

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF VALUES AND SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the issue of social acceptability and how it is constructed within society when certain innovative but controversial behaviors that challenge generally accepted traditions are already socially manifested, and members of society are forced to position themselves towards these realities. The theories in the scientific literature that are influenced by classical Weberian rationalism emphasize that reality is objective, even if individuals relate to it from their subjective positions, and acceptance comes from the rational understanding of the world around them. One reason why the formation of social acceptability is not satisfactorily explained only by the process of rational filtering is the fact that argumentation is what makes the reality of the minority comprehensible for the majority of individuals, and argumentation involves communication, i.e. an exchange of ideas that can change both the perception of the transmitter and the receiver. The perceptual position adopted by the receiver is influenced by his / her own experiences, as well as by their system of values. In the process of socialization, individual values come into contact with the values of other individuals, and sometimes as a result of this contact a conflict of values results. From a constructionist perspective, in the process of the social construction of reality, the co-transformation of values through the communicative action between individuals produces a re-creation of the reality initially perceived, which can lead to either social exclusion or social acceptability. This paper analyzes from a theoretical standpoint how

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the social construction of values within society influences the process of achieving social acceptability.

Keywords: social acceptability, social values, social construction of reality, social innovation, social perception.

1. INTRODUCTION

From an ontological point of view, individuals are parts of the whole (the social group), and the consciousness of the whole is formed by the consciousness and will of the members that make up the whole, whose correlation in the socialization process can be seen as a network within which “any change to the network affects the network as a whole” (Quine, 1951). From a psychological perspective, one of the fundamental needs of the individual is the need to be accepted (Jasini *et al.*, 2018). Socially, in the absence of acceptance from other members of the social group, the individual is isolated from the networking process, their social isolation being perceived as a decrease in the quality of life (Breaz, 2020), while „social embeddedness” (Pichler, 2006) is the element that ensures the feeling of satisfaction with one’s own existence and even the feeling of happiness.

The behaviors of the members of a social group are weighed and judged by the group through the values that the respective group promotes (Albrecht, 2006; Apostu, 2013; Berger *et al.*, 1977; Burke, 2007). The values promoted by the group are those values perceived by all or most of the group members, in consensus, to be important for the proper functioning of relations between group members (Sandu, Frunzã & Huidu, 2020), supporting the stability of the network. Returning to the psychological paradigm, stability is another fundamental need of individuals (Waytz *et al.*, 2014), and one of the elements that psychologically supports the feeling of stability is predictability (Erickson, 2009).

When the innovative element goes far beyond what is traditionally perceived as being acceptable and it generates major ethical controversies, then social innovation becomes the opposite of social stability (Mulgan, 2006). What then becomes apparent is that the behaviors of certain individuals, who are initially fully integrated parts of their social group, are perceived as being extreme or inappropriate compared to the behavioral line drawn by the group. This happens when some individuals, under the impact of personal needs or motivations, assume behaviors that are controversial among the group members or even rejected by the group. Social innovation occurs when the group accepts those behaviors as not threatening the stability of the network. And since the stability of the network, as we mentioned above, is based on a series of unanimously or quasi-unanimously accepted values as the pillars that support a healthy social interaction, social innovation implies the acceptance of an innovation of group values.

Some authors (Guenther & Guenther, 2013) define social innovation as a new solution to an old social problem, but which, through its novelty, brings a more efficient solution for individuals facing the problem than the variants already established socially as being ethically acceptable (therefore, compliant to values) solutions. Individuals who face the problem that needs to be solved thus become stakeholders in the process of implementing the controversial solution (Guenther & Guenther, 2013), but in order for the solution to be accepted by the whole social group it is necessary that the values of the minority stakeholders become values of the enlarged social group or, at least, to be such as to sufficiently change the group's perception of traditional values so that their innovation is accepted by the group.

A number of theoretical directions can be extracted from the works of Taebi (2016), which raises the issue of differences between the concept of acceptance and acceptability, considering that acceptance should be linked to the individual, while acceptability to the social processes of group interaction; of Van de Poel (2016), who links acceptance to the psychological perception of individuals and acceptability to the ethical position adopted by these individuals towards a certain behavior manifested socially, an idea supported by the research of Huijts et al. (2012), who states that acceptability is affected by social ethical norms, research that can be correlated with Doorn's (2010) theory, which inextricably links acceptability with the reconciliation of values in society.

2. THE TRIGGERS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION – ARGUMENTS FOR A SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

Of course, the first question that arises when we talk about social innovation is what produces social change or, more precisely, what are the triggers that motivate the departure from the traditional and the acceptance of novelty. Transhumanist sociotechnicists believe that in today's hypertechnological knowledge-based society, technology is what shapes society (Bijker & Pinch, 1984), as elements of technology are crucial to the social order, and only the design and implementation of technology is shaped by society (Latour, 1992). Examples of social innovation generated by technology can be, among others, the implementation of artificial intelligence in educational teaching-learning activities, the application of biotechnologies in the treatment of diseases, applications of genetic engineering to prolong the life of individuals or to eliminate genetic illness of embryos, the virtualization of social space through the technology of augmented reality, the digitalization of industrial processes (Diaconu & Moraru, 2019). Of course, the examples can go on, but the basic idea is that the needs and desires of individuals remain the same (the desire to be healthy, to live a long life, to have high quality of life, when both the primary physiological needs and intellectual and spiritual needs are met etc.) at a macro-historical level, but the methods by which

these needs and desires are met differ from one historical period to another, depending on the technological evolution.

Each technological innovation involves both benefits and risks (Hanaba *et al.*, 2020; Hleșcu *et al.*, 2020), and there is a relatively unanimous consensus on this aspect in the literature in most fields of science. Focusing on the risks involved by an innovative technology implicitly means focusing on how the applications of that technology can lead to the violation of values traditionally perceived as representing the elements that bring stability to the group network. For example, genetic engineering raises objections regarding the appropriateness of intervention in the genetic heritage of humanity, as well as the risk of affecting genetic biodiversity, although gene therapy has undeniable positive effects for the eradication of diseases to which humanity has not yet found effective treatments (Colang & Vlad, 2020). Another example is the virtualization of social space, which has the benefit of facilitating interaction between individuals that are divided by great distances physically, supporting the exchange of ideas (including scientific ones) and cooperation without the limitations inherent to the human condition brought on by temporality and spatiality, but it also implies a withdrawal of the individual from the direct interactive social life to a virtual environment, in which the otherness is perceived differently, and individuals tend to be seen as avatars rather than as persons in themselves, with possible disastrous consequences on the collective *psyche* in terms of feelings of cohesion and social empathy (Sandu, 2020). In parallel, as the culture shock generated by the use of new technologies dissipates (Lilley, 2013), the impact of ethical controversies decreases and the number of successful or at least harmless examples increases, thus reducing the influence of traditional beliefs and facilitating a shift towards the acceptance of social innovation (Cohen, 1992).

Cultural shock produces a state of mental discomfort, the social effects of which can only be fully understood in time, and those effects that persist over time lead to the formation of trends of opinion. It is important to identify and understand the social effects of culture shock, in order to understand the type and importance of the changes that an innovative element brings to society, on the one hand, but also the threats (as perceived by individuals) that this innovation brings upon social stability. The notion of cultural shock must be correlated with the notion of a risk society, which is a society where one is much more aware than in previous historical periods of the risks that a certain change in daily life brings to individuals and society, a phenomenon amplified by contemporary means of distance communication in the online environment, in real time. When we discuss the risk society, we ask ourselves what are the perceptions of individuals about risk and what risky is. The virtualization of social space brings with it the possibility for any member of society to release in the public space his own perceptions on social phenomena, sometimes unfiltered in a responsible way or without assuming the effects that releasing that perception will produce on others. The phenomenon of

real-time communication of an enormous amount of information makes the sources of information extremely diverse, difficult to filter and difficult to verify in terms of their credibility. Such phenomena contribute to the maintenance of the cultural shock and to the propagation in the public space of its harmful effects, amplifying very quickly the process of forming trends of opinion that lead to inacceptability. Correlatively, reactions to information and perceptions released in the public space through the virtual environment also occur in real time, so that the process of forming public perception becomes fluid, almost unstable, and perceptions change rapidly, their fluctuations being difficult to locate, explain and record in real time.

Objective reality can be measured, determined, explained, and rational explanations – communicative action in the Habermasian sense (Habermas, 1985) – determine the adherence of group members to what is identified as acceptable by the majority. The rational paradigm for relating to reality is based on communication, seen as a rational argumentation of the truth, a process in which the truth remains the same even if individuals' perceptions of what is true differ. The truth being, however, unique, it can be explained or revealed by rational arguments, and thus deviant perceptions can be corrected and social consensus can be reached.

Although the theory of Habermas (1985) on communicative action is depictive of the rationalist paradigm that links social consensus to the rationalization of communicative processes within society, this comprehensive and elaborate theory can also be used to explain reality from a different point of view: the constructionist approach. This approach to reality starts from a presupposition that in neuro-linguistic programming can be synthesized by the phrase “the map is not the territory” (Dotz & Hoobyar, 2018).

In other words, according with this paradigmatic view, reality is not objective in a static and immutable way, but deeply subjective, permanently build through social interactivity, and the reality of a social group is formed by the realities of all members of the group, correlated with each other (Sandu, 2015). Likewise, the values of a group cannot be separated from the individuals who form the group, so the values promoted by the group are, in reality, the values promoted by the members of the group starting from their individual perceptions, which were harmonized as a result of the process of communication between group members until a consensus was reached. And if in neuro-linguistic programming (Robbins, 2001) one operates with the concept of *mental map* (which is everything that an individual considers to form the reality in which he lives), at the psychological level (Bateson, 2000) one speaks of *perceptual positions* (meaning, the way in which each individual integrates the events they observe or participate in within their own system of relating to the environment), social constructivists state that there are as many realities as there are individuals (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 2001), and that the social reality for the individuals that form the social group is constructed in the process of “negotiating reality” which is “an emerging,

applied social constructionist approach to engaging situations of cultural difference and intergroup conflict” (Arieli & Friedman, 2013)².

In neuro-linguistic programming, each mental map is composed of the feelings, concepts, experiences of the individual to whom the map belongs and through which he/she judges the actions of all other individuals. But this judgement is made with the limitations of their own mental map, therefore through the limits of their own experiences. The clash between the mental maps of individuals can generate the rejection of the Other. From a psychological perspective (Cooper, 2007), the confrontation with an innovative situation can lead to cognitive dissonance (i.e. the situation in which the individual has a double set of feelings, attitudes, points of view that are in conflict with each other). In terms of social constructionism, when a controversial ethical behavior falls within the perceptual sphere of the individual, sometimes even without his or her will, the individual is forced to position himself regarding that controversial ethical behavior and as a consequence, social unacceptability may arise. Kenneth Gergen (2009) recommends negotiating reality with the other, as a way to know his arguments, to provoke his empathy and, thus, to make his reality comprehensible for oneself, as a way to accept the other.

3. CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND CHANGING VALUES – THE ROAD TO SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY

In a first stage, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by perception, on the one hand, and by perception of ethical values, on the other hand. Traditionally, axiology, as a branch of philosophy, can provide the answer to the content of the concept of ethical values, but the actual definition of the notion can raise a number of difficulties, because when we make the transition from theoretical philosophy to its applied side in everyday life, we will notice that for each individual the concept of ethical value can have different meanings. From the perspective of social philosophy and sociology, we will see that the notion of “value” is a rather unclear term in ordinary, non-philosophical language, and this is particularly important given the fact that individuals build the reality in which they live with the help of language and cultural concepts. Even if individuals come into contact with certain definitions formulated in various sources of information regarding the meaning of the concept of “ethical value”, each approaches those definitions according to their own experience, culture, education, thus outlining their own semantic area in which they place the notion of “value”.

² Although, from a strictly grammatical point of view, the expression “negotiating *on* reality” or “negotiating *about (some part of)* reality” is correct, the social-constructionist concept in the international literature, in English in original, is “negotiating reality”. For clarity, we also provided a brief definition of the concept in the literature.

In order to determine the way in which individual perception and individual values contribute to the formation of the climate of social acceptability, one of the first concerns of the authors of this article was to determine what individuals understand by the notion of “value”. In this regard, we developed a series of studies (Huidu, 2020; Sandu, Frunză, & Huidu, 2020; Sandu *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b) that aimed to identify both the meaning of the concept of “value” and the hierarchy of values depending on different contexts, on the source of values, on the factors that influence the change of perception on ethical values etc.

Generally, the values are the same for everybody, but the scale of values, more precisely their positioning on a hierarchical scale according to their importance, differs from individual to individual. These differences are determined by the personal experiences, but also by cultural or religious elements. What prevails, however, when the perception is formed on the importance of an ethical value (according to which a certain behavior is judged as acceptable or unacceptable) is primarily the individual’s own experience, since our studies (Sandu, Frunză, & Huidu, 2020) show that values that humanize ethics (such as compassion, care for the other) rank last in the hierarchy of individual values. This is likely to indicate that a directly perceived experience (of which the individual has only become aware of) is more likely to influence one individual’s values than another person’s experience. Up to this point the results are not surprising and are in line with other studies conducted in the international literature, among which we will mention the theory of predisposition to favor available memories, by Cass Sunstein (2007), which essentially states that the individual’s emotions are activated by the intensity with which he / she imagines negative events, which have been somewhat ignored until the moment he / she faces the problem. So, when we relate to the other, an important role is played by the power with which we can imagine the suffering or need of the other, but when we ourselves have experienced a need or a desire, we move from imagination to concrete, with direct consequences on the perception of values or, in other words, on the importance of the values that we violate or that we apply only partially in order to be able to satisfy our needs.

Our own experience transforms ethical values from abstract concepts to personalized concepts. Therefore, although values should be generally valid and have a universal character, with the particularization of values on the personal experience of each individual, these values become fluid and we cannot speak anymore about universally valid principles, applicable in any situation. Ethics suffers from an interpretive adrift from a universal ethics to an individual ethics, where the perception on the importance of values changes, and so does the perception on what is unacceptable or acceptable. The phenomenon we discuss here is the displacement of the perception related to individual ethics towards the universal ethics, which governs the society as a whole, yet between these two types of ethics there is a transparent border, in which one influences the other and vice versa.

In a recent empirical study (Huidu, 2020), we determined that the social acceptability of biotechnology is closely linked to the idea of social innovation, as the ethical controversies that mark the use of biotechnology come from the fact that these new techniques come in conflict with widely accepted values, socially and traditionally. The counter-arguments against these techniques can be of moral-social, ethical-scientific, moral-religious origin etc. The formation of the ethical decision of individuals is augmented by these arguments to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the importance that each individual attaches to the sources of morality with which they come in contact. It is true that the abovementioned study dealt with social innovation in a single area of social life, namely in the field of medically-assisted human reproduction, and the approach to the issue of acceptability was made from the perspective of religious beliefs, but the research allowed us to draw a series of conclusions that can be extrapolated to the general mechanism of forming social acceptability, at least in terms of the importance of individual values within this mechanism.

Among other things, the study allowed us to reveal the existence of a phenomenon of moral relativism in the process of transition from unacceptability to acceptability. Moral relativism, described extensively in the works of authors such as Chris Gowans (2019), Richard Joyce (2006) or Michael Shermer (2004), assumes that moral values are perceived differently depending on the type of society we refer to and the cultural or historical context in which a certain society evolves. From the perspective of social acceptability, we determined (Huidu, 2020) that moral relativism appears in the process of social construction of reality, depending on certain factors that add to the cultural and historical context (which is of course important), such as individual emotions and the desire to satisfy one's needs.

In other words, when individuals are forced to satisfy their personal needs, they tend to be less radical in rejecting an innovative idea. The dilution of radicalism is based on a change of perception regarding the general context, generated of course by the individuals' own special context, because the individuals are now prepared, due to their own experience, to accept that the values that guided them so far are not absolute and they tend to attenuate this hegemony of values³, by adapting them to the new context they find themselves in. This change in perception generates, in turn, changes in the value system of the individual. These changes are revealed in the behaviors and statements of the individual and, through those behaviors and statements, they influence the perception of other individuals with whom they come into contact.

³ "Hegemony of values" is a concept used by the authors to depict the situation when the actions, opinions, perceptions and reactions of individuals are controlled, sometimes even without individuals being aware of it, by certain values to which they adhere unquestionably, in an absolute manner, which prevents individuals to adapt to the context or to be flexible, to accept the Other's position, to enter a dialogue with the Other, to compromise, so in the end, it makes them oppose change or innovation.

Another empirical study, conducted with prof. PhD. Antonio Sandu and PhD. Ana Frunzã (Sandu *et al.*, 2020a), that focused on the social acceptability of euthanasia from a religious perspective, comes to confirm the theoretical model resulting from the first study (Huidu, 2020), and in addition shows that social perceptions change when, socially, it appears something what some authors (Beck, 2010; Talbot, 2019) call “windows of opportunity”, through the exploitation of which stakeholders can stimulate the willingness of individuals to broaden their perceptual positions and thus accept to broaden their ethical horizons, including by questioning old values and taking into account the opportunity to accept new behaviors, contrasting with traditional social ethics. The study also reveals that the perception of individuals on certain elements of social innovation is sometimes formed unconsciously, due to the fact that they take for granted certain arguments, which are found in and repeatedly mentioned in the discourse of stakeholders, without a deep and proper ethical reflection on controversial ethical issues. In order to provoke a true ethical introspection, it is necessary for individuals to experience themselves various contexts when they need to deal with the behavior that is subjected to ethical evaluation (in the case of our study, this experience was brought on by watching a video that presented the suffering of a sick person, and that disease would have justified a possible option in favor of euthanasia).

Starting from the research of Antonio Sandu, who stated that the values that individuals use socially and which guide their relationships with the Other represent “a social and communicative construction generated as a negotiation of interpretations between actors (moral agents)” (Sandu, 2017), we conducted together with him and PhD. Ana Frunzã a third study (Sandu *et al.* 2020b), which this time aimed to determine the social perception of values in a post-secular society and how this perception influences individuals in the most important areas of their social life. The study was revealing because one cannot discuss social innovation without discussing ideological and cultural innovation, and one of the premises from which we started was that the values that guide individuals are social constructs of cultural origin.

One of the most important findings we made as a result of this study was that in post-secular societies there is a tendency to reject individualistic values and to respect social values. This conclusion of the study correlates with that of the two previous studies (Huidu, 2020; Sandu *et al.*, 2020a), which is not surprising as long as both previous studies reveal that the availability for innovation of one’s individual perception is catalyzed by either their own needs or by their empathy with the situation of other members of society (when this situation is brought to their attention in a way that helps them become aware of the perceptual position of those in need). This correlation between the conclusions of the three studies indicated would suggest that in a type of post-secular society that presents the characteristics of the analyzed society, the change of perceptions is not made through a process that starts with the individual and ends with the group, but rather

the other way around, from the group to the individual, through stakeholders, who accumulate and transmit to other members of society the wishes, needs and desires of the minority groups they represent.

On the other hand, the second important finding we made during the study on the social perception of ethical values (Sandu *et al.*, 2020b) was that values are transmitted through education received within the family, and in case of a conflict between the values to which the individual adheres in his personal life and those to which he adheres during his participation in the public sphere, there is an axiologic imperialism (Rorty, 1991) or an imperialism of values that comes mainly from the private sphere, which contaminates the public sphere. In other words, learning ethics is done in the privacy of the group of origin and not from stakeholders acting at the social level, and in case of ethical conflict, the individual will remain subjected to the values learned in the group of origin. The second study (Huidu, 2020) reveals, at the same time, an increased willingness of individuals to change their ethical position if members of a group of social intimates are in a state of need that calls for an ethically controversial solution. By empathizing with loved ones in need, individuals attenuate their ethical position and more easily accept innovation, and then, further on, influence those close to them. Among these social micro-groups, there are stakeholders who then stand out and make their discourse public, and who end up influencing other individuals at the macro-level.

The mechanism described above and supported by the data collected on the occasion of the four studies mentioned above reflects a constructionist system *par excellence* through which public perception translates from unacceptability to acceptability, through a continuous social negotiation of reality and mutual co-influence from the micro-social to the macro-social, and then from the macro-social to the micro-social, through repeated communicative action

4. CONCLUSIONS

The socialization process involves a networking between the members of society, a networking that favors the observation by the whole social group of those behaviors that deviate from the traditional or from what is unanimously accepted. Technological and scientific innovation is likely to bring innovative solutions to existing social problems, but when this innovation is perceived as likely to threaten the stability of the entire social system, the rejection reaction appears. The path to social acceptability can be traveled only by changing the perceptual position of each individual with respect to their own values, and this change will generate similar changes in the perception of the group. The group, taking the innovative impulse from some of its individuals, will “socialize” it, “generalize” it and return it to individuals enriched with the legitimacy offered by the group. After the dissipation of the culture shock, the individual needs or the pressures made socially

by stakeholders representing the interests of minority groups create an atmosphere of awareness and empathy towards innovative solutions and the behaviors that are adherent to these solutions, in a process of continuous communicative exchange, from the individuals to the group and from the group to the individuals.

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