



## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

**Lt.Col. Constantin MIREANU\***

Defining reality and the mechanisms by which people perceive it is a difficult and challenging task in this age of post-truth, where everything is relative, interpretable, and dynamic, without generally accepted norms. However, there is a close relationship between the human and the social environment. This binomial is a construction that integrates the human mind, body, spirit and environment. The continuous interaction between the human and the social environment creates the reality that manifests itself as a continuous process of coding and decoding. But, the way we interpret a situation determines the consequences of our actions and even the way things can evolve, so starting from the wrong premises, from a wrong interpretation of a situation, people behave accordingly. Therefore, in this material starting from the way the representation of the individual is formed about the environment, society, world from the perspective of neuroscience, social psychology, cognitive sociology, the main aspects of how to construct reality will be reviewed.

**Keywords:** reality; social construct; perception; emotion; semiotics.

Reality is a social construct, a continuous process of coding and decoding, and its perception involves understanding the data, situations, experiences with which we get in touch, analyzing the differences between them or the common points and after processing these data and situations in our own coding system the result should be whole.

According to John Fiske, codes built on perceived reality contain not only functions for organizing and understanding data, but also social and communication functions<sup>1</sup>. For example, the codes for nonverbal communication are gestures, eye movement, facial expression, appearance, orientation towards the interlocutor, posture, proximity, etc.

John Searle shows that the process through which an individual comes to believe different things about the world can be described as a social construction of reality. The author distinguishes between things that simply exist in the most concrete way without having received symbolic importance, such as mountains, rivers, clouds, etc. and things made by people, invested with certain social symbols, which owe their existence to the values attributed by people, such as money, social position, rare metals, jewelry, etc. Thus, we assign codes, symbols, interpretations, meanings to

information coming from different sources based on the context in which we received them, on previous experiences, intellectual level, environment, age, etc. In fact, "the biological capacity to symbolize – or to signify, to express – something beyond itself is the fundamental capacity found not only at the foundation of language, but of any form of reality"<sup>2</sup>.

Language has a defining role, the repository of accumulation of meanings and experiences shared and transmitted over time. It diminishes the subjectivity of individuals in perceiving reality and building, even for a short time, a common reality because "the continuous production of voice signs in conversation can be well synchronized with the current subjective intentions of those who discuss. I talk while I think, and so does my conversation partner"<sup>3</sup>. Each of the interlocutors hears what the other is saying and, at the same time, has his own thoughts, ideas, beliefs related to the subject, even if he does not fully express them. Thus, language contributes to a better rationalization and knowledge of one's own ideas, of one's own subjective meanings, which, once expressed, become more real. So it can be said that language makes my subjectivity "more real" not only for my discussion partner, but also for myself.

The role of language is to exteriorise personal experiences thus passing them into the ordinary, into anonymity. A personal, actual, unique experience of family quarrel is linguistically typified with the formula "trouble with mother-in-

\* *The Press Trust of the Ministry of National Defence*

e-mail: dan\_mireanu@yahoo.com

law". Thus it becomes an anonymous conflict, an experience familiar to any character in the "son-in-law" category. As a matter of fact, personal, human experiences are continuously grouped into general categories of meanings that can be perceived both objectively and subjectively. In fact, due to its ability to transcend the "here and now", language connects different areas of everyday reality and integrates them in a whole meaning. These transcendences have spatial, temporal and social dimensions<sup>4</sup>. Language can transcend the reality of everyday life, integrating symbols and experiences in the lives of individuals, that were not actually lived, which they did not witness, but in which they took part indirectly. Likewise, language is the basis of a solid foundation of symbolic representations, from another world but integrated into everyday reality, such as religion, science, art and "thus symbolism and symbolic language become essential constituents of reality of life and of the daily current perception of this reality. The individual lives daily in a world of signs and symbols"<sup>5</sup>.

In order to better understand the neurocognitive mechanisms regarding the subjective perception of reality, we turned to the studies of the neurologist Antonio Damasio, who dealt in his research with the way cerebral functioning interacts with the physiological one, in a continuous relationship with the social environment. Inside the brain, as well as between the brain and the body, there are a number of neural networks that transmit information continuously. We are aware of a part of the information that circulates, whether we receive it or transmit it, while of another part we are not. However, the brain constantly updates the physiological parameters in all regions of the body as well as the body's relationship with the environment, in order to constantly have the latest information on the functioning of each subassembly in the body. Damasio suggests that as an emotion unfolds, the brain immediately builds a pattern, a map. The author notes that there are no major differences between what maps the brain and the actual state of the body, although the boundary between them is sometimes blurred. Thus, a mapped wound in the brainstem which is perceived as pain leads to several reactions coordinated by the brain in the body. Emotional reactions that occur will immediately change both the physical state of the body, the functioning of certain systems, and the

mood of the individual. Thus, says Damasio, it is impossible to be happy when we are hurt, because "in general, these processes lead to the assembly of distinct maps in terms of quality, contributing to the substratum of experiences of pain and pleasure"<sup>6</sup>. Sometimes, the construction of a body map can occur before emotional changes take place in the body, which shows the brain's ability to simulate, in some somato-sensitive areas, certain states of the body, as if they actually appeared.

Based on studies and collaboration with Damasio, Manuel Castells analyzes our interpersonal relationships, the formation of our impressions, attitudes and reactions to certain stimuli, including media messages or advertising. The brain processes information from the body's sensors, but also from the environment, in order to constantly monitor the body, to balance it and to produce a good condition. Thus a multitude of networks appear where images, ideas and feelings associate and become connected in time, making up neural patterns of thinking that structure emotions, feelings and consciousness. "Thus, the mind works by creating a network between brain patterns and sensory perception patterns that derive from contact with networks of matter, energy and activities that make up past, present, and future experience (by anticipating the consequences of certain signals based on images stored in the brain)"<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, reality could be defined, in this context, as a reaction to current events, internal or external, which the brain reflects according to its own patterns: "So, reality is neither objective nor subjective, but a material construction of imagery that combines what happens in the physical world with the material representation of experience in the brain circuits"<sup>8</sup>.

Neural connections create new experiences. Spatial and temporal connections are established between perceived objects, events, experiences. Equally important are the experiences we have only witnessed. Mirror neurons are responsible for indirect experiences as well as for feelings of empathy. In an attempt to show how mirror neurons work and what role they play, Damasio recalls an episode in the lab. One afternoon, as he got up from his chair and started walking, the image of his former lab colleague, Dr. B, popped up in his mind, without having thought or seen him recently. He tried to explain the origin of this completely random



thought. The conclusion was that his movement in trying to get up faithfully imitated the gestures that B made in a similar situation. Even the gait had been imitated at that moment. Technically, it had generated a somatosensory image<sup>9</sup>. This discovery would reveal the close links between the actual movement of the body, the representation of that movement and the memories that can be evoked in connection with one aspect or another of those representations. The episode is relevant to the fact that connections between people are not only reduced to language, visual images and logical deduction, but also to our body.

Damasio also defines emotion and feeling, with an emphasis on the distinction between the two terms. "Emotions are actions accompanied by ideas and ways of thinking, while feelings are perceptions of what our bodies do while we are overwhelmed by emotions, but also perceptions of our mental state in the same time frame"<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, emotions make their presence felt when the images processed in the brain put into action a number of regions that trigger them. When these regions are activated, there are certain consequences, secretions of certain chemicals by the endocrine glands that are distributed to the brain and body. Thus, the body receives certain commands spontaneously, such as freezing or running, and certain facial expressions are displayed. People, in these moments, instantly come up with different ideas and action plans, depending on previous experiences or training for a certain situation. A negative emotion experienced in a moment of panic will lead to the recollection of ideas about negative facts, while a positive emotion leads to the recollection of pleasant situations. As an emotion develops, certain types of mental processing automatically appear. Sadness, for example, slows down thinking and can cause the person to sink even deeper into the state that caused it. Joy accelerates thinking and reduces attention to unrelated events. All these actions that take place in a short time constitute an "emotional state". It gradually disappears until new stimuli appear that initiate another chain reaction.

As for the connection between emotions and memory, in order to be easily recalled, an event must be emotionally striking. "If a scene has a certain value, if there was enough emotion at that moment, the brain will capture images, sounds, touches, tastes, smells, etc. multimedia and will

play them at the right time. Over time, the memory may fade. Over time and with the imagination of a narrator, things can be embroidered on the edge of the material, it can be fragmented and recombined in a novel or a script"<sup>11</sup>. It is one of the reasons why the presentation of atrocities in the media, the show, death arouse the public's attention and remain imprinted in the memory.

Regarding the media and the emotions intentionally transmitted by journalists, Castells points out that the public shows different degrees of attention depending on the type of report presented in the media. Thus, the most striking reports are those that present situations that seem to threaten consumer safety or those that violate social norms. Reactions to events that endanger survival mobilize cognitive resources that induce the individual's attention. Violence, hatred, anxiety, fear are retained in long-term memory. Thus, when emotional mechanisms are triggered in the brain's surveillance systems, the individual pays more attention to information and is more interested in researching it in depth. In most cases, the stimulus is sufficient to activate and generate reactions even in the absence of a certain socio-political context. It is important that the stimulus awaken the feeling of danger for the individual and for his relatives. Reports that predict the apocalypse, economic, political, social forecasts made by televisions, often without reflecting the reality, articles from the "hot areas" of the Globe are easily captured and remembered by the general public<sup>12</sup>.

Emotions in relation to memory are processed in the brain, which means that feelings include associations with other events, some experienced directly, others genetically or culturally transmitted. "Emotions are deeply rooted in the human brain, because they were induced by the instinct to survive during the evolutionary process. (...) Thus, the six basic emotions are fear, disgust, surprise, sadness, happiness and anger"<sup>13</sup>. Images are stimulated by events or objects. The brain processes events based on existing networks of associations and structures them. If the events are negative, the norepinephrine<sup>14</sup> circuit transmits negative emotions to the brain, if they are positive, the dopamine<sup>15</sup> circuit transmits positive emotions. The mind has the ability to think in the "future", to make connections between predictable events and the conceptual correspondences of the brain.

According to Damasio, we perceive things around us through involvement, not through passive receptiveness. For self-awareness to exist there must be some communication protocols in the human mind between the brain and its perceptions. These are called, in terms of neuroscience, metaphors. A metaphor actually means repeating a neural pathway until it becomes irreversibly imprinted on the structure of the brain.<sup>16</sup> Metaphors arise as the same path of information in the brain is activated.

The synapses of the neurons in the pathway are consolidated to form a permanent circuit, which is called neural recruitment. The more neurons enter this path, the better this circuit called metaphor is consolidated, resulting that metaphorical thinking is physical, i.e. the information is written like on hard disk. Simple metaphors combine and result in complex metaphors. These metaphors are essential for connecting language with brain circuits. Narratives are made up of cognitive frames, i.e. from the structures of the resulting narratives, imprinted in the brain over time. Narratives define social roles in social contexts. That is why the models during childhood, the patterns of thinking in the family, school, social environment are very important in explaining attitudes towards different events<sup>17</sup>.

Paul Watzlawick was also one of the researchers concerned with how we perceive reality. According to the researcher, reality is a fantasy that we consolidate all our lives, adapting the facts around us to our image of reality and not the other way around. "Of all the illusions, the most dangerous is to believe that there is only one reality. In fact, what exists are different versions of reality, some contradictory, all being effects of communication, and not the reflection of objective and eternal truths"<sup>18</sup>.

Perception and understanding of reality are closely related and depend on the culture we are part of, the language used, the context in which a particular event takes place. Perception tends to be influenced by desires, needs, attitudes, mood at a given time. This fluctuation in perception depending on different factors leads to different people reacting differently to the same message. This is why communicators cannot fully anticipate the effects of messages on the public<sup>19</sup>.

Exposed to the same stimuli, people act differently because they process information

differently as it is analyzed according to the individual's previous experiences. Relevant to exemplify the different reaction to the same stimulus is the Berkley experiment. One man holds one hand under a stream of hot water and the other under a stream of cold water. Both hands are then placed in a bowl of water at room temperature. The subject involved will feel cold in the hand that was under the hot water jet and warm in the hand that was under the cold water jet. The same individual subjected to the same stimulus will feel different, depending on previous experiences. "The sensory characteristic is never structured in itself and for itself, but only on the basis of previous experience"<sup>20</sup>. During the communication act, each participant practically reconstructs the communication situation.

Communication is understood in this perspective as an interaction between social actors who have a certain identity, motivations and interests according to which they interpret in a particular way the social practices, values and symbols shared at a given time in society. In fact, "in a constructivist analysis, the message exists insofar as we rearrange the context or in other words, create a new context, reconstruct both a symbolic universe and the actual situation in which we communicate, with its various contexts"<sup>21</sup>. Constructivism considers, according to the direction given by the Palo Alto School, that individuals construct the world having the impression that they perceive it and what they define as reality is, in fact, their own interpretation, based on communication.

The Palo Alto school emphasizes that man is "condemned" to communicate even when he does not want to do so, through gestures, attitudes, reactions, facial expressions, postures, etc.<sup>22</sup> Human behavior thus becomes the foundation of the study of communication. By analyzing human behavior constantly we build the meaning of the things around us, of the world, we obtain our own representation of the universe in which we live. People are constantly trying to understand and explain the behaviors of others, entering the role of the naive psychologist who attributes causes, often imaginary, to a certain situation.

The continuous relating to the other person in the vicinity, to the event that takes place, to the position of a political leader in a complex situation or to the way we have the impression that society is evolving is a deeply subjective one. "These primary



orientations that constitute a selective relating to a social object (event, personality, institution) and that determine a model of behavior are called social attitudes<sup>23</sup>. By examining this construct, Gavreliuc shows that one can better understand the cognitive mechanisms that anticipate our behaviors, as well as the fact that people's relationships to the world are often based on stereotypes, prejudices that produce a series of unfair behaviors towards others discriminated on the basis of sex, ethnicity, political affiliation, etc. This new logic of communication according to Watzlawick's axiom "One cannot not communicate" would open new avenues for communication.

C.H. Cooley is the author of the looking-glass self theory. He is the researcher who initiates the theories according to which the identity of the subject is defined by the interaction with the other and is continuously shaping, in the middle of a process of mutual mirroring and re-mirroring. Therefore, the subject and the society form a whole, the attitudes and behaviors being the result of a social construct. They are born of interactions and not of solitude. The strongest metaphors, patterns of thinking through which the dominant values and attitudes are transferred to the self are due to primary groups, such as family, social environment, neighbors, friends. These groups play a crucial role in the development of the individual's personality. Thus, the other becomes the mirror in which the self is reflected. In other words, the behavior, the character, the expectations are projected and reflected continuously in the relationship partners, being in a permanent dynamic<sup>24</sup>.

Here, in fact, is the starting point of symbolic interactionism: the close relationship between the individual and the social environment. We could say that the social environment has its own reality, from which the individual subjectively selects a certain part. Interactionism involves a creative, constructive response to various environmental stimuli. Also, people interact subjectively, using symbols, meanings in social relationships. In this process of symbolic interaction the self is constantly developing. A part of the self will be found in the environment it is part of, with which it will identify, while another part of the self will be in opposition to others and to the environment.

A continuous game, referred to by G.H. Mead when he introduces the concept of the role

played by each individual in different situations<sup>25</sup>. During the role play, the individual manifests contextually a behavior in relation to the attitudes of others. Thus his conduct is articulated according to personality, role and reference group. The self is continuously modeled, gaining coherence and unity through others. The interaction takes place through symbols, in which the subject looks at himself through the eyes of others and develops a series of strategies of successive adaptation of the self to the expectations of those around him<sup>26</sup>.

Regarding the performative act played daily by each individual in public, this is, according to Goffman, a social *face* that includes, like a play, a scenography, props, a role, an attitude, etc. Sometimes the dramatization of an attitude, trade, situation requires quite an extensive sacrifice. In order for a radio discussion to seem as spontaneous as possible, simple, without inhibitions, the moderator prepares for hours, creates a well-developed scenario, practicing spontaneity for a long time. Another example that Goffman gives about the dramatization of everyday life and role-playing games is that of a famous model displayed on the cover of "Vogue" magazine, who portrays excessively through clothes, posture and facial expression a perfect understanding of the book he has in his hand. In reality, those who strive to express themselves so adequately will no longer have time for the actual reading<sup>27</sup>.

Goffman also refers to the selection of roles according to profession, social status. "Thus a specialist may want to present a modest image on the street, in a store or at home, but in the social sphere that includes the display of his professional skills will be more concerned with providing an effective show"<sup>28</sup>. It is, moreover, the case of television stars, movie stars, who, knowing they are admired want to give the impression of worldly people, modest, sociable, playing the role of the humble man, with nothing out of the ordinary. Just as there are cases of individuals who invest in clothing, car or house more than they can afford, for the sake of a spectacular representation in the eyes of others.

Blumer considers that the individual has a creative role in society, because through interactions with the environment he not only reacts but also acts, producing his own behavior. The idea of an actor, for the individual, becomes central. The

author emphasizes that people act according to the meanings that different social objects hold to them. These meanings, in turn, are socially constructed, within the interactions of the environment. Also, these meanings are reinterpreted in their turn through the prism of the schemata, the thought patterns of each individual<sup>29</sup>.

R.K. Merton believes that people, through their faith, can force reality to fit in new frameworks of definition<sup>30</sup>. Therefore it is possible that certain false premises give birth to truths. Merton proposes a scenario for example. During the economic crisis of 1930, in the USA, a bank is faced with an unexpected situation. A rumor appears that the bank has financial problems. The director refutes, but once this rumor is out in the public space, the main shareholders withdraw, the most important partners do the same, and, in the end, regular customers follow their example, thinking that, of course, if those who know, are influential and have money have retired, it is time for them to do the same. So, in a very short time, an institution without any problem goes bankrupt, thus confirming the prophecy.

### Conclusions

The social environment has its own reality out of which the individual subjectively selects a certain part by reacting to the interaction with different environmental stimuli. Dialogue partners also constantly build a sense of communication. They constantly define and redefine the relationship, everything being a continuous negotiation.

Perception and understanding of reality are closely related and depend on the culture we are part of, the language used, the context in which a particular event takes place. Therefore people act differently when exposed to the same stimuli because they process information differently, which is analyzed according to the individual's previous experiences.

The language used by an individual has the role of exteriorising personal experiences and thus passing them into the ordinary, into anonymity. Another feature is that it can transcend the reality of everyday life, integrating in the lives of individuals symbols and experiences that were not actually lived, which they did not witness but to which they took part indirectly. Therefore, language has the ability to transcend time and space, linking

different areas of everyday reality and integrating them into a whole meaning.

When people are convinced that their predictions will come true, whether they refer to certain family situations, attitudes of colleagues, situations, than they will be confirmed, even if people are not aware that they have acted so that the prophecy is fulfilled. The individual manages, therefore, through a series of presented items to build a reality according to the factors that acted on him in the first years of life, the social environment, education, group membership, etc. This reality can be, in certain situations, a real battlefield that the media, through specific means, can potentiate, recreate, influence.

### NOTES:

1 John Fiske, *Introducere în științele comunicării*, Polirom Publishing House, 2003, p. 91.

2 J.R. Searle, *Realitatea ca proiect social*, Polirom Publishing House, 2000, p. 179.

3 P.L. Berger, T. Luckmann, *Construirea socială a realității: Tratat de sociologia cunoașterii*, Univers Publishing House, 1999, p. 58.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 60.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 61.

6 A. R. Damasio, *Sinele: Construirea creierului conștient*, Humanitas Publishing House, 2016, p. 119.

7 M. Castells, *Comunicare și putere*, Comunicare.ro, 2015, p 140.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 141.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 123.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 128.

11 *Ibidem*, p. 151.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 140.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 142.

14 Noradrenaline or norepinephrine is a neurotransmitter; it differs from adrenaline in that it lacks an amino-related methyl. (...) As a stress hormone, it involves parts of the brain where attention and reaction controls take place. Together with epinephrine, it causes the "attack or escape" response, activating the sympathetic nervous system to increase the heart rate, releasing energy as glucose from glycogen and increasing muscle tone. Noradrenaline is released when a series of physiological changes are triggered by an event. Source: <https://educalingo.com/ro/dic-it/noradrenalina>, accessed on 03.01.2020.

15 Neurotransmitter in the group of catecholamines, a precursor of norepinephrine, having a fundamental role in the brain for motor control and used in therapeutics for its stimulating action on the cardiovascular system. Source: <https://www.csid.ro/dictionar-medical/dopamina-11555116>, accessed on 03.01.2020.

16 M. Castells, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

17 *Ibidem*, p. 141.

18 Paul Watzlawick, Don D. Jackson, Janet Helmick, *Une logique de la communication*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris,



1967, p. 46.

19 W.J. Severin, J.W. Tankard, *Perspective asupra teoriilor comunicării de masă: Originile, metodele și utilizarea lor în mass media*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 81.

20 A. Gavreliuc, *Psihologia socială și dinamica personalității*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2019, p. 63.

21 C. Beciu, *Sociologia comunicării și a spațiului public*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011, p. 22.

22 P. Dobrescu, A. Bârgăoanu, N. Corbu, *Istoria comunicării*, Comunicare.ro, 2007, p. 357.

23 A. Gavreliuc, *Psihologia socială și dinamica personalității*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2019, p. 101.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 45.

25 B. Kenneth, *The methodology of Herbert Blumer*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 13.

26 A. Gavreliuc, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

27 E. Goffman, *Viața cotidiană ca spectacol*, Comunicare.ro, 2007, p. 68.

28 *Ibidem*, p. 68.

29 B. Kenneth, *The methodology of Herbert Blumer*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 86.

30 R.K. Merton, "The Self-Fulfilling prophecy", *The Antioch Review*, No. 74(3), 2016, p. 3.

## REFERENCES

Baugh Kenneth Jr., *The methodology of Herbert Blumer*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Beciu C., *Sociologia comunicării și a spațiului*

*public*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011.

Berger P.L., Luckmann T., *Construirea socială a realității: Tratat de sociologia cunoașterii*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999.

Castells M., *Comunicare și putere*, Comunicare.ro, 2015.

Damasio A.R., *Sinele: Construirea creierului conștient*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016.

Dobrescu P., Bârgăoanu A., Corbu N., *Istoria comunicării*, Comunicare.ro, 2007.

Fiske John, *Introducere în științele comunicării*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003.

Gavreliuc A., *Psihologia socială și dinamica personalității*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2019.

Goffman E., *Viața cotidiană ca spectacol*, Comunicare.ro, 2007.

Kenneth B., *The methodology of Herbert Blumer*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Merton R.K., "The Self-Fulfilling prophecy", *The Antioch Review*, No.74(3), 2016.

Searle J.R. *Realitatea ca proiect social*, Polirom Publishing House, 2000.

Severin W.J., Tankard J.W., *Perspective asupra teoriilor comunicării de masă: Originile, metodele și utilizarea lor în mass media*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004.

Watzlawick Paul, Jackson Don D., Helmick Janet, *Une logique de la communication*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1967.