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CONSTRUCTING ORGANIZATIONAL DISCOURSE. A SYMBOLIC ACTION IN IMPROVING WORK

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Abstract

Social constructionism, a postmodern approach with epistemological assumptions, brings new resources for organizational interventions. A key element in organizational development, the discourse plays an important role in fashioning the future of this. This article presents the organizational discourse as a symbolic action in which discourse influence behavior of members and reinforces mindsets. Discourse shapes the relations between individuals, and creates mental frames. Create change by changing the discourse generates fresh new possibilities and innovative forms to look at a situation. Constructing a positive organizational discourse offers a great potential for social change and address challenges and advances thinking in the organizational field.

Social constructionist perspective

Our society is undergoing, affecting organizations and their form of functioning (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Although many organizations make great efforts to restructure their organizations, embracing new strategies and different tools, most of them remain rooted in outdated concepts and old interventions that prevent the capacity to remain sustainable (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013). According to Lusch (2007) a meaningful value co-creation is what guarantees today's organizations to move on, which open the door to much-needed theorizing and research. Promoting a co-creation, all the stakeholders contribute to create, transform and determine value to organizations. There is a need to embrace a more inclusive approach, co-creating value by taking into account the expressed needs and wishes of people (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008; Prahalad, 2004).

Gergen (1994) propose a new perspective, social constructionism that focuses on the processes of understanding and addressing changes in the postmodern society, in a wider sense, but specifically on organizations. Social constructionism may be defined as a perspective which believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen, 1985, p. 265). Social constructionism is a theoretical movement that brings an alternative philosophical assumption regarding reality construction and knowledge production. Social constructionism considers that realities are created by people who communicate through language, each of them influencing and limiting the responses of others (Cojocaru, Bragaru, & Ciuchi, 2012). 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). The meanings are socially constructed via the coordination of people in their various encounters (Gergen & Gergen, 2012), hence it is always fluid and dynamic. Social constructionism as a postmodern paradigm has important consequences for knowledge production in the organizational field. 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 people" (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011), generating new possibilities of doing research and interventions. 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. The knowledge has its roots

in shared interactions with others, gained through social exchanges, relationships, and dialogue (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Burr (2003) notes that "knowledge is therefore seen not as something that a person has or doesn't have, but something that people do together" (p. 9). Language, a fundamental aspect for the process for 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. From a social constructionist perspective, language is more than just a way of connecting people. People „exist” in language. Language gains its meaning from its use in context (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1994; McNamee, 2004). Social constructionism is very sensitive to changes, generating new forms of practices and behavior, being a useful approach to address and embrace changes in context. From a constructionist perspective, organizations are seen as „potentially fluid field of meaning making” (Gergen, 2009, p. 321), being an ongoing process of development. This paradigm generates specific implications regarding 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). This approach is a good way to “analyze the ways realities are created within organizations as a result of interactions between individuals and of the significations they assign to these realities” (Cojocaru et al. 2012).

This approach brings in concepts such as language, discourse, dialogue, imagination, co-creation, and meaning-making, creating a “hybrid toolbox” to be used by managers, supervisors, group members and of course by each member of organizations as resources for organizational interventions (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013). These resources offer them a blink to discover how useful they can be, stimulating professionals/practitioner's creativity to develop new possibilities to improve work, influencing the future of organizations. The social constructionism opens space for a variety of alternative intelligibilities. The challenge is to expand the possibilities of understanding and to look at a situation.

Discourse a symbolic action. Social constructionist perspective sees the discourse an essential process of building, creating and transforming organizations. The discourse is a particular form of speech and can be analyzed in a constructionist manner as textual analysis. This postmodern approach places discourse at the centre of sense making (Weich, 1995) and the ongoing social creation of reality. Berger and Luckmann suggested (1966) that social reality is known to individuals in terms of symbolic universes constructed through social interaction. The

language is viewed as the “most important sign system of human society” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 51) and discursively mediated experience in organizational settings (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). The discourse generates involvement and promotes change in organization. “Thinking differently requires speaking differently” (Lakoff, 2004). “Communication represents not only the primary mechanism of change in organizations, but for many types of change may constitute the outcome as well” (Lewis, 2006, p. 46). Discourse as symbolic action views reality as a social construction and individuals as symbolic universes constructed through social interaction (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). The attention is not focused on the individual, but on the network of interactions between individuals (Cojocaru et al. 2012). Different understandings are welcomed, the focus being on the potential of multiple local realities that can be shared (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001).

In the organizational context, the discourse occurs when organizational members construct a shared sense of their identities, their organization, and specific ways to discourse and act (Cunliffe, 2001). By developing a social ontology of discourse allows the understanding, and the development of the entities, powers, and mechanism at work (Elder-Vass, 2011). The discourse is the principal means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are. Organizations exist only as far as their members create them through discourse (Mumby & Clair, 1997, p. 181). How things are framed and talked about becomes a significant context, “shaping how people think about and respond to any situation” (Marshak & Grant, 2008). Organizational discourse as symbolic action offers a better way to understand the nature of organizational change. Discourse creates mental frames that are “metacommunicative” (Bateson, 1972, p. 188). According to Phillips & Brown (1993) discourse is not simply symbolic, but at a broader level of framing evokes particular associations through connotation and invites others to view the world in these terms. Its interest in how narratives, texts, conversation and other forms of communication influence and shape organizational processes, behavior and change, creates and reinforces mindsets (Marshak & Grant, 2008). Discourse creates change by enabling participants to frame new shared meanings. It is not focused on finding the “right way” to do things, but to create a framework in which people can feel connected and want to be involved. “Discourse is everything and everything is discourse” (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004). Discourse does not merely describe things, it does things (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Grant, Keenoy & Oswick, 1998). Studying

discourse is a powerful way to explore the processes of the organizational life (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000).

Constructing a positive organizational discourse offers a great potential for social change and address challenges and advances thinking in the organizational field. The focus on what is locally viewed as positive, what works, and what is energizing within an organization, has better results (Cooprrider & Whitney, 2005). Discourse 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 et al. 2011). Changing the discourse involves changing the texts, the narratives and conversations that affect how people think and act (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). This makes the discourse as an important tool for organizational change, for example, strategies, structures, rewards and processes (Marshak & Grant, 2008). The organizations can improve their work by changing the conversation, by involving people to dialogue, and co-creating new possibilities for action. The discourse constructs a space of conversation. The conversation will not turn into action unless it modifies or changes discourse, producing new concepts, ideas, and subject positions (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000). Our discourse has infinite human resources that can be enacted (Cooprrider & Whitney, 2005). The use of a positive discourse generates great potential for social change, new ideas, commitment and relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). Discourse lead to new organization realities, develop a sense of belonging and co-responsibility among all social actors involved.

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