

Individual versus Social in Psycho-Sociology. The Social Construction of Reality

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Abstract: Behaviors, emotions, and reasoning are influenced by the presence or absence of others - both physical and imagined. Social conventions, norms and values determine behaviors even in the physical absence of people who observe these respective behaviors and sanction them based on a continuous process of social control. The theory of a social constructed reality (social constructivism) will allow us to argue throughout the article the idea that nothing exists in society that does not have correspondences, components and psychological implications.

Keywords: *psycho-sociology, social constructionism, social constructivism, social behavior.*

How to cite: Sandu, A., & Nistor, P. (2020). Individual versus Social in Psycho-Sociology. The Social Construction of Reality. *Moldavian Journal for Education and Social Psychology*, 4(2), 44-49.

<https://doi.org/10.18662/mjesp/4.2/21>

1. Introduction

Social psychology studies the behavior of individuals and how it is influenced by the real or imaginary presence of others (Boncu, 2010). Not only behaviors, but also emotions and reasoning are influenced by the presence or the absence of others - both physical and imagined (Cifu & Savu, 2020).

Ștefan Boncu (2010) shows that the social environment influences cognitive processes - including that of reason -, because it is based on the idea of the implicit presence of others. Social conventions, norms and values determine behaviors even in the physical absence of people who observe these respective behaviors and sanction them based on a continuous process of social control (Sandache, 2016).

We argue the idea that psychic processes - including perceptions, emotions and feelings, respectively reason - are socially influenced starting from social-constructionist theories (Gergen, 2001) regarding the social construction of reality.

The same theory of a constructed social reality (social constructivism) will allow us to argue the idea that nothing exists in society that does not have correspondences, components and psychological implications.

2. Social construction of reality

Language “constructs social reality” (Sandu, 2016), because the reality we have access to is not purely objective, but rather appears for individuals as a world of meanings, institutions, interpretations (Sandu & Unguru, 2017). Social reality is subjective and multiple, with individuals playing the role of actors in the process of creating the meaning of the world for themselves, in fact establishing their own reality (Creswell, 2007). Social reality has as many facets as the number of subjects who are involved in its co-construction (Sandu & Unguru, 2017).

Theories on the social construction of reality originate in two epistemological directions. The first is part of sociology – and is found in the work of Berger and Luckmann (2008) - and the second has its origin in social psychology, especially in the work to Payne (1999). The psychological perspective aims at the emergence of constructs such as identity, personality and perception (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Gergen, 2005) and the sociological approach rather seeks the interpretive adrift of these constructs, depending on the social context in which they are used and transformed into meaningful stories about social reality.

The idea of a social construct represents “the structural-functional unit of the process of social construction of a certain reality, as an equivalent to the idea of an operational definition, on the basis of which social actors act” (Sandu & Unguru, 2017). These reunited constructs become “the reality itself” for the individuals who adopt them (Sandu, 2015; 2016). Social constructs are beyond the primary perception of individuals, and are even influencing it, in a reductionist sense, by focusing perception especially on the objects of knowledge that are functionally defined by such constructs. This approach to the social construction of reality is called social constructivism.

We can provide an example in the film “The Englishman Who Went up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain” (Monger, 1995), which is a cinematic example of what the social construction of reality means in practice. The inhabitants of a community in Wales considered themselves mountain people and had built their social and personal identity starting from this attribute of being mountain people. When the Geographical Society of London sent two representatives to measure the height of the landform nearby, they found that it was a few centimeters short of being declared a mountain - according to the standards of that Geographical Society, declaring it, consequently, a hill. This finding created a real identity crisis for the inhabitants of that community, who could no longer consider themselves "mountain people". Consequently, they decide to act, artificially raising the landform to the height necessary in order for it to be declared a mountain.

This example shows that social perception overlaps with purely psychological perception, with standardized definitions influencing the meaning of terms that define objects, including landforms, but which later contribute to the construction of individuals' identities that relate to those physical objects in the form of social objects. The idea of the mountain is therefore a socially constructed one, either on the basis of the social acceptance of a standard height, or on the basis of the opinion of that community about the landform and about themselves as its inhabitants.

The construct of “mountain and mountain people is reified, becoming substantial and defining” (Sandu, 2020). A social construct, although it is the result of an interpretive convention, that is, of a purely noetic activity, acts as a constraint on the identity of those who accept it, as if their social status really depends on the substantial difference in height of the landform. "A social construct, once invested with interpretive power, objectifies itself and generates behaviors specific to the new interpretative convention, as if it had always been real" (Sandu, 2020).

According to Boncu (2010), the fundamental principle of social psychology is that the social context has an overwhelming influence on the behavior of individuals. Indeed, in the opinion of the quoted author, there are a small number of social psychologists who believe that there is a link between prosocial behavior and conformist personality traits and that the success of leaders can be explained by their charismatic personality, although, in general, the influence of personality on social behavior is minor or even non-existent. Personality is explained in social contexts - that is, for example, in a social-constructionist way - rather than on the basis of stable personality traits.

The attempt to explain social behavior in terms of intra-psychic or motivational processes is reductionist and is generally rejected by the scientific community in the field (Boncu, 2010).

At the same time, social behaviors represent, from a social-constructionist perspective, the result of the internalization of social constructs and the use of the operationalized definition on these constructs in different social contexts. As we refer to the same film presented above, we can see that the collective behavior of the members of that community - who raised the landform so that it met the socially accepted standards of height in order for the landform to be called a "mountain" - is justified by the self-perception of the inhabitants of that community as being "mountain people". The constructed identity, that of mountain people, becomes a source of motivation for a specific behavior which cannot be analyzed outside this context of a social construction of a preferred identity (Chow, 2015). The preferred identity is defined by Chow (2015) in the context of narrative therapy, as a narrative way of constructing the identity to which the individual turns when he perceives himself as a social personality.

The identity of "mountain people" imposed on the inhabitants of the community presented in the film a series of values to which they adhered unconditionally, by virtue of assuming this identity, and which differentiated them from other inhabitants of that region - who were perceived as "hill dwellers", but brought them closer to other "mountain dwellers", perceived as being the same as them, thus establishing a process of anticipatory socialization (Sandu et al., 2019).

By anticipatory socialization we mean the assumption of values, norms and rules specific to the reference group in which the individual wants to integrate and which can sometimes differ radically from the group to which the individual is linked through socialization processes. Identity conflict can lead to the loss of self-esteem when the individual denies his preferred identity, by virtue of rules or values specific to the group.

Extrapolating what is presented in the script of the film, we can show that the processes of the social construction of reality are not simple adherences to social values, but complex processes of internalizing them, involving emotional and volitional reactions, including what Ioan Petru Culianu called "interpretive will and deforming grid" (Culianu, 2015). Collective action - be it social or communicative action (Habermas, 2000) - is internalized differently by each of the individuals, depending on the experiences they lived and the meaning they attributed to those realities, the cognitive contiguity of these experiences with similar ones, the reconstructive dynamics of memory etc.

The social-constructionist approach, as a particular field of social constructivism, emphasizes the significant stories, and is more interested in the process of creating meaning, than in the created meanings themselves. According to the idea of a social construction of reality, social behavior generates an impact on individuals precisely by assuming values and societal models, transformed into constructs or operational definitions, with the help of which individuals interact with each other, in the process of seeking a collective meaning to redefine social reality, specific to the interpretive community.

3. Conclusions

Social constructionism is an integral part of the postmodern paradigm, that bestows on it the ideas of a "socially negotiated reality" and of a language consensus (Hacking, 1999; Sandu & Ponea, 2010). Even if we refer exclusively to the fact that there are individual contents of consciousness, as direct results of the perceptual act, these acquire meaning, for example, as they become objective and become socially re-constructed socially when individuals try to operate with them. As such, even memory is reconstructive, and is the subject of the social construction of reality through its re-signification processes.

Consequently, we agree to the idea that "there is nothing in human psychology that is not socially influenced and conditioned" - which we translate as: the whole social reality is the result of a process of social construction.

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