

# The Heroes of the Pandemic: On the Discursive Construction of ‘the Healthcare Workers’ Collective during the COVID-19 Crisis<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Besides its impact in health, economics, and politics, the COVID-19 pandemic was the source of phenomena of a discursive nature, specifically regarding the solutions found by societies to make sense of the crisis caused by the uncontrolled spread of the virus. This article analyzes from a socio-semiotic perspective the construction process of the collective identity of “the healthcare workers” during the pandemic. After generally introducing semiotics as the discipline interested in meaning-making and signification, the article studies four semiotic mechanisms present in the discursive construction of any collective identity. It then moves on to its main goal: the analysis of the functioning of those four mechanisms in the specific case of “the healthcare workers,” a collective identity that, since the beginning of 2020, has been central in the narratives that emerged around the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, it should render visible the semiotic mechanisms of segmentation, actorialization, generalization, and axiologization.

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## 1. Introduction

In January 2020, a virus – until then unknown to the scientific community – became global news due to its high contagiousness and rapid rate of spread. Originally considered as a Chinese problem – specifically, of the Huabei province and the city of Wuhan – after the first infections took place in Italy in February of that same year, the threat became more real for the Western world, first for Europe and, subsequently, for the Americas. That is how the *novel coronavirus*, colloquially and simply known as “coronavirus”, the cause of the COVID-19 illness and of the longest periods of lockdown and confinement in recent history, came under the spotlight of the media, governments, academics and citizens. 2020 was undoubtedly the “year of the coronavirus.”

Beyond the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health, economic and political domains, it was also the source of a series of phenomena of a *discursive* nature, particularly regarding the how societies *made sense* of this crisis. These phenomena are relevant to researchers working in the fields of discourse studies and semiotics – the discipline that examines processes of signification and circulation of meaning within the social sphere. To mention a few examples, a phenomenon of utmost interest for such an approach is that of the construction of the coronavirus as *an enemy*, which in case was even represented with anthropomorphic features such as faces, gestures and intentionality, with whom humanity is *at war* (Moreno Barreneche 2020a). Although the coronavirus certainly exists as a biological entity, its propagation has been accompanied by a series of processes of textual production in which that entity – one that is invisible to the human eye – has been transformed by societies around the globe into something *meaningful* for them.

A second phenomenon of discursive nature linked to the COVID-19 pandemic is that of the construction and use on a discursive level of narratives and imaginaries linked to specific collective actors. These actors are then given a role in the narrative *plot* of the pandemic. Within the broader attempts to make sense of an unprecedented situation that posed a significant threat to normality and the *status quo*, of particular interest were the causal explanations in the form of blame attribution (Moreno Barreneche 2020b) – to start with, several actors used the category ‘the Chinese’ to assign responsibility to *a whole national culture* for the spread of the virus<sup>2</sup>; subsequently, once the pandemic expanded around the globe, and lockdown measures had been taken in numerous countries, repeated references to the group of ‘the reckless’ – those that denied the existence of a pandemic and did not respect

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<sup>2</sup> As an example, a picture of a Donald Trump’s printed speech was major news in March 2020. In the picture, it can be seen how Trump manually replaced the prefix ‘corona’ that was printed in the text with a handwritten ‘China,’ to directly refer to the Chinese origin of the virus.

their government's measures and recommendations – started to circulate, reaching its peak with young Americans unwilling to stop partying arguing that “if I get corona, I get corona” (Noor 2020).

Moreover, depending on the country and the region, other collectives were also used on the discursive level as scapegoats, both by the media, politicians and even citizens in their efforts to make sense of the crisis that the world has been living since the beginning of 2020. In the Southern Cone of Latin America, a narrative quickly emerged in March 2020 attributing blame to the collective of ‘the posh’ [*los chetos*], a disdainful mode of referring to the wealthiest groups of society, for the introduction of the virus in countries such as Argentina and Uruguay, given that they could afford to travel to Europe and, upon their return, spread the disease to their countries of residence (Abdala 2020).

As it can be seen, multiple interesting discursive phenomena took place linked to the sanitary crisis caused by the COVID-19 disease. Some of them consisted in constructing specific roles that allowed the articulation of narratives to make sense of the crisis, such as an enemy to defeat, someone to blame for the pandemic (given that ‘nature’ cannot really be blamed, as it is not a moral agent), a victim (humanity) that must make a sacrifice by renouncing *normal life* and social relations, etc. In this general context, another collective actor that was discursively constructed through specific images, narratives, testimonies, imaginaries and other signifying mechanisms was that of *the healthcare workers*. This collective subject encompasses doctors, nurses, paramedics, stretcher-bearers and ambulance drivers, amongst many other social roles that belong to the professional domain of ‘healthcare’ and that, for this reason, are already known by the citizenry. However, during the pandemic, besides being clearly identified as a group in the form of a collective with a distinct identity, these professional roles underwent *a positive valorization*: they were the “heroes without capes” (France 24 2020; La Nación 2020; United Nations 2020) in a narrative in which the enemy was a natural agent that – through the mediation of the metaphor of war that has been hegemonic during the pandemic – needs to be fought on “the frontline” (Time 2020; El País 2020).

From a semiotic framework – specifically, from a socio-semiotic approach – this article aims at identifying the mechanisms through which the collective identity of ‘the healthcare workers’ has been discursively constructed within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. With this goal in mind, the first section briefly addresses social semiotics’ core aims and tenets. The second section consists of a conceptualization of the discursive construction of collective identities based on four semiotic mechanisms – segmentation, actorialization, generalization and axiologization. Finally, the third and final section studies the discursive construction of the collective identity of ‘the healthcare workers’ during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Semiotics and the quest for meaning within the social sphere

Both Saussure and Peirce centered their work on the study of signs. This focus has given rise to a simplistic conception, hegemonic for decades, of semiotics as the ‘science of signs’ and of a mostly *descriptive* character. However, following the theoretical and methodological expansion of the discipline over recent decades as a result of its attempt to gain autonomy and specificity, the object of study is currently not any longer conceived of as the analysis of signs and sets of signs – i.e., texts *stricto sensu* – but, rather, as the multiple, heterogeneous and complex processes of signification and meaning-making that occur within the socio-cultural sphere (Hénault 2012; Marrone 2018; Verón 1989). As Eliseo Verón (1988: 125) argues, “every social phenomenon is, in one of its constitutive dimensions, a process of sense-making.” This approach places within semiotics’ field of interest not only the study of textual *corpora* clearly delimited and empirically accessible (such as audiovisual spots, literature, political propaganda, etc.), but also dimensions of a more *existential nature* (Fontanille 2015; Landowski 2012). In fact, for Eric Landowski (2012: 129), the aim of semiotics is to “better understand how, under which conditions and through which procedures our presence in the world becomes meaningful.”

A constructivist premise underlies semiotic research: to a great extent, social reality is *constructed* in intersubjective processes of signification and negotiation of meaning (Verón 1988). Such an account aims at overcoming realist, positivistic and materialist accounts of social reality; its purpose is to study *meaning in action* by scrutinizing the multiple and heterogeneous dynamics of meaning-making that characterize everyday life. In his ethnographic studies and drawing on Max Weber’s work, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 5) championed a semiotic account of culture. Accordingly, “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.” Therefore, culture is a system defined by complex processes of production, distribution and consumption of meaning, the study of which requires, rather than a quantitative and mechanical approach, a work of *social semantics* – i.e., an interpretation of a group’s cultural practices as if these were texts – to grasp their meaning and the sense these have for those who carry them out.

Within this broad understanding of culture, social semiotics is conceived of as the specific branch of general semiotics whose specificity is defined by its focus of interest: *social* phenomena, mainly in the form of practices (Demuru 2017; Dondero 2017; Floch 1990; Fontanille 2008) and interactions (Landowski 1997; 2016a). Social semiotics is currently interested in studying collective memory (Demaria 2006; Violi 2014); conflict (Mazzucchelli 2010); space (Giannitrapani 2013; Marrone 2013); interactions (Landowski 2016a) and alterity (Landowski 1997), amongst many other

phenomena, generally and traditionally conceived of as natural, given or pre-social, from another optic, i.e., under the presumption that they are rather socio-cultural constructions that stem from discursive phenomena and from the circulation of meaning within webs of signification that are intersubjective. Eliseo Verón – who was particularly interested in political discourse (Verón 1987; 1989) and the phenomenon of mediatization (Verón 1994; 1997; 1998) – argues that “the semiotic outlook is one that looks at the interstices with the aim of reconstructing sense-making within the inter-discursive networks of our [modern] societies” (Verón 1989: 138).

In short, given the overlapping of their objects of study, current social semiotics conceives of itself as in an intimate relationship with anthropology and sociology. Nevertheless, its focus is centered specifically on meaning-making and signification, as these phenomena constitute its object of study.

### 3. A semiotic approach to the discursive construction of collective identities

After having introduced the main tenets of social semiotics, this section discusses a number of mechanisms that characterize the discursive construction of collective identities. If social semiotics is interested in studying meaning-making as it takes place in intersubjective, everyday life practices, then grasping how perception of reality is mediated by certain categories of meaning seems to be an object of clear interest for the discipline. Hence, to properly grasp the discursive phenomena of this nature, like the one that interests us here, a combined social and cognitive approach seems necessary: making sense of social reality is a process that depends on mechanisms of a cognitive nature.

The argument that follows has its point of departure in one of the core ideas of so-called *cognitive* semiotics: an individual's perception of the world, both external and internal, has a *narrative* articulation, i.e., it is based on a *principle of narrativity*, according to which “narrativity constitutes the form of meaning” (Paolucci 2012: 303). As this principle was postulated concomitantly both by semioticians and cognitive scientists (Paolucci 2012), cognitive semiotics aims at articulating the two theoretical fields and puts forward the hypothesis according to which perceived experience is organized through the mechanisms used for the creation of stories, i.e., storytelling. This process includes the creation of actors with specific roles in the plots that are constructed. As Claudio Paolucci (2012: 300) argues, cognitive semiotics aims at understanding “how narrativity can influence, modulate and transform the way in which one conceives of cognition.” As the author argues, the most recent developments within cognitive sciences are closely related to those within semiotics.

Given its constructivist character, one of the central tenets of semiotics is anti-essentialism, i.e., the belief that meaning is not given, but that rather emerges through the establishment of *differences* (Eco 1976; Hjelmslev 1943; Violi 2017). In linguistic terms, this means that a word becomes meaningful for a given culture based on an opposition to other terms that differ from it. In socio-cultural terms, this premise also applies to the discursive construction of collective identities – these are units of meaning also based on the establishment of certain borders between social actors, which are conceived of and imagined as different from each other based on specific processes of a semiotic character (Moreno Barreneche 2020c).

As it happens with every distinction between concepts, the establishment of boundary types within the social realm is arbitrary, i.e., it is neither natural nor given. As political theorists Chantal Mouffe (2005) and Ernesto Laclau (2005) have argued in their research on political discourse, the social field has an inescapable antagonistic dimension. This dimension consists of a conflict between collective identities that were constructed based on a dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Similarly, Verón (1987) argues that politics is the discursive field in which the management of collective identities in the long term takes place; hence, according to the author, the field has an inescapable adversarial logic.

The mechanism of the discursive (and imaginary) construction of collective identities is not exclusive of the field of politics – it can also be found in everyday life, a domain in which collective actors are constructed permanently to help organize the perceived world in narrative terms. For example, one frequently finds references to ‘the politicians’ as a general, homogeneous and clearly delimited category of people as a way of making sense of social phenomena, such as when establishing a cause-effect relation based on the belief that politicians – all of them – are corrupt or liars. Something similar occurs with other categories of meaning linked to collective identities, many of them highly problematic not only with regards to their segmentation, but also to their discursive valorization, such as ‘foreigners’ or ‘immigrants’ (Bauman 2016; Moreno Barreneche 2020d).

How are these categories linked to collective identities constructed in discourse, so that they can be employed as means to make sense of social reality in narrative terms? In what follows, four mechanisms of a semiotic nature are introduced and discussed – segmentation, actorialization, generalization and axiologization. Although for analytic reasons they will be introduced in a successive manner, all these mechanisms are synchronic; hence, the discursive construction of collective identities is a complex phenomenon in which the multiple dimensions are interlinked and interact permanently.

The first mechanism to take into account is that of *segmentation*, i.e., the delimitation of a portion of meaning (a semantic field) that is considered as one that differs from other portions and that leads to the identification of the given collective identity as distinct and unique. This mechanism is based on the structural premise of semiotics according to which meaning and sense are not given, but rather emerge relationally, i.e., from sets of oppositions. As Patrizia Violi (2017: 27) argues, “single elements do not have an absolute, ontological value in themselves that is defined once and forever in essential terms; they gain their value and meaning only in the confrontation of what they are not, i.e., in the positional value of a relation with an Other.” This anti-essentialist premise is also assumed by researchers that have studied the construction of identities in the political domain (Laclau 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2005).

When segmenting the *continuum* of all possible collective identities, identifying a particular one as distinct from others implies an arbitrary process of segmentation that follows a logic already identified by Louis Hjelmslev (1943) and systematized in semiotic terms by Umberto Eco in *A Theory of Semiotics*. In the book, Eco (1976: 67) asks: “What, then, is the meaning of a term?” and argues that “from a semiotic point of view it can only be a cultural unit,” which he conceives of as “a semantic unit inserted into a system.” Therefore, for Eco (1976: 66), “every attempt to establish what the referent of a sign is forces us to define the referent in terms of an abstract entity which moreover is only a cultural convention.” The meaning of a term – including more general categories of meaning such as ‘the politicians,’ ‘the youth’ and ‘the foreigners’ needs to be looked for in the differences that are established between that concept and other concepts, which are considered by a given linguistic community as different from each other. Hence, as Eco (1976: 73) argues, “a cultural unit ‘exists’ and is recognized insofar as there exists another one which is opposed to it.” This is a premise that can be clearly visualized in a table that Eco recovers from Hjelmslev’s work (Figure 1), in which the Danish linguist compares the different modes in which Danish, German and French deal with the boundaries within concepts.

trae	Baum	arbre
	Holz	bois
skov	Wald	forêt

**Figure 1.** Meaning as a cultural unit. Source: Eco (1976: 73).

In the table, it can be seen how meaning – conceived of as a cultural unit defined not by looking at its reference, but by taking into account its oppositions to other concepts – varies from one culture to another (in this case, linguistic cultures). As Eco argues quoting Schneider (1976: 67), “in every culture ‘a unit ... is simply anything that is culturally defined and distinguished as an entity. It may be a person, place, thing, feeling, state of affairs, sense of foreboding, fantasy, hallucination, hope or idea.” When studying the discursive construction of collective identities within a given community, identifying a unit of meaning as different from others reflects this mechanism of conceptual segmentation in relational terms (Arfuch 2005). We shall see in the following section how this mechanism functions in the specific case of ‘the healthcare workers.’

Once segmentation has taken place, a process of *actorialization* begins. This consists in constructing in narrative, discursive and audiovisual terms the identity that has been segmented. As semioticians have argued, every social discourse is organized in narrative terms based on relations between actors that fulfill specific roles within the plot. After the *continuum* of all possible identities has been segmented into differential units, these need to be somehow *materialized* so they can become tangible and empirically recognizable. In semiotic terms, they must undergo a process of *figurativization*, which takes place through various mechanisms of *semiosis*, i.e., the linking of a specific content to a set of units in the dimension of the expression, such as names, images, descriptions, stories and graphic visual identities (logos, colors), amongst multiple other semiotic resources. For example, this mechanism is clearly visible in the construction of political parties or groups: once the (blurry) boundaries of the group have been set through an identification with a given set of ideas and programmes, a complex system of semiotic mechanisms must be put in place to render the group’s identity tangible; this semiotic work includes creating a name, a logo, flags, posters, specific colors, campaigns, jingles, etc. The result of this mechanism is that the collective actor, whose unity is purely imaginary and arbitrary, becomes more tangible through a process of *semiosis* in which a connection is established between a unit from the dimension of the content and one (or more) units from the dimension of the expression.

At the same time that collective identities undergo the process of actorialization, they normally experience one of *generalization*. In this third process, some common features that are imagined as *essential* of that identity are attributed to every individual imagined as a member of it. In politics, formulas such as “left-wing voters are such and such” and “right-wing voters are such and such” are frequent and leave little margin for internal diversity – a diversity that undoubtedly exists. In social terms, attributive generalizations such as “politicians are such and such” and “foreigners are such and such” are frequent.

It was argued before that units of meaning linked to collective social actors are not referential – i.e., they do not have a concrete reference outside discourse. Therefore, collective actors are constructed and consolidated through this general and imaginary characterization in which a set of generic attributes (Appiah 2018) is imagined as valid also for the members of that group. This process is characterized by a tendency to simplification that, even if it might be extremely dangerous in socio-political terms, nevertheless occurs and has a substantial impact in how collective identities are imagined and conceived. The most salient example of this mechanism might be the collective identity of 'the people,' particularly as it is employed in populist discourse (Laclau 2005; Moreno Barreneche 2019). As Verón (1998: 128) argues, "a social discourse, whatever its nature or type might be, *does not reflect anything*; it is only a checkpoint [*punto de pasaje*] for meaning."

Once a collective identity has been segmented, and while it is constructed as an actor and some of its attributes imagined as essential are postulated and applied in a generic manner to every member of that identity, a fourth process takes place – arguably, the most interesting of them for social semiotics: that of *axiologization*, also called *valorization*. In semiotic terms, *axiologization* can be defined following Anne Hénault (2012: 275) as "the static valorization of a given universe of discourse." This definition refers to the attribution of value to units of meaning by recurring to a specific value system. Following Greimas and Courtés (1979), every semantic category can be *axiologized* through an investment of positive and negative values according to a passion dimension that is articulated as a lineal axis oscillating between the *euphoric* (that what is valued positively) and the *dysphoric* (what is values negatively). This attribution of value takes place mainly in the form of an attribution of connotative marks – both positive and negative – to the actors that are involved in the narrative plot. In this process, the semantic categories linked to collective identities are invested of moral and ideological value. According to Mouffe (2005: 5), this *moralization* is one of the most visible features of the political in the contemporary era: "the we/they, instead of being defined with political categories, is now established in moral terms," i.e., as a struggle between *good* and *evil*. These two units of meaning are contingent, as they are the product of a social construction throughout history; as a result, they are strongly loaded in ideological terms and, hence, do not seem to be useful to capture the complexity of social reality in a proper manner.

The four semiotic mechanisms discussed in this section – segmentation, actorialization, generalization and *axiologization* – belong to the very ground of the discursive creation of collective identities. The products of this process – the identities – are then emplotted into narratives and discourses as those that take the lead regarding the plot of the social world – a plot that also has a narrative articulation. In the following section we will examine how these four mechanisms have been in action in the discursive construction of 'the healthcare workers' collective, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

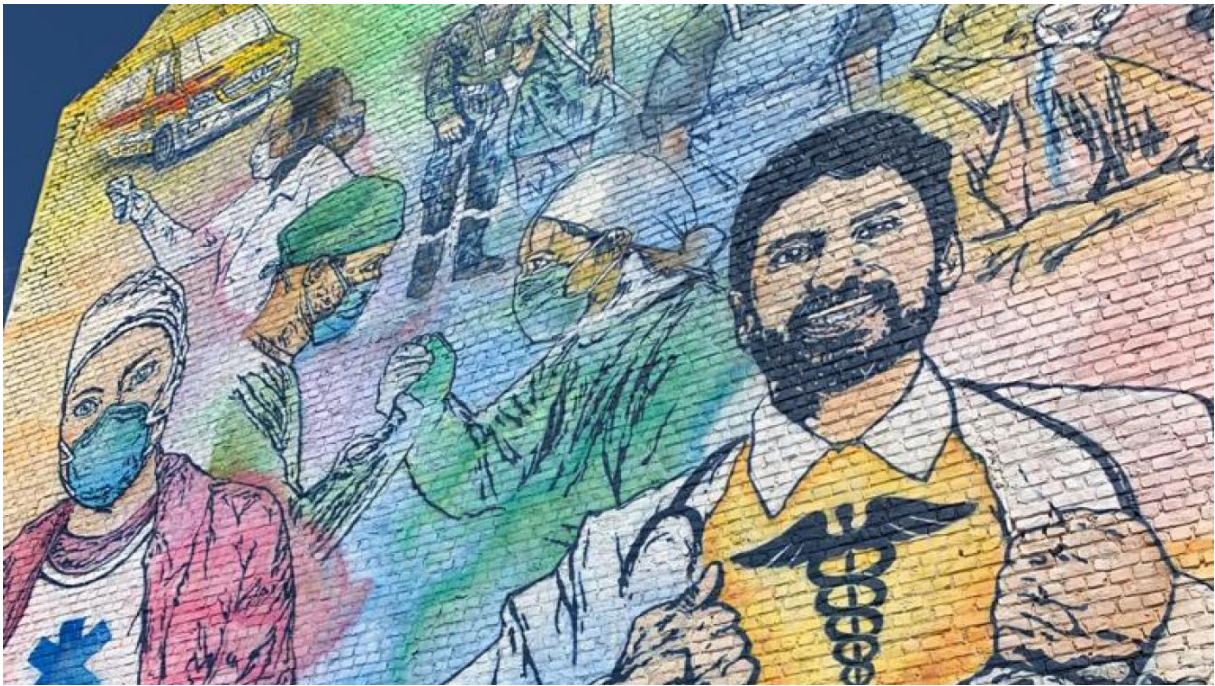
#### 4. The discursive construction of 'the healthcare workers' collective

Before we begin with our study, it seems relevant to mention a key principle of social semiotics, one that is intimately linked to a still ongoing debate within general semiotics – the one concerning whether the research focus should be set on structures or on processes. It was argued above that one of semiotics' core tenets – and, particularly, of its social branch – holds that social reality does not consist of a given or pre-social essence, but that, rather, is the product of intersubjective processes of construction and reproduction that occur through a negotiation of meaning between social actors. Stemming from this premise, meaning started to be strongly tied to the concept of *interaction*. This move has led social semiotics to stop focusing exclusively on studying signifying *systems*, and concentrate on analyzing the *processes* through which meaning emerges (Landowski 2014; Verón 1988). In line with this disciplinary shift, the focus of what follows will be set primarily on the *process of construction* of the collective identity of 'the healthcare workers' during the pandemic.

Any research in the field of semiotics implies dealing with a *corpus* of empirically perceivable materials that allow researchers to postulate the principles that underlie



**Figure 2.** Mural in tribute to the healthcare workers in Lisbon, Portugal. Source: Pacheco-Miranda and Pinto da Costa (2020).



**Figure 3.** Mural in tribute to the healthcare workers in Lisbon, Portugal. Source: Pacheco-MiranMural in tribute to the healthcare workers in Brussels, Belgium Source: Nord Éclair (2020).

the possibility of signification. Therefore, studying the discursive construction of 'the healthcare workers' collective requires gathering a set of materials; these will allow us to study how meaning emerges around this specific collective actor. However, in contrast to what normally happens with a *corpus* composed of texts that are more or less closed and autonomous, the process of our interest is open and *in vivo*; hence, its elements cannot be limited to a single matter; rather, they can be found in expressions of a different nature that span from representations produced *from outside* the collective – such as those created by the media, political actors and artists – or *internally*, such as declarations done on behalf or in the name of the collective, videos thanking citizens for their support, or practices and acts with a political meaning. Therefore, the construction of a *corpus* to study what we want to study here seems to be a complex task.

With the aim of building a *corpus*, in what follows four products – manifestations of meaning, in semiotic terms – will be considered: (1) the creation of visual representations of the collective (Figures 2, 3 and 4); (2) the rounds of applause thanking them for their work (Figure 5); (3) a set of generic and illustrative journalistic texts, taken from the press (El País 2020; France 24 2020; La Nación 2020; Time 2020; United Nations 2020); and, finally, (4) actions carried out by individuals that identify themselves with this collective (The Brussels Times 2020). Hence, we are dealing with a heterogeneous *corpus* that is composed of images, texts and practices – all of them objects of interest for social semiotics.

This heteroclite *corpus*, made of diverse types of texts (in a broad sense), to which the reader could certainly add innumerable other texts, allows us to identify certain mechanisms that can be postulated as those underlying the construction of ‘the healthcare workers’ collective actor. To start with, in Figures 3, 4 and 5 there is a prominent reference to the cultural content of the *super(heroic)*; in Figure 3, this content is brought to life through a *gesture* – opening the shirt to reveal the hidden heroic identity – normally done by superheroes; in Figure 4, this figurativization takes place through a visual juxtaposition that overlaps the bodies of well-known superheroes with those of the healthcare workers; in Figure 5, it takes place through the use of the word ‘heroes’ [*helden/héros*]. Moreover, the fact that citizens developed the habit of applauding this collective from their balconies or windows every evening, together with the references made to this collective by numerous actors from the public sphere, such as the media, politicians, etc. (France 24 2020; La Nación 2020; United Nations 2020), evidence that, underlying enunciation, there is a given collective identity that is assumed as *unitary* and *distinct* from other collective identities. Something similar occurs in those cases in which specific individuals enunciate on behalf of or in the name of that collective, as we will see subsequently.



Figure 4. Mural in tribute to the healthcare workers in Sint-Martens-Lennik, Belgium. Source: Metro (2020).



**Figure 5.** Announcement that circulated in social media in March 2020, inviting Belgian citizens to applaud the healthcare workers. Source: La Libre (2020).

Let us start by examining the mechanism of *segmentation*. During the global COVID-19 health crisis, the world witnessed the emergence of new collectives, such as 'those infected by the virus,' 'those infected by the virus that recovered,' 'the elderly that were infected and that recovered,' amongst many others. Within this broader phenomenon, the collective of 'the health-

care workers' is not new: this collective identity existed in the imaginary of societies around the world prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. With regards to its boundaries, the segmentation of this identity is carried out in terms of a professional sector – healthcare; especially, physical health. It is this sphere of professional action what distinguishes the collective identity of 'the healthcare workers' from other collective identities, such as those of 'the businesspeople,' 'the politicians' and 'the university professors.' Nevertheless, all these social categories have in common the fact that their grouping implies postulating *something* that allows a segmentation of a collective out of the addition of multiple individuals. Regarding the extension of this particular collective identity, it includes men and women working as doctors, nurses, general hospital workers, ambulance drivers and any other professional roles linked to healthcare. Therefore, as we are dealing with a collective identity that preexisted the narratives that emerged to make sense of the pandemic, up to this point there does not seem to be anything new.

Things get interesting for semioticians when scrutinizing the process of *actorialization*. Although this mechanism linked to the collective identity of our interest also existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this new context facilitated the emergence of new modes of actorial construction. Before the pandemic, the mode of representing a healthcare worker could consist, for example, in using a particular type of clothing – a face mask, an isolation [hazmat] suit, gloves or a white tunic – or its association with particular instruments, such as a stethoscope hanging around the neck. But *during* the pandemic, new mechanisms emerged to *bring this collective identity to life*. One of those mechanisms consisted of associating the collective actor with the idea that, within the narrative of war that has been hegemonic during the sanitary crisis (Cassandro 2020; Testa 2020), healthcare workers were "in the frontline" on the battlefield (El País 2020; Time 2020).

Therefore, this collective identity saw its meaning strengthened by drawing on an association with other semantic units that already exist in the cultural repertoire of a society: healthcare workers have always been in the frontline fighting diseases – particularly those with a high infection rate. But it is only now, in a context that *feels* different, given the restrictions imposed by lockdown and confinement measures, that this characteristic that was until now not highlighted in an emphatic manner, acquires a special visibility as a result of a repeated association with soldiers and with (super)heroes. As a result, a new identification of the collective identity occurs based on a feature that, in the context of a global pandemic, becomes relevant and particularly meaningful.

Besides this association, other mechanisms of actorialization of this specific collective were put into play. One of them, of utmost interest for a semiotic and constructivist outlook, is that of the daily rounds of applause that citizens organized in multiple countries around the globe as a mode of recognizing and celebrating the efforts and hard work carried out by this collective social actor – in numerous countries hard hit by the virus such as Italy, Spain, France, Belgium and Argentina (to mention a just a few in which this phenomenon occurred), during the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020 there were initiatives spontaneously organized by citizenry that quickly lead to the creation of a *tradition*: at the end of the workday – the time varied from country to country – many people would go out onto their balconies or stand in their windows in order to pay tribute to the healthcare workers while, at the same time, respecting the confinement rules.

Besides the constructed nature of this collective practice that quickly became a tradition (albeit a temporal one), of interest for a semiotic perspective is the role that an imagined collective actor fulfils as an *invisible receiver* of the applauses: to applaud is a mode of sign production that expresses a content, normally linked to a message of approval (although it can also be one of irony); if applauses are conceived of as an act of enunciation, to whom were they addressed every evening during the first months of 2020? When citizens from country C went out onto their balconies or stood before their windows to applaud the efforts and sacrifices made by the healthcare workers, who are they thinking of? Are they thinking of a particular healthcare worker that they know personally? Are they addressing the representations of the collective actor that circulated in the media during that period? From a semiotic perspective, given that they are a mode of sign production (Eco 1976), applauses become a meaningful resource that contributes to the creation of the collective actor – applauding *the healthcare workers* renders this collective identity, which is one already known by those who applaud, more tangible by worshipping it through applause, an action from the domain of everyday life, also already known by those who carry it out, albeit normally linked to contexts that are not quotidian, such as theatres, concerts, etc.

In terms of actorialization, during the COVID-19 pandemic a series of interesting situations of self-actorialization occurred, that is, acts of enunciation carried out by individ-

uals who regarded themselves as part of 'the healthcare workers' collective, with the aim of highlighting the nature of that identity as unitary. An example of this mechanism is that of the rounds of applause by healthcare workers dedicated to the citizenry for their staying home and reducing their social contacts. Even audiovisual materials were produced in multiple hospitals around the world with messages of recognition, as in the Belgian city of Louvain (The Brussels Times 2020). But some of these acts of self-actorialization were implemented as a means of gaining strength in the sending of political messages, generally of discontent and dissatisfaction, such as when in May 2020, Belgian Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès visited the Saint-Pierre Hospital in Brussels and was received by two rows of healthcare workers in their uniforms showing her their backs (Hope 2020; Thomas 2020). Through these actions, which have a clear semiotic component, multiple individuals that self-identify as part of 'the healthcare workers' contributed not only to the actorialization of the collective identity, but also to communicate on its behalf.

With regards to the semiotic mechanism of *generalization*, it is interesting to consider how certain specific features resulting from the process of actorialization – and, as it will be discussed below, of axiologization – gave way to a situation in which certain features associated with the collective identity of 'the healthcare workers' underwent a process of generalization, as if they were applicable individually to all its members. Hence, during the pandemic, *every* healthcare worker became, in discursive and imaginary terms, either soldiers fighting the coronavirus in the frontline, or heroes. Although it is known – and evident – that not *every* healthcare worker found themselves in a situation of exposure and exhaustion – think, for example, of an ophthalmologist, whose sphere of action does not seem *a priori* to be related with the fight against the coronavirus – these associations encompass *the whole collective*. As a result of the mechanism of generalization, which is one strongly based on a cognitive need of simplification of reality, this collective was invested with such associations. This phenomenon is particularly interesting given that it allows to visualize the semiotic basis of cognitive processes: once a generic feature has been attributed to a category of meaning (such as "healthcare workers work tirelessly and in risky conditions to fight the coronavirus"), then every single individual case that an observer might associate with the category of meaning of 'the healthcare workers' will also have those features. To sum up, this mechanism does not differ significantly from the one that is in action when formulating stereotypes, such as with regards to national cultures.

Finally, the mechanism of *axiologization* will perhaps be the most interesting of all for a semiotic account, given that it has been clearly active in the specific case of healthcare workers who, during the pandemic, were permanently associated with the figure of *heroes* (France 24 2020; La Nación 2020; United Nations 2020). This association is based on an identification of the features that are normally attributed to heroes – such as courage, sacrifice, bravery and commitment to what is morally righteous – which

are then projected into the healthcare workers given that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, their actions as a collective identity have reflected those features. This mechanism was enhanced partly due to the fact that one of the dominant narratives during the pandemic presented the virus as an *enemy*; it was normally represented as a *villain* with an evil intentionality that threatens humanity's wellbeing (Moreno Barreneche 2020a). In Spain, to mention an example, the collective actor received in June 2020 the Princess of Asturias Award for Concord, whose jury highlighted the healthcare workers' "outstanding spirit of personal sacrifice" and "unconditional dedication" (El País 2020) in the form of lengthy working hours without rest, the ever-growing number of patients, the permanent contact with death, the lack of appropriate equipment and working conditions, the permanent risk of infection, and even violent situations that originated in their being members of the collective actor (González Díaz 2020).

Hence, the connotation of heroism emerges from the fact of not giving up in their efforts, in a context that easily invites one to do so. This seems to reflect an adherence to certain ethical principles that seem to be unquestioned. Therefore, as the jury of the Princess of Asturias Prize argued, healthcare workers:

... with an outstanding spirit of personal sacrifice in support of public health and the well-being of society as a whole, have become a symbol of the fight against the greatest global pandemic that has afflicted humanity in the last century. (El País 2020)

As Olga Velásquez (2020) argues in an op-ed published in the Colombian newspaper *La República*, "the moment that a state of sanitary emergency was declared nationwide due to COVID-19, healthcare professionals, technicians and technologists magically reappeared in the media's radar as heroes and heroines without cape." To this, Velásquez adds that, as a country, Colombia owes "the healthcare workers a major debt, and the government must ensure that the human talent policy for healthcare workers that is demanded by law to actually take place." She also claims that "our gratitude must be shown with concrete and measurable actions."

Nevertheless, even if a positive axiologization was hegemonic in the discursive constructions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, in numerous particular cases there were also processes of a *negative* axiologization of the collective identity: in multiple unfortunate episodes, individual healthcare workers received anonymous notes from their neighbors asking them to temporarily leave their homes as they might be a source of contagion. The logic underlying those messages seems to be the following: individual I, a member of the healthcare workers collective, is a hero – a positive axiologization – that one wishes to have nearby in the case of an infection with the virus; nevertheless, during normal times, it is better to have individual I far away, as s/he can be a source of infection – a negative axiologization.

Finally, it seems relevant to point out the *dynamic* character of such processes of identity construction. Once that the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic passed, the mechanisms described in these pages blurred – as Bettiza (2020) argues, “around the world, frontline doctors and nurses are being hailed as heroes for risking their lives to treat patients. But in Italy, this love is ebbing away.” The author quotes Monica, a healthcare worker who states that “when they were scared of dying, suddenly we all became heroes but they’ve already forgotten us.” These reflections evidence the dynamic and process-oriented nature of discursive phenomena within social life, what renders the task of grasping them *in vivo* a major challenge for the work of social semioticians. The second wave of the pandemic helped render this nature visible – at least in Europe.

## Concluding remarks

As stated in the introduction, the goal of this article was to study from a socio-semiotic perspective the mechanisms through which the collective identity of “the healthcare workers” has been discursively constructed within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As it was shown, we are dealing with a collective identity that existed prior to the pandemic and that, given the unexpected and sudden change of circumstances linked to the uncontrolled spread of the virus, was the object of a set of processes of meaning and sense-making. These semiotic processes have consolidated it as a key category of meaning within the hegemonic narrative that has been used in numerous countries to make sense of the pandemic and of the radical changes that it has brought with it, both at the macro and micro levels. As it was argued above, collective identities are cultural artifacts that fulfill a central role in the discursive articulation of social reality, given that, because of the principle of narrativity, they work as the units of meaning that allow articulation of the multiple plots that are at work in the social domain – for example, in the form of “justification narratives” (Forst 2017).

To further develop a more detailed mapping of discursive phenomena linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, we should proceed to identify and analyze the semiotic mechanisms discussed earlier in concrete textual *corpora* delimited according to specific parameters – such as media representations (expressions, images, and references used), artistic creations (cartoons, graffiti, murals), testimonials of citizens and workers – together with other forms of enunciation that might allow recognizing the mechanisms of segmentation, actorialization, generalization, and axiologization, particularly those revolving around the healthcare workers. This project could be organized, for example, by country and examined comparatively if the representations – and, with them, the construction – of this collective actor in the various public

spheres differed. Moreover, once that time has passed and the pandemic starts crystallizing as a historical fact, it would be interesting to trace the diachronic changes in the discourses linked to this collective actor.

As we can see, semiotics still has significant material to examine meticulously and, by doing so, shed light on the signification processes revolving around the pandemic. This could certainly help to recognize the mechanisms through which individuals make sense of their social reality. In this quest, semiotics will contribute substantially to the explanation of discursive phenomena present in multiple societies and, particularly, to understanding the functioning of mediatization, a phenomenon that Verón widely studied. This article attempts to contribute to this goal: theoretically, by looking at the dynamic process of the discursive construction of collective identity through four mechanisms of a semiotic nature; practically, through the study of a specific case from our present.

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