

Lets not talk about it for a change

Dian Marie Hosking	Andy Bass
Professor elect in Development & Change Dept. of Policy & Organisation Studies Tilburg University, The Netherlands dhosking@compuserve.com http://www.geocities.com/dian_marie_hosking	Freelance consultant APBass@aol

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Abstract

Here is presented a social constructionist account of relational processes in which the focus is on joint (rather than individual) acts or "co-ordinations". Co-ordinations are considered to be achieved between acts, artifacts, and nature, (re)constructing social realities. Such arguments enable and warrant some interesting possibilities concerning persons, processes, and change. Not least is the changed significance of shared understanding and talk 'about' reality constructions. A light hearted but entirely serious exploration then is conducted of some narratives in relation to which certain shifts make sense. The first is to shift focus to the present in relation to possible futures (rather than talk about constructions of the past and of problems). The second is to act from 'within' local co-ordination processes and construct "power to" (rather than try to achieve change from 'outside'). Third, it is suggested to accept multiple local constructions (rather than e.g., a shared vision). A running theme, and the central narrative of this piece, is that talking *about* what is 'real and good' limits possibilities for change. Other inclusive ways of knowing and being are proposed that might open up richer relational possibilities.

keywords: co-construction processes, knowing, power to, inclusive relations, change

An Unfortunate Interlude

Dr Sub: Oh hello Rita, I won't keep you long. I want to talk to you about the student feedback on your lecturing. I'm sorry to say that it's pretty awful and I need to know what you intend to do about it.

Dr Objecting: What do you mean 'its awful?' That's not how I remember it. Anyway, that's not why you said you wanted to see me.

Dr Sub: Someone said that you said you didn't want to be there anyway - what kind of thing is that to say to students?

Dr Objecting: You have to be kidding. What the hell is this? Where's the Business School ducking stool?

Dr Sub: This is a talk about your feedback. You need to be seen to do something about it and it's my job to see that you do.

Dr Objecting: The hell it is.

Dr Sub: Let me try again, are you going to take responsibility for this?

Dr Objecting: No I well am not! (they spend the best part of an hour recycling through these themes and finally -)

Dr Sub: For the last time, are you going to take responsibility for this feedback?

(Dr Objecting repeats some more Anglo-Saxon expressions and then storms out of Dr. Sub's office).

Of course Dr. Objecting and Dr. Subject could get together later and talk *about* their row, the view each has of other, their relations... However there are ways they could 'go on' in relation that do not involve talk *about* these matters – ways that might work better in some sense. These will be overviewed. But first it will first be necessary to say something about the perspective in relation to which these other ways become possible and possibly sensible. The perspective is here referred to as social constructionism and draws upon the contributions of a great many theorists and practitioners.

Some Constructionist Premises

The term social constructionism embraces many variations in theoretical perspective, interests, and methods. These variants might be considered to be found, to mention just a few in: feminist studies, radical approaches to therapy, ethnogenics, the sociology of knowledge, and symbolic interactionism. Indeed, perhaps it is better to speak of *constructionisms* (e.g., Gergen, 1994; Potter, 1996). A common concern is with *the processes by which knowledge is constructed in everyday activities*. Further, a few theorists also include 'doing science', and scientific claims to knowledge as one such everyday activity. In exploring such views of knowledge and praxis, certain assumptions are made that depart from the "received view" of objects (people and 'the world') and our knowledge of them (see e.g., Woolgar, 1996; Slife and Williams, 1995). So, for example, the processes of knowing are shifted from some knowing mind to co-ordinated action (co-construction processes) and knowing and doing are joined. Knowledge of self and other - conventionally regarded as independently existing people and things – becomes viewed as co-constructed in co-ordinated action. So, what some have called "possessive individualism" - the view of personhood as bounded, as "self contained" (see Sampson, 1993) - is set aside in favor of a much more co-constructing relational conception that joins persons and worlds. Three interrelated constructionist premises will be sketched. Some of their implications for talking *about* past misunderstandings and relational problems (cf. Dr Sub. and Dr. Objecting) will be explored along with other 'new' possibilities for constructing changes.

Language as action, action as communication

Perhaps the most commonly held view of language treats it as if it stands in for, or represents, things in the world. Another, not necessarily contradictory, view suggests that language can be

considered as performative, as action, in that it brings people and things into being. In addition, this performative view may be joined with the presumption that language, that all action, is social or relational in that *joint action* (co-ordinations) constructs social realities (see Burr, 1995 for a very readable introduction). For example, saying something ("hello") may be regarded as an action or communication open to be joined with or supplemented by some other action ("nice to meet you"): language can be regarded as doing (rather than naming), as making (rather than representing). This emphasis on language as performance makes it possible to join what more usually is separated, especially talk and action. For example, co-ordinations could include receiving an e-mail & replying (or deleting or...), or an extended hand - which is clasped and shaken. So action now can be considered to include written and spoken words, non-verbal gestures, voice tone, artifacts of human activity such as a logo, interior decor, music... Action may be viewed as ongoing co-ordinations of acts and artifacts (artif-act) co-constructing a communicative process (e.g., Gergen, 1994, 1995; Dachler and Hosking, 1995).

Co-constructing realities

For any act or artifact to exist as a social reality, it must be co-ordinated with, or supplemented, in a communication process. This means that *social realities are co-constructed*, rather than an individual affair. This general line of talk is what is here meant by the term "social" in talk of "social constructionism". But this is *not* talk about interpersonal processes - a line of talk that goes together with the assumption of intrapersonal processes (e.g., cognition) and persons separate from other independently existing realities (other persons, markets...). Rather, *this is talk of relations between acts*. This can be illustrated by reference to 'the sound of one hand clapping' - which might remind us that to make something involves co-ordination - in this case of two hands. More generally, it is possible to speak of co-ordinations as being between text and con-text or "act and supplement" (see Gergen, 1994; 1995). Staying with talk of hands for the moment, how some act (text) is supplemented is not in the hands of the actor - even though it may seem to be when a particular supplement has become conventional. To return to an earlier illustration, one person may extend their hand and another may shake it. However, the co-ordinating act could instead be to grab the proffered hand and wrestle the person to the ground - or pointedly to ignore it; the process 'goes on' differently depending on the supplement. A variety of language tools are used to speak of and write about these relational constructions. The terms narrative and discourse now are widely used (see e.g., Mischler, 1986; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), although they perhaps are too suggestive of *conceptual language* as action and *people* as actors. The term 'narrative', when used here, is intended to refer to *processes as they construct relations between acts* (of whatever kind), centering co-ordinations and constructions, rather than individuals.

Co-constructing people and worlds

Co-ordinations of the sort outlined *make and remake* people and worlds in ongoing communicative processes. This is meant here by social *construction* and construction is located in 'running' co-ordinations. The way someone or something is known is always with reference to many interwoven and cross-cutting referents (some might say discourses or "narratives") reconstructed in communicative processes. Such processes both (re)construct *stability* - in which case we might call them socially constructed conventions, cultures, or institutions... (see e.g., Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1979; Schutz, 1967) - and construct *possibilities for change*. In this view, relational processes re-construct what can only be known to be *local-historical* rather than general-transcendental conventions and possibilities (knowledges, truths, people and worlds...). Further, such processes (re)construct *realities as multiple, simultaneous, and emergent 'products'* of multiple co-ordinations and not as individual states of mind (subjective knowledges) that more or less closely approximate some transcendental truth. Processes might get stuck such that co-ordinations reconstruct what seem to be "games without end" (e.g., Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, 1974), or construct some-one or some-thing new

through possibilities previously left uncoordinated.

It is instructive to compare this view of constructionism with more the perhaps more familiar constructivist perspective. In our view, the latter retains: the assumption of individuals and individual action; an emphasis on language as the vehicle for representing - Self and Other (self and the world); the assumption of independently existing realities (ontologies), and; the presumption of objective, and subjective knowledges. A little later social constructionist premises will be explored in terms of some of their (different) implications for the pragmatics of change.

Projects

Constructionist arguments seem enormously rich in that they invite new questions and new projects. Where academic projects are concerned, relational lines of argument have been pursued in two ways (see Pearce, 1992). In the first, and by far the most common, researchers investigate *socially constructed 'products'*, discourses (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987) or narratives (e.g., Sarbin, 1986). So, for example, researchers' investigate the many different relational constructions that participants in therapy construct of Self and Other(s). The second sort of project - and the one most of interest here - focuses, not on products, but on *processes of co-construction*. However, constructionist premises make distinctions between product and process a matter of point of view and emphasis. This is because socially constructed products or content can only be frozen process, so to speak, much like the relationship between a snapshot and a movie. This said, the distinction is useful for pointing to different sorts of constructionist project and for drawing attention to the under-theorising of processes (see Pearce, 1992).

Turning to interests in *processes*, these also are pursued in two ways. The first sort of project is the familiar scientific study as understood in the "received" or textbook view of science (e.g., Woolgar, 1996). Here the researcher acts to observe Other (whilst attempting to minimize bias) and to represent in language, what they did and observed. In projects of this kind investigators construct Self as researcher, their research methodology, their actions... as separate from other - *self as apart from*, rather than 'a part of', the someone or something they (according to their own narrative) wish to know about. Separation of Self and Other is taken-for-granted in the former's constructions of self as able to know about other (e.g., some leadership process or organizational change program) and able to use knowledge to achieve "power over" (Gergen, 1995) Other. Processes are understood as produced by the individual acting as subject in one-way relations with a knowable and formable object. Consulting practices, be they represented as individual or organizational, may do something similar i.e., be constructed by the consultant as if self were outside and above the process being studied, able expertly to analyze and diagnose (research) as a basis for subsequent influence (intervention).

The second sort of 'process project' is one in which practitioners set aside narratives of individual acts, observation, and representation... and instead reference narratives of *self as part of* the process and therefore part of what they (self) can know. This opens up all sorts of possibilities. In particular, (a) it becomes possible to see self as a relational construction - co-constructed in relation to other - and changing in different self-other (text-context) relations. In this view, self embraces other in yin - yang, both/and, inclusive relations, rather than being separate and self - contained in either-or, exclusive relations. It is vital to appreciate that this particular "participative" concept of relations is a *world view* (Reason, 1994) and *not* a methodology of consultation or governance as it has been understood e.g., in "self contained individualism" (Sampson, 1993), in "the received view" of science, and related positivist practices of industrial democracy or civic decision making. Further, (b) these constructionist premises invite narratives of knowledge (knowing) that are radically different both from abstract knowledge (that can be abstracted from its local i.e., narrative/discursive/act-supplement contexts), radically different from propositional knowledge (as knowledge 'about' some-thing or some-one

that has its own ontology). *This* variant of constructionism joins knowing (epistemology) and existence (ontology) - both now collapsed together and discoursed as ongoing co-constructions. As will be seen later, these views of process offer some previously unconsidered or unwarranted possibilities for change.

Constructionist narratives offer all sorts of possibilities to deconstruct and blur conventional distinctions between e.g., research and intervention, finding out (knowing) and influencing (changing), consultant (researcher) and client (researched). It should be stressed that these are *possibilities* and not requirements. There is no *one* constructionist method or project that is generally relevant, applicable, or helpful (e.g., Gergen, 1994; Woolgar, 1996); the present argument is not that talking *about* e.g., some person or event is *necessarily* unhelpful. Rather, for example, a possible consulting methodology could involve attempts to coordinate with clients in ways that do not claim an outside and 'above' (superior knowing and influencing) position (see e.g., Anderson, 1997; Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar, 1995; Weisbord and Janov, 1995). Such an approach may be adopted, for example, to give voice to multiple, simultaneous, local construction processes and to new (local) social realities. Such processes might construct e.g., "power to" in both/and relations (where change is constructed from within), rather than "power over" in either/or relations (where change is imposed from the 'outside'). Later discussions will explore how an organizational consultant might work with both/and, inclusive, transformational ways of relating as ways to change.

The present line of talk has theorized processes as ongoing, as referencing narratives 'already in place', so to speak, and as always offering possibilities to 'go on' in changed ways. This should not be understood as a linear conception - a past, present, future - conception of process. Rather, in this view, process is an ongoing here and now, full of possibilities that may or may not be realized in some continuing sequence of co-ordinations. As an illustration, consider *this* ongoing moment - *this* ongoing now of co-ordinating with this written text, supplementing it with multiple, interrelated narratives, for example, of science, knowledge, people and how they may co-ordinate. These are processes of bringing 'con-texts' to the text and actively constructing relations, reconstructing institutions, (re)constructing social conventions. Multiple co-ordination processes are likely to reference (at least some) different narratives, including various narratives of *self in relation to other* and narratives of one's own pragmatic purposes or projects. For example, narratives referenced as justifications for getting hold of this article could include seeing if it is useful for a student, wanting to reference it in an article of your own, or needing it to line the cat's basket.

Co-ordinations form the basic material for discussion and illustration in the rest of this article. It may be helpful, as you read on, to consider the present reader-writer relationship as one example of the kind of processes being discussed. But it is useful to re-emphasize the earlier comment that talk of co-ordinations here is intended to include many forms of action and not only written and spoken talk. In addition, talk of co-ordinations implicates multiple constructions of self, other and relationship (see e.g., Dachler and Hosking, 1995) including you, the reader's, construction of self in relation to this text, for example, as included or excluded by these constructionist arguments. It also should be stressed that the relational viewpoint is not being proposed as the one and only truth - this would contradict the relational premises outlined. Some possible implications of these constructionist premises will next be explored in relation to conventional narratives of talk and its value in constructing shared understandings. Illustrations will be given throughout, not as supporting evidence, but to facilitate co-ordination with this line of thinking.

Constructing the Illusion of Understanding

In the third film of the *Star Wars* trilogy, *The Return of the Jedi*, the heroes, led by Luke Skywalker, are captured by a tribe of hostile bear-like warriors called the Ewoks. There seems

every possibility that the Ewoks intend to feast on their prisoners. Fortunately for Luke and his band, however, his loyal and fawning protocol droid C3P0 is mistaken by the Ewoks for some sort of Messianic god-creature whose arrival is predicted by their tribal mythology. He is accorded the awe and respect appropriate for a divine being and proceeds to use his position to enroll the support of the Ewoks in Luke's bid to rescue Princess Leia from the evil forces of the Empire. In the ensuing battle with imperial stormtroopers, many Ewoks are killed, although, happily, Luke, Leia and C3P0 survive.

A useful strategy for enhancing creativity, innovation, and change is periodically to question assumptions about reality. Sometimes, the more obviously true something seems, the more profitable it is to challenge it and so open up possibilities for change. A conventional assumption in recent Western cultures is that *a key component of relationship is understanding*. For example, couples seeking counseling might be given exercises designed to improve their respective understandings of themselves (self) and their partner (other) and their relations. Perhaps more obviously relevant to us here are approaches to organizational development, conflict resolution, and change that make use of dialogue in the hope that this will increase mutual understanding e.g., between different organizational groups. Common ingredients include an emphasis on spoken dialogue, on unfolding different meanings, through reflection for example, so that people "become conscious of the very process by which they form tacit assumptions and solidify beliefs... surfacing fundamental assumptions and gaining insight into why they arise..." (Isaacs, 1993 p.25-26). So, for example, participants may discuss locally employed categories such as management and union, how each 'others' the Other, and feelings that usually are left unstated. Uncovering, inquiring, diagnosis... understanding the underlying 'whys', to learn about learning, is how this "organizational learning" approach often is narrated (e.g., Senge, 1970). Many of the recently popular approaches to metaphor narrate the business consultant as the one who may diagnose and understand metaphors (and their underlying assumptions) and then change them - to "induce new ways of conceiving a situation" (Marshak, 1993; p.55) as a tool for organizational change.

On the face of it, this emphasis on understanding, and on talk as a tool for building understanding and achieving change, might seem reasonable and helpful. But this 'understanding of understanding' references some problematic taken-for-granted, namely that people experience internal subjective states of mind, and that one person can gain an accurate knowledge of another's mind state. Both assumptions are vulnerable to constructionist critiques e.g., of "possessive individualism", including deconstructions of mind as a taken-for-granted characteristic of person, the notion of mind contents, and the assumption that these contents are knowable - by self or by some other. These presumptions are justifiable in relation to a particular "community of practice" (Brown and Duguid, 1994; Lave and Wenger, 1990) or "language game" (Wittgenstein, 1953). However these presumptions also present many problems including those that arise from the treatment of mind as a separate subject that knows other (minds...) as objects, along with the difficulty of theorising how one may make one's own mind the object of ones own regard (object) as a knowing subject! (see e.g., Gergen, 1994). Even if one decides to accept the notion of individual minds, the assumption that mind reading is possible is perhaps even harder to accept - although, in practice, people constantly make statements which presuppose their ability to read minds e.g. "the staff are not committed to the new change program" (see e.g., Bandler and Grinder, 1975, 1976).

Seth: What does it taste like?

Maggie: It tastes like... a pear. Don't you know what a pear tastes like?

Seth: I don't know what a pear tastes like to you.

(From the film *City of Angels*)

As has been suggested, social constructionist premises and arguments make possible other language games, other presumptions, (see e.g., Berman, 1983; Gardner, 1985; Gergen, 1994; Jaynes, 1976). Instead of assuming that self may understand and be understood by other(s) it becomes possible to adopt the following presuppositions, not as truths, but as working assumptions, held lightly and regarded always as open to revision.

It is not possible to know what someone else means

Seth realizes that he doesn't know what a pear tastes like to Maggie. His question "what does it taste like?" is, in a way, nonsensical, since there is nothing Maggie can liken it to that they can knowingly share as a common reference. When she attempts to elaborate by telling him that the fruit she is eating tastes sweet, he remains none the wiser since, again, they have no way of sharing a referent for the quality 'sweet'. By extension, it can be suggested that it may not be possible to convey the meaning of any word, gesture or symbol to another mind. This is not to say that the conversation between Seth and Maggie, or indeed that any other conversation, should be viewed as non-sensical. This point will be returned to shortly.

It is not possible to understand someone else in the sense of knowing what they mean

If it is not possible to know that we share a reference to some thing, experience or quality, then it follows that we may not understand someone in the sense usually implied in western psychologised cultures. When given an 'explanation' by someone, or an answer to the question why, we have no way of knowing if we share the same meaning with the other person. Of course, one may say "I know what you mean" or "I understand", however, such utterances can be viewed as acts that help a conversation (communicative process) to go on. Such acts may be co-ordinated with as implying that one is listening, inviting other to continue... rather than statements that represent how things really are and therefore open to a judgment of true or false. Another possibility is to say "I don't understand - please say more". But then, whilst bravely attempting to clarify, Other is necessarily introducing new sources of equivocality - and this process is (in principle) endless. This is soon recognized by parent and child (lecturer and student, supervisor and subordinate...) alike when the questioner refuses to accept as adequate the proffered answer and continues to ask "why" (see e.g., Garfinkle, 1967). Some of the same difficulties are encountered in attempts to produce an accurate and exhaustive specification of procedures for someone else to understand and execute (e.g., Hosking and Morley, 1991).

Mistaken identity is the norm.

Out of the illusion of understanding arises the illusion of knowing who (or what) some other person (or thing) is and, indeed, the illusion of the possibility of knowing one's Self. The Star Wars example is only a slightly exaggerated case (which turns out happily for Luke Skywalker and his band, but less so for the Ewoks). Presumably the surviving Ewoks still believed (mistakenly) that C3P0 was a Messiah, and therefore that their dead compatriots were martyrs in a holy war. Unfortunately, it is not only in children's films that such communications lead to death on a wide scale.

It is not necessary to understand in order to act jointly

If it is not possible to know that people understand each other then how might it be possible to describe what is going on when people co-ordinate - with words, gestures, artifacts..? Joint action has here been spoken of as an ongoing process in which the illusion of understanding may or may

not be reproduced, as a process that (re)constructs stability and possibilities for change. Given these moves, it becomes possible to narrate joint action as simultaneously constructing *multiple different* projects rather than e.g., actions reflecting shared understandings of one project and associated co-ordinations. For example, three academics may co-ordinate their actions to organize a conference and may do so in relation to very different projects. X may wish to increase his/her visibility, Y to find more persons to dialogue with, and Z to appease her Dean. And, as was seen earlier, the Ewoks and Luke and his colleagues co-ordinated in ways that helped the latter in their battle with the Empire and allowed the Ewoks to fulfill their destiny as prophesied in the oral history of their culture.

Satir's work on "people making" also illustrates joint action that does not depend on understanding another's mind contents. She showed how certain communication patterns usefully may be understood as conventional *co-ordinations* instead of individual acts or states (Satir, 1972). Two of her communication categories are "blaming" and "placating". For example, blaming - fault finding, "you never do anything right", "you always..." - can be 'run off' smoothly when supplemented with placating - apologising, agreeing, "if I could just...", "I would but..." (see e.g., Grinder and Bandler, 1975). So social realities can be thought of as constructed in interlocking acts. Further whilst constructing what is real (and not real), relational processes also are constructing what is good (bad) - again in relation to some particular set of narratives. So, for example, a couple may or may not construct their blaming-placating patterns as problematic, and the Ewoks, or at least those who survived, may or may not deem their past actions as wise!

It is preferable to know that one does not and cannot understand

Following from the above, it could be preferable to act on the assumption that one does not and cannot understand Other. Indeed, countless deaths, disasters, cock-ups and comedies may have been produced by people assuming that shared understanding is possible - either by believing they *do* understand - or by concluding that they do not, that they have tried and failed, and that other courses of action now are required (Dr. Sub please note). Change programs - whatever the target system - regularly invest huge resources, emotional, financial, time... in talking and listening - in *trying to understand* (know) - and in *trying to intervene* (influence) e.g., to develop a common language and shared understandings. Where would management development and planned organizational change be without visioning, without attempts to get people to 'buy in' to someone else's values, goals, or mission statement, without team-building and leadership training, and - most recently - without shared metaphors as the basis for action? What else could change be if not constructed by a knowing and influencing Self, understanding and intervening to achieve power over a separate (exclusive) and formable Other? What other possibilities might relational arguments make available for changed ways of 'going on'?

Why reflect? Lets not talk 'about' things

Recent reconstructions of language as action (rather than representation) seem often to be accompanied by change tactics that emphasize talking 'about' things as a way to change them (e.g., Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990; Barrett, Thomas & Hocevar, 1995, Isaacs, 1993). However, constructionist premises offer some interesting reflections on such practices. For example, relational premises lead directly to the view that talking about e.g., poor relations between management and engineers *is a social practice that reconstructs exactly those relations*. Returning to their row, Dr Sub. and Dr Objecting may attempt to discuss their contretemps in an attempt to 'clear up' misunderstandings and to mutually agree a way forward. However, by talking about the past they reconstruct (what they represent as) the past in the present. So, for example, in answer to the question "what kind of relationship is this?" a constructionist theorist might say "the kind of relationship in which we talk about what kind of relationship it is"; talking 'about' things is a bit of people and world making that may well reproduce the status quo. For

example:

Dr Objecting: Hi. I'm glad I caught you. Can we take a few minutes to talk about our row the other day. I'd feel better if we could sort things out and reach some kind of mutual understanding on this feedback issue.

Dr Sub: Sure. That'd be great. Apart from anything else, we need to find a way forward. I need to know that you are going to take responsibility and make the necessary changes.

Dr Objecting: I thought I made it very clear that you've misunderstood. I don't regard your garbled version as valid feedback, and I resent the way you raised the issue. If you are going to stick to that line then I refuse to discuss the matter further without a staff rep present.

Dr Sub: So, we're going to go over all that again are we, well that's just what I'd expect from you

Dr Objecting: And just what's that supposed to mean...

Key aspects of relationship that seem likely to be reproduced in talk *about* relations include: Self and Other as separate and opposed (I-you, we-they, inside-outside); hierarchy (boss-subordinate, knower-known, right-wrong, better-worse) and competition (for who is right, better, more knowing...) - as in the relations constructed between Dr. Sub and Dr. Objecting. Further, whilst Dr Subject may construct Objecting as presenting an unfortunate case of resistance to change, another narrative might be that both are competing for whose constructions will prevail i.e., who will achieve "power over" other. In addition, and as was said earlier, talking *about* a relationship - whilst usually understood as a means to understand, clarify, to achieve a meeting of minds... - must necessarily introduce new sources of equivocality. Of course, these new equivocalitys can be talked about, providing resources (fuel?!) for continuing discussions. So, Dr. Sub and Dr. Objecting can continue by constructing additional resources with which to resource and reproduce their understandings of self, other, and their relationship! Small wonder that, like some forms of therapy, organizational change programs are said to be long term (e.g., French and Bell, 1990). Relational premises invite us to shift to forms of action other than talk.

Co-constructing Change in a Relational Perspective

These relational arguments suggest that reality constructions will be multiple rather than singular according to the networks of act-supplement relations referenced. Whether things *are* stable or changing (what's real) and whether they *should* stay the same or change (what's good?) also may be subject to multiple constructions. It has been further suggested that there might be some limitations around the usual assumption of: (a) shared narratives (vision, goals, values...); (b) the possibility of building understanding by talking *about* constructions; and (c) the value of talk/spoken dialogue as a means to change. Relational alternatives can be found in constructing changed co-ordinations. A few will be explored, emphasizing the usefulness of forms of action other than talk, and joining (or rather not separating) analysis and intervention.

Coordinating and co-constructing change

Relational arguments have been suggested to open up new possibilities for what might be constructed as real and good. Relational practitioners (researchers, consultants, coaches, therapists...) have the possibility to do something other than act as knowing experts in relation to (more or less) knowable and changeable others. Their potential resources now include ways of

acting that are likely (in relation to particular local-cultural narratives) to *facilitate the co-construction of change*. A number of interrelated shifts are involved in both methodology and methods. Perhaps the most general way to introduce matters is to return to the now collapsed distinction between individual acts of understanding (or finding out about, analyzing, diagnosing..) and influencing (changing, intervention...) some-one or some-thing. The relational premises here outlined have offered a different view i.e., of *joint actions* as co-ordinations. It could be said that any co-ordination that allows the process to continue smoothly with a minimum of questioning (requests for explanation and justification) is the action equivalent of understanding. So, for example, our ubiquitous visitor from Mars very likely will fail appropriately to co-ordinate with an American who greets them with a "and how are you today", perhaps by co-ordinating with this act as if it were a genuine inquiry that required a reply. There will, of course, be many ways in which our Martian could fail but all would mark them as a cultural outsider, as - by their actions - not understanding.

Transformational change - change from within

But then how can change occur from within an inclusive (both/and, yin-yang) relation, rather than 'from the outside' in either/or relations between self and other? In other words, how can change be co-constructed in "power to" rather than imposed in "power over"? Some principles have been outlined which can be put to work generatively with respect to already imagined and yet to be imagined possibilities. Returning to our rowing colleagues, Dr Objecting could co-ordinate with Dr. Sub, joining with the latter's self understanding in ways that invite her to act a different one. Similarly, Dr. Objecting might act to *unblock* Dr. Sub's othering, for example, by bringing in and playing with other voices and doing so in ways that open up new possibilities (e.g., Anderson, 1990). In general, transformational change is possible when acts co-ordinate in ways that interlock smoothly, simultaneously and tacitly failing to warrant old, stability maintaining taken-for-granted whilst making available new liberating ones (e.g., Cooperrider, Barrett, and Shrivastava, 1995; Grinder and Bandler, 1975; Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch, 1974).

Rather than talk of unblocking or insight it could be preferable to emphasize *co-ordinating that opens up new possibilities, to allow flow* so to speak; this is another way of speaking of "power to". So, a relational consultant may co-ordinate with other(s) in a way that simultaneously tests the co-ordination pattern, disrupts it, and makes space for new patterns - new realities. There are many ways to do this such as e.g., playing the reverse polarity - in the case of the "placator-blamer" dynamic this would involve e.g., the placator switching to blaming and doing this until the blamer switches. Another tactic is for B enormously to exaggerate A's discourse ("yes - you are right of course - I screwed up, I always screw up, I'm stupid...") until A has to switch polarity (see e.g., Farrelly and Brandsma, 1974).

Dr. Sub: Hello, I um...thought I should offer you one last opportunity to talk about the feedback on your teaching and what you are going to do about it. If we can't reach some agreed understanding then I will have to take this matter to the Head of School.

Dr Objecting: So nothing's changed huh? You still consider YOU have the responsibility to get me to take responsibility?

Dr. Sub: Er, yes...

Dr. Objecting: So do you take responsibility for my feedback to you about the appalling way you've dealt with this whole matter?

Dr. Sub: I.er. I can't control what you think.

Dr.Obj: So how do I control the apparent thinking of those students whom, according to you, said my teaching is awful? And what about the positive comments - what about those who said the course was great?

Dr Sub: Whether or not they enjoyed it is irrelevant, besides, we need to be seen to respond to all criticism.

Dr.Objecting: So what do you propose?

Dr Sub: Well, how about if we look at how the course might be delivered next year...

However, we still might have our doubts that more *talk about* this matter will change anything!

Emphasis on present actions for making possible futures is becoming increasingly characteristic of approaches to (what commonly are referred to as) individual and organizational change. Such approaches increasingly are shifting away from 'digging up the past', from reconstructing problems and games without end. So, for example, the Public Conversations Project developed a practical methodology to prevent the re-enactment of old ways of relating (in this case, between adversaries in the abortion debate) and exercises that fostered new ways for people to relate (e.g., Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin, Becker, and Stains, 1996). Similarly, organizational change work such as Future Search and Appreciative Inquiry are oriented to action in the here and now in the enabling of *multiple* new possible futures. These methodologies have no need to talk *about* relations (e.g., identities, past problems...) and need not seek shared agreement around one vision or mission (e.g., Weisbord and Janov, 1995; Cooperrider, Barrett, and Shrivastva, 1995). Such reality construction processes concern *present possibilities* (not past problems), include discussion of *what can be done now* - not what could not be done then, and embrace many forms of *non-discursive* action.

To open-up multiple possibilities, would-be change agents (manager, mum, consultant...) must let go of outsider claims to be the knower, commentator and critic, must let go of claims to "authorial expertise" (Barry, 1997) in hierarchical (exclusive) relations. Instead they will act to construct an insider position of different but equal - in relation to multiple knowers, multiple knowledges - co-constructing inclusive relations. Our change agent has no more legitimate claim to be a mind reader than managers (in relation to their subordinates) or husband (wife) in relation to partner. Co-ordinations 'from the same level' - in inclusive, heterarchical relation - make space for many narratives, for many projects. "Multilogical" change approaches will be under-determined in the sense of being relatively open as to content, so avoiding 'managing meaning' or imposing 'one mission' or 'vision'. Approaches to consulting - be they community development, family therapy, or organizational change increasingly operate with a methodology of co-construction, allowing rather than destroying the 'possibility space', the space for multiple local realities. It will never be possible to imagine all the possible ways this might be done but further examples can be profered. These include community development projects that actively involve the entire community as co-researchers and co-developers, using ways of knowing/acting appropriate to the local culture (singing, dancing, drawing...) to construct changes that are locally useful (e.g., Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991; Sanchez, 1996; Almeida, 1999). Similarly, Future Searches involving the "whole system" (multiple stakeholders) may simultaneously enable many local projects (Weisbord and Janov, 1995), and may construct heterarchical ways of relating as the new status quo.

It should be emphasized that these narratives of multiple voices, multiloging, and inclusion (narratives to which many have contributed) should not be understood as yet another vote for "participation" or organizational democracy. This is *not* a call for more attempts to solicit multiple

subjectivities or for developing the skills of influence so as to gain consensus around some-one's mission statement or vision. Nor should talk of multiloging in different but equal relations be made sense of in relation to narratives of right/wrong and independently existing and knowable realities. Rather, if the language tool of "participation" is to be used, *it must be understood in relation to a social constructionist epistemology/ontology* - that offers the possibilities of both/and i.e., inclusive relations, and "power to". This said, the valuing of different but equal relations between multiple constructed realities, is not intended as a universal truth. Rather, it is suggested as a possibly useful fiction, myth, or narrative that might be of service in relation to e.g., intercultural communications, globalised organizations, inequalities of life opportunities, destruction of species and landscapes, and pollution of presents and futures (Reason, 1994; Walck, 1996).

Last, these arguments about inclusive relational processes suggest some very interesting possibilities relevant to this suggested shift away from 'talking about' self, other, and relations. These possibilities embrace ways of knowing that join mind, body and landscape - rather than separating mind operations from (what other perspectives might call) 'internal' and 'external' nature. Given an inclusive view of relations, change and development now may employ ways of knowing that are "ecological" (Bateson, 1972) - with mind in nature and nature in mind (e.g., Berman, 1983; Hosking, in press; Walck, 1996). Change may be constructed in ways of knowing that are embodied, sensual, analogical, enchanted, and natured (see e.g., Reason, 1992; Heron, 1992; Castaneda, 1974). Such ways could include practices that avoid 'talking about' e.g., as in Tai Chi, connected breathing, meditation, collective chanting... (e.g., Biberman and Whitty, 1997; Reason, 1994). These practices may allow experience of the world unmediated by a sense of 'I' (self), along with participation in 'non-ordinary' realities (e.g., LeShan, 1974). Of course narratives of possessive individualism and the "received view of science" make such practices - at best - to do with personal development, most certainly un-scientific, and - at worst - seriously irrational. Bearing this in mind (a figure of speech!), it is perhaps important to re-emphasize that *these arguments about co-construction processes offer a very different meaning context* - one that includes the possibility of a participative ontology, of power to, and of silent action; not talking has a lot to be said for it!

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Biographical Notes:

Dian Marie Hosking BA (Hons), MSc., PhD took her first degree in psychology at the University of Sheffield and went on to research, training, and consulting. She did her masters in industrial and organisational psychology and her doctoral work in the area of contingency theories of person-context relations and leadership before moving to Aston Business School. Her publications include 'A social psychology of organising' (with Ian Morley, 1991) and

‘Management and organisation: Relational alternatives to individualism’ (with Dachler and Gergen, 1995), along with works around practical interests in co-construction processes, heterarchical ways of relating, gender relations, leadership, networking, negotiating, knowing, and change.

Andrew Bass BSc. PhD has his degrees in information technology and expert systems. His teaching is in the area of systems approaches, knowledge, approaches to system design, and change work. His publications and consulting include work on constructivism, safety cultures, ergonomics, dyslexia, neuro linguistic programming, and change.