Reality construction, Communication and daily life – An approach to Thomas Lukmann work

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Abstract

The article offers a synthesis of Thomas Luckmann proposal about Communication and interaction in daily life. In this argumentative text, based on a methodology of theoretical revision, are identified and explained some of the fundamental elements of Luckmann work. The objectives of the work are: to expose theoretical and epistemological bases of the author; to explore some of the main concepts presented in the book *Social Construction of Reality*, such as interaction, intersubjectivity and symbolic universe; and to explain a less well-known theory of the author, the theory of the communicative genres that allows understanding the pragmatic vision of Luckmann around Communication in daily life. Luckmann puts the subject in the center of his proposal, and conceives it, before any other thing, like an individual in permanent bond and interaction with its resemblances; from these situations of interaction, the subjects construct the society and, simultaneously, they are constructed by it. The theory of the communicative genres can be compared to a sociology of Communication in daily life.
Keywords: Thomas Luckmann. Interaction. Communication. Daily life. Knowledge.

Luckmann: between the social constructionism and the phenomenological sociology

Thomas Luckmann's transcendence in the field of social thinking was given by the publication of *La construcción social de la realidad* (1967), and by completing the unfinished work of his master Alfred Schütz. In *Las estructuras del mundo de la vida* (1977), the authors present a theory of the world

of life in which, from the individual experience of the subject, describes the stratification of his world of life with focus on the daily life. The daily life reality finds itself dominated, then, by the action and the Communication. Luckmann, however, cannot be ascribed to one perspective such as the social phenomenology only. According to Dreher, the fields worked by the author are "the proto sociology, the reconstruction of the sense in the social sciences, the theory of time and identity as well as the theory of communication" (DREHER, 2012, p.92). Always from a constructionist perspective, Luckmann centers his proposal on the subject and conceives it, before anything else, as an individual permanently linked and interacting with its similar; from these interactive situations the subjects construct society and, therefore, are constructed by it.

The perspective of social constructionism has grown considerably in the last decades, as much in the social psychology field as in sociology. Although is clear that there is not a single interpretation of what social constructionism is, in general they are not identified with works that go from the symbolic interactionism to the ethnomethodology. In the field of social psychology, the social constructionism is defined clearly from the initial proposal from Gergen. However, the first time that the notion of social construction was explicitly mentioned was in the work *La construcción social de la realidad,* by Berger and Luckmann (1967). Attending to Cromby y Nightingale (1999), there are four general characteristics of social constructionism. The first has to do with the primacy of the social projects; it is considered that the experiences of the subjects in the world are, first and foremost, social processes, and the interaction in daily life is conceived as a determinant of the knowledge incorporated by the subjects. The second idea is related to the historical and cultural specificity, on a way that all that we subjects know are specific social and cultural products. In third place, is highlighted the idea of interdependency between knowledge and action, thus, each way of knowledge brings in them differentiated forms of action, which leads to, at the same time, consequences also differentiated. The fourth idea

has to do with the critical posture that the social constructionism assumes with respect to positivism and empiricism; constructionism assumes that all knowledge is historical and socially specific and a critical contribution of it was to defy essentialism, individualism and mentalism, central ideas of the hegemonic psychology, of a more experimental approach.

For the social constructionism, thus, the social world is shaped by conversations, conceived as patterns of joint activities, similar to games. Thus, from birth, we have been included in patterns of social interaction. As in the case of many games, these patterns are started by ourselves, however, as time goes by, we find ourselves increasingly involved by them: they allow us to apprehend and construct the meanings of our surroundings. The subjects have the innate capacity of inserting themselves in these conversations or interaction guidelines. These activities structure themselves, like the games, according to certain norms.

On the other side, to talk about phenomenological sociology involves having clarity about what we understand as phenomenology. Phenomenology is a philosophical movement of the 20th century that describes the structures of the experience as they present themselves in our conscience, not recurring to theories, deductions or assumptions proceeding from other disciplines, such as natural sciences. This movement presents many ramifications, although the book *Investigaciones lógicas* (1900) by Edmund Husserl is considered his first source of inspiration. The starting point of the author was the natural attitude of the conscience, defined as if the natural wished to live where it finds itself, effective and definitely in its acts, believing in the reality in which is presented to them; consists in an experience originated from the world, from things, that are given to us before all theorization, before any cultural construction and meaning. The phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schütz is based in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl in the comprehension method *(verstehen)* by Max Weber (1978). The general debate revolves around how can one achieve knowledge from questions as these ones: How can we treat the subjective data in objective terms?

How do we know other minds? How is the comprehension and reciprocal Communication produced between the subjects? Schütz, different from Husserl, understand phenomenology as an instance of approach to the daily life. Therefore that is why we can speak about a sociological phenomenology (more than philosophical), whose centre of interest resides in knowing and explaining the intersubjective experiences of the subject in their daily surroundings. The Schützian proposal emphasises the social system not in the functional relationships that happen in life in society, but in the interpretation of the meanings of the world *(lebenswelt)* and in the actions and interactions of the subject. From the known world and from the shared experiences, it is obtained the signals, therefore, the indications to interpret the diversity of symbols; and, to Schütz, the intersubjectivity exists in the living present, in which the subjects talk and listen to each other.

The works of Schütz were continued by Berger and Luckmann, the latest a direct disciple of Schütz.

Berger and Luckmann: the social construction of reality

The phenomenology of the social world is closer to sociology than to the husserlian philosophy that inaugurated the phenomenological thinking. Berger and Luckmann do not constitute an exception. The authors claim that the daily life implies a world ordered through meanings shared by the community. Their phenomenological proposal has as a main objective to re-establish the social constructions of reality. The core of *La construcción social de la realidad* is found in the affirmation that the subjects create society and the same is converted to an objective reality that, both, create the subjects: "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality, man is a social product" (BERGER; LUCKMANN, 1967/1993, p.61).

To Berger and Luckmann, subjectivity is comprehended as a phenomenon that manifests the universe of meanings constructed collectively from interaction. The proposal has as a centre piece the concept of intersubjectivity, understood as the meeting, by

the subject, with another consciousness that keeps constituting them in its own perspective. Intersubjectivity is not reduced to face to face encounter, but it expands in all dimensions of social life. Hence both Berger and Luckmann as well as Schütz abandon the conception of intersubjectivity in the sense of interior consciousness flow and understand it as a human living in a social and historical community.

His socio-phenomenologic proposals imply the transit of the individual to the social, from the natural to the historical and from the original to the daily life. In *La construcción social de la realidad* (1967), the authors depart from two basic thesis: on one side, that reality is constructed socially; on the other side, it is considered that it is a task of the sociology of knowledge to analyse the processes in which reality is socially constructed. Thus, *reality* is defined as an own quality of the phenomena that we recognize as independent of our own volition; meanwhile, *knowledge* is conceived as a certainty that the phenomena are real and possess specific characteristics.

To the exposition of these basic theses, the authors construct a central argument: the objectivation, realised by means of the language used in the daily social interaction, construct society and convert it to an objective reality, through the mechanisms of institutionalization and legitimation. The subjects internalise these processes of primary and secondary socialization.

The reality of daily life is organised around a *here* and a *now*; both dimensions constitute the real of the subjects' consciousness. However, reality does not exhaust in these phenomena present, as it also covers phenomena that occurred in the past. From there the subjects could experiment the daily life gradually distinct of proximity and remoteness, both in the spatial and temporal terrain.

As Schütz, Berger and Luckmann conceive daily life's reality as an intersubjective reality, that is, shared with others; it is considered the "face to face" interaction as the most important of the social interaction experiences, because from it comes all the other situations of interaction. Then the social reality of daily life is apprehended in a continuous classification that return

progressively anonymous, as long as they distance themselves from the *here* and the *now*, from the "face to face" situation. On one end would be those others who the subject interacts with in an intense manner, permanent; on the other end, there are the more abstract, anonymous, those who could be even inaccessible "face to face".

Definitely, for the authors, the social actors perceive that the social reality is independent from its own apprehensions. Reality, therefore, appears already objectified, as something imposed to the subjects. To the objectifying of reality it is fundamental to consider the language, that in Berger and Luckmann stands as the basic means to provide to the subjects of the indispensable objectivations and that arranges the order in which the reality of daily life acquires meaning to people.

The concept of symbolic universe is central in the proposal of Berger and Luckmann. The authors conceive it as the matrix of all the meanings objectified socially and subjectively real. The symbolic universe is constructed through social objectivated and provides the order to the subjective apprehension of the biographic experience; thus, can be described saying that "it puts everything in its place", because it orders the different phases of the biography. As a legitimator, the symbolic universe protects the institutional order and the individual biography; orders history and locates the collective happenings inside a coherent unit that includes the past, the present and the future; establishes a memory that shares all the socialised individuals, as well as a common reference point to the projection of the individual actions; and provides a wide integration of all the isolated institutional processes.

As Schütz, Berger and Luckmann conceive the interaction and intersubjectivity as independent situations. However, the contributions by the authors of *La construcción social de la realidade* add little to the work previously done by Schütz. The "relationships-we" by Schütz imply, according to Berger and Luckmann, an immediate exchange of meanings; in them there is a smaller degree of typification that in the case of

"relationship-they", that imply to other anonymous subject. As the "relationship-we" are less determined by typifications can allow a bigger space to the negotiation between subjects.

Luckmann and the theory of Communication

Thomas Luckmann proposes the sociology of knowledge as a base of a new social theory of human action. The questions that guided his proposal were the following:

How do you construct society and reality?, How forms and models produced by society, the experience and everyone's daily action are determined?, How the societies generate, publicise, and reproduce what they believe they know, where they live and define as real? how is it possible that the historical and social order of the things thereby generated is presented to the actor as an order that can be objectively experimented and produces meaning and identity? And finally: What effect the social constructions have over their constructors? (KNOBLAUCH*et al.*, 2008, p.10-11).

> To Luckmann, either knowledge or what we human beings define as reality, are determined socially. According to the author, the interactions are the foundations of the social and have an intermittent character, but are essentially permanent. They allow to guide the interactions of the subjects with the others. "The order is the result of the human activity and it is only possible while human activity continues producing" (GAYTÁN, 2011, p.72).

In his analyses about the language and the Communication, Luckmann focuses on the symbols and the signals as components of knowledge. To the author, the language is the main means, either to the social construction of reality as to the mediation of the reality socially built. The language "is the carrier of the social knowledge, but also is a system of action and thus, will update itself in situations of concrete interaction and contingent processes" (DREHER, 2012, p. 97). This way, language is a system of signal that serves to mediate reality.

Luckmann was not only interested in the epistemological and anthropological foundations of Communication, but also in the

theoretical determination of constitution of the Communication genres and in the analysis of linguistic Communication. For him Communication is a social action that uses signals of different forms and that, before all else, is reciprocal. Communication is, therefore, a process of production and mediation of knowledge, in which it is crucial the production and reproduction of the social structures.

*La construcción social de la realidad*es is a sociology classic, specifically the sociology of knowledge. Responding to Knoblauch, the authors

> depart from the idea that the reality in which we live is constructed through our acts. What is reality is consisted of the 'smaller' or 'bigger' institutions of the action. And what reality means is determined by what these institutions accept as knowledge and divulge through language. That is, there is no reality without human beings. Human beings produce their reality through their acts. It is what is fundamental from a sociologic point of view: In this work humans are not alone. And more, reality only acquires an objective character due to what shares with others, that is, because it is intersubjective (KNOBLAUCH*et al.,* 2008, p.14).

Therefore, all social action is developed, above all, in interaction processes, from which shared interpretation and action models come from: "These models are negotiated, changed, maintained or implanted in society" (KNOBLAUCH *et al.,* 2008, p.19). They are, then, changing dynamic constructions. As it can be seen, Berger and Luckmann grant a role and important status to daily life Communication. It will be based on this consideration that Luckmann will, in an individual manner, centre his studies, both theoretical and empirical, on communicative action.

Based on the previous, the sociology of knowledge started to become interested in the analysis until the last detail of the construction of comprehensive actions that are developed in the daily life scenario.

Communicative genres and communicative construction of reality

Thomas Luckmann was interested in the interaction processes particularly relevant to the organization of collective human life'

conceived as responsibilities of a society's tradition, especially in its moral order.

The theory of communicative genres of Luckmann comes from the following basic idea: all symbolic action, or communicative, is subjected to norms that foreshadow conduct, that acts as previous structuring to the communicative situation. But not all communicative processes are forms of rigid action and neither the actors will always act based in generic forms previously determined. That is, in many cases the actors return to construct and design their acts; these more spontaneous acts are found opposed to those communicative processes in which the action of the involved come determined in its development by a general given form, in which is gathered many established communicative elements. The roughly firm forms are the communicative genres, because their are available to the actor as elements of the social knowledge.

The communicative genres work as solutions more or less effective and binding of all types of Communication problems generated in a society. They are means and programs to build a meaning intersubjectively. Examples of communicative genres are the proverb, the joke, the tale, the announcement, the confession and many others. They are then "stylish patterns that objectivate units of meaning, making possible, this way, the creation of imposition of meaning traditions" (SCHÜTZ; LUCKMANN, 1977, p.13).

Luckmann confronted a methodological problem in his investigation about communicative genres: "how to transform concrete and specific typical forms of a culture and a time of universal data, timeless necessary to carry through objective comparisons" (KNOBLAUCH *et al.,* 2008, p.33). This problem has remained in other sociological proposals, and there is much criticism towards these microsociologic approaches for not making possible the generalization of specific empirical data.

The knowledge of reality is settled in a variety of knowledge that the subjects incorporate throughout their biographic trajectory. In this process "reality is converted to biding" (LUCKMANN, 2008, p.154). The varieties of knowledge are not static; but they are

maintained, and in some cases transformed. This transformation is the result of certain communicative processes that, therefore, form what can be called a socializing unit.

Luckmann affirmed that all social theory should begin as a systematic comprehension of human Communication, its forms and social functions, this way is evident the importance that Luckmann grants to it. According to Luckmann, the use of the socially established Communication systems is found one way or another regulated. There are mediate communicative actions, that use the conceptual, figurative or iconic system of signals, "or any other technical means that endures time or beats space" (LUCKMANN, 2008, p.159). Currently, the mediate Communication has gained fields on other forms of Communication. On the other end, Luckmann identifies the immediate, oral and reciprocal communication that

> continues being fundamental for the construction and maintenance of reality, and also for the construction, transformation and publishing of the social knowledge. Do not forget that this form of fundamental communicative action still forming the core of the primary socialisation (LUCKMANN, 2008, p.159).

All the communicative processes, mediate or immediate, have a basic pragmatic function: to serve as a solution for the problems of life not properly communicative. Luckmann names, as an example, the following: the reconstruction of experiences and living, the planning of combined actions, the maintenance of emotional communities etc.

In a superior level to the communicative processes in general, Luckmann affirms that the function of the communicative genres is to serve as a solution to a communicative problem. "The concept communicative genre gathers the models of communicative action that somehow are 'institutionalised', come socially preformed and include instructions of use more or less biding" (LUCKMANN, 2008, p.61).

To the author, in the communicative genres one can distinguish an internal material structure, an external social

structure and an intersubjective situational interstructure. Regarding the internal material structure, it refers to the many systems of signals available in the social knowledge, same as the more or less conventional forms of expression and important to the direct Communication; it is composed of norms that which the actor, who acts according to the genres, can choose, amongst the different communicative codes, signal systems and expression etc. The external social structure, meanwhile, refers to the socially fixed definitions that establish the communicative social contexts as communicative contexts and the social situations as communicative with determined communicative acts; the definitions derive from context, situation and actors. Lastly, the intersubjective situational interstructure includes the regulative systems of dialogue, the changes of shift, the demands of coordination and pre-interpretation, fixing, rights and duties that develop a theme and the need to apply, in conversation, repairing techniques.

From a theoretical point of view, to recognise the communicative forms solidified as genres seems not to entail many problems. "The knowledge about these genres usually is found in the social knowledge and not only as a tacit practical knowledge, but also as part of some daily theories and taxonomies more or less explicit" (LUCKMANN, 2008, p.166). In addition, the communicative, differentiated, solidified and intercalated genres in an institutional context are of a vital importance to comprehend the communicative construction of a society.

Although oral Communication is ephemeral, and this characteristic makes its contents and also, in part, its forms, can be rebuilt, Luckmann emphasises that durability of Communication in daily life, materialised in the communicative genres, makes precisely that this ephemeral nature, somehow, becomes lost.

Luckmann affirms that people are generally interested in talking about past events. We narrate doings and acts, others or our own; we ask ourselves the consequences, reasons etc; we justify, we curse, we celebrate, we blame, we praise, we argue and more. It is said "almost always behind these communicative

reconstructions a pragmatic reason is hidden; a few times we relive the past just for the sake of it" (LUCKMANN, 2008, p.171). Said it in another manner, in the words of the author, "the past is interrogated by its possible utility for the projection of future acts" (LUCKMANN, 2008, p.171). Around the communicative construction of reality, Luckmann affirms that all constructions of reality, consist, precisely, of communicative elaboration from the past, as the result transmission of these elaborations to the future generations. Despite the centrality of daily life Communication in the construction of reality, Luckmann warns that there are a few investigations around the ways in which the past is elaborated inside the daily oral Communication. The ephemeral character of it, therefore, makes complicated to apprehend these constructions, to grab them in a systematic way and to study them as static elements.

Without a doubt, the proposals around the communicative construction of Luckmann's reality are related to his bigger purpose of comprehending the social interaction as raw material for institutionalisation, production and distribution of knowledge.

The social knowledge, collectively constructed, stands, therefore, as the core, both cognitive and moral, of a determined culture. It comprehends conventional solutions to the daily problems presented to the subjects, both individually and collectively. These solutions are a type of recipes – permeated, al, by processes of concrete Communication – which "indicate, suggest or determine how one should act in this natural and social world" (LUCKMANN, 2008, p.178).

To the solutions that are converted to norms of conduct, Luckmann denominates them "institutions" and they belong to the order of social structure. So, affirms that "these structures can be described, in an analogous manner as the case of the social institutions (that refer to the general problems of human life), as solutions to the specific communicative problems. We will call these *communicative genres* (LUCKMANN, 2008, p.179).

The genres can be daily terms but also analytic-theoretical. These last ones characterise typical forms, recurrent and

more or less obligatory in the communicative processes. The communicative genres, therefore, are not static, but are temporal structures and change with time.

The whole theory about Luckmann's communicative genres is framed in the general proposal of the social construction of reality. In this sense, the author stands out from those studies taking into account the communicative interactions as minimal units of meaning, configured as linguistic forms and analysed "objectively" from disciplines such as linguistics. As the author affirms, "the communicative interactions were recognised as a fundamental manner of producing of a social order, or, in a more general term, as the primordial producer of the social construction of reality" (LUCKMANN, 2008, p.180).

From there the author understands the social interaction as an empirical form of a more outstanding, clearer, Communication. This social interaction is characterised by having a reciprocal structure of functioning and based in the use of a wider signal system shared between the interactors. A system that, says the author, can be the language or a wider system of signals. To Luckmann there is no Communication that is not social. The author affirms that, in its stricter meaning, Communication is an adaptation process, because it "determines in a significant form of daily conduct of the members of our species while constituting the texture of the human social organization" (LUCKMANN, 1984, p.11).

In addition, as in any other form of interaction, the communicative goes through processes of institutionalisation that include, before anything else, social routines.

Communication and the sociology of knowledge

The exposed in the previous paragraph makes clear the central role that Luckmann grants the Communication in social theory and, especially, in sociology of knowledge. Although at the beginning of his work, the sociologist was interested in a social theory of language, during the last decade was centred, further, in elaborating

analysis of all those forms of Communication that produce, transmit and reproduce knowledge and, therefore, social meanings.

"A social science dedicated to the empirical study of social reality should systematically have to take into account the intersubjective construction of the reality that investigates" (LUCKMANN, 1996, p.165). Reality is subjective because the objective data of social sciences originates from subjectivity, that is, in the human activities subjectively significant, "but decidedly it does not mean that they are subjective in a sense that it makes them inaccessible to this class of systematic study that we dignify with the name of science" (LUCKMANN, 1996, p.165).

To Luckmann the analysis of social realities should begin in the interpretation, but it does not finish there, it should continue with the explanation (the interpretation) of the constructed social realities, connecting them (establishing casual relations, functional) to previous conditions and to consequences. This analysis framework assumes that "the majority (although not all) of the procedures in which are constructed the social realities are communicative procedures" (LUCKMANN, 1996, p.166). The procedures, in all cases, if they are communicative, are, to the author, those in which are reconstructed the social realities. These reconstructions not only happen in the field of science, but also exist, according to Luckmann, in the popular, daily reconstructions, without theoretical purposes.

Societies, conceived as groups of subjects who interact and communicate among themselves are text producers. The sociology of knowledge that Luckmann proposes should, before all, analyse those discursive productions:

> the logical constructions and reconstructions that determine the social interaction, should adopt the method we could call an 'attentive' reading of the 'texts' which the members of a society produce constantly. This is a task that the sociology of knowledge – 'new' in the sense that at last pays attention to the ins and outs of the communicative processes – is doing in the field of social theory (LUCKMANN, 1996, p.171).

Luckmann, therefore, does not present an approach to the linguistic Communication. But rather infers, phenomenologically,

necessary relations between the activities of the subjective conscience and the social Communication systems, while it contrasts the casual connexion of the social structure in relation to the actors and the communicative actions. In his considerations about the ritual and the symbol, it is developed the thesis that the limits of the experience of the world of life can overcome itself with the help of symbols and rites, which represent a form of symbolic behaviour. Somehow, Luckmann searched for "the beginning of the relations between a reality socially constructed, the communication, and the realization of the subjective conscience" beginning by the "analysis of the constitution of the signal systems in the world of human beings" (LUCKMANN, [1973] 2007, p.96, *apud* DREHER, 2012, p.97).

Language is considered the main way to the construction of reality, on one side, and for the mediation of the reality socially constructed, on the other. It is the carrier of the social knowledge, but also an action system that updates itself in situations of concrete interaction and in the contingent processes. By means of symbols, the human beings can overcome the limits of the experience in the world of life. To the experience of the subjects not only are imposed small transcendences media the world of others, the social world, that can overcome by comprehension and Communication. This way, the symbols produce a significant connexion between the extraordinary fields of reality and the daily life of the subjects.

Closing: the synthesis of the contributions of Luckmann to the Communication and interaction

The sociology of knowledge of Luckmann can be compared with what we can denominate daily life sociology of Communication. Not only the author was interested in the epistemological and anthropological bases of Communication, but also in the theoretical determination of the Communication genres and in the analysis of linguistic Communication.

Communication is understood as a social action that utilises

signals in different ways and is characterised by its reciprocity. Every time the individual actions and behaviour are found systematically related between themselves, the Communication is a process of production and, above all, of mediation of knowledge, in which it is crucial to the production and reproduction of the social structures.

Luckmann analyses the interaction processes particularly relevant to the organization of the collective human life, that are responsible for the diffusion of the traditions of a society and, especially, of a moral order. It is for this reason that it was centred on what was denominated communicative genres or genres of Communication. According to the author, these not only serve to coordinate actions, but also are patterns and prefabrications of the Communication processes, that are deposited as such in the knowledge variety and serve to resolve problems of knowledge transfers between subjects. Here we can see, although between lines, a pragmatic vision of Communication, every time this is seen as a daily basic process which contributes to the resolution of the practical problems that every subject meets in the world of life.

The theoretical contributions of Luckmann to comprehend the social and communicative construction of reality are doubtless and leave several points for reflection about the importance of the daily interaction in the conformation of the socially constructed meanings of daily life. In summary, to the author, society and subject are constructed mutually; the subjects interact, above all, in face to face relations and through language, considering the objectifying means by excellence; and also, maintains communicative relations regulated by the communicative genres, that have an important pragmatic function and operate as a guide of the subjects' actions.

As it can be observed, beyond the joint proposal with Berger, captured in *La construcción social de la realidad,* Luckmann achieved important contributions to the comprehension of society in communicative terms.

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