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Is there a lack of consensus on consensus theory? Habermas' communicative action theory contextualized in public administration

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Abstract

Considering the criticisms of Habermas' communicative action theory, this essay problematized and reflected on another possible criticism: scholars of the theory, despite presenting a common understanding – enlightenment and emancipation of man – do not reach a consensus on what this theory represents compared to other theories and rationality types. The guiding question of the essay is: does the transition proposed by Habermas from other rationality types to the communicative concern an interparadigmatic theory or a paradigmatic leap? Methodologically, we adopted the conception of an essay according to which authors and readers need to recognize that reality can be understood in different ways. The discussion, contextualized in public administration, allowed us to understand that considering the communicative action theory as having an interparadigmatic character does not mean it is a mere gathering of other theories because it surpasses those it dialogues with, additionally presenting a radical shift. We propose that the Communicative action theory comprises a paradigmatic leap with interparadigmatic characteristics. Finally, we present implications of this discussion for Public Administration.

Keywords: Communicative action. Communicative rationality. Habermas. Public Administration. Social participation.

Existe falta de consenso quanto à teoria do consenso? A teoria da ação comunicativa de Habermas contextualizada na administração pública

Resumo

Considerando as críticas à teoria da ação comunicativa de Habermas, este ensaio problematizou e refletiu sobre outra possível crítica: estudiosos da teoria em questão, apesar de apresentarem um entendimento comum – iluminação e emancipação do homem –, não chegam a um consenso sobre o que essa teoria representa, quando comparada a outras teorias e tipos de racionalidades. A questão norteadora do ensaio foi: a transição proposta por Habermas de outros tipos de racionalidades para a comunicativa diz respeito a uma teoria interparadigmática ou a um salto paradigmático? Metodologicamente, adotamos a concepção de ensaio segundo a qual autores e leitores precisam reconhecer que a realidade pode ser compreendida de diferentes maneiras. A discussão, contextualizada na administração pública, permitiu-nos compreender que considerarmos a teoria da ação comunicativa como possuidora de um caráter interparadigmático não significa que a mesma seja um mero ajuntamento de outras teorias, porque ela ultrapassa aquelas com as quais dialoga, apresentando, adicionalmente, uma mudança radical. Propomos que a teoria da ação comunicativa compreende um salto paradigmático com características interparadigmáticas. Por fim, apresentamos implicações dessa discussão para a administração pública.

Palavras-chave: Ação comunicativa. Racionalidade comunicativa. Habermas. Administração pública. Participação social.

¿Existe falta de consenso sobre la teoría del consenso? La teoría de la acción comunicativa de Habermas contextualizada en la administración pública

Resumen

Cada vez más, la investigación sobre la gestión de las organizaciones culturales se destaca al reconocer las contribuciones simbólicas y materiales. Considerando las críticas a la teoría de la acción comunicativa de Habermas, este ensayo problematizó y reflexionó sobre otra posible crítica: los estudiosos de la teoría en cuestión, a pesar de presentar un entendimiento común –iluminación y emancipación del hombre–, no llegan a un consenso sobre lo que esta teoría representa, en comparación con otras teorías y tipos de racionalidad. La pregunta orientadora del ensayo fue: ¿la transición propuesta por Habermas de otro tipo de racionalidad a la comunicativa concierne a una teoría interparadigmática o un salto paradigmático? Metodológicamente, adoptamos la concepción de ensayo según la cual autores y lectores deben reconocer que la realidad puede entenderse de diferentes formas. La discusión, contextualizada en la administración pública, permitió entender que considerar la teoría de la acción comunicativa como de carácter interparadigmático no significa que sea un mera agrupación de otras teorías, pues va más allá de aquellas con las que dialoga, presentando, además, un cambio radical. Proponemos que la teoría de la acción comunicativa comprende un salto paradigmático con características interparadigmáticas. Finalmente, presentamos las implicaciones de esta discusión para la administración pública.

Palabras clave: Acción comunicativa. Racionalidad comunicativa. Habermas. Administración pública. Participación social.

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INTRODUCTION

Instrumental rationality, grounded in success, based on ends, and pillar of Max Weber's bureaucratic model, has not allowed public administrators and administered ones to develop their actions in an emancipatory way, despite its pretension to improve human relations through labor division and homogenization of social actions within organizations. According to substantive rationality, also discussed by Max Weber, social actors within organizations must develop their relations, following their way of perceiving rational action in relation to ends (Paula, 2013; Tenório, 2000).

From this encounter between instrumental and substantive rationalities, German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas emerges with the proposition of communicative rationality. His proposal of communicative rationality – or communicative action – contrasts with instrumental rationality, suggesting more democratic and less alienating relationships (Lara & Vizeu, 2019). Habermas criticizes the influence of money and power on society, classifying them as discretionary and reifying means of communication, the former harming the private sphere – egocentric functioning of the market –, and the latter the public sphere – dysfunctions of bureaucracy. In his own words: “Just as the private sphere is sloped and eroded by the economic system, so is the public sphere by the administrative system” (Habermas 1987, p. 325).

Habermas' criticisms towards instrumental rationality are among the pillars of Critical Theory (Vizeu & Matitz, 2013). It is noteworthy that, even though Habermas proposes a more democratic model, he does not consider that every individual's opinion should be taken isolatedly, as substantive rationality suggests, but based on solutions through dialogue, best argument, and consensus (Bachur, 2017).

Considered capable of “unlocking the iron cage” within which bureaucratic society lives trapped and alienated, as well as considered capable of enabling humans to achieve freedom, free communication, and emancipation (Moreira, Vieira, & Silva, 2015), communicative rationality is highly supported by defenders of social participation in Public Administration. The Communicative Action Theory by Habermas is considered a powerful analytical instrument, for instance, in the study of the structure and functioning of councils with popular participation, which comprise marks of contemporary societies. Moreover, its principles, when put into practice via corporate mission in private organizations, can generate benefits, such as the improvement of their social image (Vizeu & Matitz, 2013). Despite the benefits of communicative rationality on the public and private spheres, it is criticized by many theorists (e.g., Deleuze, 2014; Fink, 1998; Foucault, 2004; Gutierrez & Almeida, 2013; Irazábal, 2009; Vianna, 2008).

One of the criticisms received by the Communicative Action Theory is focused on possible power asymmetries between individuals. Vianna (2008, p. 39) states that “Habermas presupposes an aseptic communicative action, by which power is not exercised over the interlocutor, but only the understanding is sought. Language, however, is an instrument for exercising power”. Strengthening the same argument, Foucault (2004, pp. 276-277) states that “in human relationships, whatever they may be – whether in communicating verbally, as we are doing now, or in love, institutional, or economic relationships – power is always present”. Deleuze (2014) and Foucault (2008) add that consensus, a pillar of communicative action, will always be permeated by asymmetries between the involved subjects who will strategically elaborate intersubjectivity, in order to achieve their own wills, which represents a power dispute. Fink (1998, p. 22) corroborates this criticism by stating that “understanding is always the imposition of one truth on another; it is always the exercise of power”. However, these criticisms need to be pondered, because Habermas does not ignore possible power asymmetries. On the contrary, it is precisely in the systematically distorted communicative action that the theoretical body of the German philosopher portrays the historically constituted power relations. He calls this strategic action influenced by money and power as colonization of the world of life.

A second criticism to be taken into consideration was brought up by Dussel (1998), Mignolo (1993), and Escobar (1988). Their criticism is based on the fact that Habermas' ideas of communicative action assume that all individuals have the freedom, equality, and dignity to participate, jointly, in the space of dialogue, which is something that, according to the referred authors, has never been guaranteed in any historical moment. They believe that, in the political praxis, only a few groups are, indeed, heard by public administrators (State), while others are ignored. That is one of the reasons why Gutierrez and Almeida (2013) claim that Habermas' model presents a utopian inspiration.

Chambers and Kopstein (2001) argue that, even when consensus is satisfactorily reached, it will not, necessarily, imply the good and progress for civil society, which means that consensus, one of the pillars of Habermas' ideas of communicative action, will not always result in something positive for society. Vizeu and Matitz (2013) add that, in search for consensus, communication can be systematically distorted. This takes place when speakers deliberately induce a false idea through their claim or speech act. These criticisms also need to be pondered, once they claim that Habermas ignores that only a few groups are heard by the State. Actually, Habermas presents the communicative action as a possible solution to mitigate systematic distortions that characterize a society harmed by money and power.

In the midst of many criticisms on Habermas' Communicative Action Theory and on the communication process, the present essay sought, precisely, to problematize and yield reflections about another possible criticism that can be raised: scholars of the Communicative Action Theory, despite presenting a common basilar understanding – enlightenment and emancipation of man –, end up assuming different interpretations about its representativeness, that is, not reaching consensus about what this theory really represents, when compared to other rationality types. This means that the theorists of the *theory of consensus* – as the Communicative Action Theory is known – do not, paradoxically, reach consensus about its representativeness in the history and evolution of rationality types. Some scholars of Habermas' Communicative Action Theory believe it represents an incremental proposal – interparadigmatic proposal –, while others believe it rather represents a radical shift from other rationality types – paradigmatic leap.

What we seek is to reflect about this possible theoretical dilemma: *does the transition proposed by Habermas from other rationality types towards communicative rationality constitute an incremental proposal or a radical shift? Put in other words: does Habermas, in fact, propose only an interparadigmatic theory or a paradigmatic leap?*

The reason behind this discussion is to help clarify what the Communicative Action Theory, in fact, represents, once it is considered one of the most important theoretical foundations of social participation in Public Administration. The reasoning is: how can principles of a given theory be put into practice in case they are not fully comprehended? How can the principles of Communicative Action Theory be effectively applied to Public Administration in case misunderstandings about its foundations still persist? How can social participation in Public Administration be effectively solidified in practice if theoretical propositions of one of its most important foundations are still considered contradictory?

By analyzing different theoretical interpretations about the representativeness of this theory, our main argument, throughout this article, is that the answer is yes to both hypotheses confronted in the guiding question of the present essay, which indicates that, despite diverse interpretations of what this theory represents, they are not mutually excluding whatsoever. This means that the Habermasian proposal presents several incremental characteristics, absorbed from other rationality types, as well as other theories, but also constitutes a paradigmatic leap, that is, a radical adjustment that needs to be acknowledged. We defend that the Communicative Action Theory can be interpreted, simultaneously, in a more conservative way and in a more emancipatory way. This does not mean that the theory in question lacks internal consistency, but that its representativeness can be interpreted in different ways by its scholars. The possible lack of consensus that this article focuses on is not related to the understanding of the basic assumptions of the Communicative Action Theory, but strictly related to the representativeness of this theory in relation to other theories or to other rationality types. We defend that this possible theoretical dilemma, which might represent one of the criticisms received by the Communicative Action Theory, should not be considered a dilemma.

We believe that the fact that one considers the Communicative Action Theory as possessing an interparadigmatic character does not mean that this theory comprises a mere summary of several other theoretical lines, but a theory that surpasses many others it dialogues with. We problematize that the consensus to be obtained about, specifically, the representativeness of this theory, does not imply the adoption of only one side. Otherwise, we would not fully understand the features of this theory and its importance to Public Administration and social participation. Adopting the principles of Communicative Action Theory – best argument, dialogue, and consensus – in the praxis of Public Administration, does not imply abandoning the benefits of other rationalities, such as instrumental rationality and its bureaucratic model.

This article, although motivated by the search for consensus on the incremental or radical features of Habermas' Communicative Action Theory, does not aim at exhausting any other discussion on the subject. The main purpose is not to achieve an absolute and universal consensus, but to promote consensual and dialogical practice. More importantly, even though the guiding question of this essay uses the word consensus meaning convergence, it is fundamental to emphasize that, according to Habermas,

consensus, as a dialogical practice, should not be taken as a possibility of convergence, but as a possible argumentative solution. Given its intersubjective nature, consensus is based on argumentative debate between interlocutors and their respective arguments. Methodologically, we adopt the conception of essay by Meneghetti (2011), according to whom, authors and their readers need to acknowledge that reality can be comprehended in different ways. Hence, emboldened by the essence of the Habermasian communicative action, we dare to raise arguments worthy to be read and discussed.

The present essay is subdivided into eight sections. This first section highlights the guiding question of the article. The second presents different ways in which paradigm, a key concept in the present discussion, can be interpreted, as well as we make clear which one is adopted in this essay. On the third, fundamentals of the Communicative Action Theory are presented, contextualized in Public Administration. The fourth and fifth present possible interpretations about the representativeness of the Communicative Action Theory, with respect to what it represents in the midst of other theories and rationality types. On the sixth, it is attempted to demystify the possible dilemma with respect to what the Communicative Action Theory represents. The seventh section brings implications of the discussion to the praxis of Public Administration, and, on the last section, conclusions are brought up, based on strong evidence from literature raised throughout the article.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PARADIGM ADOPTED IN THE DISCUSSION

Given the fact that paradigm is a key concept in this discussion and given the fact that it can be interpreted in different ways, it is fundamental to make it clear which conceptualization is adopted in the present essay, especially when confronting the interparadigmatic character versus the paradigmatic shift of the Communicative Action Theory.

First, among possible conceptualizations, a paradigm can be interpreted as an analytical category within a given theory (Gomes, 2006; Gutierrez & Almeida, 2013). Even though this interpretation is mentioned in some sections of the present essay, especially when highlighting the fundamentals of the Communicative Action Theory, this is not the main conceptualization adopted in the present essay and in its guiding question. Following this first possible interpretation, Habermas, sometimes, associates the concept of paradigm with analytical categories within the Communicative Action Theory, and not with the theory as a whole. For instance, according to Gutierrez and Almeida (2013), the Communicative Action Theory perceives two different paradigms, namely, *the world of life* – communicative paradigm – and *the systems* – systemic paradigm. The world of life and the systems are analytical categories governed in different ways. For Habermas, the world of life is the transcendental place where speaker and listener meet, a healthy space that accepts the validity of arguments present in speech acts, aiming at consensus. On the other hand, the systems, characterized by conflicts, work anchored in the world of life, colonizing its wealth. The world of life and the systems would comprise two different paradigms or two different analytical categories within the Communicative Action Theory.

Second, when analyzing other social and theoretical movements, the concept of paradigm can be different. In the context of comparing theories, a paradigm can be interpreted as the understanding that social collectives possess about the world, that is, a theory as a whole (Gomes, 2006; Gutierrez & Almeida, 2013). This is the conceptualization adopted in the present article, especially in the guiding question of the present essay: does the transition proposed by Habermas from other rationality types towards communicative rationality constitute an interparadigmatic theory or a paradigmatic leap? In this sense, a paradigm comprises a unity, that is, a theoretical model to explain social relationships. Hence, the interpretation of paradigm adopted in the guiding question of the present essay is according to the concept proposed by Morin (2000). While the traditional concept of paradigm proposed by Thomas Kuhn (1998) refers to universally recognized scientific achievements which, for some time, provide problems and solution models for a scientific community, Morin (2000) expands this concept to any theory, doctrine, or ideology.

Considering this second possible interpretation of paradigm, the Communicative Action Theory is represented by the language philosophy paradigm, that is, the language paradigm can be interpreted as capable of representing the essence and the fundamentals of the theory as a whole. It is well known that Habermas uses ordinary language philosophy to argue for the primacy of the communicative use of language. This argument suggests that the use of language is fundamental in attempting to reach understanding, which comprises the basics of the Communicative Action Theory.

Having indicated the conceptualization of paradigm adopted in the present essay, let us discuss the fundamentals of the Communicative Action Theory, contextualizing it in Public Administration.

FUNDAMENTALS OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION THEORY CONTEXTUALIZED IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Habermas' ideas of communicative action start from the assumption that consensus is possible, even though there are diffuse interests between individuals (Habermas, 2002). According to Vizeu and Matitz (2013), in search for consensus, speakers can deliberately use three ontological dimensions in their speech acts: truth claim, a statement about an object or reality; legitimacy claim, a statement which is normatively compatible with socially accepted values; and sincerity claim, a statement that reflects the speaker's intention and interior state. Moreira et al. (2015) add that language underpins communicative reason, which means that speech acts are imbued with a claim of validity.

Language comprises a fundamental topic in the Communicative Action Theory, once it comprises the means by which several issues can be discussed and approached, in an attempt to reach understanding between subjects instead of control and domination. The linguistic dynamic constitutes the externalization of human intentions. This means that Habermas presupposes that there must be symmetry between the interlocutor and the speaker in the sense that they should not focus on their own interests and preferences, but on dialogue, best argument, and consensus (Dupeyrix, 2012). Habermas states that, in a communicative relationship, subjects are mediated by language and that, in this dialogical process, alterity must be maintained (Andrade, Alcântara, & Pereira, 2019). According to Vizeu (2005), language allows subjects to give meaning to the world in which they live, and this meaning allows them to guide their actions. Hence, the Communicative Action Theory is intimately attached to the language philosophy paradigm. When language is used for social integration and consensus, we are dealing with Habermas' communicative action (Ferreira, 2000).

Habermas' ideas, based on solidarity, best argument, and consensus are important to Public Administration, especially because they can be considered ways through which society can be guided towards democracy and social integration (Lima & Rivera, 2009). Communicative action is considered the founder of sociability (Santos, Amaro, Lisboa, Félix, & Castro, 2016) and capable of improving human civilization and evolution of societies (Gomes, 2006).

Sanderson (1999) gives us practical examples of attempts to apply communicative action in Public Administration, especially in government practice. He highlights the example of the United Kingdom government that, from 1997 on, has sought to renew its local democracy through more direct forms of participation, empowering citizens and making their views taken into account in decision-making. At the time, communicative rationality was seen as an alternative to solve problems of bureaucracy's instrumental rationality, which is based, essentially, on professional and managerial power.

Sanderson (1999) also presents the well-known *medical model*, in order to criticize instrumental rationality. According to this model, the mastery of professionals, managers, and specialists, which is valued by instrumental rationality and bureaucracy, is similar to a doctor who holds all the technical knowledge – equivalent to the technocrat – to cure the patient's illness – equivalent to the population. Citizens, therefore, would play the role of an elderly patient: compliant, tired, fragile, and dependent. According to the Communicative Action Theory, this scenario is not appropriate, once citizens' opinions are not taken into account in problem solving. Further detailing the metaphor, the doctor would be interested in knowing what the patient is feeling and not their opinion on how to best cure the disease.

Adopting the principles of Communicative Action Theory in Public Administration is a challengeable task. Habermas acknowledges that communicative action, when attempted to be put into practice by modern organizations, whether in the public or private sector, is susceptible to manipulation of meaning, which can take place due to the influence of modern rationalities of market and bureaucracy (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Vizeu & Matitz, 2013).

One of the key expressions to understand how Habermas' Communicative Action Theory can be put into practice in Public Administration is *social negotiation*. It refers to a participatory approach that seeks to identify and take into account the views of all relevant stakeholder groups. However, different stakeholders will have different points of view on an issue and will need, through dialogue, to negotiate differences and build shared meanings (Sanderson, 1999).

Another key expression to understand how Communicative Action Theory can be put into practice in Public Administration is *collaborative government*, which, according to Kelly (2004), is a government that conceives forms of participation,

disseminates information, shares responsibilities, and even serves as a defender of marginalized citizens. This concept is closely related to what is known as discretionary power of public administrators, contrary to being merely law abiding. The author also raises an important criticism to the tricks used in participation practice. Once administrators use one type of rationality, and citizens – administered ones – another, the former gets frustrated with the latter and begins to, systematically, exclude them from public discussion. This is done, for instance, through public hearings held in places and at times that hinder citizen's participation.

For Habermas (2002, 1987), some typologies of problems, such as nuclear threat, prejudice against minorities, and misery in the third world are not merely technical problems and cannot be solved only with bureaucratic administrative power based on instrumental rationality. Decisions must be taken from a reflection process where free discussion of themes and solutions are assured, guaranteeing effectiveness and responsibility of participants for the decisions taken. Communicative rationality emphasizes that our greatest authority must be a good argument, and our fellows – *the others* – are our main source of guidance (Habermas, 2002, 1991).

Interpretive pluralism affects the worldview and self-understanding. In this sense, only as participants in a comprehensive, consensus-oriented dialogue that we are called to exercise the cognitive virtue of empathy in relation to our reciprocal differences in the perception of the same situation (Habermas, 2007). The exchange of arguments, in order to solve practical-moral issues, must include impartiality; expectation that the participants will go beyond their preferences, including all those affected by a decision; equality, freedom, and ease of interaction, with the absence of internal and external forms of coercion; non-restriction of topics; and results review (Mendonça, 2016; A. P. Nunes, & C. R. R. Nunes, 2005).

Having briefly discussed the fundamentals of communicative rationality contextualized in Public Administration, we will deeper look at the guiding question of this essay, by raising direct and indirect thoughts of relevant authors about the meaning of the communicative action proposed by Habermas and the representativeness of the Communicative Action Theory. Does Habermas propose only an interparadigmatic theory or a paradigmatic leap? What does it represent in fact?

Some authors have stood out in the discussions about the Communicative Action Theory, such as Freitag (2004), who considers Habermas' proposal to be a radical paradigm shift from subjectivity into intersubjectivity, from monological reason to dialogic reason – which is metaphorically paraphrased in the present essay as a *paradigmatic leap*. We also come across other authors with different opinions, such as Siebeneichler, Vasconcellos-Silva and Rivera (2007), who understand that Habermas' theory does not comprise a paradigmatic shift. According to the referred authors, Habermas' communicative rationality can only be constructed on a discursive coherence between distinct theories, a point of view that acknowledges the prevailing interparadigmatic character of his proposal.

This is the possible theoretical dilemma that guides the present essay: does Habermas' communicative rationality represent a paradigmatic leap – radical adjustment – or is it almost a *catch-all* that adjusts some ideas of other rationality types and paradigms – incremental adjustment? We believe that not reaching consensus on this matter may jeopardize the attempts to put the principles of this theory into practice in Public Administration. Let us discuss these two main possible interpretations.

FIRST POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION THEORY: A PARADIGMATIC LEAP

Gutierrez and Almeida (2013) state that Habermas proposes a new paradigm: a libertarian paradigm, based on understanding and social integration. Following the same reasoning, Rossetti (2010, p. 4) understands Habermas' proposal of communicative rationality as a paradigm shift. "This paradigm shift brings new foundations of reason, human being, and society, leaves aside the paradigm of conscience and proposes that rationality does not depend, directly, on the subject, but on intersubjectivity".

Freitag (2004) considers that the conceptualization itself of communicative rationality already presupposes a radical paradigm shift, given the fact that reason is implemented through a dialogical process. Silva (2011) corroborates this idea of a paradigmatic leap by stating that Habermas, by performing the substitution of the paradigm of consciousness for the language paradigm, emphasizes that language must be seen as an expression of understanding in a normative and

evaluative context. According to Gutierrez and Almeida (2013), Habermas places the Communicative Action Theory at a level above different schools in the field of social sciences, such as Marxism, Organicism, and Comprehensive Sociology, which strengthens the idea of a paradigmatic leap.

Moreira et al. (2015) also agree that Habermas' proposal can be considered a paradigmatic leap. They highlight the necessary transition from one type of reason to another. According to them, this "leap" is implicit in the basic understanding of the Communicative Action Theory: "the transition from instrumental reason to communicative reason occurs in the social space in which two worlds agglutinate: the systemic world and the world of life" (Moreira et al., 2015, p. 128). They strengthen this argument by stating that, according to Habermas, even though two forms of reason exist – instrumental and communicative –, they are separate and non-overlapping, and communicative reason needs to prevail.

Gomes (2006) highlights that, for Habermas, the emancipation of society still is an unfinished project that needs to be rebuilt under a new paradigm, according to which emancipation is inherent to communication. This means that it is necessary to develop educational projects that, based on consensus, strengthens the communicative competence of learners, in order to make them competent to face challenges of modern times. Habermas makes it explicit the proposal of a paradigmatic leap by indicating the reconstruction of society, aiming to make it more just and freer. He understands that the meaning of emancipation, as originally formulated by Frankfurtian theorists, such as Marx, Adorno, and Horkheimer, needs to be reformulated, based on a new paradigm: the explicative paradigm. By proposing a new concept of rationality, Habermas makes it clear that the Communicative Action Theory is, indeed, a paradigmatic leap, that is, a radical adjustment to other rationality types.

We can also infer that Habermas proposes a paradigmatic shift when he states that rationality has less to do with knowledge, or with the acquisition of knowledge, and more with the way subjects make use of knowledge through language (Habermas, 1999). This proposition indicates the existence of two analytical categories: the paradigm of the subject, which corresponds to the cognitive-instrumental rationality model, and the paradigm of intersubjectivity, that corresponds to the communicative rationality model.

For Habermas (1984, p. 285), "communicative action occurs whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated, not through egocentric calculations of success, but through acts to reach understanding". In communicative action, there is an orientation not towards individual success, but it is pursued in a joint, interactive, and dialogically negotiated way. This concept, in spite of exposing a significant rupture from individualism to collectivism, which reinforces the idea of a radical adjustment – paradigmatic leap –, was constructed by Habermas, based on fundamentals from the *Symbolic Interactionism* by Mead, the concept of *Language Games* by Wittgenstein, *Speech Acts Theory* by Austin, and *Hermeneutics* by Gadamer (Pinto, 1995). This highlights the interparadigmatic character of the Habermasian proposition, which constitutes an incremental adjustment of other theoretical lines and comprises a second possible interpretation of what the Communicative Action Theory, in fact, represents. Let us discuss it hereafter.

SECOND POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION THEORY: AN INTERPARADIGMATIC PROPOSAL

Gutierrez and Almeida (2013) state that Habermas, on the Communicative Action Theory, adopts, more or less directly, the idea of linguistic communication present in Mead, the social action as developed by Weber, the role of solidarity as a fundamental element for social integration as in Durkheim, and the concept of systems by Parsons with respect to defining Economy and Public Administration. According to them, Habermas himself state that the Communicative Action Theory does not comprise a paradigm in a normative or prescriptive way.

Pinto (1995) states that Habermas constructs his Communicative Action Theory in a permanent dialogue with authors from a wide range of theoretical lines, such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mead, Lukacs, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Parsons. This way, Habermas incorporates a series of themes and contributions that have been developed by Functionalism, Phenomenology, Marxism, and Critical Theory of Frankfurt School, which can all be considered as incremental features of his theory.

Another author who corroborates the incremental trait of Habermas' Communicative Action Theory is Barreto (1993). In analyzing various rationality types, he concludes that Habermas' conceptions on communicative rationality and Ramos' conceptions (1989) on substantive rationality are not contradictory, but complementary, that is, the proposals by Habermas and by the Brazilian sociologist are not exclusive, but incremental, once both highlight the subjects and their ideas. The complementarity between the two rationality types in question is further evidenced by the fact that both consider rational debate as an essential requirement for the harmonization of associated human life.

Bachur (2017) supports this interpretation by arguing that consensus must be sought through dialogue, and the discourse on a given issue may end up being reopened later and continue with infinite replicas. According to him, dialogue demands consultation of others by testing each argument, on whether or not they are desirable for everyone. The desired situation would be that of rational discourse: based on consensus and dialogical process. Gutierrez and Almeida (2013) state that Habermas commits himself to a science historically constructed by the appropriation of classic authors and by the acceptance of ideas from the social environment that a theorist studies. In this sense, radical shifts to the past would not be welcome with respect to theory construction.

According to Milovic (2002, p. 196), "Habermas follows Searle's Theory of Speech Acts. The act of speech is the first unit of communication, that is, all communication presupposes acts of speech". This absorption is evident in Habermas' own words: "With his speech act, the speaker seeks to achieve his goal of achieving communication with the listener about something" (Habermas, 2002, p. 193). This is one more evidence from Habermas' proposal that indicate an incremental character, once it follows ideas of an existing theoretical line.

For Freitag (2004), the process of reification of societal components, called by Habermas *colonization of the world of life*, was what Weber called *the loss of men's freedom*, what Lukacs called *alienation*, and what Marcuse called *unidimensionalization*. Freitag (2004) implicitly accentuates the interparadigmatic character of the Communicative Action Theory by exposing its similarities with other authors' theories.

Despite Habermas' criticisms of money and power as *colonizers of the world of life*, one of his proposals for communicative rationality is the maintenance of the economic and administrative systems guided by the mechanisms of the market and bureaucratic administration, all of them submitted to external control (Athayde, Paula, & Gomes, 2019; Pinto, 1995). This reflection leads us to reinforce the idea of the interparadigmatic feature of the Habermasian theory. Habermas does not propose the extinction of bureaucracy and the market but emphasizes the importance of citizens' participation and control over governmental decisions through, for instance, nongovernmental organizations, popular councils, discussion forums, and deliberation mechanisms that stimulate understanding and not, merely, the conquest of power.

In the words of Pinto (1995), Habermas does not propose the destruction of the state-bureaucratic apparatus, or of the market. What he suggests is "a procedural democracy, a 'sovereignty in procedure' in which the mechanisms of market action and administrative power will be controlled within the framework of popular councils" (Pinto, 1995, pp. 93-94). This constitutes another argument in favor of the incremental trait of communicative rationality. Habermas proposes an incremental adjustment both to instrumental rationality and to substantive rationality.

The complementarity between communicative and substantive rationalities is evidenced by Serva (1997). For him, substantive rationality seeks to promote proper regulation of associated human life. For the same purpose, Habermas states that rational orientation of communicative action lies in the attainment of understanding among men. Here, there is another point of non-radical distinction from the Habermasian proposition when compared to other rationality types.

Even making the proper distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality, Cavalcante (2001) understands that the latter includes the former. He states that instrumental reason is reduced to technical knowledge, and that communicative reason takes into account a plurality of knowledge types, including the technical one. He is one more author who believes that the Habermasian proposal of communicative rationality has an incremental feature, once it does not claim the total abandonment of technical knowledge.

DEMYSTIFYING THE POSSIBLE DILEMMA

We have seen that some theorists state that the Communicative Action Theory represents a paradigmatic leap – radical adjustment to other rationality types –, while others state that it represents an interparadigmatic proposal – incremental adjustment to other rationality types. Additionally, we bring up a crucial observation: the literature on this subject not only presents two possible interpretations separately, as explained previously in two separate groups with opposite ideas. It is also possible to infer, from a same theorist, both interpretations simultaneously.

Serva (1997) states that, from the 1980s on, Habermas turned sharply against Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment and proclaimed the need for a radical paradigm shift in the approach to rationality, viewing the emancipation of man in the face of constraints imposed by bureaucratic society, constraints that affect even the academia (Teixeira, Vinhas, Perret, & Junqueira, 2009).

Although Serva (1997) makes explicit that Habermas' theory constitutes a paradigmatic leap, he *also* emphasizes that communicative and instrumental rationalities present a common point, namely the concern for individual and collective goals. The difference lies in *how* these goals are pursued, whether by power imposition or in a consensual way. This analysis shows us that, even though the referred author clarifies the primordial radical differences between two rationality types, he also emphasizes that there are common points between them, which reveals the incremental character of communicative rationality. The same author, when approaching Habermas' communicative action and other rationality types, ends up evidencing features of both incremental and radical changes.

Despite reinforcing that Habermas does not claim the Communicative Action Theory to be a paradigm in a normative and prescriptive sense, and despite highlighting common aspects between communicative action and other rationality types, Gutierrez and Almeida (2013) conclude that this theory comprises a paradigm, based on arguments and consensus, that is, they acknowledge both interpretations.

In order to further intensify the theoretical discussion, what about we focus on evidence brought up by the author himself of Communicative Action? What does he say about it more directly? The idea of radical adjustment – metaphorically paraphrased as *paradigmatic leap* in the present essay – is reinforced by Habermas (1984, p. 386) himself:

I intend to argue that a *shift* from paradigm to that of communication theory will make possible a return to the task that was interrupted with the critique of instrumental reason. This change presupposes the *abandonment* of relations 'subject-object' to relations 'subject-other subject', that is, the components of society cannot be seen as simple things (reification), but they must have their opinion taken into account in the search for mutual understanding.

In addition, Habermas affirms that a paradigm only loses its force when denied by another of definite form. For him, the work of deconstruction "can only have definable consequences when the paradigm of self-consciousness, of self-reference of a subject who knows and acts alone, is *replaced* by another, by the paradigm of intercomprehension" (Habermas, 1990, p. 288). We can see that Habermas used words, such as *shift*, *abandonment*, and *replaced*, which reinforce the interpretation that his proposal represents a paradigmatic leap. Habermas (1990) reaffirmed his proposal for radical adjustment by saying that "the paradigm of object knowledge must be *replaced* by the paradigm of mutual understanding between subjects capable of speaking and acting" (Habermas, 1990, p. 276).

Even though Habermas strongly highlights the idea of paradigm replacement, he ends up revealing incremental features of the Communicative Action Theory, as if he was looking for a *middle ground*. Habermas (1997) criticizes the political reduction to an individualistic and competitive logic – questioning the instrumental rationality –, but also questions the exacerbated and even utopian idea of a robust and integrated collective will of people. This clearly shows us that he seeks, therefore, to find a balance between these polar positions, articulating both. By presenting the tripartite theory of rationality that includes the epistemological, teleological, and communicative roots, Habermas (2002) evidences that communicative rationality is not a radical adjustment from the other two rationality types, but an additional component, which reinforces the idea of incremental adjustment:

Communicative rationality remains *at the same level* as epistemological and teleological rationality, not constituting the dominant structure of rationality, but rather one of the three nuclear structures that are, however, *interconnected* among themselves by the discursive rationality that results from communicative rationality (Habermas, 2002, p. 185).

In the citation above, Habermas used words, such as *at the same level* and *interconnected*, which reinforces the interpretation that his proposal also represents an incremental adjustment to other theories and rationality types. Gutierrez and Almeida (2013) state that, in his first book on the Communicative Action Theory, Habermas (1988) cited more than 550 authors. This is an evident indication of the interparadigmatic character of his theory. Habermas states that he treats Weber, Mead, Durkheim, and Parsons as theorists that still have something to tell us. He insists that the Communicative Action Theory should not be treated as a paradigm with a normative or prescriptive character.

Some authors have been adept at the understanding that communicative action is the proposal of a radical adjustment by its own concept, others have emphasized the incremental character of this theory, and others, such as Habermas himself, simultaneously, reinforced both. It is possible to note, by the many intertwined points of view presented so far – which, obviously, do not exhaust the discussions already made in the academia about communicative action – that the Habermasian theory in question proposes an incremental adjustment to other theories and rationality types and that, *at the same time*, represents, in fact, a radical leap. This was noticeable even when the author of the theory – Habermas – was focused, which ended up reinforcing our conclusion.

By raising and intertwining the ideas of relevant authors about Habermas' Communicative Action Theory, we claim that the answer is *yes* to both hypotheses confronted as the guiding question of the present essay, which indicates that they should not be taken as mutually excluding whatsoever. The Habermasian proposal presents several incremental characteristics compared to other theories and rationality types, but also constitutes a paradigmatic leap, that is, an original and consistent theory that surpasses many others it dialogues with, proposing a new way of interpreting social relations.

Habermas (1987) supports the thesis that it is possible to gradually institute a counter-discourse capable of giving new directions to reason and to generate a new balance between the system and the world of life. We believe that *new balance* is a fundamental expression to understand what the Communicative Action Theory really represents. As stated by Habermas himself, it is necessary to generate *a new balance between the system and the world of life*. The word *new* indicates a radical shift, that is, a paradigmatic leap, and the word *balance* presupposes an interparadigmatic character, that is, an equilibrium between the system, marked by instrumental rationality, and the world of life, marked by communicative action.

Habermas (2004), when discussing the meaning of rationality, states that rational is also the proof of reality (Freud), learning through mistakes (Popper), and choosing means oriented to ends (Weber). Hence, it can be inferred that, by dialoguing with different theories and rationality types, Habermas acknowledges the interparadigmatic character of communicative rationality. However, Habermas (2004) also states that communicative rationality cannot be equaled to a general rationality, which suggests a paradigmatic shift from other rationality types. Habermas (2004) mentions a transition from consciousness philosophy to language philosophy, the latter connected to the Communicative Action Theory, which points to a paradigmatic shift. It is denoted, then, that, according to Habermas, his proposal of communicative action presents an interparadigmatic character, but also comprises a paradigmatic leap given its originality.

Based on strong literature evidence, we claim that the consensus about the representativeness of the Communicative Action Theory is not obtained by the adoption of only one side and should not be taken as one of the criticisms received by theory, as if it did not possess internal coherence, diminishing its importance to Public Administration and social participation. Hence, we propose that the Communicative Action Theory comprises a paradigmatic leap *with* interparadigmatic characteristics. There is not a dilemma nor a paradox in acknowledging that.

The book "The ethics of discussion and the question of truth" (Habermas, 2007) presents Habermas' answers to many questions raised by philosophers. One of them, the philosopher Alain Renaut, asks Habermas about the paradigm issue. Renaut questions Habermas' assumption that the communicative action comprises a new paradigm. Renaut questions whether or not it is really possible for us to abandon Kant's paradigm of subjectivity. Renaut's main argument is that even in a dialogical practice, an argument must be ultimately approved by the subject. According to him, when an interlocutor agrees with the speaker's argument, this agreement has more to do with the interlocutor himself than with his relationship with the speaker. Renaut proposes, then, that the subjectivity paradigm and the intersubjectivity paradigm are not incompatible.

In response to Renaut's questioning, Habermas acknowledges that integrating both paradigms in one single conceptual structure is not easy, however, agrees with Renaut on the complementarity between subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Hence, even though Habermas invites us to leave the subjectivity paradigm towards the intersubjectivity paradigm, it can be inferred

that he does not mean complete abandonment. That is exactly our main argument throughout this essay: The Communicative Action Theory comprises a new paradigm, but it does not mean complete abandonment of other paradigms. This means that the Communicative Action Theory is a paradigmatic leap with an interparadigmatic character.

When we state that Habermas' Communicative Action Theory comprises a paradigmatic leap, we do not treat it as a normative and prescriptive paradigm, but rather highlight its originality and great contributions to many knowledge fields, that is, it meets the necessary conditions to be called a theory and a paradigm. For Habermas himself (1988), the paradigms in nature sciences succeed each other, with the following replacing the previous one, unlike social sciences where they live together under debate for a long time.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? IMPLICATIONS TO PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Habermas (1999) insists on the concept of communicative rationality as a systematic connection of universal pretensions of validity that must be properly developed through argumentation. This means that the criterion for measuring rationality is established by the capacity and willingness of subjects to expose themselves to criticism and to participate in argumentation. Therefore, we argue that the correct understanding about the representativeness of the Communicative Action Theory might influence Public Administration with respect to the capacity and willingness of public administrators to create space for dialogue with administrated ones – population –, while elaborating public policies and making decisions.

First, we defend that, in case public organizations, cities, states, or countries are governed by administrators who do not accurately understand that communicative action comprises a new paradigm, that is, a new way of interpreting social relations, social participation will tend to be viewed only as a good advice. This would hinder social participation in public decision making. This scenario would be contradictory to Habermas' ideas, once he states that, according to the new paradigm of communicative action, what prevails is no longer the propositional truth, but the cooperative search for truth, aiming at intersubjective convictions based on best arguments (Habermas, 1999).

On the other hand, we defend that, when public administrators comprehend communicative rationality as a radical shift to instrumental rationality, possessing an emancipatory capacity to make society more just and less alienated, this paradigm will tend to be put into practice more frequently and more effectively, through public policy management councils – within the areas of social assistance, health, and education – and participatory budgeting, for instance. This effective application of communicative action into Public Administration would be more likely, given the fact that administrators, by acknowledging a new paradigm, would frequently question their behaviors in public management, as well as would accept more easily radical changes in decision-making.

By understanding that the Communicative Action Theory represents a paradigmatic shift towards intersubjectivity, public administrators would be more likely to include and empower civil society in public decision making, which impacts the extent to which affected communities can become active protagonists in solving societal problems. Public administrators cannot create participation themselves, nonetheless, they can enable and encourage participation, especially from vulnerable and excluded groups in post-modern society.

Second, we claim that not acknowledging the interparadigmatic characters of the Communicative Action Theory leads to utopian forms of management, which jeopardizes the process of applying communicative rationality into the praxis of Public Administration. For instance, in case public administrators assume that the adoption of communicative action implies the abandonment of both instrumental rationality and the bureaucracy model that it underpins, their government conceptions would tend to anarchy and would be utopian. In this case, the theoretical discourse and the praxis discourse would be much far from each other. This scenario would be contradictory to Habermas' ideas, once he states that there are two distinct environments in which the process of argumentation takes place: the theoretical discourse, which is related to pretensions of truth, and the practical discourse, that concerns the validity of norms, ensuring, in both environments, the possibility of forming rationally based consensus (Habermas, 1999).

Hence, our main argument, when attempting to raise implications of this discussion in Public Administration, is that the understanding about the representativeness of the Communicative Action Theory – whether a paradigmatic leap or an interparadigmatic proposal –, may influence the degree to which communicative action can be applied into the praxis of

Public Administration, that is, how hard or how easy it can be put into practice. A deeper understanding of the position of the Communicative Action Theory when compared to other theories and rationality types is able to question, to a greater extent, hegemonic practices and present new ways, means, and possibilities to discuss, construct, and reconstruct management processes and organizational processes.

Furthermore, when public administrators acknowledge that the Communicative Action Theory is both a paradigmatic leap and an interparadigmatic proposal, they are able to better understand not only the extent to which it is put into practice, but more importantly: how correctly it is put into practice. A superficial understanding about the features of communicative action may lead a public administrator, for instance, to include population in certain public decisions, however not based on best arguments. In this hypothetical case, he would not be putting communicative action into practice accordingly.

At this point, it is fundamental to make it clear that Habermas does not propose a political model capable of solving problems caused by distortions in democracy through the language paradigm. On the contrary, Habermas emphasizes that, in a social context where democratic values prevail, if a communicative interaction is reached without the deliberate distortion of speeches, we would find the possibility of an emancipated social context. This means that, by both considering the communicative action as a new paradigm (paradigmatic leap) and acknowledging its interconnections with other theories and rationality types (interparadigmatic proposal), the Communicative Action Theory is more likely to be put into practice in Public Administration, as well as emancipation and cooperative search for truth based on best arguments are more likely to be achieved.

According to the speech act theory, inspired in Austin, the speaker not only wants the interlocutor to receive an information, but also to agree with him, that is, to reach the same conception. In a speech act, speakers raise pretensions of validity which can be questioned and lead their interlocutors to present a rationally motivated response (Habermas, 2004). This suggests that attempts to put the Communicative Action Theory into practice in Public Administration demand that public administrators justify their decisions with pretensions of validity, but also that administered ones (population) respond with their pretensions of validity. For that to happen, State and citizens must profoundly understand the assumptions and representativeness of communicative action so that the world of life can be intersubjectively shared. Previous studies on this subject contextualized in Public Administration have debated the necessity of the government to open space for citizens' participation, but we need to reflect that when this space is opened, citizens must know how to properly occupy it. What citizens know, do, and say can only be considered rational if they know, at least implicitly, why their opinions are true, why their actions are correct, and why their linguistic expressions are valid. Only through argumentation can pretensions of validity raised by speech acts be examined based on reasons (Habermas, 2004).

Hence, discussing the representativeness and position of the Communicative Action Theory in the midst of other theories and rationality types naturally implies discussing its fundamentals and its likelihood of being put into practice in Public Administration. According to Habermas (2002b, p. 224), "we certainly cannot know a rule without knowing how to apply it to some cases".

CONCLUSION

The robust discussion presented allowed us to understand that the fact that we consider the Communicative Action Theory as possessing an interparadigmatic character does not mean that this theory consists of a mere summary of several other theoretical lines, but a theory that surpasses many others it dialogues with. It was our purpose to foster the validity of our arguments. The strength of an argument, in a given context, is measured by the pertinence of the reasons and manifested, among other ways, "[...] by the ability to convince the participants of the discussion, that is, to motivate the listener to accept the claim of validity in discussion" (Habermas, 1987, p. 18).

Habermas brought a substantial contribution to contemporary society and Public Administration, proposing a rationality based on reason open to dialogue and communicated in a consensual way. However, in the dialogical process, individuals' wills differentiate from the will obtained by consensus and representing the group in the end, to a greater or lesser extent.

At this point, we leave, here, the following reflection, which can be approached theoretically and empirically in future studies: what degree of inequality between the individual's will and consensual results is acceptable, once complete equality is unlikely?

Communicative action was discussed in this paper in a macro-level approach – theory. This naturally leaves the opportunity for future studies to analyze it from a micro-level perspective – methodologies, as Mucci and Mafra (2016), for instance, successfully did by evaluating the methodological practices of *action research* and *dialogical mediation*. Moreover, even though the focus of this essay has fallen onto Public Administration, we believe that this theory has the potential to be deeper explored in private organizations, given its social nature, once they are comprised of relations of both public sphere and private sphere (Couto & Carrieri, 2017; Teixeira et al., 2009).

Even though some criticisms exist regarding the Communicative Action Theory, they do not deny its importance to Public Administration, especially when it comes to municipal councils and participation in public management, something that has been gaining more and more relevance in Brazil (Couto & Carrieri, 2017; Martins, 2015), through the creation of Managers Councils of Public Policies, for instance.

Nevertheless, public administrators need to consider some significant challenges that come along with when communicative action is attempted to be put into practice, especially because the success of communicative action demands deep knowledge on the field, rules, and other elements that make up the *world of life* (Couto & Carrieri, 2017). Moreover, public administrators need to be familiar with some of the existent criticisms on Habermas' ideas of communicative action, which can offer deep reflections about the praxis of this theory.

At last, immersed in the essence of the Communicative Action Theory, it was our purpose not to achieve an absolute and universal consensus, but the promotion of consensual and dialogical practice. Therefore, other arguments through future studies on this matter are welcome to intensify our search for consensus on the representativeness of the Communicative Action Theory.

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