

## ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE. A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF FOLLOWERS' PERSPECTIVES

Alexandra Galbin

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

*Abstract: The paper adopts a social constructionist perspective to explore how followers construct their role in organization. Data come from four in-depth interviews with social workers, who are employed in different NGOs from Iasi County. Data were collected in May-June 2016, in neutral space, the interviews during around 60 minutes. The followers underline the importance of their role which is always fluid and dynamic, being in an ongoing process that evolves within the organizational knowledge. An important aspect related is the fact that their realities are constructing and reconstructing depending on the language used in organization. In this context the language of leader has a significant influence on the followers' activity, and the stories of beneficiaries are a real inspiration in their desire to get involved into organizational actions.*

*Keywords: followers, organization, role, social constructionism*

### Introduction

This paper is based on constructionist epistemologies (Gergen, 1995; Gergen, 2009; Burr, 2015) and it emphasizes that organization is a result of meanings constructed through the interactions between individuals in organizational context (Gergen, 2009; Gergen, 2015). A thematic area emerging from the answers of subjects participating in this research is the sense that they give to the activity they practice. Thereby, the research focuses on the way the individuals construct their organizational role, pursuing the interactions with the other members. The meaning given to activity is contextual and relational, continuously evolving. Interactions happen through constant negotiation of meanings that fluctuates depending on emerging challenges, the language having the role of constructing and deconstructing realities, thus limiting the actions of the members of organization. In this process the leader of organization has a particularly important influence, directing the employees' activity by the language used and by reactions to different situations and events that occur. The interpretation of data emphasizes the importance of relationships constructed, underlining the leader's role in the meaning given to the organizational activity (McNamee, 2004; Dragonas, et. al. 2015). The paper concludes with future directions regarding the exploration of the organizational activity meaning from leaders' perspective, but also the way the members' reactions and attitude influence leader's behavior and decisions.

### The organization – a Social Constructionism approach

Social constructionist paradigm claims that organization is a dynamic process, socially constructed and reconstructed, which is developed from multiple realities (Gergen, 2009) and interpretations given to these realities (Gergen, 2015; Burr, 2015). Individuals construct their own reality while interacting with the other members of organization in a social, cultural and historical context (Hosking, 2011). How members of organization interpret reality is a product of interactions and negotiations of meanings that are given to emerging events and situations

(Gergen, 2015). The invitation to this perspective is to understand how prejudices of a certain organizational aspects are socially constructed (Hosking, 2011; Cojocaru, 2012), leading to new perspectives, communication and dialogue possibilities. As Gergen (2009) explains, in communication we can find the lack of motivation or opportunities, dissatisfaction, but also enthusiasm, courage, hope, dreams. In this context “realities are the result of conversations that members of organization take part in” (Gergen, 2009, p. 4).” If conversations can change, then problems constructed within organization can be reconstructed as opportunities” (Gergen, 2009, p. 5). This fact leads to an enormous appreciation of the social constructionism and invites us to relating, crossing the threshold to another meaning (Burr, 2003; Cunliffe, 2008; Sandu, 2012), when “the world explained and described is a result of relations” (Gergen 2009, p. 6). Based on beliefs constructed, the organization grows depending on how language is used, a positive approach topics being a way to construct positive social realities (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). When realities are approached as socially constructed realities, the development opportunity for the organization is larger and language is able to open multiple realities. Therefore “constructs gain their meaning by their social utility” (Gergen, 2009, p. 9), as explaining and description are preconditions for the organizational activities (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008). To understand organizations it is necessary to understand the individual perceptions of the organization's members, perceptions as a result of interactions. In this context, the organizations are seen “as a potential field of creating meaning” (Gergen, 2009, p. 321), realities being a result of interactions between individuals and of meanings given to these realities (Cojocaru, Bragaru & Ciuchi, 2012). Realities are constructed by people through language, each member having an influence and limiting the others’ answers (Cojocaru, Bragaru, & Ciuchi, 2012), thereby organization becomes significant by relationships built within (Gergen, 2009).

### **Research strategy**

The question addressed in this micro research refers to exploring how members construct their organizational role. To answer to this research question four comprehensive interviews, using were conducted Grounded Theory or Data Generated Theory, an inductive approach (Sandu, Cojocaru & Ponea, 2010). This qualitative approach aims to deconstruct how individuals define their organizational activity, deconstruction aiming at capturing “the multiplicity of meanings” of any construct or term (Bresen, 1995). This technique is suitable for the research exploration in the theory of construction as it allows major themes emerging from the collected data (Conger, 1998; Bryman, 2004; Hunter et al. 2007).

### **Selection of participants**

The participants are social workers, aged between 24 and 36 years, female gender. The subjects are part of various non-governmental organizations from Iasi County, organizations providing social services for the elderly and for children with disabilities. The interviews took place in a neutral space, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, during May-June 2016. Subjects were assured confidentiality by informed consent signed and dated by each of them. The information was taped on voice recorder, afterwards being transcribed and coded. The analyzed themes are emerged from the subjects’ replies, following the meaning given to the organizational activity.

### **Constructing organizational role**

Central to social constructionism perspective, meaning is created through interactions and conversations between members of organizations (Cunliffe, 2008). The reality constructed at the beginning changes as relationships take shape and interactions occur. How

individuals define their organizational role gains new meaning along with the subjects' involvement in organizational actions. The retrospective process and bringing to the fore of certain aspects from the past are important sources of meaning (Weick, 1993). Meaning given to organizational role involves a reconstruction of how an individual interprets the outcome of activities as a result of established relations and of awareness of the contribution made to the organization. Considering this perspective individuals construct their reality around institutional rules by thinking, senses and behavior (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The social constructs in organization are better explained by the interactions that occur continuously between its members (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001) so that reality becomes a continuous negotiation of meanings (Carsten et. al, 2010), the organization being continually interpreted and reproduced in social relations. Regarding the social construction of organizational role subjects participating in the comprehensive interviews interpret their role in relation to organizational knowledge, meaning being a reconstruction given by the context of interactions. If at first participant didn't understand his role within the organization, afterwards following the established relationships and actions subject states that he feels integrated into organization and even more than that defines his organizational role as very important, considering himself part of the organization: "*Relationship I have with my colleagues and the fact that I know better about the activity itself [helped me]. At first I was doing things because I knew I had to do... now I do things because I want the organization to be better. Time has passed and I know things, I feel more incorporate in this team, I have an important role on this team*". S1, social worker, 28 years old, urban

The meanings are socially constructed through continuous interactions between individuals, being also a way to build a system of action in consensus. The meaning is always fluid and dynamic (Gergen & Gergen, 2012) incorporated into organizational practices and actions. A very important aspect is the language used to reach a common agreement. Reflecting the experience of others and especially tolerance help the participant to understand other perspectives, other points of view to a given situation. Constructing consensus occurs through expressing opinions without involving negative criticism and through realizing that realities are differently influenced by the diversity of experiences in various contexts: "*...there are situations when we have different opinions, but communicating with the leader we reach a consensus through tolerance, simply accept the other's opinion without judging it. This helps us to implement new activities*". S2, social worker, 26 years old, urban

The meaning is not constructed at individual level, but rather in a process of relating (Gergen, 2009). People interact in a social system influencing each other's actions. Actions and context are in a simultaneous equation in which members of organization interpret and re-interpret to determine the nature of the events that they are involved in (Hosking, 2011). Creating meaning through relationship provides additional information to assign a meaning. In this context the language of leader is very important having the role of mentoring and guidance on how followers interpret certain events: "*I remember that at the beginning there was a check made by social inspectors and I almost got into a fight with them. Then I talked to my leader and she told me what her attitude towards the inspectors is and how she managed the relation with them along time. What I learned that day saved me from a lot of suffering work and many headaches*". S1, social worker 28 years old, urban

Social constructionist perspective emphasizes that individuals create and interpret reality as they interact with the environment (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In this context one of the most important aspects which contribute to the organizational motivation are the stories of beneficiaries. The successful experiences of beneficiaries lead to involvement and

inspiration: “*We work with children that after a long period of time of logopedy they succeed to say their parents’ name...this kind of stories motivate you to move one and to wish to do better your work*”. S4, social worker, 36 years old, urban

### **Discussions and further directions**

The organization is a result of negotiated meanings by its members, meanings that construct and reconstruct continually in different contexts (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004). The organizational role is constructed through interactions that occur in the organization. Moreover how organizational role is perceived evolves with the relationships established in the organizational context. Meaning given to the role takes place retrospectively (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), bringing to the fore the dynamic of behavior, so the role gains another meaning with the process of knowing the organization. The process of knowing the organization is nothing but a continuous negotiation of meanings, the organization being a construct of organizational realities (Gergen, 2009). During this cycle how role is interpreted at any stage is influenced by interactions, relationships and especially by the leader’s language. Collected data emphasizes that the relationships established have the most significant influence on members of organization, language being the lens through which realities construct and reconstruct themselves continuously. Thereby, the social constructionism theory develops simultaneously with the statements collected in the field, bringing to the fore the relational constructionism (McNamee, 2004; 2011), an area of social constructionism that emphasizes the relationships constructed. A further step of this research is exploring also the significance of organizational activity from the perspective of leaders, and how leaders’ behavior and decisions are influenced by the reactions and attitudes of the members of organization.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Hamondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Education.
- Bresnen, M. J. (1995). All things to all people? Perceptions, attributions, and constructions of leadership, *The Leadership Quarterly* 6 (4), pp. 495 – 513.
- Bryman, A. (2004). Qualitative Research on Leadership: A critical by appreciative review, *The Leadership Quarterly* 15, pp. 729 – 769.
- Burr, V. (2003). *Social Constructionism* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Burr, V. (2015). *Social Constructionism* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Carsten, M. K., Uhl-Bien, M., West, B. J., Patera, J. L., & McGregor, R. (2010). Exploring social constructions of followership: A qualitative study. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21(3), 543-562. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.03.15.
- Cojocaru, S. (2012). Appreciative Inquiry and Organisational Change. Applications in Medical Services. *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala*, 38, 122-131.
- Cojocaru, S., Bragaru, C., & Ciuchi, O. M. (2012). The role of language in constructing social realities. The Appreciative Inquiry and the reconstruction of organisational ideology. *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala*, 36, 31-43.
- Conger, J. A. (1998). Qualitative research as the cornerstone methodology for understanding leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly* 9 (1), p. 107 – 121.
- Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney, D. & Stavros, J. M. (2008). *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook* (2nd Ed.) Brunswick, OH: Crown Custom Publishing.

- Cunliffe, A. L. (2008). Orientations to Social Constructionism: Relationally Responsive Social Constructionism and its Implications for Knowledge and Learning, *Management Learning*, 39(2): 123-139, Sage Publications.
- Dragonas, T., Kergen, K. J. McNamee, S. & Tseliou, E. (Eds). (2015). *Education as a Social Construction, Contributions to Theory, Research and Practice*, Taos Institute Publications.
- Eisenberg, E. M. and P. Riley (2001). Organizational Culture. *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication*. F. M. Jablin and L. L. Putnam. California, SAGE: 291-322.
- Gergen, K. J. & Thatchenkery, T. J. (2004). Organizational Science as Social Construction Postmodern Potentials, *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, vol. 40, no.2, 228 – 249. doi: 10.1177/0021886304263860.
- Gergen, K. J. (1995). Relational theory and the discourses of power. In D. M. Hosking, H. P. Dachler, & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Management and organization: Relational alternatives to individualism* (pp. 29–51). Aldershot: Avebury.
- Gergen, K. J. (2009). *An invitation to social construction* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gergen, K. J. (2015). *An invitation to Social Constructionism* (3th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hosking, D. M. (2011). Telling Tales of Relations: Appreciating Relational Constructionism, *Organization Studies*, 32 (1), 47-65, Sage.
- Hunger, S. T., Bedell-Avers, K. E. & Mumford, M. D. (2007). The typical leadership study: Assumptions, implications and potential remedies, *The Leadership Quarterly* 18 (5), pp. 425 – 446.
- McNamee, S. (2011). *From Social Construction to Relational Construction: Practices from the Edge*, *Psychological Studies*, 57 (2): 150-156.
- McNamee, S. (2004). *Social construction as a practical theory. Lessons for practice and reflection in psychotherapy*. In D. Pare, G. Lerner (Eds.), *Critical knowledge and practice in psychotherapy* (pp. 9-21). New York, NY: Haworth Press.
- Sandu, A. (2012). *Social-Constructionist Epistemology*, Lumen, Iasi.
- Sandu, A., Cojocaru, S. & Ponea, S. (2010). Appreciative evaluation training. Case Study: Lumen Consulting and Training Center, *Social Research Reports*, Vol 8./February, Expert Projects, Iasi.
- Van der Haar, D., & Hosking, D. M. (2004). Evaluating appreciative inquiry: A relational constructionist perspective, *Human Relations*, 57(8): 1017-1036.
- Weick, K. E. (1993). Sensemaking in organizations: Small Structures with Large Consequences. In J. K. Murnighan, *Social Psychology in Organizations Advances in Theory and Research*, Prentice-Hall.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking and organizing. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421.

Iulian Boldea, Cornel Sigmirean (Editors)

***MULTICULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS. Literature and Discourse as Forms of Dialogue***

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, 2016

ISBN: 978-606-8624-16-7

***Section: Social Sciences, Psychology, Sociology and Education Sciences***

---