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Social Constructionism in the Context of Organization Development: Dialogue, Imagination, and Co-Creation as Resources of Change

Celiane Camargo-Borges[1] and Emerson F. Rasera[2]

Abstract

The world faces rapid changes that call for new epistemologies and methodologies that can generate innovative forms of "being" and "doing" within organizations. This article investigates conceptual and practical resources from the social constructionist perspective that can be useful in realizing the transformation of organizations. Initially, a global context of the world in change is described, explaining the consequences for organizations; then social constructionism is introduced as a postmodern epistemology and offered as a potential approach to the organizational development field in supporting research and intervention. Some perspectives for action and knowledge production are offered in the context of an organization. Finally, some resources with examples will be articulated; these new frameworks for action can be effective for organizations coping in times of change.

A World in Change: New Theories and Practices Emerging

We are living in a time of rapid change, where stability and predictability are making way for the fluidity and complexity of our contemporary society (Castells, 2004). The world is going through crucial transformations—globalization, technology revolution, and postindustrial economy, among others—all of which are affecting the status of how society functions. These changes are bringing a more dynamic and fluid setting along with new social actors to the scenario, voices that have never been heard before (Giddens, 2009; Hazen, 1993). The global economy is becoming less manufactural and turning into what some authors call a "service economy," "experience economy," or even "knowledge economy" (Goldberg, Pasher, & Levin-Sagi, 2006). "If capital and labour are the major structural features of industrial society, information and knowledge are those of post-industrial society" (Bell, 1973, p. 13).

In this transition, social-technical advancements are said to be among the first providers of a paradigmatic shift in society, increasing technology to value creation but especially interconnectivity, generating a whole new network of people that provides the possibility of a more participatory society (Strangelove, 1994).

This new societal setting is directly affecting the organizational landscape, urging new ways of organizing the work environment, its practices, and the people involved. The impact of this informed, interconnected, and more participatory society on the organizational structure encourages new understandings of the process of value creation. While traditional organizations fabricated products and services that had value in being sold and consumed by people (sequential and linear model), customers today are much more connected to what is happening around them and want to have a voice in the products/services being produced and offered. Therefore, a more interactive role between organizations and customers is required for deciding what is valuable or not in society and in peoples' lives (synchronous value creation). This change is affecting the organizational structure as a whole, and consequently, there is a need to embrace a more inclusive approach by taking into account the expressed needs and wishes of people, thereby co-creating value with them (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008; Prahalad, 2004).

Lusch and Vargo (2008) explore the topic of value creation in a contemporary society, calling attention to a new logic of creating value between organizations and customers.

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According to the authors, there is a move from what they call "goods-dominant" (G-D) logic into a "service-dominant" (S-D) logic. The G-D logic carries the traditional dichotomous notion that value is created by an organization, and is then transferred and consumed by its customers at the moment of the transaction (when the product is bought and used). In G-D logic, the transaction moment is taken to be the most important aspect of all business.

The shift to S-D logic indicates a more interactive value creation, where customers actively participate in the process of creating value. In this logic (S-D), the most important moment of the transaction is when the stakeholders engage in co-creating value, producing something that is valuable for all involved. Accordingly, a meaningful value co-creation is what guarantees today's businesses to go on and be sustainable (Lusch, 2007; Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008). The authors argue that, in times of a network/participatory society, value co-creation should be at the heart of all corporate activity, where all stakeholders can bring their skills and resources to exchange, create, and determine value together.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) also discuss interactive value creation, bringing co-creation as a new frame of reference. The authors acknowledge the challenges that companies might face in embracing co-creation with their customers, such as sharing their knowledge and strategies. However, they also see it as a unique opportunity to empower companies by moving them forward together with their customers.

All the authors mentioned above point to crucial transformations that society is undergoing, which are heavily affecting organizations and their forms of functioning. Although many companies are making tentative steps to restructure their organizations by embracing new tools, most of them remain rooted in outdated concepts and philosophies that, as a consequence of having new interventions based on old foundations, inhibit and prevent the need for a full transformation.

Social Constructionism: A Postmodern Approach to Knowledge

Social constructionism is a theory with a philosophical framework that focuses on the processes of understanding and addressing social change in the postmodern society, in a wider sense, and on organizations specifically (Gergen, 1994; Hosking & McNamee, 2006). It is a theoretical movement that brings an alternative philosophical assumption regarding reality construction and knowledge production. It is concerned with the ways in which knowledge is historically situated and embedded in cultural values and practices. According to this approach, meanings are socially constructed via the coordination of people in their various encounters; therefore, it is always fluid and dynamic (Gergen & Gergen, 2012).

In the last few decades, social constructionism has been presented and embraced in different areas of knowledge in the international literature. As a field of interest about the constructed nature of reality, it has been influenced by different psychological, philosophical, and social perspectives, such as the analytical philosophy, the sociology of the knowledge, and the rhetoric (Gergen, 1994; Guanaes & Rasera, 2006; Rasera, Guanaes & Japur, 2004). Centering on the process of the social construction of reality, social constructionist perspectives have been used to support a variety of practices in the fields of education, health care, community work, conflict resolution, and organizations. Although it cannot be translated into a clear-cut set of guidelines, given the nature of its epistemological proposal, it has enriched a variety of research and professional practices from different fields of knowledge with a generative vocabulary, allowing innovative practices to emerge (Gergen & Gergen, 2012). Some of these practices include a focus on strengths and what is already working well instead of on problems and how to fix them, an emphasis on a diversity of perspectives instead of on commonalities of ideas, transdisciplinary teams, decentralized decision making, and increased flexibility in terms of approaches and policies, all of which are informed, in turn, by an appreciation for a multicultural and polyphonic environment.

Having a postmodern intelligibility, social constructionism invites a review of some modern assumptions about knowledge production, such as (a) individual rationality, (b) empirical evaluation, (c) language as representation, and (d) the narrative of progress (McNamee & Hosking, 2012). In a constructionist perspective, individual rationality is not conceived of as an attribute of individual thinking but as a consequence of cultural convention. It is through the coordinated actions with each other that the meaning of rationality is eventually reached. This constructionist statement invites other forms of evaluating knowledge production, which goes beyond a focus on individual rationality, and moves to relationality and creativity with the ability to generate involvement and to promote change.

In the same way, the empirical method is not understood as conveying the correct knowledge about reality, but as being a phenomenon defined and studied by a specific theory and its methods. The results of the systematic observation of reality are a priori circumscribed by the theory used. The constructionist invitation is to comprehend how aspects of the world that are taken for granted are socially constructed, thereby opening up space for a variety of alternative intelligibilities. Methodologically, the challenge is not to prove and persuade the other about the correct interpretation of the phenomenon, but to broaden the possibilities of understanding. This fluid and dynamic approach has helped to foster communication, dialogue, and integration of perspectives.

Language, a fundamental aspect for the process of knowledge production, is not conceived of as describing and

representing the world, but as a way of constructing it, being a form of social action. Language gains its meaning from its use in context (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1994; McNamee, 2004). The constructionist approach emphasizes the ability to create realities through language, in its varied forms of presentation, stimulating a process of continuous creation.

Considering the critique of individual rationality, empirical evaluation, and the representational view of language, there is a questioning of the narrative of progress in science. Historical analysis of the recent developments of scientific knowledge shows that it does not have a linear and cumulative nature—that neither has mankind achieved the control of nature yet, as it was intended by the modern researchers, nor has science led society to a life free of suffering. This analysis helps to prevent the naive acceptance of scientific authoritative claims and methods, and it also invites us to take scientific knowledge as an intelligibility that may guide our actions depending on its contextual value.

The constructionist review of modern assumptions has important consequences for knowledge production in the organizational field. First, it favors processes of deconstruction by stimulating a reflexive stance in the production of the knowledge that allows a critique of traditional practices in the society and its cultural implications.

Second, it promotes theoretical and practical reconstructions through generative theories (Gergen, 1978) that can contribute to social transformation and promote the approach between institutions as well as academia. Also, it invites openness to alternative ways of producing and presenting knowledge, which goes beyond traditional scientific texts, moving toward lively expressions of language that capture the imagination of people (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). There is room for narratives, social poetics, images, and videos in knowledge production and expression. Knowledge, in this approach, is meant to offer new intelligibilities and creatively construct new realities.

Finally, it emphasizes the contextual value of knowledge production and its practices, strengthening the liaison between research and intervention, claiming the need of involvement and collaboration of those who will use the knowledge in its production. It creates the scenario for an enhanced sense of democratization, which sustains the primacy of utility, participation, and social transformation in the assessment and use of knowledge, rather than an adequate representation of reality.

In summary, paraphrasing Gergen (1994), the production of knowledge in a constructionist perspective is characterized by processes of deconstruction, reconstruction, and especially democratization, which result in a "generative theory." It is an approach to knowledge development that has the capacity of broadening the bases and behaviors of the culture, opening up the potential for social change. In this approach, knowledge has its roots in shared interactions with others, gained through social exchanges, relationships, and dialogue (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). As Burr (2003) writes, "Knowledge is therefore seen not as something that a person has or doesn't have, but as something that people do together" (p. 9).

In this sense, social constructionism understands theory as generative (Gergen, 1978), practical (McNamee, 2004), and relational (McNamee, 1994) rather than just rational with testable facts to make it universal and replicable. It is generative in the sense that scientific valorization is evaluated in terms of its generative capacity and not just based on discoveries and law verifications that permit prediction, generalization, and control. It is practical in the sense of breaking with the binary theory versus practice, where the question shifts from theory corresponding to observed facts to theory used to present possibilities of social action and dialogue. And it is relational by looking at research as conversation, accounting for the reflexivity of all participants and researchers, in which the knowledge being produced is always practical and situated within a context.

The constructionist theory is very sensitive to changes generating new forms of practices and behavior. In times of rapid transformation in the world, social constructionism can be a useful approach to address and embrace changes in context, pointing to new possibilities of doing research and intervention. Besides this, the option for the constructionist alternative has ethical implications. It is a way of thinking and doing that moves away from expertise-based, rational, hierarchical, and result-focused models going toward more participatory, co-creative, and process-centered ones.

Considering the objectives and the scope of this article, the focus on the contributions of social constructionism will be specifically in the organizational field, which has already produced some developments. Those developments include the context of knowledge production in organizational science in general (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996; Gergen & Tojo, 1996; Yu & Sun, 2012) as well as practical interventions to the field of organizational development by reviewing well-established concepts to propose innovative practices (Anderson & Burney, 1997; Cunliffe, 2002; Hosking & McNamee, 2006).

Social Construction in the Organizational Context: Implications for Professional Practice and Knowledge Production

From a constructionist perspective, organizations are seen as "a potentially fluid field of meaning making" (Gergen, 2009, p. 321), immersed in an ongoing process of development. This approach and understanding of organizations generate specific implications regarding practice as well as research within the field.

Implications for Professional Practice

In the realm of professional practices within organizations, social constructionism brings in concepts such as dialogue, imagination, co-creation, and meaning making, creating a hybrid toolbox to be used by managers, consultants, and group leaders as resources for organizational interventions. Although the richness of these resources is to be found in the interconnections and mutual influence among them, the analysis of each of them may offer a glimpse of how useful they can be, and stimulate professionals/practitioners' creativity to develop new ways of working with their people.

Dialogue, in a constructionist perspective, is about an ongoing interactive process happening in conversation, where the focus is on the potential of multiple local realities that can be shared (Camargo-Borges, in press; Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001). In a dialogue type of conversation, different understandings are welcomed. According to social constructionism, finding out the "best opinion" or achieving "the best solution" is not a matter of accurate observation and description of the "real world" but rather a dynamic process that takes into account the cultural and historical aspects available in society.

Dialogue is different from debate, discussion, or persuasion. In a debate, there is usually a battle of views and positions where the most rational argument wins the prize. Persuasion, however, has a softer approach where the aim is in trying to find convincing ways to make people take one's side. Dialogue, in contrast, constructs a space for conversation that welcomes participants to bring in a multiplicity of voices. It is a process that is intimately connected with the co-creation of new realities (Gergen et al., 2001). Dialogue is not focused on finding the "right way" of doing things but on finding generative ways in which people can feel connected and willing to get involved. Involvement generates responsibility and care for a particular project. Therefore, the use of dialogue in organizational transformation is translated by including as many people as possible in addressing an issue, giving multiple ways to look at a situation. Through dialogue, different understandings are vocalized and used to generate fresh new possibilities. From there, many alternatives for action can then be imagined and created (Camargo-Borges, in press).

In this process, imagination is not only an important tool, but having a more fluid, less fixed and predicted view of possibilities encourages ingenuity, spontaneity, and novelty. When imagination is unleashed, meanings gain freedom, and new knowledge can arise. Having many participants voicing their views on a topic amplifies the potential of meaningful experiences to be created. Social constructionism seriously engenders the potential for imagination. According to Cooperrider and Whitney (2005), our collective imagination and discourse has infinite human resources that can be enacted. The use of imagination to favor future possibilities generates great potential for social change. Dialogues within

an organization should be seen in this light, as processes full of imagination, transforming habitual ways of thinking and talking, building new meanings going in the direction of the creation of new practices and therefore, new organization realities, more engaging and inclusive, generating a sense of belonging and co-responsibility among all social actors involved.

In this direction, co-creation in today's "network society" becomes increasingly a fundamental part of an organization's process (Ramaswamy, 2009). People are more than merely expectant, and there are new forms of participation emerging in society, very much enabled by technological developments. In this way, co-creation can build a more trusting relationship within organizations as well as with customers. However, while interactive technologies can be a tool in putting people together, the technology itself is just a tool and not a shift in relations (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010). That is when dialogue enters the scene and becomes the core process in providing an environment for co-creation, a potential approach to invest in new forms of relation and interaction among stakeholders. In the process of co-creating dialogue within an organization, participants having the facilitation of a coordinator can use their collective imagination and develop stories that speak about themselves and their surroundings, generating new ideas, commitment, and what McNamee and Gergen (1999) call relational responsibility, toward the project being developed.

From a social constructionist perspective, co-creation can be a concept as well as a practice. As a concept, it relates with the epistemological understanding of people being relational by nature, in which—since the beginning of life—everything starts with co-creating with others. In that sense, it is an emergent property of social systems in which people exist, as people are constantly in an ongoing relational process of social construction (Gergen, 1994). As a practice, it can be taken as a creative process to be designed and facilitated. It incentivizes the ability to question the taken-for-granted, to experiment with new ways of talking, to embrace ambiguity, and to evoke a state where "the sky is the limit," leading consequently to the pursuit of new ideas and solutions. To stimulate co-creation in practice, open and imaginative questions should be asked, questions that can trigger the imagination of people. Unconventional questions such as "If this organization were a sound track, which one would it be?" or "If this organization were an animal, what type would it be?" can project the organization into metaphorical ways going beyond the rational and analytical conversation, therefore opening up for imagination and co-creation. Another way to instigate co-creation is through so-called circular questions (Tomm, 1988). The purpose is to ask questions that create difference, and spark creative friction, inspiring directions that generate new possibilities of understanding and therefore new meanings. For instance, if we ask a manager, "How long have you been dealing with this issue?" the answer would be a specific amount of time, as the type of question demands a very

objective and factual answer. Instead, if the question changes to "If I asked the employees of this company how long this issue has being going around, what do you think they would say?" the answer to this type of question provides information about the relationship among ideas, people, contexts, and so on, and not just fact-finding. Circular questions stimulate people into opening up multiple descriptions of a situation, therefore amplifying the possibilities for imagining and co-creating multiple solutions.

These types of questions illustrate how dialogue, imagination, and co-creation play a role in organizational development, deconstructing old patterns of thinking about a subject, co-creating new meanings, and opening up transformation within the organization. Therefore, according to social constructionism, creating a space for dialogical conversations by making use of imagination increases the process of change through co-creation of new possibilities.

One example in which all these resources are put together is the appreciative inquiry (AI) methodology, which is a methodology developed under constructionist assumptions to organizational interventions and that views organizations as living, human constructions (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). AI methodology focuses on what is locally viewed as positive, what works, and what is energizing within an organization. It does not focus on problems as is more typical in classical approaches, nor is it about what is going wrong in the organization. It starts by concentrating on what is already working well and what is available that can strengthen the organization to pursue a strategic plan for transformation.

AI meetings are traditionally divided into four phases (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny) that can involve only one sector of an organization or all its employees, depending on the objectives of the intervention being developed. By exploring the stories of satisfaction and accomplishment experienced by members of the organization, conditions are created so that they, in a collaborative and motivational way, establish new goals and construct a future based on the abilities of the group (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Beyond facilitating processes of decision making, AI is also useful for conflict resolution and for creating a strong sense of cooperation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Hammond, 1998).

Implications for Knowledge Production

According to Cooperrider and Whitney (2005), intervention and inquiry walk hand-in-hand, being a continuum and circular process of action and reflection. This statement is based on the assumption that any form of inquiry is already a moment of interaction and potential for reflection and transformation. At the same time, any form of intervention is already a context for new knowledge to be produced. For example, when a researcher enters an organization and asks investigative questions, they are already provoking reflective processes by helping the people from the specific organization to think about the topic being investigated. Therefore, questions are never neutral and detached from conversation. Also, the type of questions asked will always set the stage for what is going to be discovered (data). This will in turn become material for the stories in which the future will be constructed (results of research). In other words, a research methodological process, under a constructionist perspective, is not detached from the context neither taken as something over-ruling the research, which allows the researcher to get the "right results." It is rather understood as a tool to facilitate the knowledge production process (McNamee, 2000).

In a social constructionist perspective, research is taken as a social practice (McNamee, 2010). This assumption is valid for any context of knowledge production, but it has important consequences for research in the organizational field. It is an alternative for the realist and empiricist traditions in the field, inviting a different approach toward research, one that is more connected and sensitive to the dynamic of the organizational everyday life. The organization doing research under this approach might use specific methods of assessment and evaluation to generate effective presentation modes, such as writing a narrative about the process of change or also the creation of a regularly updated blog describing different stages of the intervention and its results (Harper, 2005). These are ways of knowing that allow us to record, motivate, and create a new description of the organization that recognizes its own knowledge as well as the ability to change in the desired direction. From this perspective, knowledge is not taken as only a description of something that happened, but it constructs change within the organization, and its members are the immediate beneficiaries of it.

The different kinds of methods available for the researchers can be useful depending on the objective of the study and the creativity of the researcher. But it is important to note that, in tune with the constructionist approach, some methods are more preferred, such as case studies, which deepen the understanding of a given context; action research, in which participants collaborate directly in the expansion of the research questions and its results (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008); and the so-called reflexive inquiry, adopting a collaborative approach to participants, emphasizing multiperspectives and multi-voicing (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008). All of these research methods legitimize the knowledge production characterized by the expressive, reflective, and poetic methods of analysis that sensitize, involve, and capture the reader, allowing, then, new experiences and promoting new openness within organization.

Importantly, methodology inspired by the constructionist approach is conducted without over-imposition, where the set of tools available work as an orientation and should not be inserted outside of the context (Yu & Sun, 2012). The research method is understood as a performance, as a way to make sense (McNamee, 2010), and the researcher is encouraged to ask, reflectively and creatively, about what resources

are available and not used, what questions were not asked, and how a given topic or situation could change. It examines from what position and to whom the researcher intends to speak. Besides recognizing the various types of knowledge in society, this reflective and creative emphasis promoted by social constructionism stimulates the search for new social intelligibilities that not only describe or prove the existence of certain phenomena, but also invite a new look and a different future reality.

Ultimately, it is the generative quality of the research, the immediate utility to the context in which it emerges, or its ability to produce new processes and issues that dictate the positive evaluation criterion of knowledge production.

Final Considerations

When considering the rapid changes happening in the world and the struggles organizations are facing today, new approaches are urged. Social constructionism is offered here as a postmodern approach with epistemological assumptions that generates new methods for organizational change. Dialogue, imagination, and co-creation are described and embraced not just as theoretical concepts within this approach, but as practical resources that can be actualized in conversations and interactions. These concepts can become creative resources, used as research/intervention tools to favor pluralism, allowing multiple voices to emerge and to encourage diversity where new meanings can be co-created, promoting organizational transformation.

Furthermore, social constructionism blurs the division between intervention and inquiry, inviting the professional to become an integral practitioner-researcher. This stance toward intervention and knowledge production can help organizations to coordinate a collective process of collaboration among stakeholders, to reflexively and critically create knowledge that helps in understanding the organizational system and the process of change promoted by an intervention.

In conclusion, the social constructionist theory together with its resources brings a fresh approach to organizational development where the focus is on people generating meaning together to create their organizational worlds. In that sense, it sustains the assumption that organizations can change their culture by changing the conversation, by putting people together to dialogue and to co-create possibilities for action generating new possible realities.

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