Social Construction of Reality as Communicative Action

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By

Antonio Sandu

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FOREWORD

The volume written by Professor PhD Antonio Sandu is, in fact, his habilitation thesis, presented in sociology, at the University of Oradea, Romania. To help the reader understand some particularities of this work, it is necessary to explain the peculiarities of the Romanian education and research system in terms of getting the title of habilitated PhD. The concept of habilitation thesis, as developed in Romania, is that it relates to certifying the right of the holder to conduct doctoral-level research in a particular field of science, and must refer to the author's original contribution in terms of doctoral research in the field he wants to lead. Within the volume the reader will find numerous references to the author's previous work, as well as explanations and comments on the correlations between these in terms of ontological, epistemic and pragmatic perspectives. There are also clarified correlations between the author's contributions and the scientific context as it exists in the literature.

This paper is a synthesis of research conducted by Professor PhD Sandu throughout his entire scientific and professional career. The key concept of his scientific activity is *social constructionism*. This was expanded from epistemic premises that were investigated in terms of its other dimensions - sociological, ethical and pragmatic.

The studies proposed below identify the main contributions that he has brought to a transdisciplinary area of concern, including the sociology of communication, social communication, applied ethics, the social dimension of cultural studies, social philosophy and social work. From a methodological point of view, he has opted for an interpretative approach, based on qualitative techniques, with regard to which a special place is occupied by *appreciative and inductive methodology*.

Philosophical, epistemic, ethical and axiological perspectives were pursued in their pragmatic dimensions as applied in social work, and constructionist models were the basis of theoretical elaborations in relation to semiotics, sociology, social philosophy and the study of trans-modernism as a contemporary cultural paradigm.

Antonio Sandu has been Professor PhD since 29th September 2014 within the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Public Administration of the "Stefan cel Mare" University, Suceava. He has given lectures and seminars on the sociology of law, elements of sociology and logic, professional ethics and transparency in public administration, public

relations and communications and political science. Prior to that he was Associate Professor at the Mihail Kogalniceanu University of Iasi, where he gave lectures and seminars on the introduction to philosophy, ethics and professional deontology, the sociology of communication, ethics and deontology in communication, internal communication, social philosophy, globalism and globalization, sociology of law, methods of research in communication sciences, fundaments of social sciences, and the logic and theory of argumentation.

His scientific and professional training was conducted synergistically by following simultaneously the specializations of philosophy and social work, always approaching such training from the perspective of the interdisciplinary strengths of these fields of research.

As the author argues, the key concept of his scientific activity is related to social constructionism, seen from a socio-semiotic perspective. Constructionism and constructivism are paradigms that refer to the way in which the individual operates in terms of constructs – operational definitions with regard to reality itself. While constructivism places the formation of constructs at the individual level, constructionism places them at the level of interactions between the social and the environmental, with the individual acquiring constructs from the environment and re-projecting them onto it. He proposes a particular version of constructionism that takes into account Habermas' theory regarding communicative action[1].

The author analyses the social construction of reality by developing his very own version of social constructionism as being placed at the intersection between the constructionist paradigm and the theory of communicative action (Sandu, 2015).

From the methodological point of view, he proposes a semiotic strategy entitled *fractal constructionism,* which aims at analysing the interpretative drift of certain key concepts that have value as social constructs (Sandu, 2015).

The results have revealed a series of specific communicational models, among which those based on communicative action have had a profoundly affirmative aspect.

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[1] Some ideas were adapted from the original Habilitation Thesis of Professor PhD Antonio Sandu; See Sandu, A. (2015) *Communicative Action and Social Construction of Reality. A Socio-semiotical Approach*, University of Oradea, Romania, unpublished.

CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

The key concept explored in this volume is *social constructionism* in all its dimensions: sociological; ontological; epistemological; methodological; ethical and pragmatical.

Constructionism, just like constructivism, is a paradigm that refers to the way in which the individual operates with constructs, which can be seen as operational definitions of some reality clippings. While constructivism places the development of constructs at the individual level, constructionism places them at the level of interactions in the social environment, with the individual assuming and re-projecting the constructs onto the social environment (Sandu, 2013a).

The constructionist perspective is, in its structure, close to postmodernism. From the perspectives of Lyotard and Habermas, our reality is a consensus of speech. Platonian essentialism operates on two levels of reality: the first being transcendent and immutable, while the second is immanent, imperfect and discontinuous. The essentialist division is a tributary of the ontological assumption that the primary characteristics of object classes are independent of context. Constructionism denounces the idea of context independence and the idea of a unique ontological referential (Sandu, 2014c). The starting point of social constructionism is the work of Gergen (1978, 1985, 1990, 1999, 2005).

In Gergen's (2005) vision, social constructionism is concerned with explaining the process in which people come to describe and take note of the world they live in and are part of.

The constructionist model shows that reality is created within the process of communication, using language instruments, with each individual influencing and shaping the answers of others (Campbell, Coldicott and Kinsella, 1994). We consider that this paradigm can be related to the theory of communicative action, formulated by Habermas. He considers communicative action as the preferred model of empowerment in contemporary society (Habermas, 2000). From the criticism produced by

Habermas we take two distinct theoretical poles: namely (1) the analysis of the micro-level theories of social rationality, based on communicative structures and language acts, and (2) integrative theories of modern society at the macro-level. Communicative action directed towards reaching consensus is a particularly postmodern power strategy, namely the refinement of power, the development of seductive strategies and the replacement of force with the soft power of persuasion (Nye, 1990, 2004, 2011).

The semiotic pact ensures the interpretative unity of the world through the co-construction of social reality (Sandu, 2013b, 2014c). The interpretative pact involves a "negotiation of definition" with which the dialogue partners operate. Therefore, we pay close attention to the social construction of reality as a communicative action. We extend the area of communicative action to the entire social pragmatics. We interpret social action as a discursive-seductive strategy of exercising power in the public space. We utilise a constructionist understanding, in which public space is represented by any part of the co-construction of reality through social or communicative action.

1.1. The Ontological Dimension

The ontological dimension of social constructionism assumes that reality itself is a social construct, generated from multiple negotiations of interpretations that individuals give to the world. Reality has the meaning that individuals construct in the process of communication and that they assign to people. This ontological view takes into account the Kantian distinction between things in themselves and phenomena. As a phenomenon, the world is a social (communicative-intersubjective) construction whose purpose is socially set but which, once established, becomes real as the context of coexistence.

The constructionist ontology (Sandu, 2011c) that we propose aims at a reality built on levels in the manner proposed by Basarab Nicolescu. From our perspective, the social construction of reality is precisely the identification of areas of transparency to knowledge, as well as which individuals are disengaged and the meaning one negotiates with otherness. The existence is real for the individual to the extent to which it creates limits. Exceeding the limits is the process of sensification that establishes meaning. In ontological terms, we do not consider reality as devoid of substance in a purely idealistic manner.

We strongly consider that the world of the subject is almost independent from the world's being, the individual perceiving reality again as a pure social construction.

While realistic ontologies start from the assumption that "the world— including the social one— is real, objective and observable", the constructionist models that assume that the world that is not accessible to research are dependent on context and the observing subject, being rather a world of cultural constructs updated by language acts and subsisting at the communication level.

Constructionist ontologies do not deny the existence of a reality outside language acts; they argue that reality has no meaning to the epistemic subject as long as it is not identifiable and reconstructed by communication acts. Constructionist ontology is, by nature, anti-essentialist; and it does not accept the idea of preserving the essence of things outside the process of constructing meaning. Once an interpretative community level meaning is accepted, it becomes constraining to its members, being part of the constructed social reality. Thus, we consider the reinterpretation of the social construct idea as a fundament of sociability, interpreting it as a semiotic pact (Sandu, 2013j).

The essence of the semiotic pact consists of the conventions of power legitimacy. Once power is established, it acts as if it were a transcendental, imposing order to co-existence. Redefining power in the communicative process tends to humanise the experience and express it at the level of subtle soft power expressed as communicative action (Sandu, 2013c; Sandu and Caras, 2013a). If, for essentialist ontologies, reality is independent of the epistemic subject, constructionist ontology places the social construction of reality only in context (Gergen, 2005). From this perspective we analyse, among other things, the social construction of autonomy in patients with chronic diseases (Sandu, 2013d; 2013i; Manea, Gavrilovici, Sandu, Oprea, Vicol and Astarastoae, 2013; Cojocaru, Sandu and Oprea, 2013; Sandu, Cojocaru and Oprea, 2013). Social reality is constructed around the communicative interactions within the negotiation processes of the interpretations that continuously occur between the actors of communication. The constructionist ontology is similar to postmodernism, being also anti-systemic and anti-essentialist.

Constructionism does not automatically reject meta-narratives but it analyses the interpretative drift that a legitimate narration (story) supports in different communicative contexts. Thus, we conduct an analysis of the deconstruction of the idea of *charity* in a Christian sense, in order to rediscover it, in the form of welfare state policy and welfare practices based on means testing (Sandu and Caras, 2013a).

The concept of *charity* is a construct developed in the generative contexts of the Christian humanitarian paradigm, as well as in philanthropic practices. The paradigmatic cleavage given by the process of secularisation has led to the social reconstruction of the idea of *charity*, partially eliminating the connotations of *mercy* and *Christian duty.* Their place has been taken by values such as *social responsibility, solidarity* etc.

The essence of a term is not invariant to the transformations of social and communicative contexts, so the same term may differ in meaning depending on the communicative context. The constructionist paradigm shows that the changes to language conventions that make sense of a term lead to modifying the designator itself. In the specific terms of the constructionist paradigm, words create worlds (Gergen, 2005).

The analysis model proposed to identify the semantic drift and the covariance of the designated object, depending on the interpretative context, is presented in Sandu and Caras (2013a). Starting from the methodology mentioned above, Caras develops a series of analyses regarding the deconstruction of meaning of certain terms that designate ethical values in order to identify the constructive frameworks that may underlie ethical expertise. We mention the developments proposed by Caras in order to illustrate the generative capacity of the constructionist-fractal methodology developed by us and used in identifying the semantic covariance of terms depending on the interpretative context and the semantic drift, as they all are elements that circumscribe the symbolic worlds of communicative actors. The constructionist ontology is a pluralistic one, and postulates that to the plurality of worlds it may be assigned ontological validity. We develop an attempt to build a regional ontology by applying constructionist postulates of context dependence and the indivisibility between the world and the epistemic subject (Sandu, 2011c).

Rethinking reality in terms of possibility and probability begins a game of freedom in the cultural space. Cultural space opens itself in front of Otherness. Otherness becomes not opposing, nor contradictory, but complementary, which should not be rejected or avoided but, rather, protected and encouraged.

Giving up the absolute value of "reality" in favour of "possiblity" makes up the immediate experience of "I perceive this reality". It is perfectly possible in Everett's vision (1957) to build an imaginary world in which, for example, Einstein has not created the theory of relativity. This "world" will be perfectly consistent but it is not the world that we grasp as real. We present in our book, *Perspective semiologice asupra transmodernitatii (Semiological Perspectives on Transmodernity)* (2011c),

a model of metaphysical construction that begins with Everett's theory (1957), which asserts the simultaneous existence of an infinite number of worlds that continuously generate themselves in pairs of event and counter-event. As one consciousness is awakening in one of these worlds it reabsorbs the other worlds, making them inactive for consciousness. We classify this model as constructionist ontology, as it could be considered a constructionist's ideal metaphysical model. Once an "interpretative world" is selected, the other possibilities of understanding reality are suppressed as pure possibilities.

1.2. The Epistemological and Methodological Dimensions

The methodology of postmodernism and post-structuralism starts from the idea of deconstruction. To deconstruct means to search for alternative meanings for things, events and states (Baban, 2010). Derrida's stated aim, notes Baban (2010), is to release intellectuals from the constraint of rational thinking and from the idea derived from rationalism, according to which there is a single reality that can be known and has a unique and true meaning. In the view of deconstructivists, no one can decide which is the true meaning, as the interpretation of the world, especially the subjective, can be achieved in a variety of ways, in conjunction with both the observer and his ideas, visions and cultural backgrounds, as well as with the subjects and the ways in which reality is constructed and makes sense for them.

> Methodological debate in post-structuralism is centred on understanding rather than explaining reality. Semiotics and the hermeneutic approach are more relevant in terms of methodology for post-structuralism, as we operate with subjective realities, constructed through a process of creating meaning. There is no single reality capable of measuring, but a multitude of realities that could be understood and contained in a communication process (Sandu, 2012d).

Our contribution to post-structural dimensions of contemporary epistemology (Sandu, 2011f) is mentioned by Matozo Franco and de Souza Leao (2013) in a paper regarding the encoding and decoding of organisational communication. The Brazilian researchers refer to our contributions regarding the qualitative specifics of the research carried out on the post-structural paradigm.

In the epistemic field we are concerned with the distinction between the paradigms of postmodern and transmodern communication. They both have an antirealistic and anti-essentialist nature, the process of creating

meaning being seen as a negotiation of interpretation and thus a semiotic pact.

> Communication in postmodernity is governed by the assumption of difference, and in transmodernity, by that of complementarity. The emphasis is on the act of communication, not on the message. In addition, the transmodern communicational paradigm brings the humanistic centrality of communication. Communication is not just self-expression, but a subjective reconstruction of reality. The communication act, by acceding to significant levels of reality, makes possible the participation to the Whole. The act of participation is one of communication (Sandu, 2012d).

Communication techniques propose the restructuring of the subjective world of the participants in communication, in both postmodern and transmodern paradigms.

Deconstruction aims to release consciousness from dependence on meta-stories as ideological constructions that establish and uphold sense and keep the communicational actor trapped in a universe of speech. Constructionism, on the other hand, aims at understanding the way in which stories are created and the way in which they participate in the process of creating meaning. The distinction between postmodernity and transmodernity begins with the works of Ray (2011) and Codreanu (2005). In defining transmodernism, we also take into account the works of Alcoff (2012) and Dussel (1995).

We see postmodernity as a culture of pluricentral difference that centres on the nonessential. Transmodernity is a holarchyc culture that aims at the reconstruction of the world's unity using polycentric bases. The world's unity is no longer managed through transcendent meta-stories but through semiotic pacts that build new meta-stories as communicative actions. This distinction is a contribution to the culturological analysis and clarification of transmodernity.

Despite the small number of papers published worldwide, as far as transmodernity is concerned, this field is becoming more prolific, raising interest in local and foreign researchers. Beyond the aforementioned contribution regarding the terminological clarification, our vision is one in which the complementarity between transmodernity and postmodernity extends itself to a methodological plan. It is a vision of complementarity, to the one between deconstruction and social construction of reality, as a singular and continuous process. In the scientific literature, Berger and Luckmann (2008) and Gergen (2005) discuss constructionism and social constructionism as epistemological paradigms and, partially, ontological paradigms.

We develop a constructionist method that is founded in grounded theory but also in the fractalic model suggested by Gavriluta (2003), which we call fractalic-constructionism. This targets the analysis of interpretative drift of the meanings of a term according to the various contexts in which the social meaning of the given term is constructed. We are consistent with this methodology, adding to it an appreciative-affirmative dimension and following the communicational contexts of the construction of reality as a communicative act: in ontological space, as quantum metaphisics; in interpersonal relations, space as social practice (professional supervision, philosophical and ethical counselling); and in the plan of identity construction (referring to minority identities) of the Italian community in Romania, the professional identities of social workers, doctors and diabetic patients.

We follow the constructionist method in the field of applied ethics and the understanding of ethical values in their quality of social constructs. Even in the absence of a constructionist-fractalic methodology, the methodological complementarity of social construction constitutes a research opening that would regard the two sides of contemporaneity— postmodernity and transmodernity—as a necessary culturological, anthropological and, especially, communicational unity.

> In our vision, deconstruction is the epistemic tool of postmodernity and constructionism of transmodernity. If deconstruction aims at the alienation of realism until the one is lost into the multiple, constructionism restores the unity of reality as discursive play at the subjectivities' interfaces. Social construction of the Real is, at the same time, a deconstruction of the objective and a reconstruction of the Real as language. Constructionism is not beyond deconstruction but an inherent part of it, just as transmodernism is not beyond postmodernism but structurally integrated into it (Sandu, 2012d).

Complementary to postmodern deconstruction, constructionism keeps its anti-realist character; the plurality of experiences and interpretations in a plural world or in a plurality of worlds is given to us by linking meaning with interpretative will. Constructionist epistemology (Sandu and Ponea, 2010a) is concerned with the development of paradigms in the social sciences, and cultural fields as a "negotiation" of the interpretations (meanings) of given data, derived from empirical reality or other areas, such as theoretical knowledge and models etc. According to the "map" by which we understand or "we read", reality is no more than a continuous negotiation of interpretations. Understanding concepts, as they are taken from scientific language in cultural discourse, is forming a paradigmatic model, relatively independent from the science of their own. Cultural

derivation of the concepts' meaning underlies the semantic convergence of any socio-cultural paradigms. The most profound restructuring occurs at the level of mentality, through the transition from understanding an objective, knowable and unique world, to the pattern of a plurality of worlds, whose indetermination is predicted theoretically. Gergen (2005) argues that terms such as "real, true, rational and objective, have an inherent destructive potential". Constructionist epistemology is, through its structure, close to postmodernism, due to the relativisation of models and the reporting of reality to negotiations of interpretations.

We believe that social constructionism deconstructs the ontic in terms of independent existence, moving reality at the level of language experience. Significance and meaning of words are not epistemically evaluated based on a theory of correspondence truth; instead, they are based on a theory of social negotiation of the meaning and, indirectly, on a substitution of the concepts of *adequacy* and *verisimilitude* for the concept of *truth*. The constructionist perspective does not allow knowledge in itself to be free of any axiological foundation, and this perspective cannot conceptualise a disjunction between the subjective and the objective that involves a clear distinction between knowledge and reality. The book *Social Constructionist Epistemology. A Transmodern Overview,* published by Lap Lambert Publishing House from Germany in 2012, emphasises the epistemic dimension of social constructionism and the way this paradigm can define the transmodern cultural model (Sandu, 2012a).

The new epistemology can no longer be quantitative and positivist but must be, rather, holistic and qualitative, taking into account the assumption that the research should include the researcher's system and his correlation with the researched object. It slips from a hard core of the concept of reality as objectuality to a "plurality of possible realities", which, through the intervention of the researcher, is ordered (collapsed) in a single unique series of consequences and results. Rebuilding the "world image" is a constant negotiation of models correlated with new data of knowledge. This new epistemology renounces the claim to explain the cause of reality in favour of "a better understanding of it", especially the adequacy of understanding consequences and results. Models that have been successful in interpreting the world have been taken and used for interpreting other spheres of social life. For example, the model of inseparability, which works in physics at the quantum level, becomes an axiological model when implemented at the level of the world of individuals under the form of social movements such as feminism, the minority rights movement and the environmental movement. Globalism is an analogous transcription of the inseparability model from the reality of micro-particles to a social

reality. New physics generates a new humanism. We cannot claim our sovereign rights over nature, in order to investigate and exploit nature, without any consequences of our actions. The universe is a whole and there is no place to flee from the consequences of our actions (Sandu, 2012d).

Basarab Nicolescu (2006) outlines the distinction between the *Real* and *Reality*. The existence of levels of *reality* makes it necessary to introduce the concept of *complexity*. The epistemic constructionist-fractal model we propose considers a hierarchical reality that we understand in terms of an *epistemology* that takes into account the fractal world and the importance of the resignification of *reality*. In the transmodern paradigm, constructionism can be used methodologically, starting from the importance of the epistemic subject in the social construction of the truth.

In the article, *O viziune construcţionistă asupra adevărului în ştiinţă (A Constructionist View of Truth in Science)*, published in the Annals of University of Craiova, Series Philosophy, we perform a capitalisation of constructionist epistemology (Sandu, 2010c). This paper presents a series of axiomatic frames that mark scientific truth and its structure, classifying it as a social construct based on a negotiation of interpretations at the level of a professional community of researchers. From the classic frames of scientific truth, namely the existence of a referential, predictive ability and exploratory and comprehensive dimensions etc., the article examines the idea of socially constructed truth based on levels of reality (Nicolescu, 2006; 2007) and some of its intervals transparent to knowledge.

In the volume Social Constructionist Epistemology. A Transmodern Overview (2012a), as well as in the book Perspective semiologice asupra transmodernitatii (Semiological Perspectives on Transmodernity) (2010b), I refer to a particular methodology used to interpret reality, which I term fractal-constructionism (Sandu, 2012a). The fractal-constructionist approach is essentially a semiotico-hermeneutical one, aimed at a culturological analysis of the transmodern paradigm in three aspects: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. The syntax of the transmodern model is represented by the onto-gnoseologic axioms, fractalicly repeated in all areas of transmodern speech. Semantics is built by the transmodern revaluing of subjective metaphysics, viewed through the lens of contemporary science. From a methodological point of view, we are oriented, both in terms of theory and a practical application of the research, towards qualitative methodologies of a constructionist nature and constructivist extension.

The semiological analysis of communicational phenomena grants the researcher access to a multidimensional universe of meanings, represented by social interactions as vectors of social action through communicational

strategies. The scientific literature defines Grounded Theory as an inductive approach that starts from general observations and which, during the analytical process, creates conceptual categories that explain the researched theme (Glasser, 2002). The research insists on the role of the sociological theory to manage data in the research, and asserts that this theory can provide ways of conceptualising descriptions and explanations (Goulding, 1999; Branc, 2008).

This approach is opposed to a deductive logic that is based on assumptions determined a priori (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). In research focusing on grounded theory, the theory evolves during the process of research and is a product of a continuous interaction between the collection and the analysis of data. Data coding follows two stages: the initial coding and the selective/focused coding (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Analytical coding represents a reflection on the meanings of what the interlocutors are saying. During this stage, a series of referential items are established and compared to the ones in the transcription analysis (open coding). The lists resulting from this process need to be grouped into a single one that constitutes the primary list of the classification and analysis system of regularities and patterns.

> Qualitative content analysis, as we customized it, is based on a social constructionist paradigm. It aims to create an "understanding of latent meaning from the messages analysed" (Sandu, 2012d).

The proposed methodology is at the intersection of culturological analysis, qualitative analysis in the social sciences and discursive semiotics. The particular approach entitled Constructionist Grounded Theory is semiological one.

> We prefer to use a coding process in successive stages, starting with the selection of communicational structures taken from transcripts of the communicational units of the subject. Starting from them, we will move to inductive processes, of extraction of meanings assigned to the subjects' answers, and those will be assigned to a significant category. In practice, we proceeded to extract keywords, then to bring together the statements of the subject (subjects) into primary categories, which we later gather in secondary categories. The process must be completed in a finite number of steps by identifying categories of maximum generalization (Sandu, 2012d).

Inductive activity, as we applied it, is therefore accomplished in three successive steps:

- the first is the selection of communicative structures en vivo, those which the researchers agreed to be significant;
- the extraction of keywords according to research participants;
- second successive induction, extraction of globalizing categories (Sandu, Unguru, Ponea, Cojocaru, 2010).

Interpretation is followed by an analysis of the meanings of the categories, and meanings decrypted in the responses of the subjects. The theory is generated by inductive-interpretive successive processes. Data interpretation generates interpretative patterns (Sandu, 2012d).

1.3. Social Constructionist Semiotics

In terms of discursive pragmatics, we understand the social construction of reality as a competition between communicative actors, aimed at being situated within or outside an interpretive context. The discursive approach examines how people use their language in order to build their own social and perceptual realities. The use of language makes sense not only in the description of reality but also in its construction by continuing the renegotiation of meanings attributed to reality within interpretative communities.

The globalisation phenomenon represents the adequacy of interpretations of regional cultures to cross-cultural denominated meanings by imposing globally negotiated meanings beyond the interpersonal relations of individuals. In order to achieve this phenomenon of a globalising signalling semantic, adequate vectors are required, such as the media, the internet and mass marketing. Constructive discourse actors are narrators. Identity is built by people who generate meaning through proposed "stories and narrations". Stories and narratives are about one's self, others or events. They make sense becoming self-constructs only in the context of the story, to be analysed together with its contents, in order to identify the different conceptions of identity and the practices used, as well as to build functions of constructs. The dynamics of regionalism-globalism can be understood as a constructionist drift of the meaning of identity and belonging (Sandu, 2012d).

CHAPTER TWO

AFFIRMATIVE - APPRECIATIVE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Pragmatics is identifiable in the new practices of restoration and human restructuring, such practices being either counselling, the reconsideration of ethics in the spiritual past and trans-modern universe, or models of intervention in social space (Sandu, 2012a).

We have developed the social constructionist pragmatic as a form of reinterpretation of practices of restorative and human restructuring, in terms of *counselling*. We achieved a significant original contribution in social pragmatics by reinterpreting Appreciative Inquiry as a constructionist semiotics.

Appreciative Inquiry was defined as co-transforming research of the positive in individuals and organizations; it is a transforming discovery (Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987) of the resources which generate vitality in live systems at moments of maximum efficiency and maximum creating capacity, in social (Bushe, 2010), economic and human fields (Sandu, 2009a).

Appreciative Inquiry is based on the art of interrogation about the strengths of the system in order to understand, anticipate and maximize the creative potential that exists at this level (Sandu, 2009a). Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) consider Appreciative Inquiry as a mobilization of the interrogative capacity, based on the principle of unconditionally positive questions. The term *appreciation* itself - of valuing - makes us think of the positive side of the process of development, of affirming the strengths and positive aspects, and of the transformation of threats into opportunities for development (Ponea, 2009).

The element of novelty that the Appreciative Inquiry brings is the change of accent from the traditional way of action in an organizational environment, invariably oriented towards solving problems because in each environment there have to be problems to be solved, to the

highlighting of the importance of development of "what is best from what is" (Cojocaru, 2005). Cooperrider and Srivatsva (1987) state that *action research* is only based on problem solving, and that it leads to a constraint or lack of innovation when reality, or the problem, are approached (Tudosa, 2013).

Appreciative Inquiry starts from the appreciation and valuing of what is best in the organization; it continues with the building of a vision of what could be, and with dialogue about what should be the base of the assumption, namely, that an organization is a mystery that should be discovered (Cojocaru, 2005).

The concept of *Appreciative Inquiry* was created in 1987 in David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivatsva's *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life*, which defines Appreciative Inquiry as being the "search of what is best in people, in organizations and the world" (Sandu, 2009b). Appreciative Inquiry places the accent especially on the highlighting of the strengths of the targeted system, thus providing a way of understanding, anticipating and maximizing its creative potential (Sandu, 2009b).

Appreciative Inquiry is a particular way of questioning the subjects of organizational development and, at the same time, of foreshadowing the future by adopting certain positive relationships. These start from the fundamental positivity inherent to the person, organization or situation, and ask about improving the capacity of the system to cooperate and change. The method fundamentally assumes the engagement of the individuals in improving, changing and focusing on performance (Sandu, 2009a).

To appreciate: 1) to value the action of recognition of the positive aspects in people and the surrounding world; affirming past and present strengths, identifying potentialities and the perception of those things that give value to life (health, vitality, excellency) and to live systems; 2) to increase value. Synonyms: to value, honor, cherish (Cooperider & Whitney, 2001).

Inquiry: 1) action to explore and discover, 2) action to ask questions, being open to the seizing of new potentialities and opportunities. Synonyms: discovery, research, systematic exploration, study (Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987).

The perspective of the Appreciative Inquiry is a social-rationalist one, summed up by Cooperrider and Srivatsva (1987) in a few essential elements:

– The social order is fundamentally unstable: at any time it is the product of negotiations or agreements between persons and the conventions that are assumed tacitly or explicitly by them.

– Models of social-organizational action are not imposed in a biological or physical manner, being capable of an infinite variety.

– Social action is likely to be interpreted differently depending on the historical context in which it takes place, and none of the interpretations is considered objectively superior to the other.

– Human actions are prescribed by ideas, beliefs, intentions or theories. As such, any transformation of behaviour is accomplished by thoroughly changing these. The social-rationalist perspective states that the theories that we embrace, our beliefs and representations have a strong effect on social reality.

– One of the most powerful tools available to communities, when transforming conventions into norms, values, scopes and ideologies, is the act of dialogue. Changes that occur at the level of linguistic practices may cause deep transformations in social practices.

– Social theory is understood as an elevated language that has its own grammar, and which can be used as a linguistic instrument necessary to create new models of social action.

– Any theory has a normative value, latent or manifested, having the potential to influence social order. Each social theory implicitly has a moral meaning: having the potential to affect and regulate inter-personal relationships, in both the institutional environment and in everyday life. Social knowledge is built through a process of collective interaction, with knowledge being created, maintained and used by the human group (Cojocaru, 2005; Sandu, 2009b), in its quality of interpretative community.

Thatchenkery and Metzeker's (2009) construction of the concept of Appreciative Intelligence represents the psychological dimension of Appreciative Inquiry, which represents the "capacity to unite, sublime and extend the degree of intelligence from a wide variety of known intelligences: linguistic, personal non-linguistic and oriented towards other persons, being a kind of meta-intelligence, bringing together all types of intelligence in constructive purposes".

Thatchenkery and Metzker (2009) formulate, in plastic terms, the idea that appreciative intelligence is the ability to see the oak tree from the oak acorn. The three components of appreciative intelligence are:

- Reframing, understood as the redefining of the constructive framework;
- Appreciation of the positive elements;
- Notifying the most probable way in which the system will evolve, the ways of alternative evolution most favorable to the system and the ways in which you can build the future starting from the present (Thatchenkery & Metzeker, 2009).

Appreciative intelligence is referred to as "the power to reframe things, the appreciation of the positive possibilities and the capacity to see how the future evolves, starting from the present". Reframing represents changing the perspective through which things are perceived. Redefining the framework is seen as a psychological process through which a person modifies their perspective of an object, a person or a social context. It is a process of redefining the framework of the problem into a challenge for development. The appreciation of the positive represents the ability to sense the positive in events, situations and obstacles, and to focus on the positive elements from the total elements of an object. Sensing the way in which the future starts from the present represents the capacity to make connections between the generative aspects of the present and the desired future (Thatchenkery & Metzeker, 2009). Appreciative Inquiry is generally represented as a cycle with a four-phase structure that, in the scientific literature, is called the 4 Ds of the Appreciative Inquiry.

Appreciative Inquiry is a particular way to interview subjects of organizational development, anticipating and constructing the future by adopting positive relationships from the fundamental inherent positivity of each person, organization or a particular situation, by increasing system capacity for cooperation and change. The method has a fundamental assumption that individuals have a commitment to improving themselves and changing their focus on performance (Sandu, 2012e).

The Appreciative Inquiry approach is based on the mobilization of questioning (interrogative) capacity, oriented towards the positivity of the questions. Research is correlative with changing, by setting free the innovative potential and the creative imagination of people in organizations, instead of denial and criticism (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005a).

Our contribution to the development of the appreciative paradigm rests on its use as a grid of semiotics and hermeneutics analysis of discourse. We also introduce the concepts of *appreciative philosophical counselling* and *appreciative philosophical practice,* or *Appreciative Ethics*. We consider these elements to be worldwide priorities.

2.1. Appreciative Inquiry as a Social Semiotics

Syntactically, Appreciative Inquiry can be developed as an interpretive structure by which the individual manages his own social construction of reality. In this regard, we talk about the generative nature of Appreciative Inquiry (Sandu & Ponea, 2010c). Appreciative syntax has enabled the creation of a framework for a new model of ethics, which is presented in the volume *Appreciative Ethics*. So far, we have customized this model to the specific of bioethics, as *affirmative Appreciative Ethics* (Sandu & Ciuchi, 2010), and to the particular frame of doctor-patient relationships, as *Appreciative Ethics of care* (Sandu, 2012e; Sandu, Cojocaru & Ponea, 2012; Sandu, 2013e).

We have also developed *Appreciative Ethics* in the area of affirmation of freedom, as a form of *appreciative affirmative ethics* (Sandu, 2009a). The application of Legal Affirmative Ethics, as developed in the volume *Appreciative Ethics. A Constructionist Version of Ethics* (Sandu, 2012e), allowed us to reinterpret contractualist theories in a constructionist and appreciative manner.

Appreciative syntax allowed us to analyse social work practice in terms of ontological and epistemic consistency, emphasizing the need for coherence of applied levels of social intervention with the (self) reflexive dimension (Bradu & Sandu, 2009).

In terms of semantics, we built an interpretative appreciative grid analysis of the message and decryption of the degree of inherent appreciativity. We applied this methodology in the analysis of cross-cultural identity construction of ethnicity within an Italian community in Romania (Sandu, 2004; 2009b; 2010a).

Constructionist syntactic is the foundation for the customization of the models of qualitative analysis of discourse outlined above. Appreciative pragmatics allowed me to build customized models of counselling practices for social work (Sandu & Ponea, 2010d). Continuing the project of developing models of appreciative counselling, we propose appreciative philosophical counselling (Sandu, 2011a; 2011b).

An Appreciative approach aims to achieve a change of paradigm in social communications, by replacing centering on the problem with centering on successful elements, which can potentially create transformations inside systems. Starting from this vision, we consider Appreciative Inquiry to be a semiotic of the human condition: positivity. We consider Appreciative Inquiry to be a transdisciplinary approach that allows a communicative intervention in all areas of social life.

The constructionist dimension, inherent to the appreciative approach, is combined with the idea that "words create worlds" (Hayes, Higonnet & Spurlin, 2010). The nature of the appreciative inquiry involves an action-research which identifies the co-transforming valences of the interrogative process itself. Compared to the original meaning of the instrument used in organizational development, we use Appreciative Inquiry as a general instrument of analysis and development of communicational strategies at the level of groups and organizations. Practically, in our research we used the potentiality for Appreciative Inquiry to identify the internal structure of both mass communication – the analysis of public speeches, such as those of certain politicians – and public organizations of national minorities (Sandu, 2010a; 2012h).

In the article "Appreciative Semiotic and Hermeneutic Practices in the Analysis of Ethnic Minorities" (2010a) we analysed the discursive pragmatic nature of appreciative inquiry, making an appreciative semiotic analysis of the identity reconstruction of Italians in Romania, starting from their public speech. We used the discursive appreciative analysis grid to identify internal and external organizational communication, building around it an instrument for an audit of communication in organizations. The communication audit can be done from two perspectives: that of *internal communication evaluation* – under the aspect of coherent communication paths – and that of the *validity of the communicative interaction message* – between departments. The latter includes the integration of communication in the organizational culture and the joining of the members to its values, as well as the transformation of its constitutive values in the principles and practice of an organization etc (Sandu, 2014c).

In our opinion, the internal communication audit is strictly related to the audit of ethical practices developed by organizations, and ultimately results in the audit of communication, organizational cultures and ethical practices in the organization. Following the 4D model of Appreciative Inquiry, we associate these stages with the development of the communication audit. Starting with the first stage, through to the Discovery phase, the model takes into account the identification of the organization's constitutive values, namely those values that led to the founding of the organization, and of the operational values that underlie current practices in the organization. The model also focuses on the manner in which they are translated into principles of good practice, codes of ethics in quality policy, organizational strategies and internal development policies in the communication strategy (Sandu & Caras, 2014a).

The first phase of implementing the instrument targets the appreciative identification of organizational positive practices, the moments of success and the communicative strategies that generated organizational success. The organizational values understood as the Dream stage from the Appreciative Inquiry of the organization itself are compared to the development perspectives identified for stakeholders in the organization, the degree of coherence between the two visions and their adequacy, leading to recommendations for the development of appreciative organizational communication.

The audit of external communication, and of an organization's public relations, targets the messages and their impact, and the coincidence between the received communication and its intentions. Thus, at a conference in Iran, we presented the audit of scientific communication conducted at the "Mihail Kogalniceanu" University in Iasi, using an appreciative inquiry into its public communications (Sandu, 2013f). We considered the intention of the science communications produced and disseminated by the organization, in connection with the identification of elements of excellence in the research found in the organization, which might underlie some positive policies in the production and dissemination of knowledge, in and by that organization.

The elements of appreciative branding aim at constructing a public image of the organization. They start from the successful elements, in terms of production and services, as appreciated by the public. Also, the construction of an appreciative branding was considered with regards to: personalities, events, styles, and ways of communication, which lead to identifying the organization, the public's adherence to the products and services offered, and customer loyalty through the transfer of identity and the co-construction of positive identity of the beneficiary through participation (consumption of goods and services) with the public image of the organization.

The appreciative approach, as a strategy of analysis of speech and of reconstruction of communicative models, allowed us to identify a paradigmatic change in different areas of social communication: from focusing on the problem to focusing on development, starting from what already exists in that system as having potential for self-updating. What initially appeared as a phenomenological intuition gradually developed by exploring different areas in which affirmative speech tended to replace a critical form focused on the problem.

A main area of constructing Appreciative Ethics, as a communicative action, was that of the ethics of care. In this field we identified a series of synergies between the ethics of care, as formulated by Nell Noddings

(1999), and the elements of Appreciative Inquiry. The synergies aim to relinquish the approach that is centered on the common deficiency of the two paradigms. Outlining the model of Appreciative Ethics of care, we were able to formulate a series of principles with ethical values that could underlie the construction of Appreciative Ethics, and that could be widely discussed in this paper. The mentioned principles establish Appreciative Ethics as an ethics of communication in the public space. A characteristic of Appreciative Ethics, as we see it, is centered on values and their appreciation ability. By "appreciation" we understand the capacity to grasp the value itself, and to identify strategies for implementing it in daily life through means of communicative action.

We will discuss, in the public sphere, the fields of restorative justice and mediation. In this juridical area we have identified an increased interest in affirmative speech instead of one focused on the problem. The emergence of a penal restorative philosophy to replace the partially retributive paradigm leads to the creation of a social alternative to the prisono-centric paradigm (Sandu & Damian, 2012; Sandu, 2012e; Sandu, 2014c).

We will discuss the elements of existing appreciativity at the level of the restorative paradigm, showing only the orientation towards the identification of the positive personality elements of offenders, and their use in social integration programs both of offenders and of victims – in other words, offender mediation. The justice paradigm that is centered on human rights and the value of human dignity as the constitutive values of normativity (Toader, Toader & Damir, 2014) is, in our opinion, a shift of emphasis from the retributive paradigm towards social-centered models and the affirmation of the inherent positivity of human nature and the dignity of value. We applied the model of appreciative speech analysis to the matter of human rights and discovered the existence of an affirmative nucleus of the entire institutional juridical rhetoric, constituted around the dignity of the person and the human species, as a communicative fundament of contemporary humanism.

Another area of the public sphere where we applied the constructionist-appreciative analysis of speech was that of *professional supervision*. We identified, not only in public rhetoric but also in the answers of both supervisors and the supervised, a series of constitutive and operational values of the professional practices with reference to welfare practices (Caras & Sandu, 2014c; Sandu, Cojocaru & Ponea, 2010; Sandu & Unguru, 2013). In these cases, the analysis of speech was combined with other strategies of communication analysis, mainly with a particular approach of Grounded Theory methodology. The proposed approach

targeted inductive practices of the semantic analysis of public or private communication that leads, in the end, to the construction of a theoretical model of the studied communicative phenomenon.

In our opinion, supervision is a professional practice, based on communicative strategies, whose aim is to improve the performance of the professional community members. Starting from the studies on professional supervision, we proposed, together with Ana Caras, ethical supervision as a key element of ethical expertise and ethical counselling practice (Sandu, Caras, 2013b; Damian, Necula, Caras & Sandu, 2013). We included, in general, the practices of ethical counselling and of appreciative counselling, in the sphere of communicative pragmatics, as a communicative interpersonal action (Sandu, 2011a; Sandu, 2011b; Sandu & Caras, 2013b).

2.2. Appreciative Philosophical Practice as Communicative Action

Hermeneutics of reality can be seen as a philosophical reflection on the positive experiences of everyday life and falls within the philosophical tradition of the search for ultimate meanings of reality. It is a way to bring philosophy from the space of pure theoretical construction into the sphere of communicative practice, as a form of applied philosophy (Sandu, 2011a). This experience can be integrated into the philosophical discourse, in reference to both Plato's dialogues and the maieutic method.

The model of appreciative philosophy has two fundamental dimensions:

- – asocial-constructionist dimension;
- – a focus on success and appreciation (Sandu, 2011a; Sandu, 2011b; Sandu, 2012a; Sandu, Caras, 2014c).

The movement of appreciativity from organizational development into applied philosophy (Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; 2005a; 2005b) was begun by identifying the principles of appreciative philosophy that aim at partnership and co-creation of meaning between the counsellor and his audience.

Practical philosophy asserts itself in fields such as: psychosocial counselling, management strategies, and ethical guidance, becoming part of the social action. Philosophy intends to be a therapy of the spirit, rather than the psyche, reflected in social action. The process of philosophical practice consists of logical analysis of certain life situations, starting from exploration of the individual's belief system and the way in which this

influences his or her behaviour, authenticity, autonomy and state of well-being. It is a methodology rooted in both the Socratic method and the Platonic dialogue. During philosophical practice, a philosopher will identify the existential approach of each participant and align it, as much as possible, with the great philosophical currents, offering arguments to each of those present. These arguments will constitute opportunities for public lectures for the identified philosophers. After the reading of the philosophical text the dialogue with the subject will resume, in order to see the reflection of the philosophical work in the subjective vision of the participant (Sandu, 2011b). The philosophical practice proposes the transformation of life through rediscovering the interrogative and interpretative dimensions of human consciousness, and its application to the everyday experience of freedom, transposed from the metaphysical plane to the social. Philosophical thinking - taken out of the transcendent space - reconfigures the immediate, connecting it to the world of ideas, and giving the individual authenticity. Lou Marinoff (2010) proposes philosophical practice as a way of bringing philosophy from its ivory tower back to the agora (Muresan, 2014).

> The purpose of philosophical practice, according to Lou Marinoff (2010), is to solve the current problems of individuals, and the existential dilemmas that they face in daily life, through philosophical instruments. The specifics of existential dilemmas that can be approached by philosophical practice are often related to conflicts of values that are generated by opposite or contrary cognitive positions, and which interfere in the functioning of the individual. However, they are not generated by deep trauma that would require psychological or psychiatric intervention. The role of the philosopher practitioner is to present the client with possible interpretations of the situation in which he finds himself that are consistent with either one or another philosophical doctrine, and to provide theoretical justification for his practical attitude (Sandu, 2011a; Sandu, 2011b; Sandu, Ponea, 2012a).

Both philosophical practice and philosophical counselling represent a series of particular ways of philosophising which, specifically in the postmodern context, aim at reiterating its specific and dianoetic dialogue.

In the context of the present paper, we mention that some of our ideas were published within the prestigious *Philosophical Practice Journal of the APPA*, where we formulated two distinct models of philosophical practice, namely the *appreciative philosophical practice* and the *counselling and supervision of ethics centered on dilemma* (Sandu, 2011a; Sandu & Caras, 2013b). Both models are alternatives to the PEACE model proposed by Lou Marinoff (President of the American Philosophical