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THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF RESPONSIBILITY IN
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: The assumption underlying this paper states that the organizational stories, regardless of their type, act as narratives generating symbolic meanings, thus responding to the postmodern man's impetus for authenticity and significance. The first part of the paper is focused on the organizational communication's symbolic dimension, in relation to the process of personal identity construction. The investigation of the relation between identities and narratives within the framework of organizational culture opens an interesting perspective on the field of organizational communication, more precisely, on the way in which the information about the organizational responsibility, understood as a source of symbolic meanings, is communicated. Starting from the analysis of the evolution of social responsibility to its strategic stage, the paper underlines the importance of how the assumed responsibility is communicated and integrated into the meaningful stories the organization tells the public and its members.

Key words: organizational communication, symbolism, personal identity, corporate ritual, social responsibility, authenticity.

1. Organizational symbolic communication and personal identity

The last decades, we have witnessed an important growth of interest towards the field of organizational communication, as demonstrated by the huge specialty literature and the various approaches of the topic. There are several major perspectives in addressing organizational communication, understood as: a specialty in communication departments, as a phenomenon present in organizations or as a distinct mode of explaining organizations through a symbolic analysis of the communication process in organizations. (Deetz 2001, 4-5)

The investigation of organizational communication symbolic dimension offers relevant perspectives that are valuable in addressing the cultural dimension of organizations, seen as “webs of significance” the man himself has spun, (Geertz 2006) as cultural symbols which can contribute to a better understanding of that particular organization. In this broad research area, a special relevance incurs to the process of individual’s identity the construction in postmodernity. The appeal to Anthony Giddens’ consecrated phrase “the dilemmas of the self” offers an appropriate frame for approaching the relation between organizational communication and identity. For Giddens, “the dilemmas of the self” denote precisely the process of constructing the self’s identity and is synthesized in the following antinomies: unification versus fragmentation, powerlessness versus appropriation, authority versus uncertainty and personalized versus commodified experience. (Giddens 1991, 201) Thus, the identity is, in fact, a “reflexive project of the self” which does not involve a clear and definitive image of the self, but a life-narrative, a continuous project for which the individual is responsible. Giddens affirms that this is not about a better self-understanding, since to know yourself is “subordinated to the more inclusive and fundamental aim of building / rebuilding a coherent and rewarding sense of identity.” (Giddens 1991, 75)

Giddens’ view on personal identity as a coherent life-narrative permits the analysis of the professional dimension of contemporary individual’s life as a source of symbolic material in the construction of the above mentioned sense of identity. There are several studies investigating professional life’s impact on the identity project. For instance, Richard Sennett analyses the manner in which, in a globalized world, the city and the job could act as sources for the material used in the process of creating an identity, understood as life narrative. (Sennett 2001) Exploring the possibility that the workplaces could contain “some version of *home*”, (Sennett 2001, 176) Sennett underlines the major changes that have marked the concept of work in a globalized society. In this respect, he

emphasizes the inadequacy of metaphors, such as attachment, rootedness or community. Moreover, referring to the continuous need to make a fresh explanation of yourself, he affirms that “all this material changes challenge the effort to forge a sustained work narrative (...) which serves a critical and evaluative function.” (Sennett 2001, 184) The dispersion of authority and the blurring of the “work-witness” figure in modern corporations internalize the “burden of making sense of work,” (Sennett 2001, 188) laying it on the shoulders of the employee and obstructing the process of deriving an identity from work.

A different reading key, but holding a similar stake, is Akgün’s et al investigation concerning the concept of collective unconscious at an organizational level. Their research suggests that the collective unconscious is maintained and preserved by the symbolic material of the organizational culture, such as the stories, metaphors or the specific language, etc. (Akgün, Ali Ekber, Keskin, Halit 2016). Other sources of stories which contribute with material for the reflexive project of the self could be the stories about peers and about superiors, which act as “influential means through which organizational values are embedded in newcomers’ behaviour”, (Martin 2016, 1719) having thus an important impact on their life-narrative. As a result, among other texts, such as the official written and spoken texts, the organizational culture narratives “captured the essence of postmodernism as applied to organizational cultures, in which decentred individuals constantly restructured their identities” (Martin apud Eisenberg and Riley 2001, 301).

2. Social responsibility, meaning and spirituality

The investigation of the relation between identities and narratives within the framework of organizational culture opens an interesting perspective on the field of organizational communication, more precisely, on the process of communicating the organizational responsibility, understood as a major source of symbolic meanings for the construction of identity.

The assumption underlying the analysis proposed by our paper is that “organizations exist as systems of shared meanings that are developed and sustained through the symbolic process”. (Smircich, apud Riggs Fuller et al 2008) Accordingly, the organizational communication symbolism becomes an instrument used in the construction and the communication of the organization’s identity, through its main functions, which target energy controlling, the description of the culture and the system maintenance (Dandridge, apud Riggs Fuller 2008) and, indirectly, impacts on the individual’s personal narratives. The types of symbols vary from the well-known ones, such as the stories, the myths, the language, to the ones that are specific for the organization, such as titles, structures, even the physical characteristics of the place (Riggs Fuller 2008). The

different mechanisms used in the organizational communication processes are not only the official statements and the quantitative data, but they also take the form of narratives. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the organizational stories have a major impact on way the other two mechanisms are received, and also on the internal communications in general (Martin 1982).

In the organizational context, culture is a term that denotes an extensive definition of membership, a strong commitment to the company that includes rules for behaviours, thought and feelings, all adding up to what appears to be a well-defined and widely shared “member role” (Kunda 2006, 7). Gideon Kunda points out the ideological nature of organizational culture, as he speaks about its double nature. Organizational culture is understood, on the one hand, as the implicit and explicit rules guiding and shaping the work behaviour and experience, and on the other hand, as the vehicle through which the behaviour and the experience of the others are influenced, emphasizing its “engineered” dimension. The stories spread within the organization act as ideological mechanisms, since they “consists of images of organizational social reality – publicly articulated and logically integrated “reality claims” concerning the company’s social nature and the nature of its members” (Kunda 2006, 52).

The approaching of the organizational communication from a cultural reading key facilitates the understanding of the inconspicuous function of certain behaviours. Thus, a large variety of the acts and events that are taking place in the organizational milieu can be addressed from the perspective of the ritualistic dimension of the organizational culture, since, as the authors affirm, the rites and the ceremonials coagulate various cultural forms in meaningful ways. Through analyzing the ritualistic behaviour in organizational context, Trice and Beyer review the main categories of rites found at the organizational level. Their list contain the rites of passage, the rites of degradation, the rites of enhancement, the rites of renewal, the rites of conflict reduction and the rites of integration. (Trice and Beyer 1984). Affirming the importance played by these rituals and ceremonials in the construction of the web of meanings that constitute the basis of all organizational cultures, Trice and Beyer draw the attention on the fact that the symbolic behaviours should be taken into account by the managerial work, since the managerial work can be viewed as “managing myth, symbols, and labels... because managers traffic so often in images, the appropriate role for the manager may be the *evangelist* rather than accountant” (Trice & Beyer 1984). Nevertheless, as Taylor and Trujillo remark, the powerful narratives offered by spirituality can not only supplement, the “official” organizational culture and cultural practices but it can also undermine it (Taylor, Trujillo 2001, 185).

Sandu Frunzã also demonstrates that the leadership should be understood as having “an initiating structure inspired from the religious

type of initiation” (Frunză 2016). Addressing the importance of ethics and spirituality for a postmodern “desacralized” concept of work, Frunză emphasizes central dimension of ethics and spirituality in leadership programs, and indirectly in organizational culture. Sandu Frunză considers that, beside the professional results, “the work reward should include (...) the efforts for personal development, the contribution to the development of others, the participation to the welfare of the community, and positive action in the spirit of social responsibility” (Frunză 2017a). At the same time, we may notice that belonging to a religious community has a special influence not only in respect to the way individuals conceive the relation between religion and spirituality, but also on the way spirituality (as bearer of symbolic contents) affects decisions and behaviours. Ethics and spirituality prove to be important even in situations related to the biological needs, to the needs considered as primary from the perspective of physically preserving the human being (Dima-Cozma, Cozma 2012; Mamode et al 2013). This is exactly why we notice the importance of the spiritual factor in personal modelling when it comes to the grade of personal achievement, where the authenticity theme is a central one. In this respect, Sandu Frunză offers us a manner to re-construct a spiritual values-based environment within the organisation, and especially in respect to the organisations leaders options, evolving out of the philosophical reflection and its role in the managerial activity, when he states that „It is therefore useful that the managers from the public sector immerse themselves in different forms of professional training in the field of leadership. They should always search for authenticity that not only increases their existential comfort, but also provides them with an even better positioning inside their profession. Among other things, three types of qualities of the managerial action are proving the authenticity we associate with leadership: those deriving from the philosophy of values, from the moral philosophy and from the philosophy of communication” (Frunză 2017). Extending this model to the community life in general, he evaluates these results of the work activities as sources of meaning that could “diminish existential anguish of postmodern man” (Frunză 2017a). Constant cultivation of symbolic-type behaviour (inclusive at the work place) proves its relevance for the postmodern being of the consumerist society especially in the crisis occurrences or in those implying significant changes of organisation’s management. The worries and negative behaviour, the resistance to change (Hosu, Deac 2012) specific to this type of institutional re-construction stages may be diminishes by using the symbolic communication as an instrument of business ethics, in order to state an identity and to establish a relation with organisation’s values (Frunză, Grad, Frunză 2016).

In the same note, Frunză argues in favour of the affirmation that “advertising constructs reality” and he analyses the role of advertising communication in the postmodern society where the small narratives find

in the advertising message an efficient carrier, advertising becoming thus “the last refuge of the mythic, symbolic and ritualist behaviour” (Frunză 2014). Generally, we may state that, in communication, reality tends to become one with a symbolic content, due to the sense investment that individuals do when they interact in the field of exchange and consumption. Most frequently, this type of behaviour is based on a certain behaviour pattern, cultivated at the work place or in various organisational contexts. It supposes a personal engagement in relation to the things and the assets we choose from the multitude of the merchandise we have at our disposal. Something happens that is similar with the change in attitude towards the object described by Jean Baudrillard concerning postmodern being’s behaviour (Baudrillard 1996).

The beliefs and the values of the members of the organization constitute two of the most important elements of the organizational culture, given the fact that they nourish its spiritual dimension. One of the most important sources of these beliefs and values is represented by organization’s ethics. In our analysis, we will only concentrate on a narrow part of the vast field of organization ethics, to be exact, on social responsibility. Our motivation is that there is an important connection between the corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and the organizational commitment of the employees, and this commitment is essential for grasping the special dynamics of the relation between personal identity and organizational culture.

It has been noticed that this relation becomes even more evident when there are two factors mediating this relation: CSR values and employee engagement in CSR activities. (Ž. Prutina, 2016; see also Shaukat Malik et al 2015). The focus on CSR is justifiable in this context if we take into account that, understood as an important area within the organizational culture, CSR is not only the result of the decision of officials, but it should be “constructed and maintained (...) through an ensemble of ideational, material and communicative manifestations produced in interaction by individuals from various groups” (Fernanda Duarte 2010, 29).

Consequently, the decoupling of the organization’s official discourse concerning the ethics program for its implementation has a major negative impact not only on the image of the organization, but also on the employees’ attitude towards the organization. Organizational cynicism is fuelled by “suspicion, disillusionment, and a lack of faith in the integrity of the organization” as the employees acknowledge this decoupling (MacLean 2014, 356). The coherence between “the talk and the walk” in organizational ethics is critical. Whether we refer to the organization, or to the leaders’ behaviour, the impact of the structural changes on individuals must be taken into account (MacLean 2014). Moreover, even when we refer to the ethical dimension of the symbolic actions, the

distinction between the image and the essence of the symbol is relevant, given the importance of the coherence between reality and symbol.

3. Symbolic dimension of communicating responsibility

The different perspectives on corporate social responsibility mark the way in which it is defined, the definitions varying from the rather “lyric” ones, such as the “tribute capitalism pays to virtue” (Vogel 2005, 3), to more technical ones, such as, “ensuring commercial success in ways that honour [sic] ethical values and respect people, communities and the environment” (Parsons 2008, 151).

The main directions in investigating CSR are tributary to the distinction between the two paradigms that mark the evolution of the field: *doing good to do good* and *doing good to do well* (Vogel 2005). The passage from the stage of the ethical and of the “to do good” CSR to “CSR 2.0” (Carroll, Shabana 2010, 86) is signaled by the debates around „the business case for CSR”, namely by the emphasizing of the reasons which justify CSR through the appeal to economic arguments. The most important reasons that are indicated in this debate are the reducing of the costs and the risk, the gaining of the competitive advantage, the developing of reputation and legitimacy, and the creating of win-win situations through synergistic value creation. (Carroll, Shabana 2010)

By means of examining this change of paradigm, Carroll highlights the importance played by the social evolution and by the pressures on the corporations exerted by the overall encouragement of the social responsibility actions. Moreover, by identifying the essence of CSR in the ethical and philanthropic responsibilities, the analysis proposed by Carroll stresses the importance of the coherence of the CSR activities and also of their support from the stakeholders which should accept the major impact the “market for virtue and the business case for CSR” (Carroll, Shabana 2010, 102) have on their corporation.

The evolution of CSR from the stage based on normative and ethical arguments to the stage which revolve around the strategies, the performance and the profit generated by these actions concentrate the core of the controversial nature of CSR. At the same time, this transformation underscores, and this aspect is mostly of interest for our paper, the growing importance played by the communication process in the equation of social responsibility.

The passage to the “2.0 stage” of the social responsibility of organizations is accompanied by a centrality of the image of organization and by the transgression of the expectations concerning the “pure intentions” of the actions. This is the strategic stage of social responsibility, characteristic of the postmodern minimal ethics that finds itself “at the consuming hour”. (Lipovetsky 2007)

There are two recurrent themes in the ethical debate on social responsibility, which are brought into attention by the above mentioned traits of the CSR evolution. First of all, it is the issue of regularization and the voluntary character of CSR actions. Organizational social responsibility implies actions that go beyond the legal obligations of companies, actions which are the result of a pressure exerted by civil regulation, in their effort to fill the empty space found between the law and the market. This type of actions are submitted to a soft form of regularization that does not imply legally imposed standards, but are voluntary chosen, in certain conditions and by the companies for which these actions make sense (Vogel 2005, 3-5).

While its voluntary nature represents the core of CSR, there are voices arguing the necessity of a stricter regulative framework. Enrique Dans, for instance, considers that the Volkswagen scandal demonstrates one again the failure of CSR as it is understood today. The auto-regulation of companies in the CSR matters makes CSR „superfluous, a luxury that mustn't get in the way of making profits" (Dans 2015). Dans affirms the need for the reinvention of CSR within the framework of regulation, a reinvention which implies more resources - financial and informational - for the CSR departments, but also more responsibility, accountability and penalties in case of rules violation.

De Schutter builds his analysis around the eternal dilemma that marks organizational social responsibility - laissez faire capitalism or the need for rigid government regulations - and draws the attention on the thin line that delimitates the „the idea that CSR is profitable for business" and the idea that "CSR can take care of itself", assessing "the need for a regulatory framework to be established if CSR is to work." (de Schutter 2006, 12). Moreover, de Schutter remarks that, since CSR actions become a general accepted norm, the competitive advantage of the companies is smaller. In this situation, an increasingly important role is played by the way the information about the company's social responsibility actions are communicated to the interested public, but also to the employees.

4. Activism, responsibility and authenticity

Another facet of the organizational social responsibility, surpassing the borders of the particular CSR campaigns, is represented by a trend frequently adopted in promotion industries, namely the brand activism. The brand activism phenomenon offers significant insights, on the one hand, on the relationship between promotional communication and social responsibility, and, on the other, on the manner in which organizational responsibility discourse is embedded in the organizational culture and becomes an important generator of symbolic material.

While this communication technique is not new, the contemporary context, marked by the recent developments in the sphere of digital

communication bring into debate new elements which contribute to the recent spectacular evolution of this trend in communication. The appeal to “serious” issues that belong to the social and political area and the transformation of a certain attitude towards that issue in elements that contribute to the process of designing the brand or of shaping the image of the organization are trends described in already classical works of consumer society theoreticians, such as Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 2008) or Gilles Lipovetsky. Lipovetsky, for instance, signalizes the growing importance of “the consecration of ethical value, instrument for the affirmation of identity of the neoconsumers and generator of “instant” emotions for the spectators of philanthropic marathons” (Lipovetsky 2007, 115). Thus, the position of the brand or of the organization in regard to a certain social or political issue and its integration in the story delivered to the stockholders, the public and the employees has become nowadays a strategy that promotes “the company rather than its specific products or services” (Pomeroy 2011, 382) and that is largely adopted, despite the serious ethical questions and the heated debates it generates (Hooton 2017)

The growingly important role played by social responsibility in organizational cultures, in the guise of both CSR campaigns and brand advocacy, must be related to the development of social media, and more precisely, to the “impetus for authenticity”, (Duplantier 2016) that characterizes the social media communication.

Given the fact that it is almost impossible to conceive contemporary advertising outside new media, it is no wonder that authenticity has become a central point of interest for the advertising industry. So, along with the more and more efficient embedment of new media in communication, the imperative of authenticity has reached even higher levels. The techniques used in the process of legitimating the brand or company’s scope, in fact, at contributing to the construction of the company’s authenticity.

Aiming at achieving this objective, many communication tools are used, such as the storytelling technique, which allows the sharing of the stories of who corporations are and what they stand for (Klaus Frog 2010). Also, the social media communication instruments, as a result of their „instant options” and the „personal approach” underline the same trend. All these techniques communicate the organization’s authenticity, understood as a social virtue. In this respect, Guignon summarizes the ideal of authenticity as “the project of becoming the person you already are” and states that “it might seem self-evident to us in our current world that authenticity so understood is the ultimate task of life” (Guignon 2005, 2).

Thus, conceived as a moral ideal, the authenticity, the self-accomplishment have a major impact on communication in the contemporary society. Moreover, authenticity, whether of the self, of the

relationships or of experiences, understood, in fact, as a moral ideal, becomes an important force in the process of outlining the concept of communication in the advanced industrialized society. Recent studies have shown that it is more likely that the millennials become loyal customers if the brands engage them via social media and if they are provided with „authentic messages” (Tyson 2017). The transformation of authenticity into a communicational imperative and the increasing importance authenticity plays in construction of the messages the organizations are sending to their publics or to their members should be considered in the light of the promotional communication’s attempt to draw on a form of communication which carries a social or political message.

5. Conclusions

Under the auspices of a “non-painful minimal ethics” (Lipovetsky 1996) the way in which the organizations communicate with the public and with their members becomes a major source of symbolic meanings. The symbolic dimension of organizational communication has a special relevance for the dynamics of the relation between organizational culture and the process of constructing the identity of the individual in a postmodern society, especially in the context of the challenges addressed to the concept of work by a globalized society. Thus, the organizational stories, regardless of their type, act as little narratives that generate symbolic meanings. One of the most important types of significant story comes from the field of the organizational social responsibility. The evolution of social responsibility to its strategic stage raises the important issue of the way in which this responsibility is communicated, of the way in which the responsibility is integrated into the meaningful stories the organization tells to the public and to its members. The CSR stories become an important source of symbolic meanings, first of all because there is a strong relation between CSR activities and the organizational commitment of the employees. In addition, the ritual dimension of the organizational communication allows us to identify a ritual function of integration and enhancement (Trice & Beyer) fulfilled by the social responsibility activities within the organization. Bearing the features of the symbolic communication, CSR reveals an aspect that goes beyond the philanthropy-specific ethic behaviour driving the social responsibility of the organisations. The social responsibility supposes a communication mechanism that finalizes in the profit zone. The CSR actions have as ultimate finality to achieve profit. They imply community interventions, which, on short term, may be regarded as a manner to diminish profit, but it is obvious that on the average term they are part of the actions to increase organisation’s profitability. This is more obvious with the economic organisations, but it is equally valid for the other types of

organisation, even if the profit is not necessarily a financial one, but is an image plus, a prestige increase, an identity consolidation (Green Paper 2001). The symbolic communication is in perfect concordance with profit increase, regardless of the paradigm inside which profitability is recognisable.

The organizational social responsibility constitutes an area conjugating strong ethical and symbolic dimensions and having a powerful impact on the process individuals' self-narratives construction. The resort to the symbolical meaning delivered through the means of the organizational stories and its signification for the postmodern man should be related to his permanent quest for authenticity.

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