

Socio-Cultural Differences and Intercultural Communication in Social Participation Experiences

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Abstract: This article discusses the main theoretical and methodological aspects of the intercultural communication analytical perspective that I have developed to respond to specific research needs. This perspective is based on the idea that institutional and collective social actors are heterogeneous entities because they comprise a variety of internal parties, as I have been able to observe in my field research experience. Intercultural communication involves, therefore, multidimensional exchanges between heterogeneous agents that build meaning and struggle over it within their own group as well as with the other social agents. Meaning is something that is negotiated, transformed, appropriated, and can often be a subject of dispute. For that reason, the study of intercultural communication should center on social processes, not just verbal utterances. Close examination of social practices and relations enable us to understand how differences are articulated and how meaning is transformed.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, social participation, interculturality, interculturalism, social change

1. Introduction

The research projects I have been working on since 1990 have required that I develop an intercultural analytical approach that suits the various specific cases I have studied throughout the years in the context of my line of research on Culture, Communication, and Social Transformations, which has led me to re-think and broaden the applications of Intercultural Communication Studies. In this article I discuss the main theoretical and methodological aspects of this approach to intercultural analysis.

2. On the Idea of “Culture”

To begin, I would like to point out that in the line of research that I have been developing, the idea of “culture” does not denote a “thing” or a set of “things,” neither does it point to a set of attributes that may be interpreted as “objective” characterizations of a particular group of social subjects. Instead, the term “culture” denotes a *perspective of analysis* --that is, a

particular way of looking at and analyzing social processes. Nevertheless, this approach to understanding the idea of “culture” does not disregard the fact that for those social actors whose worldviews are articulated around the ideas of culture and/or identity such notions constitute significant aspects of their experience that are lived as such — and which from that point of view are real and in no way fictitious.

This “*cultural perspective*” orients our research, enabling us to focus on the *meaning* of social actors’ practices; that is, how *meaning* is produced, how it circulates, how it is reproduced and transformed, how it is negotiated, how it guides social actors’ practices, and how it may come to conflict with other *meanings*. It is these very questions that, for the past twenty years, have oriented specific research projects within this line of research. At the same time, these projects have progressively enabled us to formulate the theoretical framework in the terms that I will discuss in this presentation (Mato 1990, 1992, 1998a, 2000, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2011a; Mato, Ed. 2003, 2005, 2004, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Mato and Maldonado, Eds., 2007; Mato, Maldonado and Rey, 2011).

The research projects undertaken within the framework of this line of research, as well as studies conducted by other researchers, have allowed us to confirm that social actors are constituted as such through the production of representations of particular identities (be they individual or group identities), that give meaning to their programs and forms of social action. Depending on the particular case, these productions of identity may span just a few years of history, several decades, or even centuries, as is the case, for example, with some churches, with nations and their States, or with indigenous peoples. Actually, the duration of these processes through time depends on the narratives of identity that social actors assume, on who formulates these narratives and what moment of origin they point to, and on when what is considered to be *their* particular history begins.

The production of these representations of identity necessarily and correlatively involves the production of representations of difference regarding those who are considered to be the “other”: other nations, other peoples, other collectives, as the case may be. The identities of the thus constituted different social actors tend to be associated with, and at the same time accompanied by, the strengthening of differences in terms of perceptions, interpretations and representations of social experiences that each actor develops --and which are, therefore, the ones that each agent “truly” experiences.

Indigenous peoples and nation-States are not the only entities to possess differentiated identities and cultures, as it is possible to observe the development of the process of identity production at a much smaller scale. We thus see that many social actors (including researchers on the topic) speak of institutional, corporative, scientific, and juvenile cultures, among many others. In these processes it is usually possible to identify the existence of a variety of voices within the institutions and collective actors, each with different perceptions and interpretations of what makes up the particular “culture” or “identity” considered as characteristic of the collective to which they “feel” they belong. For example, there tend to be differences between young people and the elderly, men and women, groups that are more or less exposed to contact and exchange with other actors, between those who own and control certain resources and those who own and control others, etc. According to the above observation, we can maintain that the ideas of “culture” and “identity” result from “ways of seeing things,” and that is why

they often tend to be the object of differences and conflicts, even within social aggregates that share feelings of belonging to the same group.

Social actors relate to one another in very diverse contexts and points in time, and in very different ways. All of them, however, involve specific forms and modalities of communication, be it to collaborate, to negotiate, to make alliances or to set up confrontation, or even to “go to war.”

These forms and modalities of communication encompass not only “contents” expressed in words, gestures, images, and sounds, but also other elements that cannot always be expressed in such ways and which are related to values, temporalities, mechanisms, and forms of decision-making (a simple example: alternatively, by majority, or by consensus), and others that depending on the case and its context, may vary in importance and differ in meaning. Furthermore, such forms and modalities of communication are not only “mediated” through what we usually recognize as “means of communication” (speech, writing, audiovisual media, Internet, etc.), but also through shared experiences, whether in real time or not, as for instance rituals, ceremonies, etc., and other more or less structured or institutionalized elements (including casual encounters or informal gatherings) that, depending on the case, point in time and context, have or acquire more or less importance or different meaning.

The similarities and differences between social actors’ interpretations, their “views” and “cultures” give place to the rise of affinities, empathies, negotiations, alliances, conflicts, and confrontations. Numerous studies demonstrate how this occurs among all sorts of different social actors, in diverse social contexts, be it “large” national political processes or “small” processes that take place in more local contexts, and even within large and small institutions (see, for example, Albo, 1991; Anderson, 1983; Ardao, 1980; Barth, 1976; Benessaieh, 2004; Brysk, 2000; Conklin & Graham, 1995; Fischer, 2001; Fox, 1990; Fuller, 2005; Garcia Canclini, 1988; Geertz, 1973; Gellner, 1983; Handler & Linnekin, 1984; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Mato, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1998a, 2000, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2011b; Meisch, 2002; Mijares, 2004; Ortiz, 2005; Pancho et al., 2004; Rappaport, 2005; Ribeiro, 2000; Rogers, 1996; Sotomayor, 1998; Universidad Autónoma Indígena e Intercultural, 2007; Universidad Intercultural Amawtay Wasi, 2004; Wagner, 1981, 1986; Yúdice, 2002).

3. Interculturality and Intercultural Communication

This line of research is also based on the idea that all human practices have a certain *meaning* for the social actors who carry them out, as well as for other actors, such as those who observe them or are affected by them. The meaning that actors ascribe to their practices, however, usually differs from the meaning assigned to them by those who observe or experience those practices. This is why it is indeed potentially productive to analyze social processes not just from a cultural perspective, but also from an *inter-cultural perspective*. That is, from a perspective that considers not only how certain formulations of meaning guide the practices of particular social actors, but that also examines the relationships between social actors from the vantage point of the exchanges of *meaning* between them. To construct such a perspective and an applicable methodology entails the “deconstruction” of some commonly accepted and well-established interpretations regarding the ideas of *interculturality and intercultural*

communication.

In order to work in that direction, it may be productive to take into account the following scenario. It is commonly accepted that cultural differences among individuals are often the seed that can lead to “misunderstandings” and/or other communication “problems” that may lead to conflicts. A related notion is that “intercultural communication” is a field that can be summarized as one that is mainly concerned with issues of good or poor communication. In contrast, in Latin America, for instance, the idea of interculturality is mainly applied in the field of Bilingual Intercultural Education, while in Europe the term tends to be used especially in reference to studies and policies regarding immigrants. Connected to these types of uses, the ideas of “cultural differences,” “interculturality,” and “intercultural communication” tend to be associated –also in a reductive manner—almost exclusively with ethnic, linguistic, religious, and/or national referents.

Interestingly, these limited (and limiting) uses of the ideas of “interculturality” and “intercultural communication” are commonly accepted even today when the uses of the idea of “culture” have broadened considerably. There are numerous studies on different types of “cultures” such as corporate, institutional, professional, disciplinary, gender, generational, urban, local (not necessarily ethnic), social class or group, etc. Nevertheless, the ideas of “interculturality” and “intercultural communication” are rarely applied to the analysis and understanding of relationship experiences among social actors where there exist appreciable differences in terms of their “cultures,” “worldviews,” “rationalities,” or particular stances on what constitutes “common sense” –and these may refer to institutions, professions, academic disciplines, gender, generation, locality, social class or group, etc. This is precisely the type of application that we are interested in discussing here.

Our interpretation of the idea of interculturality necessarily depends on how we interpret the idea of culture. This study bases its point of departure on a representation of the concept of “culture” that is associated with the processes of production, dissemination, appropriation, and transformation of *meaning* that are significant in social practices. We are, therefore, working with a notion of culture that is not associated *a priori* solely with ethnic, national or linguistic referents; furthermore, it cannot be reduced to certain specific types of representations, artifacts, and “practices,” and as a result is not limited to the “arts” -- be they “folk” or “elite”-- or to the “cultural industries” or the notions of culture generally espoused by ministries or departments of “Culture”. Rather, it encompasses the various aspects of production, dissemination, appropriation, and transformation of *meaning* that are significant in the most diverse social practices, including those that are generally considered as exclusively economic, political, legal, etc.

Given these problems and points of departure, it is appropriate to begin the reflection on the idea of “interculturality” with a deliberately open position. The universe of potential uses of this notion thus includes all those cases in which named or perceived differences regarded as “cultural” or of “meaning,” “world view” or “rationality” appear not only in relation to ethnic, national, or linguistic referents but also in relation to a broad variety of other referents such as professional, occupational, organizational, institutional, gender, generational, religious, “class,” social position, territory, and political ideology among others.

Given this framework, it is not plausible to think that there is an “objectively” delimited

field of issues that can be thought of *a priori* as particularly “intercultural” matters, whereas others are not. On the contrary, the field of social experiences that can be analyzed using this type of conceptual framework is indeed very open.

4. On the Ideas of “Interculturality” and “Interculturalism”

There is an additional matter that can have important consequences even though it may appear to be a small detail. I am referring to the difference between “interculturality” and “interculturalism”. The suffix “ism” denotes a particular orientation of thought and/or action; thus, “interculturalism” refers us to a set of policies and practices (governmental or not) that are oriented toward building certain types of experiences or social orders. If we are careful to take into account this differentiation, it will be easy to understand that conceptually the idea of “interculturality” is, in itself, simply descriptive and may include cases of collaboration among agents that perceive one another as “culturally” different, as well as cases of conflict and even confrontation.

Nonetheless, there is usually no distinction made between interculturality and interculturalism. Moreover, in certain contexts—in the case of Latin America particularly in those associated with the idea of Bilingual Intercultural Education—a *a priori* assumptions assign positive traits to the notion of “interculturality.” I would like to recount, in contrast, an interesting personal experience from a few years back when, within the context of a broader conversation, I casually asked three colleagues with whom I was having dinner whether the idea of “interculturality” was used in their respective countries. One of my colleagues was from Benin, the other from Pakistan, and the third from India. The first one said that in Benin this idea was associated with inter-ethnic relations and inter-ethnic conflict, while the other two said that they associated the idea with inter-religious conflict. All three cases, remarkably, focused on the idea of *conflict*, not on the notion of policies oriented to building harmony, which is what the idea of interculturality tends to be associated with in the Americas and Western Europe.

In terms of those interpretations, it is interesting to observe that while in Latin America the most frequent interpretations of the idea of interculturality tend to associate it with the idea of “interculturalism,” and thus attribute it positive values that are sought to be achieved through intercultural bilingual education programs, there are, nevertheless, indigenous leaders and intellectuals who have a negative view of the concept. In fact, some indigenous leaders and intellectuals have stressed in interviews that the idea of “interculturality” has also been used and/or is used for the purposes of “acculturation.” And this is not coincidental, as the first written registries of the term that I have been able to identify in the Spanish language point to the fact that this idea derives from the contributions of US Applied Anthropology to “technical cooperation” programs in healthcare that since 1951 have been under way in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, with US funding and technical assistance. As the renowned US anthropologist George Foster explained in an evaluation of these programs contained in a document written for the Smithsonian Institution, the programs were aimed to achieve the gradual substitution of traditional beliefs with modern ideas about healthcare and disease prevention, to increase people’s willingness to seek treatment from a medical doctor, and to replace traditional knowledge with “modern ideas” (Foster 1955[1951], p. 28). In line with this

orientation, with differences that for practical reasons cannot be discussed at this time, and with contributions to the further development of the idea of interculturality and its relationships and differences with the notion of “acculturation,” the Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán published in the 1950s two books that had significant impact not only in Mexico, but also in other Latin American countries (Aguirre Beltrán, 1994 [1955], 1992 [1957]).

Apparently, it was based on these programs and other similar ones, as well as a result of the aforementioned publications, that the idea of “interculturality” arose and was disseminated, being appropriated and re-formulated from political, ethical, and theoretical perspectives by indigenous intellectuals and leaders as well as organizations. The idea is thus redefined as social actors formulate interpretations of life experiences within national societies that are resistant to recognizing and valuing cultural differences. The idea of interculturality is, therefore, used to develop theoretical frameworks, and to organize people and guide their struggles within these national societies. The problematic past of the uses of the idea of interculturality, along with some recent experiences that are still too close to them, has given place to two different ways of using and conceptualizing the term that, nevertheless, appear to have convergent agendas. On the one hand, there is a growing number of indigenous and Afro-descendant leaders and intellectuals — as well as educators, anthropologists, sociologists, and other professionals who maintain collaborative relationships with them— who tend to speak in terms of “*interculturality with equity*.” On the other hand, there is probably a greater number of them who ignore or have decided not to dwell on the negative past of the idea of “interculturality” and have instead opted to use the term without a qualifying adjective, assigning it values of mutual acknowledgement and respect (Bonfil Batalla, 1992, 1993; Dávalos, 2002, 2005; Degregori, 1999; Fernández Salvador, Ed., 2000; Fuller, Ed., 2005; García Canclini, 2004; Macas, 2001, 2005; Mato, 2008a, 2011a, Mato, Ed. 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Rappaport 2005; Tubino 2002).

5. Returning to the Reflection on Interculturality and Intercultural Communication

The idea of interculturality is currently applied in a variety of contexts to a broader universe than the one most often referenced by specialists in “interculturality” and “intercultural communication.” In an article published a couple of years ago, I illustrated through numerous concrete examples that the idea of interculturality is explicitly or implicitly applied by different types of social actors (for instance, governmental agencies, social and political organizations, etc.) in multiple contexts. It is used to refer to different types of relationships and articulations, including forms of collaboration, conflict and/or negotiation, that social agents establish with one another when their “cultural” differences turn out to be significant with regard to the issue(s) that are the reason for their more or less lasting relationships (Mato, 2009b).

Additionally, I have also registered its use in scholarly journals, professional training manuals, and social organization and governmental and inter-governmental agency publications. I can therefore say that at this time the idea of “interculturality” is used in explicit ways — at times along with other “neighbor” categories, (especially those of “multiculturality” and “pluriculturality”) — as well as in more implicit ways, not only by researchers and authors of professional training texts in the fields of anthropology, sociology, communication, management, business, publicity and marketing, tourism, healthcare, education, development, translation, political science,

international relations, philosophy, and law, but also by governmental and inter-governmental agencies (working on issues such as healthcare, education, justice, migration, citizenship, housing, development, tourism, “cultural sector,” and “cultural industries” among others). It is also used by political parties, businesses, organizations of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, organizations focused on specific interests (human rights, sexual orientations, etc.), religious leaders, and professionals working on applied practices in various specialty areas, among others (Mato, 2009b).

In contrast to that broad diversity of applications, in the academic field of intercultural communication, where the idea of interculturality is used prolifically, we are faced with an interesting situation. The bibliography in both English and Spanish points to two main types of studies: those focused on interpersonal communications and those focused on mediated communications. Generally speaking, in both cases these studies center primarily on experiences related to linguistic, ethnic, and national differences in various types of spaces such as cities, schools, tourism, businesses, borders, health centers, etc. (Alsina, 1999; Baraldi, 2006; Grimson, 2000; Gudykunst & Mody, Eds., 2002; Kim & Gudykunst, Eds., 1988). There are relatively few studies that concentrate on what we could call communication and inter-medial experiences, though there are some that examine the articulations between orality, writing, and audio-visual media (Mato, 1990; Ong, 1982) and even in regards to the Internet (García Canclini, 2004).

The most surprising feature of the research approaches that are explicitly framed within the field of “intercultural communication,” however, is that despite the significant breadth of the uses and applications of the term “interculturality,” as discussed above, seldom will one come across concrete “intercultural communication” studies that examine communication through the differences between the various types of “cultures,” such as business, institutional, professional, occupational, “class,” and others. These types of studies, which are of particular interest to our research, tend to be found in other fields, such as management, sociology, economic and development anthropology, legal anthropology, citizenship, international relations, and others mentioned earlier in this article.

In a field study that we conducted in Las Casitas de la Vega, an urban settlement of low-income social sectors in the city of Caracas, we examined the relationships between various groups of inhabitants and two State agencies, one of them a provider of water services and the other of Internet services (Mato, Maldonado & Rey, 2011). This study offers insight into the importance of differences of “rationalities” or types of “common sense,” and as such of “cultures” associated with institutional referents and with professional referents inside the institutional ones, as well as—in a simplified manner—with referents of locality and ideological and/or axiological orientation within the concerned set of inhabitants. Communication between these diverse “worlds,” however, is not usually the object of analysis within the field of “intercultural communication.”

The study conducted in that sector of Caracas allowed us, among other things, to observe how those various “cultures,” “worldviews” or “rationalities,” in a general and all-encompassing manner, are expressed in the ways in which the particular problems and projects that are the reason for the relationships between the various social actors involved in the management of water and computer services in Las Casitas de la Vega are “lived” (that is, how they are

perceived and interpreted in an “automatic” or compulsive fashion). Moreover, it also allowed us to see how communication between these actors takes place based on those differences, as differences are the point of departure for how interpretations and meaning are “negotiated,” and how actions are undertaken. These cases illustrate in a practical manner how various interpretations of certain problems, and the ways in which they are tackled, correspond to the various “cultures,” “worldviews,” “rationalities” or “forms of common sense” of the actors that are linked with one another precisely because of these matters, and in relation to which each one has his/her own interpretation. It can be said that these actors have thereby shaped forms of intercultural communication with one another. Even though the actors involved did not use the term “intercultural communication,” our field research enabled us to see how they were at times aware of the fact that their exchanges respond to different forms of logic or rationalities.

I would like to point out, furthermore, that this field research overlapped temporarily with another research project that was being conducted along the same theoretical lines, but in whose framework there are eleven case studies being carried out in seven countries by eleven researchers. This group of case studies examines the experience of intercultural communication in the following types of situations: between an environmental action organization, educators and indigenous individuals regarding the use of “natural resources,” between indigenous individuals and governmental offices regarding the issuance of birth certificates, between settled inhabitants of a particular area and international immigrants, between a national parks agency and peasants, between a railroad company and urban dwellers who are to be displaced by the railroad, between a neo-natal intensive care service and the patients’ families, between healthcare systems and indigenous patients, between indigenous students and non-indigenous educators, between indigenous organizations and a state-run forestry agency, and between various groups of peasants and unions in conflict and a state-run agency. These other case studies also illustrate how the various interpretations of the concrete issues at hand that link the different actors involved respond to their particular “cultures,” “worldviews” or “rationalities.”

6. Intercultural Communication in Social Participation Experiences

Beginning in the 1960s, numerous and very diverse initiatives that revolve around the idea of “participation” have been undertaken in Latin America. Some of them have been promoted by governments, inter-governmental agencies, and multilateral agencies, and have been associated with, for example, ideas about development, healthcare, education, urban improvement, and gender equality. Other initiatives, of a more critical or alternative character, have been promoted by various types of social organizations, churches, political parties, labor unions, or organizations of peasant farmers, indigenous peoples, neighborhoods, women, etc.

It is generally believed that social experiences that include the democratic participation of more social sectors and groups tend to be better able to set into motion the knowledge, abilities, creativity, and efforts of a greater and more diverse number of interested parties, and thus achieve the envisioned goals with greater effectiveness. Alongside, however, there is also the recognition that the involvement of a plurality of actors with a plurality of interests and “rationalities” also tends to bring differences to the fore, which can eventually lead to conflicts (Cerqueira & Mato 1998, Mato 1998b).

In this line of research, the expression “social participation” is used in a broad manner to encompass institutionally framed experiences; however, it is not limited to them as it is also used to refer in a broad sense to experiences in which two or more social actors “take part,” whether institutionally framed or not.

Non-institutional modalities of participation can often be observed in various types of grassroots self-management experiences. Even though these types of experiences can occur in different social environments, they are particularly frequent among social groups that arrive in big cities looking for a place to settle. This tends to be the case of migrants who hail from smaller remote cities or from rural areas within the country or from neighboring ones, and which can be or include indigenous and/or Afro-descendant individuals. Generally speaking, these are human groups that are forcibly displaced from their prior settlements due to situations of violence, unemployment, “natural” catastrophes—beyond what is known about the human factor involved in such occurrences—, and others. These groups of people create new settlements, or extensions of existing ones, in big cities, where they generally are unable to rely on enough previously developed urban and sanitary infrastructure and their ownership of the land is precarious. This is pretty much the story of the inhabitants of the community of Las Casitas de La Vega, which was the site where we conducted the above-mentioned field research (Mato, Maldonado & Rey, 2011).

In these types of circumstances we can often observe forms of collaboration that in some cases represent updated forms of cooperation and collective work that come from indigenous and Afro-descendant traditions that in some cases have gone through centuries, or at least decades, of re-working in rural communities that do not have an explicit ethnic identification.

I am not attempting to idealize the experiences that take place in low-income communities since they are also subject to situations that could be qualified as undesirable because they affect the democratic quality of participation, be it as a result of vanguardist positions of some of the members, conformist stances of others, and also selfish positions of others who stand to benefit from vanguard and collective efforts without contributing to them, along with other situations that impair participation of members due to various reasons. These circumstances and problems vary from country to country, from one community to another, and are associated, for example, with factors of gender, religion, ethnicity, particular physical conditions, location, unusual working hours (for instance, as in the case of night watch personnel, paramedics and others), family and work obligations that are greater than those of the majority of the members in the community, etc. In order to understand those dynamics and relationships, it is most productive to study participation with an intercultural communication approach that seeks to understand the differences and relationships between diverse sectors inside population groups that at times are deemed, perhaps somewhat naively, to be homogeneous. Additionally, it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of the particular “institutional cultures” of the intervening governmental and non-governmental agencies — in whose framework, furthermore, the differences, relationships, and conflicts between different “professional” and/or “occupational” cultures must be studied.

For these reasons, in addition to the conceptual ones related to the idea of “intercultural communication” discussed at the beginning of this text, the analysis of “intercultural communication” aspects in this line of research is not limited to an attempt at describing and/

or analyzing the “misunderstandings” that often arise in the relations between “culturally” different social actors, seemingly due “solely” to language differences. On the contrary, the conceptualization that guides this line of research seeks an understanding of the micro-processes of production and negotiation of meaning that occur in concrete experiences of participation.

This is why this line of research is not focused on the minute analysis of specific verbal expressions, neither is it centered on examining the role of technological devices (media). While we do recognize the need to consider these types of aspects, we try not to let them distract us from other aspects that in no way are less important. I am referring, for example, to the convergences and divergences between sensibilities, memories, feelings, values, identifications and productions of identity, prejudices, uses and values of time, and other apparently “intangible” aspects that are part of the fabric of the relations between actors.

In order to study the particularities of any experience of social participation it is necessary, therefore, to begin by identifying who participates, and who does not, and why. What may be an obstacle that prevents the participation of some and what facilitates it for others? A second aspect to examine is the type of activities pursued by those who participate. A third aspect is related to the analysis of the ways in which actors participate — that is, how they participate—, as well as how those who apparently are not participating may, in fact, be participating but in very particular or less visible ways — that is, “in their own way”—such that others may perceive them as not participating (Cerqueira & Mato, 1998).

In this type of research it is necessary to produce an ethnography of participation, searching for information about which are the spaces where and the times when particular participation activities take place. As, for example, when and where meetings are conducted to exchange points of view, generate consensus, make decisions, as these may not occur in structured spaces or times that are explicitly programmed. These types of aspects are in no way secondary; on the contrary, they often condition who participates and in which activities because there are places and times that are not accessible to all potentially interested actors, or because the ways in which information circulates and the “circuits” through which it does are not equally accessible to all (Cerqueira & Mato, 1998; Urrutia Ceruti, coord., 1995).

In order to study a social participation experience from an intercultural communication perspective (in the broadest sense of the term, as used in this line of research), it is, furthermore, imperative to observe on a micro scale the *processes* of production, circulation, appropriation, re-signification, and/or transformations of formulations of meaning that occur in the relations between the involved social actors. In this regard, it is important to stress that the goal is to study process, not just discourse objects; thus, field observation is not only productive, but also indispensable. It is essential to study all of this in the daily *dynamics* as they relate to the concrete matters that are the reason for the relations between those actors, seeking to link both their interpretations of those particular matters and the courses of action they propose with their respective “world views,” “cultures,” or “rationalities.”

To conclude, I believe it would be of interest to share with you some of the key questions that guided the field research we conducted in Las Casitas de la Vega because I think that they may be useful for other research projects. The main questions that guided our work were the following: Who participates and in what? Who does not participate and why? Why do they or do they not? How do those who participate do it? How do those who apparently are not

participating are in fact doing so — in which particular ways or less visible ones? What are the spaces and times at which specific participation activities take place? What are the significant differences between the actors' discourses/views? How are those differences expressed? What “key” ideas do the actors have/mobilize? How, when and where are they expressed? What are the spaces and the practices to negotiate/mediate meaning in the participation experiences? How do they occur? Who builds them, sustains and/or modifies them? When? What are the appropriations, constructions and/or re-significations of meaning that occur in social participation experiences? What does each actor understand as *participation* and as *non-participation*? How does each actor narrate/interpret the situation of social participation being studied? How does he/she experience it or live it? How does each actor see him/her/itself in regards to the social participation experience being studied? How does he/she/it see the others? What might the differences be between the “us” and the “others”? How do actors define the situation that has given place to the experience of social participation being studied? What are the assessments they consider as legitimate? What is considered right, and what is considered wrong?

These questions should be coupled with the recognition that institutions and social groups are not homogenous. In the research conducted in Las Casitas de la Vega, there was no reason to assume beforehand that the “the community” would be a homogenous whole —and, in fact, we were able to confirm this as the study took place. Similarly, there was no reason to assume a priori that all the representatives of the two government agencies involved (Hidrocapital and the National Center for Information Technologies) would be neutral “transmitters” of a one and only “institutional culture,” including axiological and ideological positions within these, as we, in fact, were also able to confirm. Moreover, we were able to observe the importance of differences among professionals working for the same governmental agency but with diverse professional cultures.

7. Final Remarks

Our field research in Las Casitas de la Vega, presented here as an illustrative example, — as well as other studies I have developed in the context of my line of research on Culture, Communication, and Social Transformations (Mato, 1990, 1992, 1998a, 2000, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2011a; Mato, Ed., 2003, 2005, 2004, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Mato & Maldonado, Eds., 2007; Mato, Maldonado & Rey, 2011) — shows us that *intercultural communication* does not involve unidimensional exchanges between two homogeneous social agents. Rather, it involves multidimensional exchanges between social agents that are heterogeneous, as each comprises a variety of internal parties; moreover, these social agents build meaning and struggle over it *within their own group as well as with the other social agents*. Additionally, the issue of meaning is not just a matter of words, as it does not necessarily concern something that is correctly or incorrectly understood, but something that is negotiated, transformed, appropriated, and often a subject of dispute. *Intercultural communication is about social processes, not just about verbal utterances. We need to study social practices and relations to understand how differences are articulated and the effects on how and why meaning is transformed.*

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