
BOUNDED ENTITIES, CONSTRUCTIVIST REVISIONS, AND RADICAL RE-CONSTRUCTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks clearly to distinguish constructivism and constructionism and to give the reader a more extended and detailed knowledge of the latter. It does so by outlining three different discourses: entitative, constructivism and critical relational constructionism (CRC). In the first, relations are storied as 'going on' between independently existing entities in Subject-Object (S-O) relation. The second involves a shift from naïve to (some sort of) critical realism and so blurs some S-O constructions. The third discourse (CRC) is the least well known. It is the only one that reflexively treats its own themes and assumptions and those of 'science' as constructions that could be otherwise – hence the term "critical". CRC is presented as a different language game. Instead of centring relatively stable entities, minds and 'real' reality, CRC centres ongoing relational processes as they construct and re-construct multiple Self - Other relations - as relational realities.

KEY-WORDS: *critical relational constructionism, constructivism*

INTRODUCTION

This article is written from a particular standpoint – that of “critical relational constructionism” (CRC). Three “discourses” are overviewed in terms of their interrelated “lines of distinction” (Deetz, 1996). I shall call these discourses (i) entitative (ii) constructivism, and (iii) critical relational constructionism. In each case I shall focus on how relations and/or relating is understood – given the wider network of distinctions. The third discourse, critical relational constructionism (CRC), is perhaps least well known and will receive the most detailed exploration. It is argued that CRC presents a radically different discourse of relations, one that collapses the distinction between contexts of discovery and justification, one that is self critical, and one that opens up new possibilities for relational theory and practice.

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ENTITATIVE THINKING

Objects with characteristics

The discourse with which I am concerned here includes themes that have been variously referred to as “objectivism” (Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon, 1992) and “the received view of science” (Woolgar, 1996). Others, speaking of competing “paradigms” in qualitative research, have referred to some of these themes as “positivist” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) – a confusing simplification for those familiar with the philosophy of inquiry.

Entitative thinking is reflected in narratives that, for example, distinguish between individuals and groups and more ‘macro’ units such as organizations and society in ways that are overly suggestive of concrete, separately existing objects with their own defining characteristics (Hosking and Morley, 1991). For example management and organisation studies for a long time were dominated by naïve reifications of ‘the’ organization as the largely tacit and separate context for individual action, perceptions and cognitions, and for groups and inter-group relations. Naïve reifications treat some-one or some-thing as unified, bounded, and separate – as an entity requiring its own explanatory theory. Speaking from within psychology, commentators reflected on what they saw as “individualistic” and “culturalist fallacies” (Allport, 1963). Other communities such as sociology and anthropology differentiated individual action versus social structure, whilst the philosophy of social science distinguished “individualism” and “holism” (Hollis, 1994).

Language is given a very particular role in this kind of thinking. Speaking of “objectivism”, Hermans and his colleagues observed:

“language is needed to express concepts mapped onto objects, properties and relations in a literal, unequivocal, context-independent fashion”

(Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992).

So the scientist, as a language user capable of correct reasoning (see below) is able to describe what she or he discovers about an already existing and independent reality. In other words, it is assumed that language can provide a “naïve reflection” of the world. In this discourse, ontology and epistemology are separate but related. In this discourse, the “context of discovery” (the province of social scientists) and the “context of justification” (the province of philosophers) are kept separate (see Gergen, 1994; Hosking and Morley, 2004) such that what science says about its Self can be held apart from what scientists say about Other.

This brings us to the related issue of methodology - often characterised as “empiricism”. Fiedler’s work on leadership effectiveness (see Fiedler, 1967) provides a helpful illustration. Fiedler presented his research and theorising in a manner suggestive of a classical, empiricist methodology. For example, it was through *observations* of leaders, groups and their performance outcomes, and subsequent application of “the traditional empiricist principle” of *induction* (Hollis,

1994 p.45) that he arrived at his contingency *hypothesis*. He then conducted a series of empirical validation studies designed to *test* his hypothesis – following the hypothetico-deductive process (see e.g., Kerlinger, 1964; Gergen, 1994). Truth was operationalised in terms of a probability coefficient (arrived at through sample statistics) applied to numbers produced from empirical measures (claimed to be reliable and valid). Statistically significant results were presented as evidence that the null hypothesis (of no significant difference) could be safely rejected. Fiedler claimed that many empirical studies had tested and validated his hypothesis such that the basis had been provided for the prediction and control of leadership effectiveness.

Relations between entities

When things are represented as unified, bounded, and separate then *relations* are understood as being between independently existing entities. This has been referred to as a "subject-object" construction of relations (see e.g., Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Fine, 1994; Harding, 1986; Hollis, 1994; Jaynes, 1976; Reeves Sanday, 1988). So, for example, writings often discourse people as behaving *in* or *on* groups and organisations or discourse 'the organisation' as acting on, and influencing, individual cognitions, satisfactions, and actions. The discourse of Subject – Object (S-O) relations provides the backdrop against which an alternative discourse of relations will be identified when we come to explore Critical Relational Constructionism. For this reason, it is worth giving it some more detailed attention.

First, and by definition, S-O discourses construct an *active-passive binary* between an active and responsible agent (Subject) and an acted upon Other – as a passive object. For example, the Received View of Science (RVS) positions the scientist as the knowing subject (S) acting in relation to the knowable objects (O) of his research. The scientist, mobilising the discourses of his scientific community, knows what he wants to find out (discover) and knows how to do it in ways that produce objective knowledge about Other. Equally, many theories - claimed as scientific or not - do a similar job. For example, Fiedler theorised the leader as active and "the leadership situation" as passive, available to be known and acted upon by the leader.

Second, actions, relationships, and outcomes are explained through reference to the *assumed characteristics of entities*. In an entitative discourse these characteristics include the physicalist attributes of material objects, the mentalistic characteristics of the mind, and a singular Self. So we find the RVS positioning the scientist as a cognising agent (Woolgar, 1996) who can know about Self and Other, and who can generate explanations in relation to some story of causes. Similarly, theories in Organisation Studies offer some sort of causal narrative about the characteristics of S and O and about the relations between these characteristics. So, for example, contingency theories of organisation and of leadership discoursed characteristics of entities (organisations, leaders, leadership contexts) including

goals, structures, cognitive capacities and leadership style and hypothesised causal relations between these characteristics and contingent variables such as effectiveness.

Third, the S-O construction positions the Subject as active in building his *individual knowledge*. This is the Cartesian discourse of *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). Knowledge is discoursed as an individual possession, a property of the rationalist mind; it is dis-embodied and divorced from history and culture, knowledge is objective or subjective, about the world ‘as it really is’ (accurate, true) or distorted and inaccurate. So, in the RVS the scientist (S) is considered to build his individual knowledge using ‘scientific methods’ to produce objective knowledge of what is real - including other people’s subjective knowledge claims. These “lines of distinction” are found in ‘more micro’ theories where, for example, organisational leaders are storied as people who can and must build their knowledge about Other in order to act rationally.

Fourth, the knowing Subject is assumed to exercise his knowing mind in order to *influence, form, or structure* Other as Object. So, for example, the meta-theory of the RVS positions the scientist as one who may who may use his knowledge rationally to design and manipulate the inquiry process (“methodology”), testing theory, producing knowledge that provides the basis for prediction and *control* of nature, organisation design, leadership effectiveness and so on. Arguments and data (validated knowledge claims) should convince the rational actor of the truth of things. Similarly, Fiedler’s leader-Subject has to influence Other In this case, the leader must achieve “power over” (Gergen, 1995; Hosking, 1995) the leadership situation and leadership effectiveness - either by selection (moving from one situation to another) or by re-forming (e.g., restructuring the group’s task).

Fifth, the S-O construction *turns relations into instrumentalities for S*. Other is an instrument for the Subject in the pursuit of supposedly rational and value-free purposes. So, the RVS produces value-free knowledge about the world ‘in its so being’ whilst Fiedler’s theory positions the group as the leader’s instrument for achieving “leadership effectiveness”.

In sum, entitative thinking assumes (and sometimes prescribes) S-O relations. These may be constructed in relations between the scientist and his research object and in scientific or lay theories about relations between people and the world. As we shall see, this Subject-Object construction of relations is *revised* in the second discourse we shall explore (Constructivism and individual knowledge), and *radically reconstructed* in the third and last discourse of “critical relational constructionism”.

Blurred images: post entitative thinking?

Post positivism

The “intelligibility nucleus” of the RVS embraces assumptions that have received much critical comment over the years. Criticisms include: the naïve and simplistic assumption that linguistic categories represent “innocent descriptions of segments of the natural world” (Danziger, 1997) – suggesting the need to re-conceptualise the role of language; the assumption of causal relations i.e., that the relations between the independent variables caused the state of the dependent variable – inviting other ways of conceptualising relations; the assumption of induction as a way to develop theory; the logic of verification; the assumed independence of theory and data; the assumed independence of the observing subject from the observed object and so on (see e.g., Gergen, 1994).

Some of these criticisms have been to some extent addressed in the “post positivist”, meta-theoretical shift from the naïve realism of entitative thinking to a discourse of critical realism (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The latter largely involves shifts in *epistemology* – for example, accepting that we cannot know that we know the world as it really is, accepting a changed view of truth, and shifting to talk of falsifying hypotheses rather than the language of ‘brute facts’ and proof. It is in this sense that all modern (and some would say ‘modernist’) western psychology *has long viewed its knowledge as constructed* rather than straightforwardly representative (Hosking and Morley, 2004).

But the above shifts are accompanied by a continuing “healthy respect for the ‘world as it is’” (Gergen, 1994 p.67). The distinction between, and centring of, *individual objective and subjective knowledge* continues even though it is recognised that objectivity is constrained. So too, does the *ontological construction* of separate existences (this entity, independent of that entity). Equally, when it comes to the everyday practice of social science inquiry, the meta-theoretical shift to critical realism need not have major implications - *particularly when the meta-theory keeps separate the contexts of justification and discovery*. To do “critical realist” science, the scientist must relate to Other in ways that attempt to minimise contamination of the (outsider) knowledge he is able to build about Other. The scientist must construct, as best he can, a methodology that will let him produce objective knowledge - knowledge that can be accepted¹ as justified true belief.

Constructivisms

In western psychology, constructivist themes are found in (early 20th century) shifts (a) from talk of sensation to talk of *perception*, and (b) from talk of sense taking to that of sense *making*. These shifts echoed themes in earlier philosophical work such as the writings of Vico and Kant (see e.g., Hosking and Morley, 2004; Watzlawick, 1984). Constructivist approaches assume that

¹ At least by the scientific community.

individual minds process sense data to construct knowledge about the world (e.g., von Foerster, 1984; von Glaserfeld, 1984; Kelly, 1955; Mead, 1934; Neisser, 1969; Piaget, 1954; Watzlawick, 1984). The constructivist orientation says that people do not know, and cannot know the world *as it really is*. Rather the mind ‘combines what is in the head, with what is in the world’ so to speak. *Social* constructivist approaches amend and supplement this ‘cognitivist’ story by paying particular attention to social influences and the effects they have on our knowledge claims.

(Social) constructivisms have developed differently in different Human Science communities in relation to their varied histories and varied practical and theoretical concerns (see e.g., Danziger, 1997). In recent years, the language of (social) constructivism has become increasingly prominent in business and management studies. The areas of business strategy and marketing, to name only two, increasingly put to work variants of constructivist thinking joined, for example, with more or less individualistic² versions of cybernetic systems theory³ (see e.g., Stacey, 2003). At the same time, and as noted above, (social) constructivist thinking is neither new nor radical in much of contemporary western psychology⁴ where behaviourism and the RVS have been replaced by the discourse of post-positivism, and where social influences on individual action and cognition are widely theorised.

Constructivist writings vary considerably in the particular S-O themes they blur. As far as meta-theoretical themes are concerned, the *rationalist-empiricist* construction remains part of the intelligibility nucleus but the dualist opposition is now collapsed⁵. Equally, even though reality cannot be known ‘as it really is’, ‘external’ reality usually remains the focus of scientific interest in objective knowledge⁶. These ontological and epistemological assumptions mean that talk of “construction” is likely to be understood as talk about either objective knowledge (now accepted as imperfect) or subjective knowledge. Should the constructivist writer seem immoderate, for example, in his critique of scientific practices, he will be supposed to be naïve (‘of course we already know that knowledge is constructed!’). Equally, should the constructivist writer seem to go too far in his or her talk of construction s/he will be thought foolish (daft enough to reject the assumption of an independently existing reality) - trapped in the relativist position

² and indeed, more or less realist or idealist e.g. the radical constructivism of von Glaserfeld (1984) seems to adopt an idealist position by treating reality as an individual construction.

³ Wholistic developments such as e.g. in cybernetic systems theory, complexity and chaos theories – in danger of continuing to reproduce some crucial S-O themes i.e. science, systems, talk of processes... failing to get to grips with somatic life, emptiness and space, reflexivity and openness (cf Berman 1990, p307).

⁴ Although countries clearly vary in how much they are committed to strong versions of empiricism.

⁵ As it has been in the thought styles and practices of many who would now be called scientists including Galileo and Newton (see e.g., Berman, 1981, p.39).

⁶ Although not of all, the radical constructivists shift their attention to the individual observer as one who participates in self-reflexive constructions of reality.

that there are as many realities as there are knowing minds – trapped in the deeply problematic view that ‘anything goes’.

Constructivist inquiries often continue to be oriented around an interest in ‘aboutness knowledge’ and its (in)accuracy as a representation of an independently existing world. So, for example, constructs such as mind maps, schema, narratives, discourses... are treated as characteristics of mind operations and are awarded a central role in the processing of sense data and the production of knowledge. Language continues to be given the role of representing some non-discursive world. Last, and consistent with my earlier reflections, constructivist interests are often pursued through some empiricist methodology. One major consequence of this is that post positivist science continues to discourse Other as irrational and to discourse Self as able to produce objective knowledge, thus providing the basis for rational action. Reflexivity remains an individual act in which scientists evaluate the reliability and validity of their findings but do not reflect on or revise their meta-theoretical assumptions i.e., “the context of justification”(e.g., Steir, 1991).

In sum, post positivist and constructivist thinking succeeds in blurring, but not abandoning, some S-O assumptions about relations and continues to prescribe S-O relations in the conduct of scientific inquiry. The characteristics attributed to the human subject include a singular Self (I think), with a knowing mind (I think⁷) and language ability, along with constructs such as motives and personality. The blurring of S-O is primarily epistemological and objective-subjective knowledge is about real objects, imperfectly knowable. A radical re-construction of relations awaits our third discourse of critical relational constructionism.

CRITICAL RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Overview of premises

The term critical relational constructionism (CRC) will here be used to refer to an interrelated set of assumptions and interests that differ from post-positivism and constructivist thinking. Instead of centring mind and ‘real’ reality, CRC centres language and discursive practices – and these are seen as constructing relational realities – including what is thought to be a person. This means that CRC is not talking about subjective interpretations and is not adopting idealism in place of realism. Rather, this is another ‘map’ about another ‘territory’ (to borrow freely from Korzybski⁸) - where the objective-subjective, real-relativist dualisms are no longer relevant.

This discourse centres construction not discovery. CRC centres the construction of (what might be thought of as) objects – including the Self, including CRC, and including Science and its meta-theory. So, for example, the

⁷ See Hermans et al for an excellent discussion of this.

⁸ Korzybski 1933: “the map is not the territory”.

positioning of post positivism as a special scientific way of knowing⁹ can be treated as a particular language game with its related “form of life” (Wittgenstein, 1953)¹⁰. The discourse of independently existing ‘beings’ can be set aside¹¹ in favour of a discourse that centres language based *relational processes*. Language and ‘real’ reality may be discoursed as inseparable by seeing “textuality” as a defining characteristic of all phenomena and not just of written and spoken ‘texts’ (e.g., Stenner & Eccleston, 1994; Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Gergen, 1994; Hosking, Dachler, & Gergen, 1995)¹².

The “lines of distinction” that contribute to CRC have very long histories and come from many different communities of practice (see e.g., Danziger, 1997; Gergen, 1994; Hosking and Morley, 2004). Turning to relatively recent times, contributing arguments come from literatures such as feminism and feminist critiques of science, literary criticism, cognitive and social psychology, interactionist, cognitive, and phenomenological sociologies, radical family therapy, critical social anthropology and some expressions of ‘postmodernism’ and post structuralism (e.g., Latour, 1987; Foucault, 1980). Some post-modern and poststructuralist lines of distinction are embraced, for example, in the construction of Self - Other as a relational unity that is ongoing in relational processes - rather than as separately existing entities, subjectively or objectively knowing and known. The assumption of separately existing individuals in S-O relation is itself viewed as a historical-cultural construction that can be otherwise. This is consistent with e.g., Foucault’s critique of the Cartesian separation of epistemology and ontology. According to Foucault “...we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what positions does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse?” (Foucault, 1977, pp.137-138).

The following seem to me to represent some of the key features of a relational constructionist orientation:

- Talk of the individual self, mind operations, and individual knowledge gives way to discourses of relational processes, viewed as language-based inter-actions.
- Relational processes are seen as processes that (re)construct Self-Other realities as local ontologies or “forms of life” (person-world making); and (re)construct mind - metaphorised, for example - as an imaginal space in which Self-Other relations are discoursed (e.g., Hermans et al, 1992; Jaynes, 1976).

⁹ That is, one that can know about other ways of knowing and one that has the *unique* quality of self correction (see Kerlinger, 1964, p.7).

¹⁰ As is done, for example, in the sociology of knowledge.

¹¹ Set aside, not rejected – as others have said – this discourse is “ontologically mute” (Gergen, 1994) – where ontology is thought of in terms of either of the first two discourses.

¹² Of course supporters of the RVS would regard many of these moves as constructing something that was ‘not science’ – but the definition of Science is itself a contested terrain and its ‘essence’ undecidable (Sharrock and Anderson, 1982).

- The unitary conception of Self is replaced by a dialogical conception of Self as multiple Self-Other relations such that Other, including the body, is no longer discoursed as ‘outside’¹³.
- Relational processes have a local-cultural-historical quality such that discourses of the past and future are constructed and re-constructed in an ongoing present¹⁴.
- Relational realities are viewed as constructions such that subject-object relations *may* be constructed in particular relations (e.g., in ‘scientific’ inquiry) - but do not have to be.
- Power is (re)constructed in relational processes e.g., by being linked to talk of crediting and discrediting knowledge/identity claims, closing down or opening up possibilities, creating (more or less) local realities and relations between them.

Discoursing relational processes

A good deal of constructionist work reflects an interest in *what* constructions and gives relatively little attention to theorising *the how* of relating (see Hosking, 1999; Pearce, 1992). The following section will outline some key lines of argument about the how of *relational processes* – viewed as multiple, simultaneous inter-actions and as local-social-historical constructions of relational realities.

Multiple, simultaneous inter-actions. Many theorists centre language as the primary medium in which inter-action or relating ‘goes on’. However language is no longer viewed as a medium for representing the world as it really (probably) is. Rather, emphasis is given to the ways language it is used in human relationships and the forms of life it supports (Gergen, 1994). It is important to note that this assumed to be the case whatever the particular language game – including Science – and, of course, including the RVS itself. It is also important to note that language is no longer discoursed as either literal or metaphoric – this distinction is now irrelevant since language is no longer linked to assumptions about external reality or to interests in the one, real ‘state of things’.

This reference to language can be understood more or less narrowly. For example, whilst the *conceptual* language of everyday life is usually centred “language” can also be taken to include other formal systems such as music, mathematics and statistics (e.g., Iverson, 2003). Further, non-verbal actions, and co-ordinations of bodies, things, and events may be included as ways of ‘doing’ particular “forms of life” (see e.g., Hodge & Kress, 1988; Latour, 1987). The range of emphasis also spans from a relatively narrow focus on meaning/epistemology to

¹³ ‘inside-outside’ is now viewed as a discursive construction – and not one that CRC needs to make.

¹⁴ And so, contrary to Analytic philosophy, the distinction between the contexts of discovery and justification is *dropped* (see Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Hosking and Morley, 2004).

a relatively broad focus on activity/ontology (see e.g., Newman and Holzman, 1997).

A variety of linguistic tools are used for talking about relational processes including terms such as inter-actants (Latour, 1987) “act-supplement” or “text-context” (e.g., Gergen, 1995), or more everyday terms such as story telling, conversation, performance, narrative, or discourse. The most general point here is our focus on *relating*, regardless of what is being related with what. So, for example, relating goes on in the shaking of hands, in the telling of and listening to a story, in conversations about local markets and strategy, in playing and in playing-listening to music.

Relational processes involve multiple, simultaneous, interrelated texts (con-texts). For example, the process of relating to a painting such as Magritte’s ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ *simultaneously* implicates *multiple interrelated* texts which could include relating: the visual symbol with the written text below it; the written text with the French language; the written text with the Dutch language (!); narratives of earlier viewings, of what others have said about the painting, of what is appropriately called a ‘pipe’ and so on. And, of course, *multiple constructions of ‘what it is’* are also possible, depending on the particular interrelating of con-texts: it’s a pipe, ‘it’s a painting of a pipe’, ‘it’s a paradox’, ‘it is a work of art’ and so on. The question ‘what is it’ is no longer meaningful; (il)legibility is a local-cultural-historical affair. In this discourse, action and language are joined, rather than separated through discourses of cognitive processes and representation. Relating (re)constructs the textuality of all phenomena.

Local-social-historical constructions. Relating produces and re-produces stabilized patterns as some performances are supplemented in ways that socially certify them as real, relevant, perhaps helpful and/or true (Hosking and Morley, 1991), (un)ethical, and/or aesthetically (dis)pleasing. Ethical and aesthetic aspects have been relatively under-explored by constructionists – perhaps because of continuing and unrecognised attachments to the post positivist intelligibility nucleus and its related interest in propositional knowledge. Stabilized effects or patterns include particular Self-Other-relationship constructions, social conventions, musical forms, organisational and societal structures, technology, and (what some may call) “facts” and “artefacts” (eg Latour, 1987), (un)ethical behaviour and so on. But not all texts will be supplemented; some will go unheard, unseen, unnoticed. Equally, some will be discredited, certified as not science (art, music...), claimed as heretical or irrational...

Supplementing may play with conventions and possibilities: the proffered hand may not be grasped and shaken but spat in; the improvising actor or jazz musician may take a process off in new directions. Whilst possible supplements might be infinite, not all are equally probable because there are (social-historical) limits to what is likely to be socially certified as relevant, true, or good. Once a particular performance becomes “stabilized” e.g., a greeting convention, ‘how we do things around here’, the sonata form, what counts as middle C, other possibilities have to be improvised. And, as Beethoven discovered at one of his

premiers, it may be harder to have some new form socially validated when what is 'real and good' is already established! Such difficulties are especially likely to be encountered when subject-object relations (implicating discourses of 'right' and 'wrong') are already stabilised (see e.g., Deetz, 2000).

This reference to local social-historical processes should be understood in contrasting relation to narratives of general (trans-contextual, trans-historical) knowledge about reality (as ontology). CRC speaks of social practices – including what some might construct as 'knowledge' - and emphasises that what is socially validated or discredited is *local* to the ongoing practices that (re)construct a particular culture or "community of practice" (e.g., Lave and Wenger, 1991) and so, particular Self-Other- relationship constructions. This said, local could be as broad as Western, or post-enlightenment. The "natural attitude" may mean that particular ways of 'going on' are taken-for-granted as 'how things really are'. However, the present line of argument emphasises the essential artfulness of these "stabilised effects" and draws attention to the relational processes that make and re-make them (e.g., Chia, 1995; Latour, 1987).

This reference to the *historical* quality of relational processes should not be understood to imply a linear and unidirectional story in which the present is a moment between (the now finished) past and the (yet to come) future. Rather, relational processes are always ongoing, bringing past structurings into the present (e.g., the convention of shaking hands) and anticipating possible futures (e.g., that a greeting will be successfully performed). Another way of saying this is that all texts supplement other texts *and* are available for possible supplementation and possible crediting. Inter-actions, and particularly regularly repeated ones, 'make history' so to speak and history is constantly being re-made (Vico, 1744; Hora, 1966).

Relational realities. Multiple, simultaneous, ongoing relatings (re)construct the textuality of people and worlds. The individual is not the agent of reality construction. In this view, identity and other assumed entity characteristics (such as personality, organizational goals and structures...) are not singular and fixed and do not function as the *necessary* defining characteristic of someone or something. Rather identity, and other assumed characteristics become understood (a) as relational and so (b) multiple and variable (e.g., different identities in different self-other relations), and (c) as a performed, rather than possessed, in networks of ongoing relatings. In sum, relational processes are reality-constituting practice(s) that construct markets, management, science, self-other... all textualities. These relational realities are multiple and local rather than singular and transcendent; they may be explored with a greater or lesser emphasis on inquiry or transformation in relation to, for example, their local-cultural aesthetic, ethical, and pragmatic qualities.

In my view, the critical relational constructionist orientation is best viewed as a discourse or "intelligibility nucleus" (Gergen, 1994) that emphasises the historical-cultural rather than the natural-scientific (see Morley and Hunt, 2004) whilst at the same time differing from Contextualism. In CRC, theory, method and

data are seen as interwoven¹⁵. This means that inquiry is now understood in relation to a changed range of interests such as, for example, not to ‘tell it how it (probably) is’ – but to ‘tell how it might become’ i.e., to be ‘world enlarging’ (see Harding, 1986). Similarly, interest might be directed to particular discursive practices to see what forms of life or ways of ‘going on’ are invited, supported, or suppressed. The *critical* interest includes dissensus – exploring how power-full processes construct dominance or facilitate openness and multiplicity - exploring how unitary constructions can be deconstructed and disrupted (e.g., Deetz, 2000). And last, inquiry can embrace its relational-constructive qualities by shifting emphasis– to ‘opening’ up new possible identities and (local) worlds - to *transformation* rather than simply ‘finding out’ (Hosking, 2004). In my view, it is only CRC that sets aside both I think (the individualistic self) and I think (the cognising subject) (Hermans et al, 1992) and opens up a radically changed agenda for inquiry.

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¹⁵ For this reason, theorists will probably not use terms such as ‘data’ (it is too suggestive of a view of facts as independent of theory and methods) or ‘method’ (too suggestive of a technique that is theory-free).

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