, and inadequate. Going beyond the instrumentalization of the idea of “community” as a business model might be necessary to get the trust of the people back.

More broadly, public officials should be aware of how the expectations and perceptions of audience members constitute groupings during the meeting. Whereas a rhetoric of “working together” may be an effective tool to overcome some negative perceptions, this analysis demonstrates that this type of talk alone is not enough to overcome doubt, particularly when public officials are simultaneously sending messages that reaffirm root causes of distrust. A proactive approach and follow-up related to fighting poverty, structural discrimination, and encouraging youth participation can signal the residents that the economic and political leadership of Omaha in general and North Omaha in particular is aware of the ways of being, acting, and relating in the neighborhood and willing to engage with those beyond business interactions. Although these suggestions might not be enough to overcome the distrust, they might help the Chamber of Commerce, City Council, and NODP committee members to engage in productive interactions with the neighborhood residents and create trust for future interactions.

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Transcription Conventions⁵

-	Hyphen: Preceding sound is cut off/self-interrupted
,	Comma: Falling intonation at the end of an utterance
?	Quotation mark: Rising intonation at the end of an utterance
(1)	Timed pause: Elapsed time by seconds
(.)	Parentheses with a period: A micro-pause of less than a tenth of a second
=	Equal sign: Latching onto a previous speaking turn
:	Colon(s): Preceding sound is extended or stretched
<u>underline</u>	Underlining: Stress via pitch and amplitude
.hhh	Periods preceding h's: Inbreaths
↑	Upward arrow: Rise in pitch in preceding sound
↓	Downward arrow: Fall in pitch in preceding sound
(...)	Parentheses with three dots: Text that is left out as it is not relevant for the analysis.
(point)	Parentheses with words: Description of relevant nonverbal gestures
hah	Laugh token
[]	Brackets: Overlapping speech

⁵ The transcription conventions are attributed to Gail Jefferson.