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[Papers from the Special Session in Honor of
Erving Goffman (Professor at the University of
Pennsylvania 1968-1982)] Framing and Brazilian
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Framing and Brazilian Narratives of Social Discrimination

Mércia Santana Flannery

1 Introduction

In this paper I discuss some of the concepts developed by Goffman (1974, 1967) and their applicability to the study of narratives. Specifically, I observe similarities and differences in the way that Brazilian narratives of discriminatory experiences are organized.

Personal stories are pervaded with connections to their tellers' main concerns. Therefore, to examine stories that a community tells is to open oneself to the opportunity of getting to know what the social problems faced by a group of people are.

Specifically, the observation of these narratives can be useful in revealing how discriminatory narratives are shaped, and in showing how discrimination is perceived and discussed in Brazil. Additionally, analyzing these stories can be an important consideration of discrimination and social asymmetry derived from ethnic background and race, a subject that keeps being pushed aside in Brazil under the unproven, but popular assumption that the people of this country live in a "racial democracy" (cf. Page, 1995).

I am assuming, as other authors have, that narratives are not only influenced by the social and cultural realities of the tellers but that they also reflect those same realities. De Fina (1999) in her analysis of narratives told by non-documented Mexican immigrants in the United States took a similar approach. The author explores the connections that "linguistic phenomena" in narratives establish with "wider social phenomena". In a similar way this research can be an important contribution to an understanding of how social reality and culture are a part of the stories that we tell. This is especially so considering that there are not many linguistic studies about Brazilian narratives of discriminatory experiences.

2 Data

The data used in this paper comprise a set of five narratives told by Brazilians about experiences of social discrimination. These narratives come from different sources (e.g., personal letter, court deposition) and they contain similar features that could indicate the predominance of a particular way of framing discriminatory experiences by Brazilians.

In order to observe the similarities in the ways of structuring these narratives, I look next at the notion of frame and at specific devices used by the tellers of discriminatory experiences.

3 Goffman: Frame and Remedial Work

Goffman (1974) observes how speakers contribute to create a sense that a recognizable activity is taking place. Goffman also argues that when recounting an experience “what a speaker usually does is to present a *version* of what happened to him” (my emphasis). For Goffman (1974:504), “replaying” an event is a necessarily dramatic act in the sense that it provides an audience “with an invitation to sit through a narrative, to follow along empathetically as a tale unfolds”.

Tannen (1993:17) indicates that a frame “refers to an expectation about the world, based on prior experience against which new experiences are measured and interpreted.” Tannen also observes how surface structures in narratives can demonstrate that a narrator envisions specific underlying schemes or frames. When speakers take on the role of storytellers, they rely on models (frames) of similar stories “crystallized” within the social group where speaker and audience are part.

For Tannen (1993:41) the use of certain linguistic devices allows speakers and listeners to make inferences, and to assume that certain events may or may not have happened. For instance, reporting the speech of the characters in a story also works as a way to transmit the position that the teller assumes.

The narratives of the data are characterized by a set of similar elements (i.e., “offender”, “offense”, “offended”). In order to analyze the presence of these elements, it will be useful to look at Goffman’s concepts of remedial work. Understanding how the characters in the narratives of discrimination performed remedial work may also enable us to see how the discriminatory experience is being framed (i.e., if it is overtly stated by the “offender”, or if it is implied through the “offended’s” interpretation of the events).

In the chapter entitled “Remedial Interchanges”, Goffman (1971) describes sets of potential ritual remedies that are applied whenever a social norm is broken. An individual performs remedial rules to maintain her/his status as someone who is able to act in accordance with the social values of a group (Goffman, 1971:96).

Goffman (1971:98) also indicates that the importance of using these techniques lies in their moral significance, or in how they provide evidence of an individual’s “compliance with or deviation from” social rules in general. As in Goffman (1967), here too Goffman’s notion of appropriate con-

duct towards social rules is linked to the conveyance of information about an individual and about the individual's self.

4 Analysis of the Narratives

As the offense in these narratives consists in something that was said, the use of constructed dialogue enables the tellers to create the sense that they reproduce the speech of the "offenders" during the events being narrated. As Tannen (1989) has shown, attributing voice to the characters of stories is also a way to evaluate their actions. Through constructed dialogue the characters of a story "gain life" and "speak for themselves" (Tannen, 1989:103). Using constructed dialogue also reinforces the active participation of the audience, since, in a way, it consists in an invitation "to sit through" and "follow" a story "empathetically" (Goffman, 1974:504).

Narrative 1¹ is entirely told through constructed dialogue. The teller, a dentist, describes a phone conversation with one of his clients who did not want to have a treatment done because of the doctor's ethnic background. The doctor is from a Brazilian Northeastern state, a region from where many inhabitants emigrate to the Southeast to find work (cf. Page, 1995).

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | For 15 years [I] have [had] an office in São Paulo. |
| 2 | One afternoon, a man that I had attended the day before for a clinical mouth exam, called me: |
| 3 | |
| 4 | –Look. Doctor, I'll be honest. |
| 5 | It won't be [possible for me] to have the treatment done. |
| 6 | Why [not]? Is it a problem with the payment? |
| 7 | We can divide [it] in three installments. |
| 8 | No, Doctor. You don't [seem to] understand... [the thing is] I am [feeling] insecure... |
| 9 | Insecure about what? Your treatment is simple. |
| 10 | Well, Doctor, I actually liked you. |
| 11 | You're actually polite... |
| 12 | I don't understand... |
| 13 | How so? You can't disguise it. |
| 14 | Your accent reveals [it] Doctor. |
| 15 | My accent? |

¹ The story was found in this format in a Brazilian magazine called *Maria Maria* (the equivalent of the American magazine *Ladies' Home Journal*), destined to the feminine audience. I am adding line numbers for ease of reference.

- 16 Doctor, it's obvious that you are Northeastern!
 17 Oh! Well, [then] you should know that I am from
 Pernambuco [state and I am] very proud [of it].
 18 Besides, I am going to treat your teeth.
 19 I have no intention to marry you. (...)
 20 I just want to check if I understood you well: you
 don't want me as [your] dentist because I am a
 Northeastern?!?
 21 That's right, Doctor.
 22 I am sorry for being [this] honest. In my opinion,
 northeasters make [great] porters, elevator conduc-
 tors, pizza-makers, construction workers...
 23 But, frankly, [a] doctor?!?
 (Luís Roberto, dentist, 40)

The sequence of conversation between the two characters allows the recipient to follow the client's arguments and the motives for his refusal to be treated by the dentist. Initially, the patient is portrayed as reluctant, avoiding offering the doctor an explicit justification for his refusal (lines 5, 8 and 11). According to Goffman (1967:15), avoidance "is the surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face." Some of the ways a person could exercise avoidance would be by "employing discretion," or still by employing "circumlocutions and deceptions, phrasing his replies with careful ambiguity." The patient avoided being confrontational by: 1) "employing discretion" and omitting the reason why he did want to undergo treatment, (line 5); and 2) delaying telling the dentist what was the real cause of his "insecurity", using hedges (lines 10, 11). When the client provided the doctor with the reason why he did not want to be treated by him, he offered an apology (line 22). When describing his reaction to the client's explanation (line 16) the doctor confronts the reasoning behind the client's prejudice (lines 18-19). Using reported speech when transmitting the discriminatory remarks of the offender, then, enables the teller to create a vivid description of the events. It makes the discrimination overt as the audience to this story has access to the words of the offender and not to the interpretation of the offended party.

In narrative 2² a black Brazilian woman describes her experience when applying for a job as a laboratory technician. In this narrative the offense is implied through the remedial work offered by the offender.

² Narrative 2 was posted along with the experiences of two other black women in the same web-magazine (*Maria Maria*) as narrative 1.

- 1 At 15, I took a clinical pathology technical course.
 2 When I was finishing the course, a laboratory invited
 people to immediately fill a position.
 3 (...) I arrived at the laboratory with my
 4 documents, but as soon as the receptionist saw me
 5 she was shocked.
 6 She said: wait [for] a moment while I talk to the per-
 son in charge.
 7 This moment was prolonged for half an hour.
 8 [I] started to think that there was something wrong
 because she would not come back with my docu-
 ments.
 9 When [she] finally came back, she said: “look Ma-
 gali, [I hope] you [will] forgive me but there was a
 misunderstanding and the position was already
 filled.”
 10 I [could tell] by her face that [it] was a lie, but [I]
 didn’t have arguments to tell her: you are lying. (...)
 11 The worst [thing] is that I [actually] started to think
 that I wanted too much.
 12 [Just imagine], I will be a laboratory technician? [I]
 13 won’t be [one], nobody will want me to be [a labora-
 tory technician].
 14 May be they would like], if I went to do the cleaning,
 15 if I went [to work] serving coffee in the laboratory.
 (Magali Celso)

The teller uses constructed dialogue to describe the receptionist’s remedial work when offering an apology for the apparent misunderstanding about a job vacancy (lines 9-10). She concludes that the prolonged time she was left waiting for her documents, and the “look on the face” of the receptionist, were indications that her skin color and physical characteristics were the actual reasons why she was denied a position (line 11). In this case, we could suggest, by leaving “unstated facts that might implicitly or explicitly contradict and embarrass the positive claims made by others” (Goffman, 1967:16) that the offended party employed an “avoidance” strategy. In addition, the teller indicates that people with her physical characteristics are not expected to occupy certain positions by reporting that the receptionist “was shocked” when she entered the laboratory and by constructing her own speech in reaction to this experience.

Narrative 3 is from the same source as narratives 1 and 2 and also presents events of discrimination in connection with work. However, it is structured differently, not containing instances of constructed dialogue or remedial work. The teller describes her experience while she was working in an “elite restaurant” (line 1) and approached by a client.

- 1 Recently, I was working as a waitress in an elite restaurant.
 2 I was the only black woman working there.
 3 I saw that many clients were surprised to see me.
 4 In the beginning, I didn't know exactly the reason
 5 why [they were surprised], but afterwards I started to notice that the surprise was [caused] because I was black.
 6 One day, [there] was this lady that should be from a
 7 traditional family that [probably] had [had] slaves during their entire lives, she turned to me and said that I
 8 was adorable and [asked me] if I would like to work as a maid in her house.
 9 From then on, I realized that white people thought [it
 10 was] awkward [that] a black woman [was] working in
 11 an elegant restaurant, while I belong in a kitchen or [doing] the cleaning. (Celina)

As in narrative 2, the teller indicates that people acted surprised when seeing her, “the only black woman working” in that restaurant (lines 2-3). The client's comments, indirectly reported (lines 7-8), and the invitation to work at as a maid are interpreted as implying that blacks should do “cleaning” jobs (lines 9-11). However, it seems that for waitress and client, appearance may have been used as a means to identify social roles. The teller does not provide the basis to have assumed that the “offender” in her story was “from a traditional family” (lines 6-7). Whereas it may not be clear that the lady's words and comments were meant as discriminatory, the teller's point (lines 9-11, i.e., black people should not work in elegant restaurants, but do general cleaning) reflects, as did narratives 1 and 2, the racial reality in Brazil, particularly in Southeast Brazil, where blacks and Northeasterners usually occupy lower paying positions (cf. Page, 1995).

Narrative 4 is another case in which the offender prefaced the discriminatory act with remedial work. This story is part of a letter that was sent by an acquaintance in reply to my request that she record any discriminatory

experiences. The writer describes an episode of discrimination when she applied for a job.

- 1 One day I went to look for a job at the CST.
- 2 [I] got up at 4am, took the bus at 4:30, arrived there at 5:30.
- 3 In the front room there was a[n ad for a] vacancy for an administrative auxiliary.
- 4 You have no idea how [happy] I left the CST (...)
- 5 The company's office was in Piedade, lucky me that I had taken [with me] more money fare than I usually do.
- 6 When I arrived there, [they] treated me very well and [they] told me to wait along with another girl who was [already] there.
- 7 And a detail, Dear Mércia, the girl was 1.70m tall, white, [she had] straight black hair and light brown eyes.
- 8 [We] were interviewed by Mr. Ricardo, the keeper.
- 9 He said he would call us. Up to then, everything was great.
- 10 Next day, Mr. Ricardo called telling me to go there.
- 11 When I arrived there the same girl [of the other day] was there too.
- 12 The two of us had been chosen for the same position and we [would] have 15 days of training.
- 13 Up to then [it] was a matter of capacity and performance.
- 14 In the meantime we became friends and always talked.
- 15 The general manager of the stores came to me and said "Marineide, I am really sorry. You are a good person but I want a girl good in everything.
- 16 Do you know what he meant, Dear Mércia? I wasn't
- 17 1.70m tall, nor [do I have] light brown eyes, [I am
- 18 not] white, nor do I have straight hair and this made
- 19 the difference (...). (Marineide Gomes)

In the previous narratives it was clearly stated (narrative 1) or implied (narratives 2 and 3) that people from certain ethnic background (i.e., Northeasterners and blacks) were expected to perform cleaning and maintenance

jobs. In narrative 4, the teller contrasts her own appearance with another character's, providing a description of what is the appearance of an ideal candidate. The other character is described as possessing ideal physical characteristics (i.e., being fairly tall—1.70m, white, and having straight hair). When describing her dismissal, she uses constructed dialogue to transmit the remedial work (i.e., an apology) that her boss performed (lines 14) and interprets the speech of the boss as meaning that she did not possess the ideal characteristics that the other competitor had (lines 15-18). As in the other narratives, in the orientation section the teller provides some details that help to establish her hardworking qualities. For instance, she reports getting up early (line 2), describes her enthusiasm with the possibility of finding a job (line 4) and the difficulty of arriving at the company (line 5). This description enhances her role as a victim, framing the experience as discriminatory and creating the sense that what follows was unfair.

Narrative 5 is a section of a deposition in a racism case in Brazil³. The teller describes the discrimination she faced while trying to apply for membership in a street carnival club generically called *blocos*⁴. The club, however, selects its members based on their physical appearance.

- 1 I live in the Cabula VI [neighborhood].
 2 On Carnival Tuesday, we went to the main office of
 3 the [organized street carnival group] “the boat”.
 4 When [we] arrived [there], I and Adriana, [the one]
 5 who saw everything was Adriana and [then she]
 6 passed [it on] to me and afterwards we spoke to
 7 Venusemar.
 8 We arrived there and [immediately] felt the differ-
 9 ence, everybody was avoiding us, not willing to help
 10 us.
 11 First we called, then [we] asked if [they] had abadá”-
 12 [do you] have abadá?” – “[we] have [them]”.
 (...) then Adriana approached one of her acquaintan-
 13 ces and asked if he could give us a hand. [we] also
 14 looked for another person of the [carnival group]
 Cheiro; then her friend called her and asked what it

³A Brazilian politician involved in the case has a website where similar narratives can be found: <http://www.juca.org.br>

⁴The Brazilian state of Bahia has the largest concentration of blacks and mulattoes in the country. In its capital, Salvador, these two groups “compose 80 percent of the population” (Page, 1995; 78).

- 15 was about, she told [him] that we would like to have
our registration accepted.
- 16 He [said]: "Let me see."
- 17 When he saw our picture, he turned to Adriana and
said: "But, Adriana, do you want to ruin the [organ-
ized street carnival] group? Such a black woman!
- 18 For God's sake, Adriana!" When he saw my picture:
19 "this ugly thing! What are you thinking, Adriana?
20 Maybe you, but these other two [girls]?" (narrative
continues)

In contrast with the previous narratives, the offender does not preface his offensive words with an apology or any other remedial work (line 28). In addition, the offensive statements were not directly uttered to the victim of discrimination. In narratives 1, 2 and 4, in which teller/offended and discriminator were interacting, the offense was either clearly stated (narrative 1) or implied through the interpretation of the actions performed by the "offender" (narratives 2 and 4). When the offender in narrative 5 considers the teller's friend's case to become affiliated with the club, he uses a hedge (line 18). The expectation that people of the teller's ethnic background with a certain appearance "don't belong" in certain positions is overtly stated. However, as in narrative 3 and 4, the teller doesn't report confrontation. As we stated before, only the dentist questioned his offender, which could have been a function of his perceived status as a doctor.

5 Final Considerations

As Goffman (1974:496) suggests, to understand what frame is being used an interpreter must have "linguistic" as well as "cultural" competence. We initiated this investigation to better understand what are the underlying structures and schemas in connection with experiences of discrimination.

Observing the use of constructed dialogue and remedial work was helpful in understanding how the narrators defined their experiences. These narratives indicate that there are expectations or "schemes" regarding the narration of discriminatory experiences in Brazil. Most importantly, the format and the elements in these narratives can be an indicator of where, how and by what means discrimination in Brazil occurs.

Specifically, whereas narrative 1 and 5 represent clear instances of discrimination through the speech of the offenders, in narratives 2, 3 and 4 the tellers perform an interpretive work to convey the discriminatory actions. In addition, in four narratives the tellers assumed a more passive posture, not

confronting their offenders. These narratives were also the ones in which the offended parties occupied lower positions in relation to their offenders.

Future investigation should enable us to answer additional questions. For instance, if the same format would be verifiable in other varieties of discriminatory narratives is still to be seen. A future segment of the same project would include a larger number of narratives, from different speakers (possibly from blacks, whites and Brazilians of other ethnic backgrounds). This would allow us to observe important features and provide us with material to compare and contrast these experiences.

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