

Can constructionism be critical?

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My purpose in this chapter is to set out a number of interrelated “lines of distinction” that together create a critical constructionist “discourse” (Deetz, 1996). In this context, I am using the term discourse to refer to a framework of premises that is wider than a theory, less monolithic than a paradigm, and more modest than a world view. One implication of this is that what I have to say about critical relational constructionism is not directly comparable with theories¹ framed within a post-positivist approach to science. It is not my intention to claim that critical relational constructionism is superior to other discourses or theories, only to claim that it is different, that these differences open up new possibilities for action, and that they should, therefore, be given serious attention.

I begin by drawing on literatures that declare and centre a *critical orientation* for example to studies of management and organisation or to research methodology. This allows me to overview previously established meanings of the term critical and to link them with relational constructionism. In so doing, I discuss the special role and significance of processes and language, the focus on relational realities, and the view of relational processes and realities as local in both a cultural and a historical sense. I return to these critical themes and further develop them in each of the remaining parts of the chapter. In the second part, I develop the theme of relational processes as the ongoing and simultaneous coming together of multiple acts or texts. It is in these relational processes that the construction and re-

construction of self and other and relations goes on, so to speak. In other words, the relational realities of persons and worlds emerge in processes, and they are always emerging.

The third part of the chapter further develops the theme of self/other relations as constructed realities. It does so by contrasting the “hard” differentiation of self and other as subject and object with the more rare construction of “soft” self/other differentiation (Berman, 1990). The former involves ways of relating that construct self and other as singular, stable, bounded, and independent existences (entities) interacting in instrumental relations; elsewhere I have referred to this as an “entitative” style of thinking (Hosking & Morley, 1991). In contrast, practices that are open to otherness, including other selves, construct what I shall call soft self/other differentiation.

The discussion of self/other relations lays the groundwork for the fourth part where I examine different forms of relating. In particular, I compare processes dominated by visual forms and seeing with processes in which sound, hearing, and listening are more prominent. I focus on the very particular role and significance of listening in relation to soft differentiation and stress its links with openness and appreciation. I finish with a brief discussion of how this critical relational constructionism and the associated possibility of soft self/other differentiation together open up new possibilities for inquiry and intervention.

Going Critical

A common construction of the term critical is that it implies *critique*, usually negative, of positions that differ from one’s own. Critique involves generalising one’s own standards, applying them to other discourses, and finding those other discourses deficient. The discovered weaknesses of other positions can then be claimed as evidence of the superiority of one’s own position. However, a critical relational constructionism does not provide the grounds for critique in this sense for the reason that it does not centre the assumption of one

trans-historical and trans-contextual reality. Instead, it centres the assumption that constructions of persons and worlds and their relations, including constructions of knowledge, truth and ethics, and including constructions of science, are *local relational realities*. By this I mean something similar to what Wittgenstein spoke of as language games which he saw as part of an activity or wider form of life (Wittgenstein, 1953). Such activities involve their own local forms and interests and their own rules; these “games” are neither true nor false and, indeed, may create their own facts (Chan, 2000; Falzon, 1998)

The critical themes that make up the present discourse come from many different literatures and different areas of professional practice. These include: the history of ideas, epistemology, feminist critiques of science, cognitive and social psychology, interactionism, cognitive and phenomenological sociology, radical family therapy, critical social anthropology, continental philosophy and some expressions of postmodernism and post structuralism (Berman, 1981; Berman, 1990; Corradi Fiumara, 1990; Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Danziger, 1997; Fine, 1994; Foucault, 1977, 1980; Gergen, 1994; Harding, 1986; Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992; Latour, 1987; Pearce, 1992; Schroder, 2005; Stenner & Eccleston, 1994; Toulmin, 1990; Woolgar, 1996). I bring these critical themes together to make a very distinctive discourse of critical relational constructionism. This culminates in a particular emphasis on appreciation and openness – viewed as vital to the construction of soft self/other differentiation:

“openness is key to a genuine encounter with other... other possible selves, other humans... the world... and dialogue is crucial for thisⁱⁱ” (Falzon, 1998).

Powers, interests, and possibilities

The present focus on relational realities as local language games and forms of life sets our critical constructionist discourse apart from constructivist theories. The latter usually centre individuals and individual mind operations as they construct some linguistic representation of reality (Hosking, 2006). In other words, construction is theorised as a cognitive operationⁱⁱⁱ, knowledge is the product of construction, and knowledge is separate from action.

Constructivist theories (implicitly) embrace meta-theoretical assumptions that centre a singular real-world reality (the assumption of ontology) and sharply distinguish this real-world reality from knowledge about it (the assumption of epistemology).

The meta-theoretical assumptions of the present discourse differ from those just described. Construction is viewed as ongoing in relational processes that make and re-make *local* language games and their related forms of life. Unlike constructivist theories and investigations, a critical relational constructionism includes its own activities within the scope of its discourse of construction. Thus it treats the activities of theorising and empirical work as processes of construction. In addition, and just like any other discourse, critical relational constructionism provides a position from which to reflect on the local particularities of other theories and meta-theoretical standpoints.

A critical relational constructionism may turn its gaze, for example, to deconstruct writings in organisational behaviour and in management and organisation studies. Some writings may seem to imply a “managerialist” standpoint (Hosking & Morley, 1991). Others, such as early versions of critical theory, might explicitly espouse a Marxist ideology, speak of “false consciousness” and be oriented towards an interest in revolutionary change. Reading on, some feminist approaches might speak of a “critical” interest in liberating women and other oppressed minorities (see e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, “post-positive” science (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Gergen, 1994) might be represented as taking a critical

view of the possibility of objective knowledge^{iv} and so on. However, the present discourse is not critical in any of these ways. Rather, it is critical in the sense that *it is suspicious about any claim to know what is and what is best for the other*. So, for example, to assume that the other needs liberating is to assume a superior position from which one can know the other. This assumption reproduces the subject-object construction of relations that characterises constructivist theories and (post) positivist science and so, in the present view, cannot be critical.

Explicitly critical orientations often focus on power and in-equalities of the status quo. For example, Marxist versions of critical theory assume a managerial elite with its own particular interests that dominate labour and its (different) interests. Again, I think that a critical relational constructionism can do something rather different. For a start, it is not characterised by the assumption that any particular form of life possesses power over other groups and certainly does not assume that power is one-way and uncontested. Rather than constructing a particular form of life as a stable entity with properties and possessions, a critical constructionism theorises power as a relational process. Power is an ongoing, relational construction, able both to open up and to close down possibilities. So all acts (texts) ‘act into’ processes that are already ongoing (con-texts) and so may contribute to the ongoing (re)production of power relations.

This line of talk about acting into ongoing power relations also applies to relational constructionist writings and related practices – viewed as a particular local form of life. One of the many ways in which a critical relational constructionism is critical is that it invites reflexive recognition of its own constructive potential and participation in power relations (Foucault, 1977, 1980). It assumes that the human scientist, who acts to observe Other, is necessarily acting into some already ongoing processes and relations and is, in this sense,

intervening. This re-constructs the (post) positivist science account of research design and procedures: research processes now are storied as power-full processes of social construction.

To summarise, a critical relational constructionism (1) cannot rest on any claim to know how things really are (2) is not defined in terms of an interest in challenging closure or dominance relations, and (3) does not limit itself to talk of knowledge, independently of power relations. A critical relational constructionism collapses the process/product binary and views the process as itself the product^v (e.g., Brown & Hosking, 1986). Relations become significant, not as the instrumental means to achieving some rational ends, but for their moment-by-moment openness to and appreciation of other possible selves and worlds (e.g., Harding, 1986).

A critical anomaly

I have defined a critical relational constructionism as one that does not embrace the meta-theoretical premises of a post-positivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this sense it could be called an anomalous discourse of construction in that it cannot be located on a map whose coordinates are realist-relativist (ontology) and objective-subjective (epistemology). A critical relational constructionist discourse does not centre some assumed ‘real’ reality, does not centre an individual knower and is not about the world as the subjective creation of mind. For these same reasons it is also very different from the “constructivist” paradigm^{vi} referred to by Guba & Lincoln (1994).

In contrast to the (post) positivist and constructivist paradigms as defined by Guba and Lincoln, a critical relational constructionism collapses dualist oppositions such as those between fact and value, description and explanation, theoretical and empirical. Further, it collapses the traditional distinction between the context of discovery (assumed to be the province of empirical science) and the context of justification (assumed to be the province of

philosophy). In this respect, it shares some of the themes of an epistemology that wishes either to “naturalise the mind”- by linking individual psychology and epistemology,^{vii} or to “socialise the mind”^{viii} - by linking epistemology and social psychology (Bem & Looren de Jong, 2006; Morley & Hunt, unpub ms.). However, and as will become clear, the present discourse moves a long way away from the particular “form of life” that is analytic philosophy, together with its language games that distinguish the individual from the social, speak of mind, and centre an interest in knowledge and truth. As Falzon said of Foucault’s line of talk about self, other and relations, the present discourse is not about objective and subjective knowledge (see Falzon, 1998, p. 38) of a singular, ‘real’ reality. Rather, it is about relational processes as they construct local relational realities.

Centring construction processes

The present discourse is characterised by a focus on ‘the how’ rather than ‘the what’ of construction, however, ‘the how’ is theorised in a very special (some might say “post-modern”^{ix}) way. Processes are theorised as the ever-moving construction site in which the relational realities of persons and worlds are continuously (re)produced. This means that person and world, self and other (including other people) are viewed as reciprocal co-constructions that are always in the process of becoming. This view is very different from most other (some might say “modernist”) conceptions that treat person and world as ontologically prior to processes and theorise the latter as receiving inputs from persons and from the world.

The present discourse of processes contrasts with what I earlier referred to as an “entitative” discourse (Hosking & Morley, 1991). The latter centres persons, organisations, cultures and so forth as relatively stable, unitary, and bounded states of existence. Processes go on, so to speak, within and between (the assumed-to-be-stable) entities. As a result,

processes can only express entity characteristics and are limited (by entity boundaries) to subject-object relations (Hosking & Morley, 1991). In contrast, a critical relational discourse centres processes and tries to say something about how persons, cultures, and the like emerge in relational processes. Self/other boundaries can then be seen as constructions – as constructions that may be relatively firm and stable (i.e., hard), or variable and permeable (i.e., soft) so to speak. So, unlike (post) positivism and constructivism, a critical relational constructionist discourse views stability as an ongoing construction^x and opens up the possibility of transformative change that is, of self becoming other.

Constructing self/other relations and the possibility of soft differentiation

By discoursing self and other as work in progress, so to speak, I am centring an “ontology of becoming” rather than the more usual “ontology of being” (Chia, 1995). This means that I view self/other differentiation as made in ongoing relational processes rather than dictated and fixed by the assumption of independent, knowing and acting beings (Hosking, 2004). This critical move opens up radically changed possibilities for self, other, and relations by allowing that hard differentiation is a *construction* and by adding the possibility of soft or minimal differentiation. Attention can now be directed to *how* differentiation, whether hard or soft, can be constructed. This is an important theme in this chapter. In order to develop it, I need first to say something about language, its role in relational processes, and how this constitutes a critical departure from (post) positivist and constructivist paradigms.

Language as a relational process

The present discourse gives an important role to language – a role that reflects the critical themes I have already outlined. In sum, language plays an important part in the relational processes that construct a particular form of life. Language is key to the processes in which

self, other, and relations are constructed and re-constructed as relational ontologies. Emphasis shifts from language to relational processes, and the latter are theorised broadly to include not just conceptual language as it is written and spoken but also the simultaneously embodied, aesthetic and sensual, local - cultural and local - historical aspects of relating.

The present discourse contrasts with the more usual construction of language as a vehicle for representing reality. The representational view is outlined in the following account of language in relation to “objectivism”: “language is needed to express concepts mapped onto objects, properties and relations *in a literal, unequivocal, context-independent fashion.*” (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 25, emphasis added). In the objectivist discourse, people are storied as language users who are more or less capable of correctly “mapping” what exists in the world (including themselves) through language. The scientist is presented as a language user capable of correct reasoning that is, is assumed to be able to use language to describe what she or he discovers about an already existing and independent reality. In other words, objectivism discourses language in relation to the assumption of a realist ontology and a (more or less) re- presentational epistemology. This objectivist view provides part of the meta- theoretical context of constructivist theories; it has no part in the present discourse of relational processes.

The particularities of relational processes

It is time to say more about how relational processes may be theorised in ways that reflect our critical themes and therefore, in ways that distinguish the present discourse from related but non-critical alternatives.

Inter - acting inter - textuality.

Constructionist writings use various language tools to discuss relational processes. These terms include storytelling, conversation, narrative, and discourse – often to centre written and spoken language. Sometimes the term performance is used, partly to give more emphasis to non-verbal actions, and partly to suggest an ontological (rather than epistemological) discourse of construction (Newman & Holzman, 1977). Terms such as act/supplement and text/con - text are also used in attempts to open up the relational qualities of processes (Hosking, Dachler, & Gergen, 1995). Bruno Latour (Latour, 1987) employs the term actant and, by writing of networks of relations between actants, seems neatly to avoid limiting talk of inter - action to face-to-face or verbal relations between fully fledged persons^{xi}. He defines an actant as “whoever and whatever is represented” (Latour, 1987) - including people, objects, statements, facts, events and so forth, and further writes of relations as processes of enrolling and controlling that construct and stabilise reality^{xii}.

In my view, a truly critical relational constructionism requires a broad definition of acts that goes beyond the usual focus on written and spoken language and gives attention to the body - both as a “tool” of construction (e.g., Foucault stresses that action requires embodiment) - and as a “result”^{xiii}. Furthermore, this broad definition should give space to widely distributed constructions such as, for example, Western constructions of personhood, of what counts as knowledge and of changing patterns and means of communication (Berman, 1981; Foucault, 1977, 1980; Ong, 1967). In sum: talk of interacting here refers to (1) performances (2) that involve the coming together (3) of “whoever and whatever” (Latour, 1987) to (re)construct person-world relations as (4) relational realities. Of course whenever people are involved in coming together then conceptual language is often implicated – even if only in un-vocalised talk (thinking)^{xiv}. The present discourse of interacting is both distinctive and critical in a number of important ways. First, it centres both humans and non-humans as

actants that participate in, and are products of, construction processes. Second, relational realities are storied as always-in-construction in relations between actants, and not as the a-historical product of individual action. Third, talk about the “textuality” of inter-acting refers to all inter - acts and not just to written and spoken texts (Stenner & Eccleston, 1994).

Multiple, simultaneous inter-acts

I have proposed that a critical relational constructionist discourse assumes that many simultaneously related inter - acts contribute to ongoing constructions of reality. This is very different from an empiricist approach that (1) focuses on simple behavioural acts that are performed in sequence and are objectively definable; (2) sharply distinguishes between human actors, natural and man-made objects, and language, and (3) centres objective knowledge of an independently existing Other.

To illustrate this difference, I invite you to consider Magritte’s painting *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*. An entitative discourse treats the painter, the painting, the viewer and other possibly relevant actants (con - texts) as independent entities. From the present standpoint, it turns complex, ongoing, relational processes into an interest in a seemingly singular and stable ‘it’ (the painting) in relation to the Aristotelian logic of either/or (e.g., either it is a pipe - or it is not). In contrast, a critical relational constructionism attempts to open-up the “black box” of relating (Latour, 1987) by centring multiple, simultaneous inter - textualities (rather than a singular object), by centring ‘the how’ of ongoing processes (rather than ‘the what’ of inputs and outputs) and by staying open to the possibility of otherness for example, multiple and changing constructions of what ‘it’ can be.

So returning to *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, our critical relational constructionist discourse assumes that multiple texts are simultaneously interrelated. Construction processes could relate: the visual symbol (which many would say was a picture of a pipe) with the written text

below it (which says *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* – in English - 'this is not a pipe'); the written text with the French language; the written text with some other language (!). Con-texts could also include narratives of earlier viewings and/or of smoking a pipe, of what others have said about the painting, of what counts as a painting, of what is appropriately called a pipe, and so on.

Power - full processes.

Still staying with Magritte's painting, the question 'what is it?' (text) could invite many equally correct answers (con - texts) depending on which of all the multiple possible texts are inter - related: 'it's a pipe', 'it's a painting of a pipe', 'it's a paradox', 'it is a work of art' and so on^{xv}. This suggests that an interest in asking 'what is it' questions goes together with an interest in 'knowledge that' whilst, at the same time, muting and marginalising the power - full qualities of relating. For example, which particular set of the multiple possible inter-textual relations is defined as producing the (one and only) right answer, by whom, and in relation to rules and standards provided by which "form of life"?

Continuing this theme of questioning and its relations with knowledge and power, the practice of asking 'what is it' questions ignores, or rejects as wrong, any answer that does not fit with the questioner's own local-cultural discourses^{xvi}. And yet, as we have seen, a critical relational constructionist discourse proposes that relating *constructs* stabilized effects or patterned inter - acts and accepts that not all acts are stabilised -some go unheard, unseen, unnoticed. In this view, the fate of any claim depends on whether or not it is socially certified (Hosking & Morley, 1991; Weick, 1979) that is, on whether or not it is warranted as "real and good" (Gergen, 1994). As Latour (1987) has said, the fate of a statement depends on others who have to read it, take it up and use it - others have to be "enrolled" and they have to be

“controlled” (Latour, 1987). In sum, constructions of, for example, identity, knowledge and truth, good and bad, are made, stabilised and changed in power - full processes.

A critical discourse of construction suggests that relational processes and the forms of life they reflect and construct necessarily involve what Foucault called the “power/knowledge” nexus (e.g., Falzon, 1998). But some forms of life are able to enrol and control on a larger scale than others and may appear, for example, to be supported by more powerful Gods or to have better methods for producing objective knowledge. Once particular constructions become stabilized – such as what counts as science, such as white supremacy, such as masculine norms - other possibilities become less probable or, if articulated, find it harder to achieve warrant. Closure of this sort is especially likely when a (post) positivist discourse with related assumptions of right and wrong is already stabilised and widely distributed (Deetz, 2000). A critical discourse of construction centres power^{xvii} as ongoing in all relational processes and realities^{xviii}.

Local - cultural, local - historical processes.

As I have already suggested, the present discourse talks about multiple relational realities and views them as local in both the cultural and historical sense. The assumption of *multiple* local realities contrasts with the more usual assumption of a singular ‘real’ reality about which generalizable, trans - historical knowledge can be produced. The assumption of multiple *local-cultural* realities emphasises that what is validated or discredited as (not) real and (not) good is local to the ongoing practices that (re)construct a particular form of life. However, as I noted earlier, inter - acts vary in the scale of their inter-connections. This means that my reference to local could apply to forms of life as general as ‘western’ or ‘scientific’. Those who participate as locals may take it for granted that their particular constructions are universal facts about the world as it really is, so to speak. However, the present discourse

emphasises the artfulness of stabilised effects (scientific methodology, bureaucratic organisation, social structures etcetera) and draws attention to the multiple, more or less local scale of the inter - acts that make and re-make them.

A critical discourse of construction also discourses relational processes and realities as *local - historical*. But a critical relational constructionist discourse provides a very special context for the meaning of historical. For example, it does not refer to temporary truths when permanent truths are potentially available, and it is not intended to imply a linear process in which the present is a moment between (the now finished) past and the (yet to come) future. Such a view of history (some would call it “modernist”) goes together with the separation of means and ends, process and content, “tool and result” (Newman & Holzman, 1977) and reproduces a very particular construction of time and process.

Relational processes have a historical quality in that acts both supplement previous acts and have implications for how the process will go on. The ongoing present re-produces some past structurings, for example, the convention of shaking hands and acts in relation to possible and probable futures for example, that a greeting will be performed successfully. All acts (texts) supplement other acts (con-texts) and are available for possible supplementation and possible (dis)crediting. Inter-acts, and particularly regularly repeated ones, ‘make history’ so to speak (Falzon, 1998; Foucault, 1977, 1980) and history is constantly being re-made (Hora, 1992; Vico, 1992). I now turn to history making as the ongoing construction of self and other and their relations. I argue that hard self/other differentiation is a relational construction that could be otherwise and that a critical relational discourse adds the additional possibility of soft differentiation and a changed relational aesthetic.

Differentiating Self from Other

“...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, 1980, p. 137-138).

The present discourse has positioned relational processes as the ongoing production site of self /other and their relations and has noted that forms of life can differ in their particular lines and degrees of differentiation. So, for example, empiricism and the “received view of science” (Woolgar, 1996) often have been claimed to be characterised by hard differentiation in the form of “subject-object” relations (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Similarly, many theories that focus on particular aspects of organisational life embrace subject-object constructions for example, of relations between leaders and subordinates, of relations between organisations and their environment, and of markets and hierarchies.

Differentiating subject and object

An active-passive binary characterises the subject-object discourse of relations. It is reflected in distinctions between a responsible agent or subject (e.g., a leader, manager, or scientist) who is or should be active in relation to some ready-to-be-acted upon-other whom they treat as a passive object (e.g., subordinates, an organisation, research objects). The subject relates in two main ways: building knowledge about the other and mobilising their knowledge as the (rational) basis for achieving power over the other. For example, the “received view of science” presents the scientist as the knowing subject acting in relation to the knowable objects of his or her research, stories scientific knowledge as technical or neutral, and assumes that such knowledge provides the rational basis for action and influence.

A subject-object construction reduces relations to the one-way production of ‘knowledge that’ and “power over” (Gergen, 1995) knowledge and power that is presented as instrumental for the subject. Of course, the latter is presumed to be acting in terms of technical, rational, neutral interests and this is supposed to warrant the rational compliance of the other. So, for example, a scientist or manager should produce value-free knowledge about the world ‘in its so being’ and, in so doing, can provide the rational basis for action for example, in pursuit of societal improvement or organisational goals.

The assumption of subject-object relations presumes stability and makes change problematic. Change, by being located in the context of subject-object relations, can only be discoursed in relation to “knowledge that” and “power over” the other as an object. So, for example, it is common to read of both leaders and organisations as relatively stable things with characteristics. This means that change must be understood as movement from one stable state to another. Subjects (leaders/change agents) are portrayed as those who can and/or should know about and achieve influence over the other. Their knowledge forms the basis for changes that they construct as ‘real and good’ for the organisation. Should their claims fail to achieve sufficient rhetorical force, then they can try to achieve influence through tactics such as persuasion, bargaining and negotiating (Carnall, 1990; Dachler & Hosking, 1995).

Subject-object practices privilege some constructions and silence others. The subject constructs resistance to change as the irrational response of the other - one that requires they mobilise more “power over” the other. This means that patterns of relating are likely to reproduce more of the same i.e., more facts, more rational arguments and more persuasion. In a subject-object construction, politics is a dirty word, so to speak. Politics are viewed as unnecessary and regrettable, as practices that reflect the play of local, partisan interests when neutral, non-partisan interests are at stake. Change can only be theorised and practised in relations in which one entity achieves “power over” an independently existing other. Changed

constructions of change require a shift from hard to soft constructions of self/other relations (Hosking, 2004).

Soft differentiation

I have said that an entitative discourse treats self and other as independent, although interacting, existences. Of course, discourses vary in the hardness of their differentiations. For example, post-positivist science and constructivist discourses blur the boundaries between subject and object, but the blurring mostly concerns what self can know of other (epistemology) and not the assumption that they are separate existences (Hosking, 2006). A discourse of relational processes allows for the possibility of soft or minimal self/other differentiation; opening up to these possibilities constitutes another critical dimension of relational constructionism. In exploring these possibilities, I begin by re-constructing subject-object themes^{xix}.

First: relational constructionism does not assume that there is a stable active - passive binary between self and other. Rather, relating is viewed as an active, ongoing process that constructs and re-constructs self/other and their relations – be it soft or hard differentiation. Second, there is no assumption of a knowing subject who relates to other as a knowable object to construct ‘outsider’ knowledge of an external reality. In soft self/other differentiation there is no position (for God or Man) from which the characteristics of one ‘real’ reality could be known. Rather, relational processes are assumed to construct multiple relational realities - as local ontologies^{xx}.

Relational realities can only be multiple and softly differentiated when “power over” does not dominate. This brings us to our third theme. In a critical relational view, power is constructed in always ongoing, relational processes, that is, in ongoing relatings of acts as texts. This means that power is a quality of inter - textuality rather than inherent in entities

and individual acts. Power is critical to the production and re-construction of local realities and relations between them. ‘Power to’ can be theorised as the power to act (Foucault, 1977, 1980) and ‘power with’ can be theorised as practices that allow the construction of different but equal forms of life (Gergen, 1995; Hosking, 1995). Appreciation of and openness to other possible selves and relations and to other forms of life, enables, supports, and re-constructs soft differentiation^{xxi}.

Last, processes in which soft differentiation is (re)constructed are not characterised by competition over who will be subject in subject-object relations and do not construct Other as potentially instrumental for self. By not centring ‘knowledge that’ and mind operations, relational processes are re-constructed as embodied;^{xxii} not centring language as representation makes space non-conceptual ways of relating; not centring cognitive operations and universal rationality makes more space for the sensual and aesthetic qualities of relating. In the absence of a singular and stable self who may direct processes of knowing and influencing other there is space for otherness and for appreciation of the continuing present^{xxiii} (the here and now). I now turn to an exploration of how embodied, conceptual and non-conceptual, and sensual ways of relating might be theorised in relation to soft differentiation, appreciation and openness to the other^{xxiv}.

Re-sounding relations: a changed aesthetic

I begin by discussing different relational forms (sounds, music, visual artefacts etcetera), the senses (particularly seeing, hearing and listening), and historical/cultural shifts in their roles and relations. Important in this discussion are the links that some make between the organisation of “the sensorium” (the relative emphasis on different senses and sensual forms), local-cultural practices, and self/other differentiation. For example, writers have suggested that the dominance of visual media and seeing seems to go together with hard self/other

differentiation. A stronger participation in sound and listening together with a greater “democracy of the senses” (Berendt, 1992, p.28) seems to go together with soft self/other differentiation (Berendt, 1992; Berman, 1990; Levin, 1989; Ong, 1967). The latter could provide a “changed aesthetic” that could help transformative change work as a critical alternative to finding out about, emancipating, or liberating others.

Changes in the sensorium: The increasing dominance of vision

Many have written about changing patterns and forms of relating, commenting on developments such as the creation of an alphabet and written script;^{xxv} creation of the means mechanically to reproduce texts, and the emergence, reproduction, and increased use of maps, together with technologies that allowed greater physical exploration of the world (e.g., ships and navigational equipment). Writers suggest that the (relatively recent) development of written language and visual inscriptions, together with an emphasis on appearances and on visual observation, gradually came to dominate (shall we say “western”) constructions of self and other and relations (Ong, 1967).

These changing constructions included freeing persons from the will of the gods and re-constructing them as autonomous beings or agents able to initiate, direct and control their own actions. Science became established as the way of knowing most likely to produce the best of knowable truths about an independently existing Other. Western philosophy became increasingly dominated by a focus on epistemology and on the speaking aspect of communications (Corradi Fiumara, 1990). Amidst these changes, person’s relationship to time, to space, to event-fullness, to otherness... also changed. For example, some suggest that cultures of alphabet and print gave a more permanent sense of existence to visualised words, words frozen in space, words made seemingly timeless by being stripped from the progression of sound. According to Ong, visualised words gain “a quiescence and fixity which is

unrealisable in actual sound” (Ong, 1967). He further associated with a change in self/other relations such that the former felt an increased “sense of order and control” over other (Ong, 1967).

The increasing visualisation of words also gave rise to the possibility of “literal” meaning that is, meaning ‘according to the letter’^{xxvi}. Knowledge became increasingly associated with the written word and with books, with the individual mind and individual property. The increasing dominance of vision made it possible for Locke to write of the mind as a *camera obscura* that receives “external visual resemblances or ideas of things”, and for Kant to refer to knowledge as phenomena – from the Greek *phainomenon* - meaning “appearance”, “to show”, to “expose to sight” (Ong, 1967). Observation, something for the eyes, came increasingly to dominate a person’s relationship to their self and to the (by then ‘outside’) world.

The increasing dominance of vision in all its many aspects has been linked with what Ong referred to as a transformation of the sensorium. Minimal or “soft” differentiation of self and other gave way to “hard differentiation, sharply separating and opposing self and other in subject-object relation. For example:

“The view of nature which predominated in the West down to the eve of the Scientific Revolution was that of an enchanted world. Rock, trees, rivers and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home in this environment. The cosmos, in short, was a place of belonging” (Berman, 1981).

The relational reality of a live and enchanted world was replaced with a dead, secularised, and de-natured universe. Mechanical philosophy and materialist science produced dead texts of representation. The world became a “neutralized, devocalized physical world” and Man “a kind of stranger, a spectator and manipulator...” Self/other relations were “dis-encharmed” and “participating consciousness” (Reason, 1994) largely lost. With their newly constructed,

non-participating knowledge, men could become “masters and possessors of nature” (Berman, 1981).

One obvious implication is that a critical constructionism must be sensitive to different relational forms, to the possible dominance of vision and visual actants, and to their possible relations with self/other differentiation^{xxvii}. So, for example, many constructionist writings theorise language as action, and yet research practices typically turn live talk into visualised and frozen words, into dead interview transcripts that can be analysed. Perhaps we need to amplify our sensitivity to live sound, to live processes, and to time if we wish to open up possibilities for soft differentiation and transformative change work.

Some sound qualities of relational processes

Bergson (Bergson, 1934; Schroder, 2005) argued that the lived experience of time involves an interweaving of past, present and future in an “elan vital” that encompasses everything that lives (Schroder, 2005); he called this lived experience of time “duree”. For example, when oral-aural ways of relating are prominent, the past is made present in what people say and do, in the performances of epic singers, storytellers and poets, in the arts of oratory and rhetoric... in performances that join play, celebration, and community with learning. For Ong, “*being in* is what we experience in a world of sound”^{xxviii} (Ong, 1967, p. 130, emphasis added).

This seems very different from the visualised, spatialized and bounded, linear and sequential construction of time associated with clocks and timetables, entitative conceptions of processes, science and modernity.

To participate in sound is to participate in action in a way that is rather different from looking at visual (dead) texts (Berendt, 1992; Ong, 1967). For example, in sound cultures the word is clearly “a vocalisation, a happening...an event” and is experienced as “contact with actualite” (Bergson, 1934; Ong, 1967, p. 33). Sound “situates man in the middle of actualite”

(Ong, 1967) as he relates to sounds in front, behind, above, below – "all these things simultaneously... I not only can but must hear all the sounds around me at once. Sound thus situates me in the midst of the world" (Ong, 1967, p. 129). Furthermore, in sound processes, knowing is clearly a live event rather than a dead possession; a relational process and not an individual act, and is from within inter-action rather than the product of an outside observer's distant gaze^{xxix}. Relating of this sort has been linked with soft self/other differentiation (Berman, 1981; Berman, 1990; Ong, 1967).

In Ong's view, "the word, and particularly *the spoken word*, is curiously reciprocating" (Ong, 1967, p. 125, emphasis added). For example, and as I noted earlier, the past is in the present in the sense that every action echoes and develops what has gone before. Sounds echo and resonate and rhythms synchronise. Inside and outside come together, not in the sense of inside and outside some singular and bounded Self (as in subject-object relations), but in the sense of interiors "manifesting themselves" – such as a cave when a wolf howls - or the body of a violin when a string is bowed or plucked (see Ong, 1967, p. 117). So relating goes on in variable reciprocations^{xxx} that allow sounds, multiple overtones, multiple voices, to be heard. This seems very relevant to our critical interest in soft differentiation as "relational responsiveness" (McNamee & Gergen, 1999) is impossible when one voice dominates. A sound metaphor seems to open up new possibilities for listening and for going on in ways that are open to and appreciative of otherness.

A sound discourse of listening.

Earlier I described subject-object relations as constructing an active subject who is largely closed to other^{xxxi}, where "other" includes other possible selves, one's own body (as a possession that is separate from one's knowing mind), and other people and things viewed as independently existing objects. In subject-object ways of relating, the subject acts to

construct knowledge about other as an object and acts (on the basis of that knowledge) to form, mould, or structure other. Self is understood to possess a private interiority that is closed to other, to that which is not-self^{xxxii}. And closed subjects already know what they want to know and what they want to do with that knowledge. And closed subjects relate to other in ways that are *self-interested*, that speak for and about other, and in ways that are largely closed to other possible self/world relations.

The assumption of subject-object relations seriously limits the way listening can be understood. Listening becomes something that someone does in order to know other as a separately existing entity (ontology). Listening becomes more or less instrumental in the production of propositional knowledge and is evaluated in relation to issues of accuracy and truth (epistemology) rather than in terms of its role in self and world history making. Space or emptiness has to be filled since silence implies no-thingness. Silence becomes a void to be a-voided (Berman, 1990) - emptiness needs to be filled with things rather than left open for appreciation.

To re-construct listening in relation to soft self/other differentiation requires letting go of overly sharp distinctions between the senses, between the senses and the mind, between the mind and the body, between inside and outside self, and between self and other. In the absence of these hard differentiations, and in the presence of our discourse of relational processes and sound participation, listening can be shifted out of the “self contained individual” (Sampson, 1995) and into embodied participation in local/cultural, local/historical processes. Our discussion of sound spoke of processes of coming together, of processes that “allow sounds, overtones, multiple voices... to be heard”. This brings me to “the other side of language” (Corradi Fiumara, 1990) that is, to the listening side, rather than the more commonly emphasised talking and world structuring “side” of subject-object relations.

Corradi Fiumara reflected on Western philosophy's one-sided attention to “the moulding ordering sense of ‘saying’” or *logos* (Corradi Fiumara, 1990, p. 2). Corradi Fiumara argued that attention to *logos* constitutes attention to “saying without listening” and so to “a generalized form of domination and control”(Heidegger, 1975 in Corradi Fiumara, 1990, p.2). She continued by making use of Heidegger's exploration of the relatively neglected verb form of *logos*, that is, *legein*. Heidegger's *Early Greek Thinking* provides a key text in which we find an emphasis that can help us with possible links between sound listening and soft differentiation.

For Heidegger, listening as *legein* includes “gathering”, “heeding” or “hearkening”. “But gathering is more than mere amassing. To gathering belongs a collecting which brings under shelter”, an action performed with a view to “safekeeping” (Heidegger, 1975, in Corradi Fiumara, p. 4). He continued by connecting gathering with laying: “Laying brings to lie, in that it lets things lie together before us” and “whatever lies before us involves us and therefore concerns us...Laying is the letting-lie-before – which is gathered into itself – of that which comes together into presence” (Heidegger, 1975, in Corradi Fiumara, p. 5). Given our earlier discussion of visual and auditory actants, it is perhaps surprising that Heidegger's language, or at least someone's translation of it from German to English, seems so dominated by visual imagery. Perhaps "gathering" and "letting lie" that which involves us requires sound metaphors such as the reciprocal allowing and appreciation of overtones, of multiple voices, of otherness.

Heidegger's discussion of *legein* resonates with our earlier discussion of the ontological^{xxxi} significance of relational processes. His discussion seems to imply that soft differentiation is constructed in processes characterized by listening in the sense of gathering and letting lie, giving space to otherness. Sound processes and listening as *legein* may provide opportunities for “the patient labours of co-existence” – labours that seem to need a

“modesty and mildness of language that can exorcise the risk that it (i.e., language) becomes an end in itself” (Corradi Fiumara, 1990, p.40).

For example, management and organisation studies could expand their limited focus to on the forming/ordering/moulding/structuring aspects of language (*logos*), on "power over" other, that is, on achieving closure. Such expansion could include exploration of communications and language as sound processes, listening as *legein*, and power as power to – power to be open to soft self/other differentiation. Work of this kind would constitute a radically changed orientation to eco-logical issues and to notions such as servant leadership, empowering, green management, flat organisations and so on. Work of this kind would radically reconstitute the present range of holistic approaches such as cybernetics, chaos theory, and complexity theory. So, for example, these approaches can now become embodied and enchanted, live and sensuous, can embrace somatic life, emptiness, reflexivity and openness (cf Berman, 1990, p.307). These possibilities only become available through a *critical* relational constructionist discourse. I conclude with a brief reconstruction of inquiry and intervention in relation to (1) a critical relational constructionist discourse and (2) soft self/other differentiation – reconstructions that offer a changed aesthetic for inquiry and intervention.

A changed aesthetic for inquiry and intervention

Discourses of inquiry as an activity that is separate from intervention make sense in relation to subject-object constructions of relations. For example, scientific inquiry requires separation of self (e.g., as scientist) from other (as the object to be known) for the proper production of objective knowledge. Intervention would simply be an act of dominance without the legitimising discourse of being rationally grounded in scientific observation, neutrality, and facts. However, the distinction between inquiry and intervention is no longer quite so

plausible when *all actions* are seen to have the potential for changing how processes go on and influencing the realities that are made.

In addition, critical sensitivity to power and to construction means that any claim to have observed that this is how things really or probably are (as in inquiry) now must be viewed as a claim that (1) reflects a particular local “form of life” and (2) has the potential to *influence* how others define reality. As we have seen, a critical constructionist orientation directs attention to inter-acts, to the forms of life they invite, support, or suppress and to how they do so, paying especial attention to multiplicity (or its absence) and to relations (different but equal, or dominance). So the interest(s) pursued by a critical relational orientation must differ from those of, for example, the received view of science.

In the present view, critical interests include (a) opening up rather than closing down possibilities and (b) transformation within soft self/other differentiation rather than intervention through subject-object relations. When all processes are viewed as ongoing, multiple, and simultaneous joinings of texts, it becomes possible to view all relational processes as both inquiry and intervention, to view both inquiry and intervention as relational processes and, reflexively, to study them in that way (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Returning to our interest in ways of relating that only softly differentiate self and other, we can imagine and view as legitimate forms of inquiry and forms of organisational and community intervention that would be unimaginable or just plain wrong. Furthermore, we gain a very particular understanding of practices such as participative action research and appreciative inquiry (Hosking, 2004) – practices that do not separate inquiry & intervention. The following constitute some core themes of such critical practices.

Processes of knowing and influencing. Recognition and significance is given to the influence potential of all acts - asking questions, voice tone, words used, posture and so forth,

- and artefacts - interview findings, percentage summaries, diagnostic classifications and the like. Any and all of these have the potential to contribute to the social construction of reality^{xxxiv}. All acts now are theorised as having the potential to change^{xxxv} how processes go on and change agency is located in ongoing processes and not in some-one referred to as a change agent.

Making space for multiple local realities. Attempts are made to give space to and work with multiplicity rather than suppressing or homogenising it through the application of statistical procedures or drives to consensus. In general terms, polyphony may be constructed in non-hierarchical ways that recognise and support difference and that construct “power to” rather than what I earlier called “power over”. In principle, this means creating space for voices from all local forms of life in inter-textual relation with some issue. However, the point of such participation is neither to increase the acceptance of someone else’s decision^{xxxvi} nor is it to increase the quality of a (consensus) solution. Rather, it is a way of including and enabling multiple local realities in different but equal relation.

Centring possibilities and appreciation. The view that relational processes *construct* realities has major implications for all inquiry and change work. For many (though not all) it means working with possibilities rather than with closed recipes, and with what is positively valued rather than constructing problems and critiques grounded in a particular form of life. For many, although not all, it means working “appreciatively” (e.g., Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). The shift to possibilities can invite change work that helps participants learn how better to improvise and to imagine new ways of going on together (see Hosking, 2004). Evaluation work is also reconstructed to be a multi-voiced, appreciative, and reflexive quality if change work. The shift to appreciation is a way of recognising the participation of multiple forms of

life and their differing constructions of knowledge. It is a way of working in power-full processes – working in ways that might facilitate “power to” and “power with” rather than power over. The shift to appreciation is a way of recognising that we are always already in the middle of relational realities and therefore without secure grounds for claiming self as superior (e.g., more knowing) or for critique of other.

Both inquiry and intervention. Because relational processes construct realities, there is no requirement (although, of course, one could) to narrate activities as *either* inquiry *or* intervention; rather a ‘both-and’ approach is enabled. Participative action research is clearly a move in this direction, as are co-inquiry and collaborative inquiry although they are more usually framed in relation to a humanistic discourse rather than a discourse of critical relational constructionism. Change work shifts from intervention - suggestive of “power over”, to “transformation” - suggestive of ways of relating that (re)construct “power with” and “power to”. Large-scale change methodologies such as Future Search are (re)constructed as future making in the ‘here and now’ and not as media for planning subsequent interventions; appreciative inquiry becomes a way of making self/other relations – in an ongoing present . Care-full questioning and care-full listening are reconstructed as ways of doing different but equal relations.

Questioning and listening form relations and realities. The present interest in soft self/other differentiation gives a changed role and significance to asking questions, to how they are asked, why, and by whom. For example, rather than seeing questioning as finding out about some pre-existing reality, it now can be theorised as formative of relational realities. Good questions are theorised as those that help to enlarge possible worlds and possible ways of being in relationship (see Harding, 1998). Careful attention to listening to other is centred

as it is in many approaches that aim to facilitate dialogue rather than debate, such as for example, the public conversations project and the MIT dialogue project (Isaacs, 1993). But, given our present critical orientation and interest, the importance of listening lies, so to speak, in its relational message and its role in openness and appreciation. To listen in ways that are more open to other(ness), to multiple voices, and to possibilities involves listening in ways that are both “not knowing” (Anderson, 1997) and not self-centred. Listening that is open and appreciative seems crucial in relation to “power with” and “power to”.

Constructing in conceptual and non-conceptual performances. Of course relating involves much more than conceptual language - listening has a wider context in sound processes and oral/aural cultures. Many change practitioners work with *how* people talk. For example, they might explore the dominant metaphors (such as business is war). Equally, they might explore who talks the most, who interrupts, who claims authority and expertise and on what basis and so forth. Similarly, practitioners might work with and through performances such as acting, dance, and other kinds of body work, collective sculpture making or singing. Learning how to learn, getting unstuck, constructing “power to” are central to such approaches. Performative changework, whatever its form, achieves a radically changed significance in the context of a critical relational constructionist discourse that collapses hard distinctions such those between mind and body, knowing and action, and rational - irrational. Indeed, non-conceptual forms of relating may be especially helpful in avoiding the subject-object constructions built in to most current, natural languages.

A deep ecological approach. When self and other are theorised as co-constructed, care of other is also care of the (moral)self. Discourses of care no longer have to be understood in relation to ‘soft’ humanist narratives and opposed to a ‘hard’ (factual) world of for example,

economic realities and relations that are (rationally) instrumentalised, secularised, and disembodied (see Hosking, 2000). In the present thought style, Einstein's question 'is the universe friendly' seems less relevant and less critical than the question 'how can self and other relate in ways that allow and support inter-dependent, different but equal relations'.

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ⁱ e.g., constructivist *theories*.

ⁱⁱ Even though we actively ‘organise’ other in relation to our own discourses – just as Other organises us.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although more or less attention will be given to social influences and some theorists use the language of social constructionism to emphasise the role of other persons and cultural factors.

^{iv} So, the language of “critical realism” is offered as a replacement for “naïve realism” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

^v The more common distinction between means and ends, processes and outcomes is here collapsed: the path is the goal’ so to speak (e.g., Brown and Hosking, 1984).

^{vi} And Guba & Lincoln are in good company: many writers characterise constructionism or constructivism as ‘mental constructions’ and as idealist and relativist e.g., Bem & Looren de Jong, 2006)

^{vii} e.g., Locke, Hume and Kant, Piaget and Popper (see Morley and Hunt).

^{viii} Morley and Hunt make reference to e.g., the works of ‘the late’ Wittgenstein (1953), some feminist philosophers of science, and Continental philosophers involved in Hermeneutics (the meaning of texts).

^{ix} See e.g., (Chia, 1995).

^x and not as a given – as ‘how things really are’

^{xi} By which I mean to refer to the entitative view in which persons are ‘always already’ theorised with their own ontology - with their entity characteristics - such that understandings of processes are limited by meta-theoretical assumptions about ontology and epistemology.

^{xii} In Latour’s view, cultures (we could also say “forms of life”) differ in how they do this and differ in the extent to which they are able to enrol and control reality constructions. Science is different from other cultures by being able to act on a bigger scale.

^{xiii} The language of “tool and result” is taken from Holtzman & Newman and is another way of making the point that process is also product.

^{xiv} I presume that constructionist theorists’ common reference to “language-based” interactions (Gergen, 1994)) is intended to refer to the ubiquitous involvement of conceptual language.

^{xv} Which some may take as good reason for not getting too hung up on games that focus on the question ‘what is it?’ Perhaps Lewis Carroll was playing with this idea in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. There the mouse was telling a story in which he declared that

various named characters ‘ “found it advisable - “found *what?*” Said the Duck. “Found it”, the mouse replied rather crossly: “of course you know what it means.” ’

^{xvi} Here viewed as re-constructed stabilities characteristic of a particular “form of life”.

^{xvii} More usually I have used the language of ‘politics’ to speak of these aspects of relational processes.

^{xviii} As I have said, this includes the processes that some from of life might call “research”.

^{xix} Of course this discourse is itself a local/historical construction which discourages my reflections on both hard or soft differentiation – only having experience of the latter would produce a very different discourse – and in an ‘insider voice’.

^{xx} And different forms of life may differently construct what is (locally) viewed as knowledge. For example, engineering may value numeric calculations and precision up to and beyond three decimal places whilst management may value ‘ball park’ estimates and trust.

^{xxi} The possible meanings of appreciation and openness are seriously limited by assumptions of one real world and knowledge of the same.

^{xxii} And not restricted to mind operations and rational acts.

^{xxiii} without the linear construction of history

^{xxiv} There is a view that openness is the ‘natural’ way for humans to be – and that out of openness and space – self and other are created...we create closure; I shall not explore these views here.

^{xxv} “The modern age was thus much more the child of typography than it has commonly been made out to be” (Ong, 1967.p9).

^{xxvi} unlike complex and polysemous utterances

^{xxvii} Many constructionist writings theorise language as action and yet research practices typically turn live talk into visualised and frozen words - into dead interview transcripts that can be analysed...perhaps this has more transformative significance than has commonly be realised.

^{xxviii} “To hear = To be” and “Being is only oneness” (Berendt, 1992 p.48)

^{xxix} Again we see that vision and Subject – object relations go together see Ong p219-231.

^{xxx} And does not have to refer to a relatively fixed boundary between self and other

^{xxxi} not listening? Or just listening to those things that fit their discourse of other?.

^{xxxii} Interestingly, Julian Jaynes (1976) In *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* wrote about the mind of early Greek man as *open* to the Gods – open for them to speak to him and tell him what to do... so the gradual construction of the bounded, possessive individual involved shifting the locus of agency away from the Gods and placing it in the knowing individual. Perhaps this is also connected with the story of Adam and Eve who once they became knowing could no longer remain in the enchanted world, the Garden of Eden.

^{xxxiii} rather than epistemological

^{xxxiv} This is very different from mainstream approaches that differentiate data gathering, analysis, intervention design, and implementation. In the latter case, activities are understood *either* ‘find out’/seek to know about *or* attempt to influence ‘other’.

^{xxxv} Only the “potential” as it depends on how they are supplemented and whether or not they get warranted as ‘real and good’

^{xxxvi} as in participative management and common forms of industrial democracy and worker participation.