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A RELATIONAL APPRECIATIVE APPROACH IN CONSTRUCTING INNOVATIVE THINKING

Theoretical article

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the relational appreciative approach in organizational context. In the first part it presents a brief literature review from a social constructionist perspective, and then it emphasizes conceptual and practical resources which open up possibilities to create innovative thinking. The perspective centers language as a key element in emerging ideas and implementing changes in organizations. Appreciating and understanding the realities constructed lead to a successful self-relational, increasing organizational collective commitment and motivation. In a process of continuous negotiation, each member of organization influences and directs the actions which construct the organization itself. Finally, the paper suggests that a relational appreciative approach is a powerful weapon in constructing innovative thinking in organizational development.

Social Constructionist Orientation

The social constructionist paradigm is principally concerned with 'explaining the processes by which people come to describe, account the world (including themselves) in which they live' (Gergen, 1985). Gergen (1994) proposes a new approach, social constructionism that focuses on the processes of understanding and addressing changes in the postmodern society, in a wider sense, but specifically on organizations. For example Berger and Luckmann (1966) note that when we become conscious of our identity as a 'generalized other', that we are 'in subjective possession of a self and a world' (p. 137). From this perspective, knowledge itself is socially constructed and facts are social products (Gergen, 1985). Social constructionism focuses on the relations through which social actors construct realities (Cojocaru, Bragaru and Ciuchi, 2012; Cojocaru, 2012). The process of understanding is a result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationships (Gergen, 2009; Gergen, McNamee and Barrett, 2001). This epistemological perspective is interested in dialogue and relations between members of organizations in the process of producing meaning in social interactions (Gergen, 1994). 'We are capable of making multiple and diverse maps of realities' (Maas, Manschot and Roodink, 2001). The multiple realities are constructed through language. From social constructionist perspective, language becomes a lens for understanding certain aspects of organizational life (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Ouchi and Wilkins, 1985), being a tool of relating. The constructionist approach emphasizes the ability to create realities through language, stimulating a process of continuous creation (McNamee, 2004); therefore, it is always fluid and dynamic (Gergen and Gergen, 2012). 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).

Emerging new possibilities

Based on social constructionism perspective organizations are seen as 'a potentially fluid field of meaning making" (Gergen, 2009, p. 321). Giving the epistemological nature of constructionism (Sandu, 2012; Bradu and Sandu, 2009), the postmodern paradigm allows emerging innovative practices (Gergen and Gergen, 2012). Dialogue, imagination, co-creation, discourse, and meaning-making, are key resources gained through social exchanges, relationships, and interactions (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2000; Gergen and Gergen, 2004). These resources can be useful in organization intervention, contributing to discover new posibilities to enact (Cunliffe, 2002; Hosking and McNamee, 2006). Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) hightlight that social constructionism creates potential for imagination. The focus is on people generating meaning together to develop organizational activities. These approaches asume a relational, dialogical view of person and processes (Hosking, 2011). Also, these resources work through multiple dialogues, with different self-other relations, invite, and support many lines of action (Hosking, 2011; Hosking and McNamee, 2006). Dialogical processes can be useful in facilitating multiple voices in organization and can help members to participate, focusing on the 'how' of relating and on posibilities, and construcing limits on other possibilities. 'Their potential lies in embracing a dialogical or participative view of person-world making '(Hosking, 2011).

Constructing Innovative Thinking

One example in which resources mentioned previously are put together is appreciative inquiry, a methodology under constructionist assumptions regarding organization as living, human constructions (Cooperider and Whitney, 2005). Appreciative inquiry focuses on positive things in organization, what work, developing a strong sense of cooperation (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005; Somerville and Farner, 2012). Rooted in social constructionism (Cummings and Worley, 2001; Gergen, 1994; Murrell, 2001) appreciative inquiry is useful in engaging participants in a collective process of reframing and generating new ways of acting in organizations (Cooperrider and Avital, 2004; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001). Appreciative inquiry opens space to dialoguing, developing multiple local-cultural realities (Van der Haar and Hosking, 2004). Appreciative inquiry invites a particular way of local anthologies to (re)construct local knowledge and power relations (Van der Haar and Hosking, 2004). This perspective contributes to develop skills, and to motivate a team to increase ownership, accountability, and results (Hart, Conklin and Allen, 2008). A meaningful value, co-creation, is what guarantees today's organizations to move on, opening the door to much-needed theorizing and research (Lusch, 2007). Innovation is described as 'an idea, practice or an object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption' by Rogers (cited in Steele and Murray, 2004, p. 316). Appreciative inquiry can help generating transformative learning. Transformative learning refers to the processes by which members of organization transform meaning perspectives, mind-sets, and habits of mind (Mezirow and Associates, 2000). This perspective can be viewed

as a refreshing one, being a way to construct innovative thinking. Every pattern in this ongoing social relational process develops and changes in the direction of that on which the participants focus their attention (Cooperrider, 1990). 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 and Barrett, 2001). Working together members can understand better others' points of view, and can co-construct new perspectives in order to develop innovative actions. In this application of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2000) organization is a result of collective interaction between individuals and generated by their beliefs, and values. Embrace a more inclusive approach, co-creating value by taking into account the expressed needs and wishes of people (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008; Prahalad, 2004) this relational approach appreciative inquiry can be an intervention in changing perspectives that hold down the development of organizations (Cuyvers, 2010). Focusing on the style of self as relationships (Gergen, 2009) allows discovering solutions, constructing actions in order to increase the level of involvement, and commitment in the changing process (Elliott, 1999; Whitney, 1998).

Acknowledgment

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