



# Narrating participation and power relations in a social inclusion program



Colette Daiute<sup>a,\*</sup>, Ralitsa S. Todorova<sup>a</sup>, Tünde Kovács-Cerović<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016, USA

<sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Cika Ljubina 18-20, Belgrade, Serbia

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This article examines how professionals with much at stake in challenging circumstances use diverse narrative genres to evaluate policies designed for them. Character mapping analyses of 156 narratives by 78 adults participating in the Roma Pedagogical Assistants reform program in Serbia used diverse narrative genres to make sense of the reform and their participation in it. Character mapping analyses indicated that participants conformed to professional dimensions of the program with relatively constrained character expressions in autobiographical narratives in contrast to their expansive and psychologically rich expressions in third person narratives of a Roma child. Results indicate that narrating is a flexible cultural tool for mediating individual–societal relations, with implications for research and practice design.

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## 1. Introduction

When people narrate actual and imagined experience, they interact with diverse contexts. Speakers and writers interact with society – nation, cultural groups, institutions, and individuals – especially as those with influence impose or imply expectations relevant to narrators and their purposes (Bakhtin, 1986; Bamberg, 2004; Billig, 1995). Language socialization for development involves learning over time what is worth narrating, what is not, and what is relevant to different settings and audiences. Power is not, however, a one-way process. As mediators of human interaction, symbolic discourses, like narrative language, are created in cultures allowing for a range of dynamic relations, not only oppressive functions of master narratives (Foucault, 2001) but also counter narratives (Solis, 2004) and complex interactions in daily life (Daiute, 2014). Speakers and writers may reproduce norms about sanity, sexual behavior (Foucault, 2001), citizenship (Billig, 1995), and self-presentation (Coffman, 1981). Narrators also use qualities of genres, defined as discursive practices integrating forms and contexts to interact with others (Bazerman, 2004). For example, inherent in fiction genres is that an “I” character is not (necessarily) the author. Implications of such qualities of genres occur interactively as though each text – extended novel or turn in conversation – is an “utterance” embedded in discursive practices of education, politics, and social life (Bakhtin, 1986). In this way, narrative features can be resources for engaging critically and creatively with environments and their social structures (Fairclough, 2010; Nelson, 1998; Zittoun, 2006). With close examination of linguistic features, contemporary discourse analysis offers theory, methods, and findings about the wily nature of narrative as relational and developmental performance, thereby advancing beyond a reduction of narrator to narrative (Lamb, 2013). The present analysis extends that theoretical

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 212 817 8711.

E-mail addresses: [cdaiute@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:cdaiute@gc.cuny.edu) (C. Daiute), [Ralitsa.s.todorova@gmail.com](mailto:Ralitsa.s.todorova@gmail.com) (R.S. Todorova), [tkovacs@f.bg.ac.rs](mailto:tkovacs@f.bg.ac.rs) (T. Kovács-Cerović).

perspective with a focused examination of language in a situation with much at stake for individuals, communities, nations, and a region.

The following two narratives indicate the urgency of circumstances where the study occurred, the importance of intervention, and the role of narrating as an interpretive medium, which we observe by analyzing the differences within and between the two narratives. With the first narrative, a young male in the first cohort of the focal education reform program responded to a request to narrate the journey to becoming a Roma Pedagogical Assistant.

*When I realized that children from the Roma settlement do not know to read, it moved me and motivated to take this job. At that time I already had some experience of work with the NGOs in PPP (Preparatory Preschool Program). My family was behind me, supporting me to undertake this step.*

With this second narrative, the same participant responded to a request to narrate observations of a Roma child in education.

*When I visited the family [family name] I witnessed the tragic circumstances: the father was dead and the old grandmother had to take care of the family although she had no financial means to do it in an adequate way. I had to undertake some urgent measures: I have informed the school collaborator – Roma mediator and a collaborator at the city level. They instructed me what can be done. Three of the children have been moved to the shelter where they could get food and other care. The next day I visited them and saw that they are happy in that environment with other children.*

This article considers how analyzing characters and character enactments in such diverse narrative genres offers insights into narrative meaning as relevant to an education reform. After describing the context of this inquiry and explaining what is at stake for the participants – Roma Pedagogical Assistants (PAs) in Serbia – we present the theoretical and practical foundations of research on the use of narrative genres to mediate complex challenging circumstances, like those where the Roma live. The article then presents research questions, design, and analyses of PAs' uses of diverse narrative genres to mediate the reform. The discussion considers theoretical and practical implications of the PAs' strategic and flexible uses of narrating as a mechanism of socio-political engagement and change.

## 2. Narrating reform

Roma are the most marginalized ethnic minority across Europe, where the Roma population is estimated at approximately 10 million people (European Commission, 2004), concentrated in Central, Eastern and Southern European countries including Bulgaria, Macedonia, Slovakia, Romania, Serbia, Hungary, Spain, Greece and Turkey (The Council of Europe, 2013). Although living in and migrating across Europe since the middle ages, contemporary Roma are described as living on the margins of society throughout Europe today (Brown et al., 2015). Roma are often segregated in extremely poor and often unregulated settlements that lack electricity, plumbing and other staples of modern life (Duvnjak et al., 2010). Those issues are compounded by extreme discrimination against Roma people, pushing them further afield of participating in mainstream institutions, like schooling (McGarry, 2012; Ram, 2013; Roma Education Fund, 2010). The paucity of basic resources combined with discrimination and segregation renders participating in education, employment, and politics beyond the community extremely challenging, if not impossible (Duvnjak et al., 2010).

Reports from Serbia indicate relatively low Roma participation in education in the early 2000s: 4% in pre-school, 70% of school aged children in school, 50% continuing beyond 4th grade, 10% of those completing 8th grade continuing on to secondary education; gaps are not made up by vocational education, as only 6.2% were enrolled in vocational training (Roma Education Fund, 2010; Rostas, 2012). As in all post-socialist countries, the situation of Roma in Serbia deteriorated somewhat during the transition period of the 90s (Kovács-Cerović & Grawe, 2007). The Roma in ex-Yugoslavia were also affected by the war in ways that were similar to circumstances in other countries in the region (Burnett et al., 2005). Reasons for low attendance in education stem in large part from extreme poverty, which limits Roma access to basics like food, clothing and books. Moreover, the history of exclusion remains, as Roma communities cannot easily offer well-educated and successful role models to their youth, and majority teachers and students continue to reject Roma students in subtle and explicit ways (Kovač-Cerović et al., 2013). As an excluded minority group, their narrating about reform is by definition operating from a minority perspective. The Roma PA Program is designed as a means of social inclusion.

Preparations for the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015) (<http://www.romadecade.org/article/decade-declaration/9240>) involved creating the Roma PA program in Serbia and other countries in the region, with leadership and support by the Open Society Foundation's network beginning in 1998. The Roma PA Program in Serbia became an example of an innovation successfully scaled up from an initial five PAs beginning in the early 2000s, to 25 by 2006, and, after a successful evaluation, to 50 in 2009 and 178 in 2010 with various sources of funding over time. In parallel, the status of the PAs became increasingly acknowledged and regulated, as part of the wider socially inclusive education agenda in Serbia developed from 2008 to 2012 and ultimately supported by the Ministry of Education (Kovács-Cerović et al., 2014). Instituted with national and municipal political, economic, and social supports, the Roma PA role involves a legally regulated employment status in schools, requiring candidates to have at least secondary education and participating in in-service training financed by the national budget and matching funds from international organizations.

In their role as paid assistants in public schools and liaisons with Roma parents, the PAs assume multiple, if not, potentially contentious, positions of influence and resource across Serbian society (Baucal, 2014). After more than a decade of gradually increasing support, training, and implementation, there were 174 employed PAs in schools across Serbia at the time data for this analysis were collected (November–December 2012, Daiute et al., 2013). Recently the PA program was

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