Communities of Interaction: A Brazilian NGO Sustainability Case Study

Marlene R. Marchiori
Programa de Pós-Graduação em Administração / Graduate Program in Management
Departamento de Comunicação / Communication Department
Universidade Estadual de Londrina / Londrina State University
Rodovia Celso Garcia Cid, PR 445
CEP 86051-990 Londrina, PR – Brazil
marlenemarchiori@gmail.com

&

Patrice M. Buzzanell
Brian Lamb School of Communication, BRNG 2140
Purdue University
100 North University Street
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2098 USA
765-494-3317 / 496-1394 (departmental office and fax)
buzzanel@purdue.edu

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Bios:

Marlene R. Marchiori (Ph.D., University of São Paulo) is a Professor in the Department of both Management and Communication at Londrina State University in Paraná - Brazil. Her research interests include organizational culture and organizational communication, specifically interactions and strategy as communicational practice.

Patrice M. Buzzanell (Ph.D., Purdue University) is Professor in the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University. Her research interests coalesce around organizational communication, specifically career and leadership processes.
Abstract

How third sector organizations are discursively, interactionally, and strategically constructed in Brazil is relatively unknown. Through our case study of a Brazilian not-for-profit focused on sustainability initiatives, we expand knowledge on organizational interactional processes as well as the communicative constitution of different Brazilian organizational environments, especially in the third (non-profit/non-governmental) sector. Because interaction is characterized as a necessary condition for organizational existence (Cooren, 2006), we analyze the multiple and layered interaction forms and map out how communication reveals itself within such an organizational environment. Based on thematic analyses of deep interviews with the entire NGO Board, we approach strategic interaction as imbricated layers of culture-centered processes—iterative, with multiple points of reference (see Taylor, 2011). We found five layered-linked themes that displayed how members entered into, thought about, and sustained interactional and dialogic processes. Our findings provide the first foray into analyzing interactional processes in a Brazilian third sector organization.
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Communication has long been considered continuous, complex, and essential to organizational structure (Barnard, 1938/1968) and business success (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011). Through communication, people influence each other (Bateson & Ruesch, 1965) and create organizational realities and difference (Fausto Neto, 2008; Mumby, 2011). In these ways, organizations are in essence communicational phenomena. They are constructed through sensemaking and conversation (Deetz, 1994; Kuhn & Ashcraft, 2003; Weick, 1995). Within different approaches—particularly meaning making and interaction (see Jian, Schmisseur, & Fairhurst, 2008), communication becomes “an actualizing process in or within organizations” (Cooren & Taylor, 1997) whereby organizations are constituted (Deetz, 1994; Craig, 1999; Kuhn, forthcoming; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009).

Our goal is to enhance understanding of interaction processes in organizations and knowledge about communicative constitution of organizing in different Brazilian organizational environments, particularly the third sector (non-profit/non-governmental) organizations. We chose an innovative NGO, from Londrina, Paraná state in Brazil, based on: (a) our interest in detailing, for the first time, the organizational interaction processes in Brazilian non-governmental organizations, and (b) our perception that we could provide a more comprehensive framework of third-sector organizing if segments being analyzed could be preserved in meaningful practices processes (Weick, 1979, 1995). We approach strategic interaction as imbricated layers of culture-centered processes and processes—iterative and with multiple points of reference (Taylor, 2011). Here, interaction is characterized as a necessary condition for organizational existence (Cooren, 2006). To analyze the multiple and layered forms of interaction in this context, we map out interaction processes and observe how communication reveals itself within such an organizational environment.
We begin by presenting the case of a Brazilian non-profit, non-governmental organization called "Meio Ambiente Equilibrado" (MAE), meaning “Balanced Environment”, located in Londrina, Brazil (see http://www.ongmae.org.br/). We analyze data carried out by a Brazilian research group (of which the first author was a member) supported by The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) and the Araucaria Foundation. The group’s objective was to uncover the interactions within different types of organizations. We present here the first attempt to describe the processes of strategic interaction within Brazilian NGOs.

Based on thematic analyses of deep interviews collected between July and October 2011 with the entire managing Board of MAE, we discuss strategic interaction, showing how participants in this non-profit/non-governmental agency engage in five layered-linked themes that displayed sustained interactional and dialogic processes. How such processes are embedded organizing is significant since Brazilian organizations have only recently begun shifting from external organizational foci toward recognizing the value of interpretive approaches (Putnam & Casali, 2009; see also MCQ Brazil Forum, 2009). Moreover, this shift toward organizing as communicatively constituted, interactionally based, and changeable parallels the national movement from political dictatorship and censorship to concerns with democratization, voice, empowerment, and transparency (Marchiori & Oliveira, 2009; Putnam & Casali, 2009; Reis, 2009).

**Imbricating Strategic Interactions**

Heijden (2004; see also Fairhurst, 2004) describes organizations as communities based in systems of interactions that are framed within strategic conversation. A strategic conversation is a cycle of learning, perception, conceptualization and action, leading to a strategy with a coherent pattern of action that consciously intervenes in the continuous evolution of the organization (Heijden, 2004). To participate in organizations is to participate
in these cycles of conversational influence. Attention here is targeted at daily activities, focused on relationships between people. So strategy is a communicational practice—viewed here as a social practice, something that people actually do, and not just a property of the organization (Whittington, 2006) -- “it is in interaction between people that activities happen, and where meaning is created” (Shotter, apud Reis, et al., 2010, p. 176). To perceive communication as interaction, the social practices and processes must be observed with the intent of identifying how they produce meaning (and consequent meanings) in interactive-conversational processes of relationships in day-to-day organizational life (Reis et al., 2010).

**Strategic Interaction**

In choosing the most appropriate actions, or gestures, during interactions, interlocutors are relevant based upon their ability to develop in juxtaposition with “others” and to reflect on their role (Lana, 2008). Action, gesture, and reflection are active processes, where the gestures between an interlocutor and another adjust to each other. “Circularity” through multiple levels is inherent in human communication (Bateson, 1965). Such a way of thinking about communication allows for a greater level of flexibility in interpreting and changing an organization, communication, and relationships (Jian et al., 2008; Putnam, 2008). Shared interactions challenge existing positions once that which is taken for granted is redefined in light of clearly stated differences (Deetz, 2010). Hence, more than just being an exchange of information, interaction is the way in which a confrontation between ideas and interpretations determine meaning, as focused in actions (Gramaccia, 2001) and communication constructs and negotiates meaning (Varey, 2006). It is precisely in this space of subjectivity (communicational process) that interactions are possible and meanings are exchanged between inter-agents. In short, human interaction sets in motion a constellation of objects that continue to exist after and beyond the time and place of interaction. There are not structures of global interactions, but rather interactions that launch objects that reflexively structure and
simultaneously surpass these same interactions (Latour, 1994, 1996 *apud* Cooren & Taylor, 1997).

Throughout, communication is a mediating activity (Cooren & Taylor, 1997) that involves human and non-human agency. According to Latour (1994, 1996 *apud* Cooren & Taylor, 1997, p. 225), “an act is made possible when one (human) agent enlists a second (non-human) agent in the realization of an intention.” Greimas (1987, *apud* Cooren & Taylor, 1997) conceived that mediation is as much a process as a result of a process. Boltanski (2010, p. 592) affirmed that the construction of an institutional reality, is essentially oriented by means of “operations that qualify what is to be–for both people and objects”; that is, a mixture between what is human and non-human. Language as a social practice (Austin, 1962/1990), as a form of action and argumentation, encompasses this social and cultural context. This is because it cannot be understood by itself, as words cannot be analyzed alone, but rather overall the reality about which we are talking when using these words (Austin, 1962/1990). The act of speaking can construct meaning, when people suffer reciprocal changes, influencing one another, due to any constructed relationships. This mutual interaction is not reactive (Primo, 2005). Mutual, interdependent relationships and negotiation processes can be seen in interactions, where each inter-agent participates directly in the relationship that is constructed by this process. The process itself is one of “coming to be” (Primo, 2005) that occurs and is reconstructed in relation to action with others. Deetz (2010) concurs with this viewpoint in saying that cooperation is expected to elicit reciprocity during dialogue, but towards mutually creative decisions, and not understanding. The focus is mainly intentional and creative production via the expression of desires and positions while committing to the realization of mutual interests.

It is worth considering that communication does not occur through a single, isolated channel, but rather through “multi-interactional”, or simultaneous interactions based upon
speech, non-verbal communication, smells, and so on (Primo, 2005). Thus, multiple interactions can happen during a single organizational situation, where one interacts with its context; be it intrapersonal, interpersonal, and inter-group. In this sense, the coexistence of multiple meanings systems, and consequently of simultaneous practices, endows people with the ability to learn to live together in and with diversity (Hilal, 2003).

**Exploring the Complexity of Interaction**

Interaction can be understood as “an exchange maintained between two or more inter-agents” (Primo, 2005), in that inter-agents are participants in the interaction process. We approach interactive processes in a manner that values their complexity, while differentiating between interaction and communication. Interaction is “action between” and communication is “shared action.” Weber (1987) supported the idea that relationships between individuals only have a social character in situations where individual action is oriented towards others’ actions. This means that actions can exist as isolated events, such as reactions not guided by other people’s actions, unless those acts are part of “social action” (i.e., characterized by a social relationship that allows for mutual guidance for an individual’s conduct in relation to another). Interaction in organizations is mediated through speech, text, or language, and is understood by Latour (1994, 1996 *apud* Cooren & Taylor, 1997) as a transcendence of a network, mainly to support the functioning of continuous mediation processes.

Mediation as seen by Latour (1994, 1996) is relevant when the fact that interaction is not something that can be done alone (Primo, 2005) is taken into consideration. Interaction is a process in which an individual not only communicates, but engages in communication. Even so, interactions can further “enable and constrain future interactions” (Cooren & Taylor, 1997, p. 227). For Fisher (1982) communication is the relationship that individuals create through interaction. Accordingly, Fisher (1982) believed that it is necessary to observe the
“interact”: two mutual acts. The communicative or behavioral act incorporates two aspects: the content and the relationship. For this reason, it is important to analyze the micro-social process. As such, by interacting, individuals develop patterns of interaction and practice them through communicational actions (Bateson, 1972, *apud* Rogers, 2001). These patterns may or may not be accepted, depending upon the interactive context. Because of this, this process is characterized as a process of negotiation (Bateson, 1972, *apud* Rogers, 2001).

In this context, the relationship analyzed in interaction processes links individuals and context to produce unique meanings and realities. “Interaction is always a reflection of multiple realities” (Rogers & Escudero, 2004; Watzlawick, 1976, *apud* Fairhurst, 2004). For Varey, interaction is a question of value and diverse meanings (Varey, 2006). Bateson (1958, *apud* Fairhurst, 2004) defined interaction as a “reaction of individuals to reactions of other individuals.” Human beings exist in environments permeated by “circuits of interaction”, where interactive patterns are created and maintained through feedback (Bateson, 1972, *apud* Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). For Cooren (2006), these patterns reflect collective intelligence. According to Weick and Roberts (1993, *apud* Barge & Fairhurst, 2008), a system’s intelligence is not concentrated in a single individual, but in the group of people who compose the system.

We take an interpretive approach to ask: *how are processes of strategic interaction imbricated within a Brazilian non-profit/non-governmental organization?* Furthermore, we question how such interactions can form a knowledge base for organizing.

**Method**

The NGO MAE is presented in the attempt to understand the Brazilian organizational environment. We conducted face-to-face interviews with the *entire* managing, directive board of the organizations, totaling 14 people. There were 9 men (64, or 28%), and 5 women (35.7%). The following reports are derived from data analyses conducted within an
interpretive perspective of communication (Putnam, 1983). According to Ludke and André (1986), this approach is characterized by direct contact of the researchers with the situation under observation, collecting data that are predominately descriptive and emphasizing the process rather than the end-product. The interviews asked focal questions about interactions, communication, and day-to-day practices. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later verified for accuracy prior to thematic analysis (for step-by-step procedures for quality results, see Patton, 2002). Permission to use the name of the organization was granted by its leaders. Findings have been presented to the organization for their use in strategic planning and reflection about their everyday practices.

**Understanding the Empirical Field: the Case of MAE**

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profit entities that act in the third sector of civil society, have significantly increased in number in Brazil. They include organizations that operate in diverse areas, such as environment, poverty reduction, health, education, sustainable development, and recycling. These organizations obtain funding from governmental sources, public donations, and private companies. A large number of the workers in these organizations are volunteers.

The field study for this particular research is the NGO MAE, which focuses its efforts on sustainability; preservation, and continuity of social, economic, cultural, and environmental assets from various levels of current society. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) categorizes sustainability as progress that meets current needs without compromising the future capabilities.

Sustainability does not just focus on resource allocation and opportunities over time, but also in egalitarian distribution between the current and future generations (Milne, Kearins, & Walton, 2011). Correspondingly, the NGO MAE is intensely active in the environmental
scene of the Brazilian city of Londrina, in the southern state of Parana. Indeed, MAE was founded in 2001 by volunteers and interns at the Londrina Environmental Public Ministry.

According to its current president (biologist Eduardo Panachão) MAE came about as a response to a disaster 10 years ago that had significant environmental impacts in a northern region of the city. At that time, volunteers were investigating large oil spills in rivers in a suburb of Londrina called Ribeirão Lindóia, where warehouses stored fuel. The initial worries the founders were faced with centered on the fact that there was not any legal framework for environmental issues in the city at the time. Instead, environmental issues fell under the jurisdiction of the Public Ministry. A lack of whistle-blowers and concern on the part of the local populace spurred some individuals to establish MAE. This endowed them with the will to study and work on existing environmental problems, together with other environmental agencies, so that these problems could be minimized.

Essentially, a group was established that wanted to fight for environmental rights through judicial action and legislation, and begin a broader movement for the overall environment. The need for skills that were based upon legal credentials, as well as delays on the part of the Public Ministry, were the primary motives for searching out and incorporating other experts into the group. At the present time, the exasperation felt by the general population regarding environmental problems is indispensible in helping the NGO direct attention to the government. To this end, the core characteristic of MAE as a third-sector organization is that it interacts with the different stakeholders involved in the environmental issues: government, community, partners and private companies. Its history as an organization and its history for confrontation, especially in the legal realm, have made MAE a regional and state-level reference for urban-environmental topics.

Currently, the organization counts on the participation of professionals from many different areas: lawyers, geologists, biologists, journalists, academics, field researchers, and
experts. Their varied activities include: planting seedlings; public expositions and debates about the environment; reporting of environmental crimes (whistle-blowing); protection and support of urban-environmental patrimony (such as parks, plazas, and other green areas); and research and conservation projects.

The city of Londrina, located in the North of the state of Parana, was founded in 1934. Today it has 500,000 inhabitants and covers 171,500 hectares, with 80% rural areas representing only 3% of the population, while the 20% considered urban has the other 97%. The rural areas have around 600 rivers and streams, a true wealth of water, including many that are not officially labeled. The valley floors where the streams are located are areas of permanent preservation and constitute “Linear Parks” (following the course of the stream). Londrina is lucky to have these, which are rare in cities its size, because they help stabilize the climate, protect water resources, reduce the pressures of urbanization, and above all are well-regarded areas for recreation.

The Tibagi, the largest river in the basin, supplies 60% of the city’s drinking water, and suffers the consequences of environmental degradation. Such characteristics lead MAE to work through existing partnerships, primarily in respect to recuperation and education projects and initiatives that are enacted together with the population. In this manner, the NGO is open to multi-disciplinary, collaborative, and democratic participation, which is highly relevant to studies concerning interaction.

Regarding the identification of interaction processes in organizations, MAE offers the potential to study relationships that are not of a rigid, hierarchical nature, but which do require organization to develop its plans. It counts on the active participation of interdisciplinary professionals who contribute considerably towards administration and decision making. Its structure is not hierarchical, except for having a president, but instead is based in the dialogue/discussion between members of management from three permanent study and
production groups: Grupo de Direito Ambiental or GDA (the Group for Environmental Law), Grupo Técnico Ambiental or GTA (the Group of Environmental Experts), and Grupo Comunicação Ambiental or GCA (the Group for Environmental Communication). The structure is not evident in the dialogue/discussion between these groups.

The GDA consists of interns, law students, volunteers, and lawyers. In partnership with Londrina’s Prosecutor for Environmental Affairs, this specific group undertakes all stages of civil action, from investigation to filing suit in court. Cases are studied by specialists and university students based upon modern environmental and urban law. This group’s primary areas of action include: regions of permanent preservation, public service contracts, plazas and the development of privately owned subdivisions in environmentally protected areas (which are often authorized by government agencies, but still result in environmental degradation and public health risks). The professionals from the GTA focus on proving scientific research to be used as reference for any legal proceedings filed by the GDA. Their research generally targets environmental recovery, reforestation, and water, wildlife, flora, and urban zoning. The GCA oversees public and press relations, and also develops public awareness campaigns.

Among the services MAE offers to the public are books, videos, and references about the environment, informative sessions about Londrina and the region, and information about area tourist attractions. The MAE offer excursions, walks, hiking, and adventurous activities in the areas under their watch, which function daily between 9 AM and 12 PM. There are numerous further aspects that make MAE a compelling subject for research. These include its history of development, as well as the wealth of legal, scientific and archival knowledge that has been documented over time. NGO members are also constant participants in local, regional, national, and international conferences. They produce and disseminate journalistic articles, scientific research, and practices that are based upon globally accepted concepts.
Findings

We asked, how are processes of strategic interaction imbricated within a Brazilian non-profit/non-governmental organization? We also wanted to know how such interactions formed a collective knowledge base. We present our findings as layered themes, first by displaying how members enter into and think about interactional processes, and ending with the processes that sustain the NGO. These themes are: (a) interaction as a natural and intrinsic phenomenon; (b) interaction producing collaboration circles; (c) interaction as collective action and legitimation; (d) communication promoting individual initiative and mutuality; and (e) dialogic processes.

Interaction as a Natural and Intrinsic Phenomenon

Our approach in conducting the interviews was based on exploring the conversations held during the qualitative interviews. We note that conducting in-depth interviews and questioning about the context of interactions becomes difficult since communication was analyzed as a process and not related to understanding specific duties, as we can see in the following transcripts:

“Our function as a NGO is primarily to seek interaction between all of the elements involved in the areas we work in, which are environmental issues.”

“It is important to know that no one is here for a paycheck; everyone believes in the cause, they think the same, and they want it to work out right. It is not like a company where the boss and the owner want it to work out because they want profits and the rest only do their jobs to guarantee their salary, without caring if they are really doing their best. Here we believe that an achievement for the NGO is an achievement for all of us.”

“I really believe that one of the essential reasons for a NGO is to stimulate interaction; the primary focus of our NGO is this. The NGO doesn’t exist by itself, it doesn’t offer a service, it is not a company, it doesn’t have the objective of making money.”

“There is no competition here; when I think about the interactions here, I think about everything that happens here. Here people interact because they want to; because they think it is important. Not because we are forced to.”
“Interaction here is a result of our activity, of our personal characteristics (I believe this influences a lot; we are all open to each other) and it is also a result of our ideals. We are here because we really believe and not just to get a paycheck at the end of the month.”

Interaction is thought of by the individuals as a shared action, which includes each subject’s actions in the process, capable of involving inter-agents, and goes beyond organizational activities and demands. Individuals are an integral part of the sharing process, which is constantly constructed and reconstructed depending upon their individual contributions, regardless of their official position. The opinions show the sense of detachment from being an individual when they get involved with the cause: a sense of value, an availability to serve, participate, interact, and exchange ideas and opinions with others. It is a collective pursuit.

It is not the structure that derives the organization, but rather the processes that are constantly constructed and reconstructed through each person’s contributions; in the sense that as individuals interact with others in the same organization, they lose a little bit of themselves and are changed depending upon their involvement. In their responses, those interviewed stress topics such as interaction between groups, the value of initiative, the importance of speech, the positioning of each subject in the process, and collective discourse. In these ways the interaction itself is constructed based upon the diverse meanings people develop as they talk. One interaction leads to another, adding substance, in a continuous cycle of motion where communication becomes a constantly updated process within an organization (Cooren & Taylor, 1997). Consequently, we can infer that interaction is a natural and intrinsic phenomenon for the reality of the NGO MAE.

**Interaction Producing Collaboration Circles**

Collaboration circles are cycles of continuous movements organizations develop as communities engaged in strategic conversation (Heijden, 2004). We also suggest that NGOs
should be considered to be enabling environments for communities of practice.

Conversations expand and enhance knowledge, especially when participants come from different groups, as in the production and study groups at MAE. Conversational and collaborative cycles naturally emerge as individuals progress through organizational experiences. These cycles are uninterrupted social practices and processes. The statements given by subjects interviewed for this research refer to individuals’ capacities to take initiative, which means considering an individual to be both active and pro-active.

We can see how the notion of interaction dominates the responses:

“An intern just might take apart everything or just an idea that they were thinking and just about put it into practice or construct it differently. Management meetings are open; they don’t have an agenda, so there are various topics. We try to focus the specific research groups, but everyone is free. I think that the freedom and initiative that everyone has, they must have [it] in order to maintain this rhythm; because nothing here is required, these are the differences that let interaction happen with everyone.”

“To begin with I think [...] the first thing is to come and get to know[everyone], to be introduced, bring them here, talk to the people that do the volunteer work, that do the paid work, those that are the managers. That is the beginning of the interaction process, and I see that they are already highly motivated on their own, so I think that the initial interaction is the impulse, that first thing, the catalyst that got them to get up and come get to know the NGO. I think that this is the first interaction, when talking about interaction here inside, that it is the contact that they make with the professionals from the diverse areas. They start to understand the language that is spoken here inside and starting from this is the so-called interaction process.”

“What I find interesting is that, when I came here, I started to participate here in 2009 on a project, and I assumed certain roles without really having had any previous experience with the people with whom I was working with here. So, I had already taken up some responsibilities, and I had already started to participate more actively in the organization to an extent that, even before I had officially gone to the last board meeting, I had already participated in management meetings about the same things.”

“I think, honestly, that shared responsibility is an interesting way to insert someone here, because they don’t stay away, or on the outside looking in. It implies [something] with respect to what they are doing in this organization that it is working, so they are a participant in the construction or a participant in this construction of this organization that is there, that they will be coming along”.
We perceive communication as interaction: when we need to circulate among people from other areas; to talk, interact, and exchange ideas with them. Social practices enable individuals to identify and justify meanings that are produced through interaction; meanings that are reflective of the culture and society. At the same time, new meanings are produced through a constant interactive-conversational process. It is not the content or the location of the interaction, but rather the overall context of the extended relationships at any given time that makes the process dynamic. As communication happens across multiple levels, it is essential to observe its circularity (Bateson, 1965).

Circularity can be observed in the communicational process, as communication is inherently a phenomenon with multiple, recursive levels. Such circularity manifests itself in MAE, for example, when there is a need for a particular sequence of information exchanges that involves different levels of the NGO. In order for meanings and strategy to be shared, the information must be exchanged between MAE directors, the three production and study groups, volunteers, and other stakeholders, such as the general public. Therefore, circularity can be an important concept for understanding strategic interaction through communication, as it can represent the process by which the different levels come to agree upon the definitions, perceptions, and meanings of organizational strategy.

“One of the things that people always stress heavily: Don’t just come [to be] in your group. Don’t participate just in your group’s activities, because in your group everyone speaks the same language. Now, as a biologist communicates with a law intern, as a law intern talks with a volunteer that has never studied anywhere, the message here is: exchange knowledge, get together. I say physical presence is very important. People need to be here with some constancy, because a volunteer position doesn’t guarantee that a person will be here permanently exchanging their knowledge, doing that interaction...”

“I think that proximity, between professionals, between students, is the best form of interaction for you to manage to stimulate people; even in a voluntary way, to participate, to know, to understand what the NGO’s work is. It is exactly that, that interaction is what makes things develop and not just one person as a focus, but includes the group for interaction to be, maybe to be, a little more complete.”
Freedom, as a part of collaborative interaction (Deetz, 2010) that exists in an organization, is considered to be a necessary component for members to feel stimulated to interact. This factor is essential so that different individuals, experienced in their areas of knowledge, feel free to take initiatives in terms of acting, sharing, and interacting. This interaction consists of participation in meetings, questioning of topics under discussion, an awakened interest in exceeding the frequency of activities undertaken and acted upon as an individual. Through discourse, individual positions are discussed using dialogue geared at mutually creative decisions (Deetz, 2010): working in collaboration when acting and thinking in the organization.

**Interaction As Collective Action and Legitimation**

The relationships observed strongly revealed their basis in the sharing of information between different areas, expanding individual’s knowledge. Interaction was revealed in how an individual acted in relation to another, in the multiple ways that it can be represented. Interaction was brought about by way of individual initiative. We perceived that it was practiced in different ways at MAE, which might be related to the different professional backgrounds of its members; with influence from personal and professional aspects integrating into the processes. These characteristics were learned from speech, for example, in the specific areas of social sciences and biology.

There were significant differences in understanding the nature of interaction, which suggests that there are parallels in diversity of behavior when it is practiced. In the social sciences interaction is revealed more as a transmission of knowledge, limiting it to action and reaction. In the biological sciences, it is conceived as a type of dependent relationship established between people and the physical world (nature). This second notion goes beyond
just relationships between people, and includes overcoming the barriers placed by the environments in which they are inserted. Gramaccia (2001) points out that it is precisely the actions legitimized by individuals during interaction that are used as reference and precedence for future activity. This teaches us to closely observe interactions at MAE in order to shed light on the legitimization process. Individuals’ capacities for thought, inquiry, and reflection are what sustains this process and results in actions being accepted as legitimate.

“I think that it is a division of responsibilities: as they say, you are an interaction of groups. I think, according to the NGO viewpoint, as the work is done by multidisciplinary teams, by different groups working in different areas, and you exchange knowledge, experiences, practices, all towards a common goal, that in the case here would be the defense of diffuse and collective interests.”

“It’s everything that exists in a relationship between two objects, two beings. Interaction is an action that can be direct or indirect; we can talk about a relationship between people in places like this room and also in relationships with nature. You can work on this from a micro context, like we are talking here, while at the same time we have an interaction with the wind that is entering in the window, with the air that we are breathing...”

The process of transformation of organizational meaning happens when, through collective interactions, actors legitimize their actions (Taylor, 1996). The existence of diverse areas, which are not organized or structure by a chart, reveal the possibilities for people that go beyond just sharing – observed as the predominant form of interaction in the NGO – and that instead can be understood as the action to integrate, or unite the different groups and segments that exist in the organization. This process allows for organizational learning, even though the entity is singular and large, it is formed by diverse segments that complement, relate, and communicate with each other through member interaction.

**Communication Promoting Individual Initiative and Mutuality**

The integration function that the interaction process assumes in the organization analyzed is responsible for direct influence on the existing communication process, which is
still contradictory in the opinion of members. Some of the reports point to communication as a process capable of reaching all groups and members; formally observed through channels such as email and meetings and informally through phone calls, casual encounters, dialogues and conversations, which characterize a close proximity between the inter-agents. However, other interviews give credence that the great majority of problems are due to a lack of communication; which is perceived as inefficient, unable to reach all organization members, which can come to compromise the different flows of information and knowledge.

It is important to note that the statements from individuals at MAE didn’t show a consensus as to the level of communication and information-sharing within the organization. As can be seen, some understand and perceive the organization through intense participation in its processes. They felt that the communication process reaches all groups and members; through formal channels such as email and meetings and informal channels, such as phone calls, casual encounters, and conversations. Others interviewed felt that communication was lacking and problematic: inefficient, unable to reach all members, and stifling flows of information and knowledge.

Due to this, we question if the formal and informal processes, as well as the organization’s overall official message, can be understood and agreed upon at all organizational levels and by all stakeholders. It is fundamental for the success of an organization, especially an NGO, that its messages and strategies be clearly comprehended, accepted, and supported in all areas of its activity, both internally and externally. Hence, to ensure that knowledge and recognition of strategic processes is shared, both formally and informally, the formal channels of communication must be efficient and effective in order to sustain MAE’s activities.
“But, here we have just as many formal spaces for participating in meetings, of this kind of interaction, as we do informal spaces. I talk almost every day with the majority of the people here, so that is something that happens all the time.”

“There is always someone that doesn’t know something, and this could end up hindering them because they could get help, or given an idea. I really want the communication here, that information I know could reach everyone, to happen in an efficient manner, but even so I think that everyone here is integrated.”

“Information is transmitted to all of these groups, and at least if I don’t want to and decide to block this access, the negative part of my actions, this information reaches me. Of course there are a lot of emails that circulate here and I can read them and discard [irrelevant ones], or an issue can catch my attention and I can integrate it, and react to it. But it is very efficient and enables people’s actions; I can omit it if I desire, but it reaches me, even if I am not interested.”

The NGO MAE showed consensus concerning the necessity of having individual initiative in relation to the communication that permeates organizational processes. From this perspective, we affirmed that the individuals that take advantage of communication manage to stay informed about diverse questions, or at the very least, those that are of interest to their area of expertise. This individual initiative was shown to be, once again, as an important characteristic for the organization studied, and an indispensable factor for its development.

Individual initiative is actually added onto other individual’s behavior, because interaction is a sequence of contiguous behaviors (Hawes, 1973). Interaction happens, many times, as a result of activities that depend on the knowledge of diverse professionals. In this context, the transmission of information comes to exist as a process, at least initially, if we talk about reactive interaction. This process is continuous and recurring due to the needs of day-to-day organizational practices.

The world vision for every person is altered during every interaction process, being constructed and reconstructed through the very interaction. These transformations occur during the entire process, beginning the moment in which knowledge is transmitted and stops being just the knowledge possessed by another and becomes knowledge incorporated by the individuals during the interaction process. In this perspective, involvement is a determining
condition, seeing that the social construction of meaning happens via language, symbols and behaviors intermediated by people. Thus, we suggest the need for understanding the NGO MAE as an organization where social relationships (Putnam, 1983) are possible.

“It is more natural, here the individuals are conscious of this, of the importance for us to interact, in order to acquire more information, change our way of thinking, and growing as both professionals and human beings. It is not a question of work, it is a requirement.”

“In reality, we are always discussing [things], it isn’t important where [we are]; be it in the NGO or not. This is interesting, mainly because if the NGO is perceived as a space for collective construction, as I see it, then coexisting with these people doesn’t get dull, even outside the NGO.”

Mutual interaction, clearly evident in the different processes is stimulated by the need for knowledge exchange between members of MAE. The relationships become interdependent as a function of the negotiation processes between individuals; turning each inter-agent’s participation into a constant exchange (Primo, 2005). The evolution of these individuals during this mutual interaction process, evident here through the incorporation of knowledge, is the propelling force that makes relationship construction an extension of the interaction processes.

“The idea is to always minimize reactive interaction, leaving this only for bureaucratic issues concerning NGO management and coordination, but when you refer to NGO action management, it is always pro-active, in that people always have initiative.”

“Here in the NGO I think that mutual [interaction] is what dominates, prevails.”

“I believe that it is mutual precisely because when we get together, independent of whether it is a group from a specific area or not, we develop the next steps together, in alignment with the needs.”

An organization’s structure can greatly contribute to the interaction process. At the organizational level, relationships between individuals are, many times, conditioned by diverse, inflexible factors that prevent the fluency of communication from being part of the
organization itself or capable of being managed in an interactive way. Given this scenario, the lack of a rigid organizational structure in MAE comes to stimulate the interaction in a way that allows all of its members to have full access to collective, formal, and informal meetings and encounters.

**Dialogic Processes**

Currently meetings can be attended by everyone, as well as the emails, divided only by the different research groups. The divisions are not seen as barriers to information, since any member can attend the meetings, whether they actively participate or not, and furthermore, they are able to be added onto any group’s email list.

This aspect changes the view of communication to one of allowing not just flexibility in organizational structure, but also in human relationships, which stop being instilled as part of a bureaucratic and hierarchical structure and come to be understood as indispensable for understanding an organizational as a social system. In the NGO, the stimulus for all members to participate in meetings acts as a facilitating agent not only for the interaction process, but also for the collective co-existence of the organization as a single group, which acts and is developed as such.

“We avoid changing dates/times, mainly to allow the people that go to the NGO to organize themselves as much as possible, but also to allow other people to also come. (...) There are things that we manage to build internally, from internal interaction, and from external [interaction], with society, with government. These are processes that we see as facilitating this type of relationship.”

“Well, interaction for me has to be something friendly and not so formal, like what happens here inside the NGO, because from the moment you bureaucratize the work environment a lot, at least here, you end up hindering this interaction between the people, the members.”

“It is a long process that requires everyone’s involvement.”

The interaction analyzed here can materialize in diverse manners, with dialogue being the primary form of interaction between the members of this particular organization.
Dialogical practices, studied by Barge & Little (2002) as forms of conversation, are present in practically every organizational communicative process, not just evident informally, but intensely in every formal encounter. Interaction can be experienced clearly, and meanings can be shared, through dialogue. Meanings are questioned, understood and incorporated by individuals, coming to play a part in the construction of intense, frequent, rapid, and interactive relationships that allow for a greater reflection with respect to the communication itself. This reflection, often a consequence of the informality or simultaneous nature of the interaction that comes from dialogue, can result in alterations to concepts, values, and opinions. These come to be constructed and reconstructed in the same process capable of changing the individuals themselves as they interact. In the responses, dialogue can be seen as the most frequent way the interaction process between individuals presents itself.

“But, here we have just as many formal spaces for participating in meetings, of this kind of interaction, as we do informal spaces. I talk almost every day with the majority of the people here, so that is something that happens all the time.”

“We never leave people out here. That is what people do here, that is what you can observe: everyone sitting at a table, talking, exchanging experiences, ideas, knowledge.”

“Even the conversations are important; they are essential for our work, our actions. We are always connected, (...) communication keeps circulating among everyone, from one to another. It is truly a process. All day long things happen differently, things are always changing, it doesn’t do to stay still, waiting, you always have to seek out new ways to solve problems, to communicate to others what you want, what you need. People have to understand this, if they don’t, they never solve anything, it is impossible.”

As an extension of the interaction observed in the organization, internal relationships are constant and considered to be a consequence of the relationships established among members during the interaction processes in which they are inserted. We gleaned that there existed a level of confidence and even friendship among the organization members. This differentiated it from environments where people only relate to each other professionally. In
fact, this relationship is considered by the members to be a direct and inevitable consequence of the professional relationships in the sense that they extend the internal activities to external, non-professional, and even family situations. As such, take notice that the professional relationships extend into the personal relationships, as a reflection of the interaction experienced and incorporated by everyone, extending the work environment.

“We end up confusing the professional relationships, as activist, with friendship. The relationships that we develop here inside the NGO end up being so close that they can’t just be limited to the professional arena. It is worth stressing that the NGO is a family, this comes from the trust that we give to each person, in the moment in which you work with it [trust], you can’t then disconnect it.”

“Dear me! Here we have many relationships, inside and outside of work. (...) The relationships are great; they aren’t just something about work, about the routine. This is a good thing because we talk about NGO issues in various places, in various situations; everything is connected to what we do here. This helps a lot, to have the people know each other, to have more contact, to be able to talk about something later, to call someone, even to swear at them and them at me when we need to, this is really good.”

“Things here work precisely because we know each other. I know people’s quirks, their habits; I know when they aren’t [okay], when something has happened...The relationships get to be stronger, closer.”

Relationships and closeness influence the fulfillment of professional activities. In the accounts given in the interviews, these things act most directly regarding any possible hierarchy. Hierarchy was not considered necessary for meeting deadlines or organizational activities mainly because the relationships between members are sufficient. The minimization of organizational hierarchy and bureaucracy actually further facilitate interaction, since individuals who are permitted to have more intimacy and friendship tend to interact more often and more intensely.

Understand that, for the context analyzed, the relationships based on respect and obedience that are common when individuals hold positions at different levels, such as when a boss orders and the subordinate obeys, were replaced by relationships of respect and trust. In these relationships, the people who know each other try not to disappoint each other, due to
friendship and concern, mostly coming from the greater issue they have in common: environmental causes.

“Anyways, people here have a lot of friendship, and this is really what makes the hierarchy less important. If I fail to accomplish my task I will hinder a friend of mine, not necessarily the NGO president or vice-president, or treasurer, or group director. So it is really the role of friendship that overcomes this.”

“The people here want to know each other; they want to be friends, because they want the things to go right. They want to make this a nice place to work and to make things change. Once again I will say it is important to know that no one is here for a paycheck; everyone believes in the cause, they think the same, and they want it to work out right. It is not like a company where the boss and the owner want it to work out because they want profits and the rest only do their jobs to guarantee their salary, without caring if they are really doing their best. Here we believe that an achievement for the NGO is an achievement for all of us.”

These statements display how the interaction process between individuals is a guide for behavior and actions (Gramaccia, 2001), as it is an exchange and sharing of meanings (the interaction process itself): the means to negotiate them, confront them, and finally incorporate them. The integration between different meanings coming from thoughts, attitudes, and organizational behaviors can be seen, then, as directly linked to the interaction processes that are established, followed and incorporated by an organization’s members.

“I really think that it is the relationships that make things happen here; we depend on this. The NGO objectives demand this, in our actions, our purpose. It is natural here, and doesn’t have to be formalized, everything just happens …Mainly in strengthening the coexistence and also in the results that we achieve.”

“The relationships that we establish here inside, professionally speaking, these interactions that the people have here inside, I think they make us much stronger.”

“It is what moves us. In fact, if we didn’t have everyone integrated like this, the business [organization] wouldn’t make it. I think it is a differential, and I think this is why the NGO is still here after 10 years, because everyone is cooperating and everyone is helping out.”

Interaction in the NGO MAE is considered as a way of strengthening the organization, as was shown many times by the constructed relationships.

Discussion
However, how third sector organizations are discursively, interactionally, and strategically constructed in Brazil is relatively unknown. Our study provides the first foray into analyzing interactional processes in a Brazilian third sector organization. From an empirical basis, interactions among individuals at the NGO MAE gave evidence of mutually constitutive relationship processes (Mumby, 1997). The core processes consisted of volunteers fighting for the same cause: respect for the environment. Most interesting is how this same value manifested in many different ways, as a function of the practices that each subject develops and the organizational goal of stimulating and nurturing interaction among its members. The idea is that the development and progress of the NGO MAE as a whole depends upon the knowledge of each individual.

Individuals overcome their self-seeking motivations, focusing instead on members’ involvement in relation to objectives, relationships, and reaching different communities. An organizational structure with a centralized and defined chain of command was not evident in these relationships. What was noticed was flexibility in the execution of processes as a function of teams and work groups. Dialogue emerged as a foundation for interactional processes. Bakhtin (1986, *apud* Barge & Little, 2002) analyzed conversation and its infinite meanings, in that expressions in dialogue are constantly unfolding, or rather: “An utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable” (p. 383). Conversation and dialogue, in this sense, stop being considered isolated actions (parts of a reactive interaction process) and come to be characterized as shared, transformative, and interactive actions (parts of a mutually interactive process). These processes are natural and apparent in a cycle that apparently involves: relationships between inter-agents, the speech and conversation that characterizes action, followed by a reaction in function of multiple interpretations, which makes this cycle become valuable for activating
objects that reflexively structure these interactions, and outweigh (Latour, 1994, 1996 apud Cooren & Taylor, 1997).

Organizations are favorable locations for inter-relationships, since they are in a constant state of inquiry, of pro-activeness. Studies about interactional processes allow an expansion in understanding interactions during the development of different communities that permeate the activities observed in the field, making these processes mutually dependent, and revealing them as essential to organizational life. In particular, this present study reflects upon the organization that emerges from conversations.

We close this discussion section by pointing out that interaction is a continuous and evolving process for those that actively give motion to organizational processes. The concept of interaction in this case study addressed five interconnected themes demonstrating different manifestations of interactional processes. It is natural to consider them as phenomena intrinsic to organizations, and vital for organizational existence and survival. The multiple revelations uncovered in this research demonstrate that in strategic terms, interaction is a vast concept, open to numerous interpretations sustained through analysis of interactional and dialogical processes.

There is a surge in studies in this area that can only deepen our comprehension of how organizations are constituted by communication and revealed as realities based in discursive, interational behaviors. Each is unique due to the differences and diversity found in their various contextual environments. As such, strategy can logically be understood as comprehensive organizational achievement (“Strategy as an Organizational Accomplishment”, Taylor, 2011) built upon layers of interactional processes; each with distinct points of reference that are unified through communication.

Limitations
One of the limitations that we perceived in this study is the fact that those interviewed responded about what they believe to be ideal. During the interviews we were always aware of this aspect, but even so, further research can investigate the differences between what members say and what they do at the NGO MAE. Another limitation refers to not developing research in the communities where the NGO is active, which would certainly enrich this study’s analysis. This strategy is actually planned on for the next stages of research that will be undertaken by our research group.

**Implications**

The construction of meaning is found in interactions. The communicational perspective proposes that this doesn’t just consist of processes, but creates a dynamic of interaction that constantly keeps these processes in development and reconstruction. They are continuous movements that emerge from people and which construct and reconstruct contemporary organizational environments. The interactional processes are complex and require the sense making, by way of counter-meanings, between inter-agents.

There are multiple realities in the same space, naturally occurring during the different moments experienced by the organization. What fosters change are the interactional relationships: the capacity people have to relate to each other. These relationships are no longer merely observed from their causes and effects, but instead as changes in paradigm that require organizations to have an interactive communicational practice that promotes differences and interactions between people. This phenomenon of communication is essentially socio-discursive (Marchiori, 2011).

It is distinctive to observe in the NGO MAE the desire to understand others and relationships along with the organization’s development. Also, considering its relational context, we can explore ideas about relationships and interests between different communicates and get to know how to work with them in a participatory process. This
attitude carried the organization through distinct stages of development, in which the interactions are the motive that makes it possible for individuals to live in communities.

**Conclusion**

To close, how third sector organizations are discursively, interactionally, and strategically constructed in Brazil is relatively unknown. Through our case study of a Brazilian not-for-profit focused on sustainability initiatives, we expand knowledge on organizational interactional processes as well as the communicative constitution of different Brazilian organizational environments, especially in the third (non-profit/non-governmental) sector. Because interaction is characterized as a necessary condition for organizational existence (Cooren, 2006), we analyze the multiple and layered interaction forms and map out how communication reveals itself within such an organizational environment. Based on thematic analyses of deep interviews with the entire NGO Board, we approach strategic interaction as imbricated layers of culture-centered processes–iterative, with multiple points of reference (see Taylor, 2011). We found five layered-linked themes that displayed how members entered into, thought about, and sustained interactional and dialogic processes. Our findings provide the first foray into analyzing interactional processes in a Brazilian third sector organization. It is important to keep in mind that contemporary organizations seek to have interactive communities so that people can explore and develop their own abilities, which can bring human development to its full capacity, with the only limit being what the subject plans to process and practice in their relationships.
References


