The role of language in constructing social realities. The Appreciative Inquiry and the reconstruction of organisational ideology

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Abstract

The article explores the ways in which language is a factor in the generation of social realities. Having as a foundation social constructionism, the appreciative inquiry is a form of intervention in the organisational environment that can produce a rapid change in the way an organisation's members define the organisation they work in. Thus, the theory of social constructionism seems to be operational in the organisational space, as it focuses on the *relations* through which social actors construct realities. The approach of social constructionism starts from the assumption that the language people use in order to understand the world is a social artefact, the historical product of exchanges between people. During the meetings with representatives of governmental and nongovernmental organisations involved in the experiment, we recorded the adjectives and the metaphors they used in order to describe the organisational environment they worked in. The experiment proves the fact that the negative definitions given to the organisations in which the participants were operating could be transformed into positive or neutral definitions through an appreciative approach. As a rule, people use negative terms in order to describe the organisations they work in; however, an appreciative intervention can cause a rapid change in their language, which generates in its turn new organisational realities. The results obtained during research provide the opportunity to rethink the organisational environment through the filter of ideologies negotiated and constructed through dialogue and to use an appreciative approach in order to change them.

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Introduction

Constructionism is a new orientation in sociology, based mainly on Gergen's works (1985; 1994; 1999) and it designates diverse approaches ale of the way reality can be known and especially how realities can be constructed. There are multiple definitions of social constructionism, due to its very nature, due to the recognition of the multiple realities generated by the diverse interactions between the individuals who construct these realities.

There are multiple definitions of social constructionism, due to its very nature, due to the recognition of the multiple realities generated by the diverse interactions between the individuals who construct these realities. By its very nature, constructionism cannot generate a unitary definition, due to the fact that knowledge is socially constructed. This paper does not aim to treat exhaustively the definitions given to social constructionism, but rather to highlight its essential features and the manner in which they can be used in organisation development, community development, in constructing the ideologies that structure people's perceptions within governmental and nongovernmental organisations. This approach considers that reality cannot be known in itself and asserts the existence of *multiple realities* constructed in the interactions between individuals (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011). The inquiry of social constructionism is focused mainly on explaining the processes through which people describe, explain or *interpret* the world they live in (including themselves)" (Gergen, 1985: 266). Social constructionism is interested in the communication and relations between people and in the process of producing meaning in social interactions. A point of departure is represented by the fact that people, in the same circumstances, are capable of producing very different social constructions of the same reality. Some of the most significant features we shall deal with in this paper:

    a) Language, communication and discourse are considered means of interaction between individuals who construct multiple realities. Social constructionism considers that realities are created by people who communicate through language, each of them influencing and limiting the responses of the other. In this approach, the attention is not focused on the individual, but instead on the *network of interactions* between individuals. This approach is a strategy for analysing the ways realities are created within organisations as a result of interactions between individuals and of the significations they assign to these realities. Campbell, Coldicott and Kinsella (1994) place constructionism in the area of organisational problem-

solving, considering that it concerns the process through which people construct an image about the problems of the organisation and the process through which we construct or co-construct together with them a new history, which includes the solutions to the problem (Campbell, Coldicott and Kinsella, 1994: 18). This means that human organisations represent the various ways in which people define them through explanations, personal understandings brought into the sphere of negotiation with the others.

b) Social constructionism focuses on the *relations* through which social actors construct realities. The approach of social constructionism starts from the assumption that the language people use in order to understand the world is a social artefact, the historical product of exchanges between people (Gergen, 1985: 267).

c) This type of approach considers that the *subject-object distinction* is not productive and generative enough, maintaining a dualism which considers that the subject and the object are independent one from another. "Social constructionism abandons the illusion of the ontological fissure between subject and object and replaces it with an *intersubjective reality*. Social constructionism believes in the idea that reality is considered an interactive process because people give meaning to their own experiences through constant interaction with the environment" (Van der Haar, 2002: 26). Co-operrider and associates (1995) believe that postmodernism is returning to social theory by the fact that the constructionist theory goes beyond "all the assumptions of the type subject/object, observer/object separation, words seen as instruments, the rigor of discovering immutable models and laws..." (Cooperrider and associates, 1995: 161).

d) Knowledge and social reality are dependent on the *social relations* and on the *negotiation processes* between people. In recent years, the sociology of knowledge has refined the approach of social constructionism in order to show that all knowledge of reality is more of a human creation than a mirror of the independent reality (Cojocaru & Sandu, 2011). Social constructionism considers that when we start observing or talking about what is, we, in fact, are constructing a social reality (Van der Haar, 2002: 24).

The constructionist perspective states that we can never know what is universally true or false, what is good or bad, right or wrong, instead we only know stories about truth, falsehood, good, evil, right or wrong, and it abandons the constructivist idea according to which the mind if the individual represents *a mirror of reality*. Constructionism focuses on relations and upholds the role of the individual in constructing significant realities. "The map is identical with the territory" seems to be the essence of the constructionist vision, the map being considered as an interpretation of reality being permanently constructed in the

interaction with the others. Thus, maps are permanently constructed and re-constructed through the interactions with the other individuals' maps, through a process of continuous negotiation. Reality itself is a result of these negotiations and interactions and "we are capable of making multiple and diverse maps of reality" (Maas et al., 2001: 373). Social constructionism is not interested in developing a perfect map of reality, but rather in capturing the processes through which the maps are constructed and negotiated between individuals by harmonising individual maps, because this construction process is the most important: "the attention must be directed towards the multiplicity of the ways the world can be constructed" (Gergen, 1994: 82). Dynamic maps are constantly constructed and reconstructed, having several social motors, filtered through the individual's perspective: interest, purposes and means, values, habits and knowledge. They are also useful in interpreting social realities viewed as social constructs of the individual in interaction with his environment, and at the same time as an individual's responses to the conditioning, constraints, and limitations generated by the others' interpretations and meanings.

Using appreciative inquiry in order to change the organisational environment

Appreciative Inquiry can be an alternative intervention aiming to change the way people construct the reality in which they live, act, communicate and react, without keeping in the foreground the problems they face. Other authors have seen the appreciative inquiry as an instrument that can be used to direct change in an organisation or in a community (Burke, 2011; Cuyvers, 2010; Lustig & Ringland, 2010). From its introduction, the Appreciative Inquiry has been applied in numerous domains beyond the area of organisational development: healthcare (Hirunwat, 2011; Rubin, Kerrell, & Roberts, 2011), evaluation (Cojocaru, 2008; Messerschmidt, 2008; Ojha, 2010; Kavanagh et al., 2010), therapy (Sandu & Ciuchi, 2010; Donaldson & Ko, 2010; Rubin, Kerrell & Roberts, 2011; Galazka, 2011; Wendt, Tuckey & Prosser, 2011), education (Kumar & Chacko, 2010; Kelly, 2010; Cojocaru, D., 2011), research methodology (Cojocaru, 2005a; Kluger & Nir, 2010; Van Gramberg, 2010; Cowling & Repede, 2010), human resources development (Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987; Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1994; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Rattanaphan, 2010; Bushe, 2010; Arpinte et al, 2010). The appreciative approach entails a type of *interactive planning* (Cojocaru, 2005b) that stops offering solutions to the identified problems and focuses instead on *changing the system* that generates these problems. The appreciative vision is provocative and it is not the result of a single mind, but a collective construction based on *negotiation* and *consensus* (Powley et al, 2004). From this point of view, Elliott considers that through the approach of the appreciative inquiry it is possible

to achieve "the minimisation of the asymmetry of power and the increase of the level of involvement in the change process... by direct, one-on-one communication" (Elliott, 1999: 22). This idea produces modifications concerning the management process, even a reversal of the "organisational pyramid" (Cojocaru, 2010). Some authors (Gergen, 1985; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; ---- Whitney, 1998; Elliott, 1999; Bushe, 2001; Van Der Haar, 2002; Bushe, 2010) consider that language and words are social artefacts and not only *a mirror of reality.* Words represent "a convention people establish in order to understand each other (Vad Der Haar, 2002: 25) and these conventions *construct the social reality.* An organisation is constructed through the interactions people establish (Somerville & Howard, 2010) and it reflects the multiple ways in which they interpret the past and the present (through memory) and design the future (through imagination); situations are perceived through *"stories"* about various events, phenomena, incidents etc. or through the metaphors expressed. The interpretations become, unconsciously, a motor of social actions and of the permanent construction and reconstruction of reality. The people's discourse about their organisation reflects the meanings they give to the events, for example, a simple metaphor expresses the way the organisation is structured, how it operates, how it meets the needs of its members or of its clients: "Discourse concerns a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, appreciations etc. that, together, produce particular versions of the events" (Burr, 1995: 62). In the constructionist approach, the analysis of texts, conversations and organisations are undertakings that capture the ways people construct realities and present them as such. In order to reach a *shared interpretation*, most organisations construct internally, through dialogue and consensus, a *mission*, represented by a metaphor directing the objectives and the entire activity of its members. The organisations that do not manage to *construct* a mission cannot reach a shared interpretation of a desired future. In some nongovernmental organisations we studied we found an effective practice: even though the organisation's mission has been established many years before, each year the members of the organisation take part in the *reconstruction of the mission*. Even if it stays the same, the meetings for reconstructing the mission have the role of reliving positive experiences and of re-affirming, collectively, a shared image of the future. The *constructionist principle* used in the application of the appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney 2000: 3-27) takes into account the fact that every organisation is a result of human creation, more precisely of the collective interaction between individuals and of the permanent reconstruction generated by our knowledge, beliefs and ideas. The organisation is a manifestation of the interactions between our mental models regarding it, which are constructed socially through a relational process. The organisation is not an objective reality, independent of its members' individual interpretations. From this perspective, the organisation is itself a reality generated by multiple interpretations (Murrell, 2001: 92), and organisational change through appreciative

inquiry means, in fact, changing these interpretations and constructing a shared, collective and coherent image.

The researcher using the appreciative inquiry in order to introduce change in the organisation must focus on the following aspects (Bushe, 1995:16):

   a) *To appreciatively discover* the organisation, by looking for the best examples of success found in the past of its members and to motivate them to identify these examples. The appreciative discovery of successful experiences, interpreted as successes by the organisation members, is oriented by the research topic; for example: the motivation of organisation members, identifying the needs of the members and adapting the services offered in the organisation to those needs, leadership etc.

   b) *To appreciatively understand* the organisation, by approaching it in depth and by understanding the organisational contexts that have resulted in success in the past.

   c) *To help the organisation members to appreciatively amplify* the discovered experiences and to boost these experiences by encouraging their repetition.

From the perspective of social constructionism, which forms the basis of appreciative inquiry, we "see what we believe" (Bushe, 2001: 24), and the theory that explains certain phenomena is a representation of our belief. This helps us understand how an organisation or community can be changed by redefining the way people describe events. The appreciative inquiry uses these ideas, putting in the foreground *appreciation* as a necessary and appropriate force for organisational change. It introduces the criterion of appreciative statements as a source of orientation for the organisation, according to the *heliotropic principle*, seen as a paradigm generated by analogy: "the same way plants orient themselves in the direction of the source giving them life and energy" (Elliott, 1999: 43), organisations orient themselves depending on what ensures their development. In this type of research, the use of *the poetic principle* (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2000: 3-27) refers to the fact that any organisation is the result of the multiple interpretations given by people, expressed through *language*, which, in its turn, has a formative character, being a part of the constructed world. Language is not just an image of the world, but a genuine form of social action. Ideas, representations, images, histories, stories, metaphors, generate events, depending on their *emotional charge* and on the way they are interpreted. *The metaphors* describing organisations are ways of social action for structuring these organisations. In the meetings with the two experimental groups used in order to prove the influence of interpretations given by organisation members to the way the organisation operates, the participants were asked to write down a metaphor about the organisation they belonged to; the metaphor was then analysed in order to obtain a picture of the way the members of an organisation construct it. The organisation was viewed

as an *organism*, as a *mechanism*, as a *tree with deep roots*, as a *giant*, as a *spring flower*, as an *umbrella*, as a *flowing water*, as a *body with a thousand eyes*, as a *family*, as a *locomotive*, as a *hive* etc. All these metaphors describe ways of organisation and operation, ways in which their members relate, and also avenues of intervention for change; for example, changing an organisation structured as an *organism* makes us think about it as about a living being, which cannot be turned off in order to be changed, and all change must happen on the go; the interpretation of an organisation as a *mechanism* gives us a picture of programmed operation, of change that can be achieved by turning the mechanism off, dismantling and modifying it etc. The organisation is "like a poem" (Elliott, 1999: 14) or "can be thought as a text" (Elliott, 1999: 15) that can be interpreted permanently, and the beauty and the meanings of this poem are given by those who interpret it. The poetic principle contains in itself the capacity of rapidly transforming the organisational environment; if the organisation is a dynamic construction generated by individual interpretations, changing these interpretations through dialogue and consensus result in the organisation itself changing.

The role of interpretations given to the organisation

During two of the meetings with practitioners from the area of social work we asked the participants (two groups of 30 individuals) – who represented both private and public institutions – to write down 15 adjectives related to the organisation they were working in and a metaphor that would describe the organisation, being given a limited time (4 minutes). The participants in the first group were asked to describe the organisation they came from without being given any additional explanations about the process. Before the second group started writing down their personal definitions, the researchers made a presentation concerning the importance of definitions in constructing organisational realities, the importance of appreciative language and of metaphors in constructing the organisation. When filling in the blank in the statement *My organisation is...*, the individuals included in the experiment wrote down three types of adjectives:

   a) negative, critical or hostile: indifferent, closed, rigid, conformist, chaotic, authoritarian, poor, providing no motivation, sordid, disorganised, unrewarding, pessimistic, uninvolved, conflict-prone, ineffective, unprofessional, apathetic, slow, hyper-bureaucratic, uninterested in people etc.
   b) neutral in terms of emotional charge: interesting, systematized, objective, necessary, average, professional, satisfactory etc.
   c) positive, affirmative, approving: innovative, balanced, useful, active, wise, welcoming, productive, dynamic, flexible, transparent, receptive etc.

The two groups consisted of managers, social workers, psychologists etc., and were considered experimental groups:

Table 1: *The structure of experimental groups according to the organisations the participants belong to*

Type of organisation the participants belong to	Group 1	Group 2
Total number of participants	30	30
State-run organisation	14	13
Private organisation	16	17

As far as the participants' affiliation to the public or private organisational environment, it can be noticed that the two groups had a similar structure; both groups consisted of members in both governmental and non-governmental organisations. The first group was asked to describe the organisation using 15 adjectives, without the researcher giving any details or any introduction concerning the appreciative approach; in the case of the second group, the researcher started by presenting in a general manner the use of the appreciative approach in the organisational environment, and only then asked the participants to describe their own organisation. The results were the following:

Table 2: *Repartition of perceptions in the two experimental groups*

Adjectives	Group 1	Group 2
Total number of adjectives	450	450
Negative adjectives	76.7 %	43.3 %
Neutral adjectives	10.0 %	29.3 %
Positive adjectives	13.3%	27.4 %
Total	100 %	100 %

As a rule, people tend to think negatively about the organisations they belong to; 76.7 % of the adjectives used by the subjects in the first group described their organisations in negative terms. Positive opinions about their own organisations were fewer – 13.3 % of the adjectives used in the first group. However, the experiment we made provides enough reason for optimism in terms of the possibility to change rapidly any negative perceptions about an organisation; in group two, which was influenced by a general presentation of the appreciative approach in the organisational environment, the number of negative perceptions concerning one's own organisation was significantly lower (43.3 % of the adjectives used) and the number of positive perceptions was double compared to the first group (27.4 % compared to 13,3% in the first group) *(see Table 2)*. Thus, a significant part of the negative perceptions expressed by the participants were turned into perceptions that are neutral from an emotional point of view; four instance, in

group 1 neutral perceptions made up 10.0 % of the total, whereas in group 2 they went up to 29.3 %; *(see Table 2).*

From the point of view of the participants' membership in public or private organisations, we can organise the results obtained in a table such as the one below:

Table 3: *Distribution of perceptions in the two groups as a function of the type of organisation the participants belong to*

List of adjectives	Governmental organisations		Nongovernmental organisations	
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 1	Group 2
Negative adjectives (%)	85.2	43.6	69.2	43.1
Neutral adjectives (%)	9.0	33.3	10.8	26.3
Positive adjectives (%)	5.8	23.1	20.0	30.6

It can be noticed that those *employed by the governmental system* use predominantly negative adjectives in order to describe the environment they work in (85.2 % of the adjectives used by the first group) and very few positive adjectives (5.8 %). The positive adjectives used by the participants employed by the governmental system came chiefly from individuals working in more socially rewarding positions (department heads, service heads, managers etc.), and they define the organisation in affirmative, positive terms. The change in attitude towards the organisation took place rapidly, especially due to the fact that this change was directed towards positive aspects and triggered by the introduction made by the researcher concerning appreciative methods in social work; thus, the representatives of governmental institutions in the second group almost halved the number of negative adjectives describing the organisations they worked in (43.6 %); the number of positive adjectives increased almost four-fold, reaching a 23.1 % of the total. The number of neutral adjectives given by the members of governmental organisations increased more then three times (from 9.0 % to 33.3 %). Data analysis shows that the most significant change in perception amongst the members of governmental organisations was the drop in the number of negative adjectives, which were transformed preponderantly into neutral and positive ones. It can be noticed that the changes in negative perceptions are more visible amongst the participants working in the governmental sector: these individuals have shown a greater flexibility in changing the way they interpret the organisations they work for.

The negative perception is also dominant in the *nongovernmental system*, despite being less pronounced than in the governmental system (69.2 % negative adjectives, compared to 85.2 % in the governmental system). The initial negative perceptions of nongovernmental organisations members (10.8 %) were almost at

the same level with that of negative perceptions among the members of governmental organisations (9.0 %). However, the representatives of nongovernmental organisations had a higher number of positive definitions for their own organisations (20.0% positive adjectives, compared to 5.8% in the governmental system). One can notice the change in attitude towards the organisation among the representatives of non-governmental organisations, the change in the definitions they gave after the experiment; the number of negative adjectives dropped from 69.2 % to 43.1 %, while the number of positive ones increased from 20.0 % to 30.6 % and the neutral ones from 10.8 % to 26.3%; among the representatives of the nongovernmental institutions the drop in the number of negative adjectives was accompanied by an increase in the number of neutral and positive ones.

Conclusions

Despite the simplicity of the experiment, the dependent variables taken into consideration argue in favour of the possibility of changing the interpretation individuals give to their organisations, as a result of an external appreciative influence exerted by a factor exterior to these organisations. Some organisations are viewed as ineffective and bureaucratic also due to the fact that the interpretations given by its members construct these definitions. Therefore we believe that the practices of an organisation's members reflect the interpretation people give to that particular organisation. The strategies of nongovernmental organisations are devised by few of their members, and thus the feeling of ownership is insufficiently developed in the mind of the people working in order to fulfil these strategies. The *mission* of an organisation can be a motor for driving it, for giving it direction, a source for the establishment of objectives and for their fulfilment. When the members of nongovernmental organisations are not involved in devising their missions, the latter are perceived as imposed on them, as exterior to the organisation.

As a rule, people have a *negative perception* of the organisations they work in, reflected in the statements they make about them; in the metaphors they use in order to describe their own organisations. *Negative interpretations* are more frequent in the public organisations sector than in the private one due to management, communication and valorisation styles. *Cultivating appreciative perceptions* (discovering, understanding and amplifying them) results in real change in the organisational environment, because it changes the system of interactions in the organisation. The language used by the members of an organisation in order to describe it is a social artefact, not just a mirror of reality; it is an engine for social action and helps draw *the map that precedes the future* (guides the construction of the organisation's future). The application of appreciative inquiry in the

organisational environment may lead to a rapid change in the definitions the members give to their own organisations, to the construction of contexts that can cause the modification of an organisation's values, and to changes in the value system promoted in the organisational environment.

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