

[Meeting in brackets]

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I wanted to understand who the various participants were and what role they played in the organisation, but everyone had multiple role and many interpretations of their significance. I wanted to examine the organisational structure and someone gave me an organisational chart and laughed....I wanted to examine the organisation and its relationships to the environment, but the organisation and the environment kept changing. I was confused and frustrated. I went to a lot of meetings (Schwartzman, 1989, p. 109).

I started considering the need for studying “the meetings” for themselves following my PhD research, which was not devoted to meetings but to a reform of the Belgian mental healthcare system². Through that research, I asked questions relating to change –change in the social relationships and division of work between policymakers and mental health professionals, organisational change, change in psychiatric institutions, in professional jurisdictions, and so on. I quickly noticed that jurisdictional conflicts were inter-professional conflicts and that change was an interinstitutional process involving both the professional and political worlds, and entailing ambiguous goals, contested concepts, conflicting interpretations, changing participants and environments. Such a complex process implied many meetings. Consequently, I started observing meetings –meetings of different kinds, happening in different places and involving multiple individuals³.

Using “the meeting” as a tool for researching on change in Belgian mental health policies meant observing the meetings, interviewing the meeting participants, and analysing the meeting documents⁴, but also reporting on the meeting process. As meetings succeeded one another, thus forming a meeting process, I came to realise that most meetings failed in producing the expected outcomes; that most of the meeting participants felt disappointed and deceived by the meeting process; and that the meeting documents were very poor representations of the meetings talks. Meetings nevertheless kept following one another and people continued attending meetings. Why?

On the other hand, as meetings succeeded one another, changes occurred in the meeting places, the meeting settings, the meeting talks and the role played by the participants in producing the meetings. These changes in the meeting settings and interactions reflected changes in the meeting environment. They represented new alliances, relationships and work practices that were developing in parallel to the meeting process. The meetings thus produced change, but in unexpected ways.

¹ CRIS (Centre for Sociological Research and Interventions): <http://labos.ulg.ac.be/cris/>

² Thunus, S. (2015) *The System for Addressing Personal Problems-From medicalisation to Socialisation: Shifts in Belgian Psychiatric and Mental Health Institutions*, <http://hdl.handle.net/2268/180914>.

³ The observed meetings include information meetings and committees’ meetings between policymakers and mental health professionals, mental health professionals working in various types of mental health services and institutions, and mental health professionals and services users’ representatives.

⁴ 62 meetings were observed between 2010 and 2014 and 65 semi-structured interviews were carried out with the meetings’ participants. The analysed documents include policy and organisational document, and the minutes of the observed meetings.

Following these observations, I came to consider that the meetings deserved to be analysed for themselves, as a *topic for research*, and not as a *tool for researching on mental health policies*⁵. Moreover, assuming that what the meetings did was different from what they were supposed to do, I proposed to really study the meetings for themselves, that is to say without considering the objectives which are formally and externally assigned to the meetings, or the “meeting mandates”⁶.

Bracketing meetings

The concept of bracketing provides an adequate methodological tool for exploring the role of meetings. By implying, in its original sense, to suspend the research object from external and cultural preconceptions⁷, the concept of bracketing suggests that viewing what the meetings actually do to organisational and policy work implies to put the meeting mandates into brackets. In turn, bracketing the meeting mandates enables to see that meetings tend to be the same thing over time and space, and to play the same role, independently from their explicit objectives.

On the one hand, the most common feature of the meetings is to be intermediate social events taking place somewhere in between – between two or more organisations, between two or more countries, and between other events and activities preceding and following the meeting. In other words, meetings are brackets in space, brackets in time. On the other hand, whenever and wherever they take place, meetings play a role in documenting, representing, and exacerbating their environment. This role played by the meetings in representing their social context can be compared to the role played by brackets, or parenthesis, in a text.

Therefore, such as applied to “the meeting” conceived as a research object, the concept of bracketing might be used not only as a methodological concept but also as a descriptive and analytical concept⁸. Insofar as it is used as a *methodological concept*, bracketing the meeting simply means *bracketing [the meeting’s mandate], to focus on what does happen in the meeting*, considered as a social event. This approach to meetings deliberately questions *their instrumental function*⁹ (using meetings for making decision, solving problems...), to focus on which other roles the meetings possibly play.

[Meeting in brackets]

Taken as a *descriptive concept*, bracketing the meeting means *[meeting in brackets]* or, to put it differently, *suspending the meeting’s participants from their usual work environment*.

The meeting gathers people with different roles, professions, and working in different kinds of services and institutions in different parts of a country or in different countries. *Meetings are brackets in the social world* and, in the meeting, different worlds come together (Schwartzman, 1989, p. 110). Meetings are also disruptive. To attend the meeting, those people must stop doing their job –running psychiatric institutions, devising mental health policies, caring for psychotics,

⁵ The idea of studying the meetings for themselves and not as tools for researching on other topics is borrowed from Schwartzman (1989).

⁶ See Hagene 2016.

⁷ On the concept of bracketing, see for instance, Gearing 2004.

⁸ This approach to meetings has been developed by relying on the analysis of inter-institutional, professional and organisational meetings taking place in response to Belgian mental health reforms (see footnotes 1 to 3). Further researches are required to provide an operational definition of “the meeting”, to define a classification of meetings and to test the relevance of the concept of bracketing for studying different types of meetings.

⁹ See Hagene 2016.

coordinating local care networks. *Meetings are thus brackets in the social time* as well; they momentarily break in *other* ongoing social processes¹⁰.

Meetings then constitute brackets. The meeting participants left their respective working contexts to enter a new one, with its specific problems, roles and procedures that they discover by going through the meeting; by having a coffee together, sharing their feelings, and participating in the meeting talks. *The form of meetings, as brackets in space and brackets in time, is crucial in framing meeting's talks, actions and interactions.* Indeed, by bracketing people from their usual work environment, the meeting creates a specific context where the informal parts of organisations are enacted, where social relationships are assessed, where personal projects are displayed, and where neglected social and political issues are raised¹¹.

Using bracketing as a descriptive concept thus enables to identify the *form of meetings*, as bracket in space, brackets in time. In turn, it enables to uncover the *expressive function*¹² that meetings fulfil by allowing the participants for reflecting on their environment.

The Meeting as Society's Writ Small¹³

Taken as an *analytical concept*, bracketing the meeting entails considering the meeting as *societies' writ small*, or the *reflection and representation of what is going on in the meeting's environment*. In this sense, "reading the meeting"¹⁴ is like going through a parenthesis in a text, it helps to know and understand what is coming next.

The meeting is reflecting its environment in different ways. First, since the participants use the meeting talks to reflect on their environment, the meeting, as a social event produced through the participants' talks, actions and interactions, is reflecting the social context in which it take place. The meeting talks illustrate, document and represent the meeting environment through stories and jokes, by expressing disagreements and raising ideological debates, and through references to multiple events, meetings, and documents. Second, the meeting settings are reflecting the meeting environment. The meeting place, turn-taking rules, the way in which the participants align themselves around the tables, and the use of documents and PowerPoint presentations by particular participants are features of the meeting settings that represent the social organisation of the meeting's context. Third, the meeting actions and interactions are also reflecting the meeting environment. The arrival and departure of the meeting's participants, "whose arrival signals the start of the meeting...who chats with whom"¹⁵, and who continuously receive phone calls, are some instances of meeting's actions and interactions representing the social relationships prevailing in the meeting environment.

Using bracketing as an analytical concept thus enables to see that, next to their instrumental and expressive function, *the meetings fulfil a representative function*, by illustrating and specifying what is going on in the meeting environment.

¹⁰ The degree to which meetings are disruptive could depend on the type of work performed by the meeting participants. The work of some individuals mostly consists, in fact, in organising and attending meetings. However, insofar as the studied meetings are *scheduled meetings*, they always take place at a precise point in time and space, thus implying to temporarily stop other activities.

¹¹ See Kriesberg & Guetzkow (1950) and Schwartzman (1989).

¹² See Hagene 2016.

¹³ This expression is used by Schwartzman 1989, p.39.

¹⁴ Idem, p.121.

¹⁵ Idem, p.124.

Mental Health Policies as Meetings

Finally, using bracketing both to describe the meeting form and to analyse the meeting role might help understanding the transformative, if not creative¹⁶, function of meeting.

On the one hand, by providing the meeting participants with a context in which problems, ideas, convictions, emotions and disagreements can be expressed, the meeting frames informal and unknown parts of the social reality as “the business of the group”¹⁷. On the other hand, by representing its environment to the participants, the meeting is also *reforming its environment*. Indeed, following the meeting, or outside of the brackets, the meeting participants still embody the problems and social environment raised through the meeting. And, although they are only partial and provisional problems and representations of the environment, they orient the participants’ actions and interactions until another meeting is called.

In this sense, the 65 meetings analysed through my PhD research no longer appears as tools for devising and implementing mental health policies. Instead, mental health policies are nothing but a network, or a system of meetings¹⁸.

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¹⁶ See Freeman 2008.

¹⁷ Schwartzman 1989, p.39

¹⁸ Expression used by Freeman, 2016, unpublished work.