 ARHIPELAG XXI PRESS, TÎRGU MUREȘ, 2015, ISBN: 978-606-8624-21-1

CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL REALITIES. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AS A PRECONDITION FOR ACTION

Alexandra Galbin

PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract: Language is the basic concept in learning and constructing knowledge in organizational context. In this paper, a social constructionist perspective is adopted to explore the role of language in fashioning the future of organization. The postmodern paradigm involves challenging the process whereby organizational realities are constructed, the language being the trigger of action. The way members of organization talk, describe, and explain, influences their behavior and attitudes, shaping the organization identity. The paper concludes emphasizing the connection between language, thought, action, and invites on reflection regarding the realities taken-for-granted that are essential for the development of organization.

Keywords: action, constructionism, language, social realities, though

Constructing organizational realities

In the last few decades, social constructionism has been embraced in different areas of knowledge in the international literature. Centering on the process of the social construction of reality (Gergen, 1994), social constructionist paradigm has been presented in multiple variety of practices of education, health care, community work, but also in the field of organization (Gergen & Gergen, 2012), enriched a variety of research and professional practices, allowing innovative practices to emerge (Gergen, 2009). Being a postmodern paradigm (Hacking, 1999), the central premise of this paper is to explore the ways of understanding the processes of language in the organizational context, language being the connection between thought and action. The paper offers a brief review of social constructionism perspective to create the context for the discussions, and then the potential of language that can inform and transform the organization is presented. The paper is based on the assumptions of this epistemological perspective (Gergen, 2009) emphasizing the emerging

BDD-V2066 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:51 UTC)

organization through the meanings constructed as a result of members' interactions, language being an important tool for understanding particular aspects of organizational life (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985), generating actions that can sustain, and contribute to the development of organization. The focus is to explore how language influences organizational and management practices, that may be ideologically bounded (Hemetsberger & Reinhardt, 2006; Musson, Cohen, & Tietze, 2007). Finally, the paper brings into discussion the reflection on the realities taken-for-granted, inviting to a careful choice of words that construct the limits and the opportunities in the organizational field.

The starting point of this paper is the view of the organization not as a static process, but as a dynamic process, social constructed and reconstructed emerging through the multiple realities (Gergen, 2009) and their interpretations that shape the organization identify (Cojocaru, Bragaru & Ciuchi, 2012). People construct knowledge as they interact to each other in a social, cultural, and historical context. Knowledge constructed is relational, dynamic, and based on human action (Hosking & McNamee, 2006). The invitation of the perspective is to comprehend how aspects of the organizational surroundings taken-for-granted are socially constructed, opening space for dialoging, thereby new possibilities to act (Hosking, 2011; Cojocaru, 2012). 'The way in which we understand the world is not required by what there is' (Gergen, 2009, p. 5). As Gergen (2009) explains in the assumption cited above in one conversation we may find what is wrong with the organization where the participants work, small wage, lack of opportunities, but also enthusiasm, hopes, courage, dreams. In this context 'the realities are the outcomes of the conversations in which members of the organizations are engaged' (Gergen, 2009, p. 4). If the conversation could be changed, the 'problems' constructed in the organization could be reconstructed as 'opportunities' (Gergen, 2009, p. 5). This leads to an enormous appreciation of the social constructionism potential, inviting to relating (Burr, 2003; Cunliffe, 2008; Sandu, 2012), 'crossing the threshold into new worlds of meaning' (Gergen, 2009, p. 5), the world explained and described 'being the outcomes of the relationship' (Gergen , 2009, p. 6).

Language and organizational life

The constructionist approach emphasizes the ability to create realities through language, in its varied forms of presentation, stimulating a process of continuous creation (Cojocaru, 2005; Cojocaru, 2013). Language is more than just a way of connecting people. People 'exist' in language. The type of knowledge generated from this perspective is

BDD-V2066 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:51 UTC)

knowledge about what forms of reality language constructs (Cunliffe, 2008). In this sense 'knowledge is seen not as something that a person has or doesn't have, but as something that people do together' (Burr, 2003, p. 9). Consequently the focus is not on the individual person but rather on the social interaction, in which language is generated, sustained, and abandoned (Gergen, 2005). Language and its varieties forms of representations are essential to the processes of building organizations (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001; Gergen, Gergen & Barrett, 2004). In sum the power of language shapes how participants experience the organization world and it is an important aspect generating a potential value to the study of the organization interventions (Somerville & Farner 2012). Understanding the process of language constructed can be useful to embrace the nature of change, the challenges, by drawing attention to the language roles which enables the participants to frame new shared meanings (Marshack & Heracleous, 2005). Another assumption in social constructionism approach is that organizations develop and change in the direction on which the members focus their attention (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; 2001). Based upon the beliefs constructed the organization grows in the way the language is used, the choice of a positive topic is proposed, being a way to construct positive social realities (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Further, when realities are viewed as socially constructed the possibility of change seems to be greater, language opening up multiple local realities. Hence, 'constructions gain their significance from their social utiliy (Gergen, 2009, p. 9) describing and explaining being preconditions for the future of organization (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). So, upon which the members of organization create their inquiry will largely 'determine what the members of organizations come to discover, know, and contribute to the world of human organizing' (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2001). Working together members can understand better others' points of view, and can co-construct new perspectives in order to develop innovative actions (Cuyvers, 2010). As social constructionism proposes, the practices of language are bound within relationships, and the relationships construct the organizational life. Language is a major resource of organization action, broader constitutes the social life itself (Gergen, 2015). As Dulcan (2009) sustains the language is the biggest resource from universe, language used influencing the attitudes, the behavior, in other words constructs organizational realities. The challenge in organization is much difficult in times of rapid changing, information constantly evolving (Andrus, 2010; Bushe, 2010). Reflecting on the realities taken-for-granted, members of organization can create knowledge, developing

BDD-V2066 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:51 UTC)

meanings together, constructing a common sense to understand the 'micro processes that underlie macro processes' (Zilber, 2007, p. 1049).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This work was co-funded by the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013, project number POSDRU/187/1.5/S/155397, project title "Towards a New Generation of Elite Researchers through Doctoral Scholarships".

REFERENCES:

Andrus, C. (2010). Using appreciative inquiry to build organizational capacity to learn, risk and grow. Appreciative therapies. *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala, 30,* 63-76.

Burr, V. (2003). *Social Constructionism* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Bushe, G. R. (2010). Comparative case study of appreciative inquires in one organization: implications for practice, *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala, 29,* pp. 7-24.

Cojocaru, D.(2012). Appreciative Inquiry and Organisational Change. Applications in Medical Services, *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala, 38,* 122-131.

Cojocaru, S. (2005). *Appreciative Methods in Social Work. Investigation, Supervision and Case Management,* Polirom, Iasi.

Cojocaru, S. (2013). *Appreciative Inquiry in Social Work*, Lambert Academic Publising.

Cojocaru, S., Bragaru, C. & Ciuchi, O. M. (2012). The role of language in constructing social realities. The appreciative Inquiry and the reconstruction of organizational ideology. *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala, 36,* 31-43.

Cooperrider, D. L, Whitney, D. (2000). *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization Toward a Positive Theory of Change,* Stipes: Champaign, IL.

Cooperrider, D. L., & Whitney, D. (2001). A positive revolution in change. In D. L. Cooperrider, P. Sorenson, D. Whitney, & T. Yeager (Eds.), Appreciative inquiry: *An emerging direction for organization development*. Champaign, II: Stipes.

Cooperrider, D. L., & Whitney, D., & Stavros, J. M. (2008). *Appreciative inquiry handbook* (2nd ed.). Brunswick, OH: Crown.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2008). Orientations to Social Constructionism: Relationally Responsive Social Constructionism and its Implications for Knowledge and Learning, *Management Learning*, Sage Publications.

BDD-V2066 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:51 UTC)

Cuyvers, G. (2010). Appreciative inquiry as a foundation for quality development. *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala*, *30*, 39-52.

Deal, T., & Kennedy, A. (1982). *Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Dulcan, D. C. (2009). *Inteligenta materiei*, Cluj-Napoca, Eikon.

Gergen, K. J. (2005). *Social Construction in Context*, Sage Publications, London, U.K.

Gergen, K. J. (2009). *An invitation to social construction* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gergen, K. J. (2015). *An invitation to social construction* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gergen, K. J., McNamee, S., & Barrett, F. (2001). Toward transformative dialogue. *International Journal of Public Administration, 24* (7/8), 679–707.

Gergen, K., J., Gergen, M., & Barrett, F. (2004). Dialogue: Life and death of the organization. In D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick, & L. Putnam (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational discourse* (pp. 39-61). London: Sage Publications Ltd. doi: http://dx.doi.org/104135/9781848608122.n.2.

Gergen, K. J. & Gergen M. (2012). *Playing with purpose. Adventures in performative social science*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Gergen, K. J. (1994). *Realities and relationships*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hacking, I. (1999). *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hemetsberger, A. & Reinhardt, C. (2006). Learning and Knowledge-building in Open-source Communities: A Social-Experiential Approach, *Management Learning*, *37* (2), 187-214.

Hosking, D. M. (2011). Telling Tales of Relations: Appreciating Relational Constructionism, *Organization Studies*, *32* (1), 47-65.

Hosking, M., & McNamee, S. (2006). *The social construction of organization*. Malmo, Sweden: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.

Ludema, D., Cooperrider, D. L. & Barrett, F. J. (2001). Appreciative inquiry: The power of the unconditional positive question. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds), *Handbook of action research*. London: Sage, pp. 189-99.

Marshak, R. J. & Heracleous, L. (2005). A discursive approach to organization development, *Action Research*, *3*(1), pp. 69-88.

BDD-V2066 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:51 UTC)

Musson, G., Cohen, L. & Tietze, S. (2007). Pedagogy and the Linguistic Turn: Developing Understanding Through Semiotics, *Management Learning*, *38*(1), 45-60.

Ouchi, W. & Wilkins, A. (1985). Organizational culture. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *11*, 457–83.

Sandu, A. (2012). *Social-Constructionist Epistemology*, Lumen, Iasi.

Somerville, M. M. & Farner, M. (2012). Appreciative Inquiry: A Transformative Approach for Initiating Shared Leadership and Organizational Learning. *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala*, *38*, 7-24.

Van der Haar, D., & Hosking, D. M. (2004). Evaluating appreciative inquiry: A relational constructionist perspective, *Human Relations*, *57*(8): 1017-1036.

Zilber, T. B. (2007). Stories and the discursive dynamics of institutional entrepreneurship: The case Israeli high-tech after the bubble. *Organization Studies*, *28*, 1035-1054.

BDD-V2066 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:51 UTC)