

Telling tales of relations: Appreciating relational constructionism

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Abstract

The terms social constructionism and (social) constructivism are employed in the context of different problematics and different philosophical assumptions. This article presents ‘relational constructionism’ as a social science perspective. The perspective centres language based relational processes as they (re)construct more or less local relational realities. The latter includes western individualism and its construction of the bounded, separately existing individual relating to a separately existing other where ‘other’ is everything which is not self; this has been called ‘hard’ self-other differentiation. The perspective of relational constructionism allows that ‘soft’ self-other differentiation also is possible for example, in the practice of relationally engaged inquiry and change work. Relational constructionism, as outlined here, has a number of distinctive features: it clearly speaks about ontology and power (unlike many other constructionisms); it centres and gives ontology to construction processes (to how, rather than what) and sees persons and worlds as emerging in processes (rather than assuming individual minds and actions); it opens-up the possibility of soft self-other differentiation (rather than assuming that ‘hard differentiation is ‘how it really is’), and; it centres dialogical practices as ways of relating that can enable and support multiple local forms of life rather than imposing one dominant rationality on others.

Key words: relational constructionism, processes, subject-object relations, soft self-other differentiation, dialogue.

Introduction

This special issue is devoted to exploring constructionist and critical realist perspectives in organisation studies in the light of recent debates. The issue editors identified a number of possible contributions and this article intends to respond to some of them. I shall present ‘relational constructionism’ as a ‘social science perspective’ (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). I will show how this perspective deals with issues identified in the Call for Papers (Call) including its constructions of stability and change and of inquiry and intervention. Finally, I will suggest that relational constructionism enables us to ‘move beyond a partisan position’ (Call) which claims (some version of) constructionism as better or worse than (some version of) critical realism. It does so by inviting us to view all social science perspectives - including its self - as constructions. Further, it invites a reflexive stance which allows us to see debate and critique and partisan claims to superiority as the play of relational processes - and so power and politics - between different academic communities or ‘forms of life’ (Wittgenstein 1953 no 241: 226). Another way for communities to ‘go on’ in relation could be to relate in ways that do not attempt to impose a single evaluative hierarchy as if it were true and universally applicable.

In Part One I present a brief overview of constructionist themes and the various disciplinary, historical and issue-related contexts in which they have emerged. This overview provides the context for Part Two in which I outline ‘relational constructionism’ in contrasting relation to other constructionisms and critical realisms. Part Three explores relational constructionism in relation to issues identified in the Call, beginning with a discussion of *the role of theory*. So I present relational constructionism as having the rather unusual characteristic of being largely ‘empty’ of content in the sense of claims about of ‘what is’,

instead instead being directed towards ‘the how’ of relating. Another relatively unusual quality is that it is oriented towards opening up possibilities rather than towards making positive (factual) claims about what ‘really is’. I then go on to discuss *the role of empirical work*. In this context, what is distinctive is that relational constructionism views the empirical process is, itself, the 'product' so to speak. And so the perspective directs our attention to the ways inquiry processes (re)construct particular relational realities (people and worlds) and construct limits on other possibilities;.

The Fourth Part focuses on relational constructionist views of stability and change, inquiry and intervention, critique and critical interests before ending with a discussion of dialogue and relationally engaged practices. A key interest here is in how to give space to multiple simultaneously existing local realities as local rationalities or forms of life. The emphasis is on facilitating ‘power to’ go on in different but equal relations. This is NOT a liberal-pluralist conception. Rather it follows directly from relational constructionist themes and the possibility of soft self-other differentiation that the perspective enables. As we shall see, it follows from relational constructionism’s turning away from ‘self celebration’ towards relational issues and ‘celebrating the other’ (Sampson 1993).

Varieties of constructionism

In their 2008 Handbook of Constructionist Research the editors summarised the ‘leading idea’ of constructionism. Their summary was that the world we inhabit and our relations to it ‘are not simply and self evidently there’ - rather participants ‘actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2008: 3). This said, the ‘leading idea’ is further articulated in very different ways in the context of different social

science perspectives. For example, around ten years earlier, in an essay reviewing different varieties of social constructionism, Kurt Danziger wrote that once one moves outside a particular discipline context ‘...the 'ism' in ‘social constructionism’ becomes virtually impossible to pin down’ (Danziger 1997: 400). Different disciplinary contexts, with their particular histories of ideas, interests and assumptions have each provided a different ‘intellectual heritage’ (Pearce 1992). Perhaps it is for this reason that ‘Constructionism has been called radical and conservative; liberating, managerial, and oppressive; relativist, revisionist, and neo-objectivist...’ and much more besides (Gubrium and Holstein 2008: 3).

Given this diversity, I shall overview some of the different (overlapping) contexts and the different constructionist ideas and lineages that have emerged. This will show that the terms used for expressing ‘the leading idea’ of construction - terms such as ‘the world’, ‘participants’, relations, and ‘actively construct’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2008: 3) - can mean very different things.

Empiricism

The first con-text consists of critiques of empiricism and of its many interrelated assumptions and practices by e.g., historians and philosophers of science, sociologists of knowledge, cultural studies, social psychology and feminism. These have focussed on, for example, the assumed separateness of: fact and value (allowing one to speak of value free data); theory and data, induction and deduction (assuming that theory could be derived from data, and the latter could be used to test theory); the scientist (as the active, knowing subject) separate from 'other' (as a passively available, knowable object) and so on (e.g., Benton and Craib 2001). These many critiques have led in different directions, one of which has been to recognise that

some sort of construction is involved in scientific theorising and empirical inquiry (e.g., Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000; Gergen 1994).

Entitative thinking

The second con-text flows from critiques of entitative and unitary thinking. Drawing from different disciplinary backgrounds, various approaches to de-construction have been applied to break-up the seeming unity, stability and 'naturalness' of categories and narratives. In so doing, they have given varying emphasis to multiplicity (rather than unity), to ongoingness or emergence (rather than stable states), and to arte-factual worlds (made worlds). For example, in social psychology critiques of the *entitative narrative of person* referred to the latter as part of 'the western project' in which 'dominant groups construct (...) servicable others' (Sampson 1993). Sampson spoke of this 'monological and self celebratory' construction as being oriented around the notion of (i) a singular and rational self (ii) who is able to know other as other really (or probably) is, (iii) who can speak for and about other (followers, women, other ethnic groups...), and (iv) can use other in the rational pursuit of (supposedly) rational goals and interests. In contrast 'dialogical' approaches emphasise multiple self-other relations and their mutual creation and co-emergence in ongoing processes (Sampson 1993).

Entitative narratives of organisation also have been de-constructed to instead emphasise organising as ongoing processes constructing multiple, local, relational realities (e.g., Chia 1995; Hosking and Morley 1991; Weick 1979). In a similar vein, and very relevant to our concerns here, *entitative constructions of science* have been deconstructed by work in the sociology of knowledge and in the history of ideas – work that has pointed to multiplicity or fragmentation within science (it is not just one thing) - and to shifting historical constructions of the same (e.g., Berman 1981, 1990; Chia 1996; Latour 1987; Woolgar 1996).

Language and 'the person'

The third con-text concerns language, language users and the role of language as a tool of relating. The 'monological' construction of self and other as self existing (each having their own, independent ontology), as able to know and be known, as able to influence and be influenced 'from the outside' implicates a very particular view of language. This construction is reflected in the view of the scientist as a language user capable of correct reasoning and able correctly to represent what she or he discovers about an already existing and independent reality (e.g., Woolgar 1996). Language is assumed to represent, refer to, or 'mirror' a non-linguistic 'real' world of objects (e.g., Rorty 1979) and ontology and epistemology are clearly separated.

Critiques of these assumptions have led in various directions. Where science is concerned there has been widespread acceptance that knowledge of other reflects some element of construction - partly for reasons to do with language and relations between words and things. Another, and perhaps more radical shift has centred language, not as a tool for representing things in the world, but as a way to 'create, sustain and transform various patterns of social relations' (e.g., Shotter 1991: 70). Pearce refers to language-based relating as 'a formative process' (Pearce 1992: 140) or, in other words, as a process of constructing social realities; researchers may choose to focus on socially constructed content or, more rarely, on the construction processes themselves (Pearce 1992). Related social science work has employed the concepts of 'discourse' (e.g., Alvesson and Kärreman 2000; Wertsch 1991) and dialogue (Gergen, McNamee and Barrett 2001). And in social psychology the concept of person has been radically reconstructed - not as one independent and bounded existence, and not as a language user describing what is - but as 'dialogical' i.e., as multiple selves

constructed in always ongoing language-based relational processes (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992; Hosking and Morley, 1991; Sampson, 1993).

Science and the scientist

The fourth con-text involves critiques of the view of the scientist as a bounded, individual, 'cognising agent' and critiques of scientific activity as designed, rational, and rule following (Woolgar 1996). Again, this stream brings in various lines of talk about construction. So, for example, the claimed superiority of scientific knowledge rests on certain assumptions about the scientist, scientific procedures and - in some approaches - the possibility and superiority of Truth (Chia 1996). And, as we have seen, critiques of empiricism and of the representative view of language have led in various tales of construction particularly the variety that accepts that knowledge can never be fully objective because of the intrusion of factors to do with the knowing subject and the operations s/he performs to know other. Science has become widely viewed as a social practice involving (some sort of) social construction. But in this view, science continues to be set apart from other 'forms of life' and therefore able to produce relatively objective knowledge of them. This view of science retains a demarcation between the 'context of discovery' and the 'context of justification'. Another view - embraced in relational constructionism - includes the role of history and culture in all areas of practice including science and organisational studies (e.g., Benton and Craib 2001; Deetz 2000; Gergen 1994). This brings us to our fifth and last identified stream.

Self, other and relations

The fifth con-text concerns the concept of person (including the scientist), together with self-other (person-world) relations. Post-positivist science perspectives including critical realisms

assume that *subject-object relations 'is' or 'ought' to be the case* (Harding 1986, 1991; Dachler and Hosking 1995). (Post) positive science and critical realism (e.g., Fairclough 2005) continue to assume a separately existing, knowing individual who constructs their knowledge about other. Of course 'other' is also assumed to have their own ontology, to be relatively stable and bounded (see Chia 1996; Hosking and Morley 1991). But in disciplines such as social psychology and micro sociology, this individualistic, 'monological' concept of person and self-other relations is viewed as a construction - a construction that varies historically - in different communities, cultures or 'forms of life'.

For example, very different constructions of the self/non-self boundary have been suggested to be associated with different cultures and historical epochs (e.g., Berman 1981, 1990; Sampson 1988). Relatedly, Cartesian notions of the individual mind and individual rationality have greatly changed - at least in some communities. For example in cognitive science mind is increasingly researched as extended in the world – including the body or 'the flesh' (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1999). And in social psychology 'ensembled individualism' (in contrast to 'self-contained or possessive individualism') does not centre a singular 'I', does not centre a singular and stable self-other boundary, and does not assume individual agency (Hermans, Kempen and Van Loon 1992; Sampson 1988, 1993). The 'sovereign', self-contained subject constitutes only one possible view of person. Other views emphasise e.g., socially constituted identities, power relations and the individual as a 'structuring possibility' (Deetz 1994: 190; see also Foucault 1977, 1980; Friere 1982; Gergen 1994; Hardy, Phillips and Clegg 2001; Sampson 1993).

The mainstream of construction and a relational alternative

It is now timely to see how these various con-texts come together. The dominant bundling of con-texts presents construction as the product of individual intrusions (subjectivities) that blur subject-object relations and set limits to objectivity. Construction is largely treated as being of epistemological significance and interest continues to be directed towards individual objective-subjective knowledge about independently existing, real objects. In this tale of construction, the ‘context of discovery’ (traditionally the province of social scientists) and the ‘context of justification’ (traditionally the province of philosophers) are and must be (constructed as) separate (Gergen 1994). This tale embraces a very particular notion of the human subject as a bounded and separate existence, possessing a singular Self (I think) with a knowing mind (I think) that relates to the world and re-presents it (more or less well but never perfectly) in language (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon 1992).

In the next part I will outline ‘relational constructionism’ as a different bundling of these con-texts - a bundling that makes it a ‘social science perspective’ (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). It differs from the dominant discourse in its handling of five core themes. First, it does not assume and centre a constructing, sovereign subject. Instead it centres relational construction processes as the ongoing medium in which relational realities are always in construction. These relational realities include constructions of a relational self - in relation to some particular other(s). Second and relatedly, this implies not one but many selves each of which is produced in particular relations with particular others. In other words, instead of a monological view we have a ‘dialogical’ view of person (Sampson 1993).

The third theme is that, by giving ontology to relational processes and the relational realities they produce, relational constructionism assumes multiple local or ‘regional’ ontologies (Benton and Craib 2001). Fourth, relational constructionism views science or

rather social science perspectives - including relational constructionism itself - as constructed local ontologies and so sees them as local 'language games' together with their related 'forms of life' (Wittgenstein 1953). In other words, this 'tale' of construction includes not just the objects of scientific discovery within its scope but also science and scientific practices such as theorising, inquiry and intervention. And last, relational constructionism views the dualisms of objective-subjective, real-relativist as local-cultural, local-historical 'lines of distinction' (Alvesson and Deetz 2000) that characterise other, *different*, social science perspectives (including critical realisms) and their different tales of construction.

Constructing Self, Other and Relations

An overview of key premises

The lines of distinction that contribute to this version of constructionism have long histories and come from many different language games together with their related forms of life (Wittgenstein 1953). Turning to relatively recent times, contributions have been drawn from many areas of practice and from literatures including feminist critiques of science and related approaches to inquiry, literary criticism, cognitive and social psychology, interactionist, cognitive, and phenomenological sociologies, radical family therapy, critical social anthropology, collaborative consulting (Anderson 1997; Danziger 1997; Gergen 1994; Hosking and Morley 2004) and some expressions of postmodernism and post structuralism (Foucault 1977; 1980; Latour 1987)

As an abstract theoretical formulation, relational constructionism can be viewed as a framework of premises articulated at a level similar to that of a sociology or philosophy of (social) science. The following constitute some key features of the orientation:

- Relational processes are centred and not the bounded individual, individual mind operations, and individual knowledge.
- Relational processes are considered to 'go on' in inter-acts that may involve speaking, sounds, hearing and listening, gestures, signs, symbols, seeing, dance... theorised as ongoing performances.
- Inter-acts (re)construct multiple self-other realities as local ontologies or 'forms of life' (person-world making).
- Relational processes and realities are theorised as local-cultural and local-historical.
- Relational processes may close down or open up possibilities.
- Relating can construct hard, soft or indeed minimal self-other differentiation.
- Power is ever ongoing as a quality of relational processes including 'power over' and 'power to'.

I shall now say something more about these interrelated themes.

Discoursing relational processes

Inter-acting. In relational constructionism, talk of the individual as possessing a self, a mind and individual knowledge gives way to talk of relational processes. Language is viewed – not as a way of representing some independently existing reality – but as a key medium in which inter-acting 'goes on'. In this view, language derives its significance from *the ways it is used* in human relationships and the particular forms of life it supports (Gergen 1994) e.g., doing science and scientific rationality, in doing leadership, organising or organisation development. The focus on relational processes avoids the dualistic lines of distinction that discourse mind independent of body, construction as 'just' a mind operation, language as

different from action and relating as individual action in the context of, and about external, independently existing realities.

A variety of tools are used to theorise relating. Sometimes written and spoken language is emphasised - using terms such as story telling, conversation, narrative, and discourse (variously defined). Sometimes the term 'performance' is used – perhaps to give more emphasis to non-verbal language including 'body language', gestures and dance – and perhaps to suggest an ontological (rather than epistemological) discourse of construction (Newman and Holzman 1977). Some writers employ the term 'actant' – and write of networks of relations between actants. This avoids identifying construction as an individual cognition avoids making the individual the 'figure' and everything else 'ground', so to speak. For example, Latour speaks of an actant as 'whoever and whatever is represented' (Latour 1987) including people, objects, statements, facts, events...

My own preference is to use a form of words that is as inclusive as possible. Broadly speaking, I use the term inter-acting (a) to speak of a performance (b) that involves a coming together (c) of 'whoever and whatever' thereby (re)constructing person-world relations as (d) relational realities. I do not confine my theoretical considerations to 'just' voiced or conceptual forms of relating. Of course when humans are involved then language is often implicated – even if only in thinking (considered as un-vocalised dialogue). And language is necessarily involved in writing 'about it', in theorising, in talking with potential clients and in conducting organisational inquiries and interventions. I presume that constructionists' common reference to language-*based* interactions is intended to reference the ubiquity of conceptual language.

This discourse of inter-acting stands apart from individualistic, subject-object discourses of science and construction in a number of important ways. First, construction is

storied as a process of inter-relating acts, actants or texts and not as individual action. As we shall see, power becomes understood an inevitable part of these processes. Second, relational constructionism takes the view that relational processes ‘go on’ in language-based interactions. Third, relational constructionism talks about the ‘textuality’ of all relating - and not just of written and spoken texts (Stenner and Eccleston 1994). Last, relational constructionism and other social science perspectives/practices all are included in the scope of the discourse. I shall return to and expand these points after my account of construction processes.

Multiple, simultaneous inter-acts. Empiricist work reflects the assumption that it can be helpful to reduce the complexity of interaction to simple behavioural acts performed in sequence and objectively definable. Human actors, ‘natural’ and ‘man-made’ objects, and language are more or less sharply distinguished and scientific interest is discourses as being to produce objective knowledge (as far as this is possible) about Other. For example, if we consider Magritte’s painting *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, entitative thinking treats the painter, the painting, the viewer and other possibly relevant con-texts as independent existences in relation and turns complex, ongoing, relational processes into a seemingly singular and stable ‘it’ (e.g., the painting), in relation to the Aristotelian logic of either-or (e.g., it is either a pipe - or it is not). In contrast, relational constructionism opens up the ‘black box’ (Latour 1987) of relating. It centres multiple, simultaneous inter-acts or inter-textuality (rather than a singular object); it centres the production – the performance or ‘the how’ - of ongoing processes (rather than ‘the what’ of inputs and/or outputs); these processes construct power relations as they form particular forms of life and not others (rather than centring human agency and rationality); and; it stays open to the possibility of multiple and changing relational realities as ‘content’.

Relational constructionism assumes that many simultaneous inter-acts (con-texts) continuously contribute to ongoing (re)constructions of reality. So, for example, in the case of Magritte's painting, relational processes simultaneously implicate multiple interrelated texts which could include relating 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* – 'this is not a pipe'), the written text with the French language, the written text with the Dutch language (!), narratives of earlier viewings, of what others have said about the painting, of what counts as a painting, of what is appropriately called a pipe and so on. The question 'what is it?' could invite many equally correct answers depending on the *particular* inter-relating of multiple texts: 'it's a pipe', 'it's a painting of a pipe', 'it's a paradox', 'it is a work of art' and so on. The 'correct' answer is not dictated by the contours of real world objects. Rather, it is a matter of relational processes including processes of warranting or social certification (Hosking and Morley 1991), 'enrolling and controlling' (Latour 1987), 'power over' and 'power to' (Gergen 1995; Hosking 1995) as they (re)construct, stabilise and transform relational realities and relations.

This illustration suggests that getting taken up with what 'it' is goes together with a particular local interest, that of producing a certain sort of knowledge i.e., 'aboutness' knowledge. Whilst this is a common interest in scientific perspectives such as critical realism (e.g., Fairclough 2005; Fleetwood 2005; Newton 2003) relational constructionism is more interested to explore multiple, local forms of life as ontology and to include its own 'form' as part of, rather than apart from that exploration. When compared with, e.g., critical realism and its interest in making positive statements about the 'isness' of 'real' reality, relational constructionism is more interested in possibilities and possible ways of 'going on' in relation; I shall return to this in part four.

Local-cultural, local -historical, power-full processes. This relational constructionist orientation sees relating as always re-constructing more or less stable, local, relational realities as 'content', so to speak. These can be theorised as multiple 'regional ontologies' (Benton and Craib 2001) and relations - as ontologies that open-up certain possibilities whilst rendering others less likely. This is a different way of conceptualising, for example, a 'fragmented' approach to organisational culture (see e.g., Martin 2004) or talk of a 'web of power relations' (e.g., Hardy and Clegg 2004).

Relational realities are local to relational processes as they, for example, perform the same social science perspective, (re)construct Western individualism, make and re-make organisational and societal structures, and construct what some language games and related forms of life (such as e.g., Bhaskar's critical realism) might call natural or social objects, individual agents or social structures (Bhaskar 1989). Of course when talking about constructing local realities and relations between them, not all inter-acts get stabilised. Some go un-supplemented - unheard, unseen, unnoticed - unwarranted. The fate of an identity claim such as 'this is a pipe', 'this is a natural object', 'this is science' (and that not), will depend on whether or not it is warranted as 'real and good' (Gergen 1994). Or, as Latour would have it: the fate of a statement *depends on others* - who have to read it, take it up and use it - in the words of Latour others have to be 'enrolled' and they have to be 'controlled' (Latour 1987); processes of construction are power-full.

Continuing with this theme, some forms of life are able to 'enrol and control' on a larger scale than others and so may appear, for example, to have more powerful Gods or better methods for producing objective knowledge. Once a particular performance becomes stabilized e.g., a greeting convention, a particular sonata form, what counts as middle C... other possibilities may find it harder to achieve warrant. As Beethoven discovered at one of

his premiers, it may be harder to ‘enrol’ and ‘control’ an audience when its participants are sure they already know what is ‘real and good’! His power to reconstruct the sonata form was limited by what others would warrant. The same can be true of efforts at organisational change or efforts to set out a particular discourse of construction to those who are already convinced that they know what ‘it’ is. Such difficulties are especially likely to be encountered when discourses of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are already stabilised (Deetz 2000). Another way to say the above is that *relational constructionism theorises power as a quality of all relational processes and realities*.

In the present context one meaning of ‘local’ lies in its contrasting relation to general - as in narratives of one trans-contextual, trans-historical reality and generalizable knowledge of the same. As we have seen, relational constructionism emphasises that what is validated or discredited (or given power, so to speak) is local to the ongoing practices that (re)construct a particular form of life. But this does not mean that relational realities are necessarily quickly passing or necessarily very limited in scope as has been suggested by some critics of (some version of) constructionism (see e.g., Newton 2003). Rather, inter-acts vary in the scale of their inter-connections such that the ongoing web of local inter-connections could be as broad as ‘western’ or ‘post-enlightenment’. Of course the locals (including e.g., scientists) may take it for granted that their particular constructions are universal in the sense of (probably) true of all times and all cultures or forms of life. However the present line of argument suggests the essential artfulness of stabilised effects (forms of music, forms of life, leadership, organisation, social structures...) and draws attention to the relational processes that make and re-make them (e.g., Chia 1995; Hosking 2000)

Implicit in my discussion so far is that my reference to local includes both *cultural and historical* aspects. However, these terms should not be given some entitative construction.

My talk of history is not intended as talk of temporary truths when permanent truths are potentially available and is not intended to imply a linear and unidirectional process in which the present is a moment between (the now finished) past and the (yet to come) future. Such a (some might say ‘modernist’) view of process goes together with the separation of means and ends, process and content, ‘tool and result’ (Newman and Holzman 1977) and reproduces a very particular (western? post-enlightenment?) construction of process and of time.

Relational constructionism is not speaking about ‘all social reality’ as ‘just *present* social construction’ (Newton 2003) – at least, not in Newton's sense of the word ‘present’. Rather, relational processes are said to have a historical quality in the sense that acts always supplement earlier performances and have implications for how a process will go on. Put in another way, the *ongoing present* re-produces some previous structurings e.g., the convention of shaking hands, and acts in relation to possible and probable futures e.g., that a greeting will be successfully performed. So what is possible at any given moment is both resourced and constrained by what has already been constructed as ‘real and good’ and is in history, so to speak. In the present discourse, inter-acts, and particularly regularly repeated ones are considered to ‘*make history*’ - so history is constantly in the re-making (Hora 1992; Vico 1992).

Newton and Parker critiqued (some version[s] of constructionism) as making a dualist distinction between stability and change or flux and emphasising the latter at the expense of the former (Newton 2003; Parker 1995). Relational constructionism does something different. It centres and gives ontology to relational processes and it is these processes that actively create and maintain stabilities. Relational constructionism assumes that change (in the process sense) is ever present and assumes that inter-acts always have the possibility (however remote) to change the 'content' of some local relational reality. Furthermore it is

clear that history making necessarily involves power - both 'power over' (Gergen 1995) - in constructions of subject-object relations, right-wrong and so on - and 'power to' (Hosking 1995) - 'go on' in ways that fit that particular local form of life.

Given the above, relational constructionism seems best viewed as a discourse that emphasises the historical-cultural rather than the natural-scientific (Morley and Hunt unpub ms). However it differs from contextualism' - described by Morley and Hunt as a 'historical-cultural' approach - and from critical realisms by *fully recognising that theory, method and data are interwoven*. It does not differentiate between the context of justification and the context of discovery, makes no generalised claims to rationality and embraces a dialogical rather than monological view of person..

A dialogical view of person

Social psychologists such as Harry Hermans and his colleagues (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon 1992) and Edward Sampson (1988; 1993) have written of what they call a dialogic view of person. Sampson wrote at length about what he called 'the dialogic turn' which he saw as a turn to 'celebrating the other' (rather than The Self). He wrote:

...what stands out when we look at what people do together is language as communication in action. Because we have become so intent on searching deeply within the individual's psyche for the answers to all our questions about human nature, we usually fail to see what sits right before us, a dominating feature of our lives with others: conversations. It is time now to take conversations seriously.
(1993: 97)

He singled out four key features of conversations. First, they go on between people; even when people are alone 'their thinking occurs in the form of inner conversation or

dialogue' (1993: 97). Second, conversations are public (we could also say, social) because they involve signs that are generally shared by a particular community. Third, conversations implicate addressivity - they are addressed by someone to (an)other(s) and they are what we humans do i.e., conversation is action (rather than about action). Last, conversations include verbal and non-verbal aspects, symbolic and written material. For Sampson 'These four features link person and other in such an intimate way that disentangling the bonds that join them becomes an exercise in futility' (Sampson 1993: 98). He continued: 'The argument, in short, is that we gain a self in and through a process of social interaction, dialogue, and conversation with others' (Sampson 1993: 106). And so, by being constituted in conversations *each person is a multiplicity* and multiplicity is the norm.

As I noted earlier, these dialogic, conversational processes are processes in which all aspects of relational realities are in ongoing, emergent (re)construction. They (re)create particular language games together with their related forms of life which we then take to have their own independent existence or, in other words, to be how things 'really are' (e.g., Bohm 2004). So, as Sampson remarked: 'our conversations both express and presuppose a reality which, in expressing what is presupposed, we help to create' (Sampson 1993: 108).

To conclude this part, I have set out an abstract framework of relational constructionist premises articulated at a level similar to that of a sociology or philosophy of (social) science. This constructionism implies that all social science perspectives, including its self and including critical realism, be viewed as different constructions that open up and close down different possibilities – for theory, inquiry and intervention practices, and for reflexivity – in all forms of construction process. Returning to the call for papers and to recent debates in organisation studies, critics - usually speaking from a critical realist perspective – have focussed on (in their own words) 'extreme' or 'hard' versions of social constructionism. These

they have storied as ‘subjectivist’, as ‘relativist’, as taking the view that nothing but language, discourse and metaphor shapes our world (Fairclough 2005; Parker 1995), and as over-emphasising transience relative to stability (Newton 2003). I hope to have shown that there is another sort of constructionism; now I hope to show that this offers some interesting and useful re-constructions of theory, empirical work and change work.

Re-constructing theory and empirical work

Theory in practice

The word ‘relational’ in relational constructionism has a very different meaning from that which usually is found in social science and in organisation studies. I have emphasised that it is not a reference to relations between bounded and separately existing persons/entities/ontologies. By now it should also be clear that it does not refer to relations between variables. In addition, and unlike other social science perspectives, ‘relational’ constructionism embraces both the context of discovery and the context of justification - it is science ‘with philosophy’ so to speak (Bentz and Shapiro 1998). For these reasons it cannot be viewed as complexity theory nor as a systems theory that theorises individual entities and their characteristics and relations (see e.g., Stacey 2003). Last, relational constructionism cannot be located in relation to the usual philosophy of science distinction between individualism and holism (e.g., Hollis 1994).

The relational constructionist perspective deals with ‘the how’ of constructing and says little about the ‘what’ or ‘content’. This makes sense given that it is intended to speak (a) about *how*, rather than what (b) about *multiple*, local realities and relations, rather than the one way things probably are (assuming some universal rationality), and (c) about ‘developing’ or

ongoing rather than stable realities as ‘content’. Perhaps this approach illustrates what Robert Chia spoke of as a post-modern (and indeed Buddhist) recognition of, and turning towards, emptiness (Chia 1996). Indeed, I have sometimes found myself referring to this orientation as ‘empty theory’. Whilst I do not want to push either of these terms too far (particularly ‘theory’) talk of ‘emptiness’ does give a flavour of what is meant. This relative emptiness is one of the ways relational constructionism differs from post-positivist and critical realist positions that, as I outlined earlier, assume a great deal about the scientist and the self-other boundary, about ‘structures and their causal powers’ (Fairclough 2005: 922), about the value of scientific rationality and scientific interest relative to the interests of other forms of life, and so on.

Of course, other questions might well be asked about the status of this relational constructionist framework. It is not offered as a theory in the sense that it is not about causal relationships between variables and it is not stated in a way that invites or is amenable to ‘testing’. Unlike post-positivism, relational constructionism makes no predictions and has no interest in control; unlike critical realism it is not offering explanations or actionable knowledge (e.g., Manicas and Secord 1983). The framework of premises is not oriented towards arriving at some objective knowledge of the status quo and does not share the critical realist interest in entities that exist separately from our knowledge of them (see e.g., Fleetwood 2005).

Rather, in contrast to work done out of other social science perspectives, ‘theory’ is not the point, nor is theory testing, nor is knowing what is or was the case. Rather, relational constructionism provides a way of orienting to practice - to ongoing relational processes and the ways they (re)construct particular relational realities - such as self as a knowing and power-full agent (scientist, leader, consultant) in relation to some ‘serviceable

other' (Sampson 1993). In this context, practice is intended to have practical effects and to develop practical wisdom (Toulmin and Gustavsen 1996). One of the distinctive qualities of this perspective is that it both allows and invites us to explore ways of being in relation that depart from the subject-object separation - which is itself regarded as a relational construction - and one that could be otherwise.

Unlike work grounded in other social science perspectives, the relational constructionist perspective offers practices (a) that open up *multiple self-other relations* - to a dialogic rather than mono-logic view of person (b) that *open up possibilities* such as new ways of being in relation (e.g., in therapy or in stuck conflicts) or new possible futures (e.g., in Future Searches or Imaginization projects) rather than trying to make positive (factual) statements about how things are (c) that open up to *ongoing, emergent and multiple local realities* - rather than assuming stable, separate entities and trying to 'fix' these (assumed to be stable and separate) things. Earlier I spoke of these relational practices using the summary term 'soft' self-other differentiation; they might also be called 'relationally engaged' (rather than distancing, separating and supposedly 'neutral'); it is to such practices that I now turn.

Empirical work

Given its focus on 'the how' of relating, the relational constructionist orientation invites researchers to regard their inquiry process as, itself, the product (Pearce 1992:151). There is no need to (although of course one could) treat social practices as either methodology or data. There is no need for the inquirer to view their inquiry as the instrumental means to say something 'about' some-thing from a detached observer position (e.g., Weick 1979) or to say something about identified discourses (e.g., Fairclough 2005). When viewed from a relational constructionist standpoint, inquiry does not discover what is so that this can provide the basis

for some subsequent ('evidence based') intervention. Returning to criticisms that have been voiced of (hard or extreme versions of) social constructionism, relational constructionism neither assumes nor valorises some individualised notion of agency and responsibility (see Parker 1995) and nor is it 'for taking sides' (Clegg in response to Parker 1995). Rather, it offers a view of inquiry as a process of (re)constructing realities and relations. The objects of inquiry are the very processes themselves, the relational processes: as they co-ordinate or organise activities; as they make identities and relations; as they constitute and live a certain 'form of life' (Wittgenstein 1953); and as they construct different but equal, or different and unequal orderings of power and value (Hosking 2007).

Of course the 'inquirer' may participate in the inquiry process in many different ways. Other social science perspectives could be said to invite researchers to do research 'on' and 'about' other. But relational constructionism makes meaningful the possibility of doing research 'with' others (Pearce 1992). This means working in ways that minimise a priori assumptions about local rationalities and their (hierarchical or otherwise) relations. This includes not centring scientific rationality above others. This could mean, for example, joining with organisational or community participants to perform some sort of participative or collaborative inquiry (Friere 1982; Reason and Bradbury 2008) that might help (perhaps in quite different ways) the various participating forms of life. To quote Darin Weinberg on 'the philosophical foundations of constructionist research': 'The practical point of doing constructionist studies has very often been to promote a better way of thinking and, more important, living...' (Weinberg 2008: 15). But, I should add, in the relational constructionist orientation this 'promoting' is viewed as *ongoing*.

Doing research with others means creating opportunities for dialogues. Other social science perspectives view dialogue (a) in the context of methodology - where it should be

minimised since it reduces experimenter control, and (b) as an individual act by other (the research object) which provides potential data. These practices privilege the local rationality of science and so relations of what some have called ‘power over’. Conducting inquiries ‘with’ others means working in and through dialogues and so opening up the possibility of becoming more *multi-logical* - of opening up multiple local rationalities. Work of this sort that is presented as inquiry includes ‘generative metaphor intervention’ (Barrett and Cooperrider 1990; Barrett, Thomas and Hocevar 1995); appreciative evaluation (McNamee 2006) and ‘responsive evaluation’ (Greene and Abma 2001) and participative action research or ‘action science’ (Reason and Bradbury 2008). These all ‘go on’ in ways that aim to open-up spaces for new kinds of conversation and for new ways of being in relation, and to open up possibilities for multiple local realities (as forms of life, not individual subjectivities) to co-exist and be appreciated as different but equal.

Reconstructing change work

Intervention (re)constructs ‘power over’

What I have said about the relational constructionist orientation to theory and empirical work has many implications for what the Call for papers referred to as intervention or, more broadly, change work. The relational constructionist orientation implies that post-positivist and critical realist approaches to intervention do indeed ‘take sides’ (Call). They do so by privileging the rhetoric, practices and products of science, and probably those of the contracting client, and so privileging particular local community-based rationalities over others. Yet this is not how other social science perspectives view their own practices and the relations to which they contribute. Processes that (re)construct the reality of experts and

expert knowledge, right and wrong, technical (not political) procedures, shared goals and shared rationality give little space for reflexivity in connection with power relations. Instead, power is pushed into the context of discovery. Once there it is most readily assumed to be something a person, group or other entity has or does. Then it is further theorised as irrational in the sense of reflecting the play of local, partisan interests when more neutral, non-partisan interests are at stake (Hosking 2008). From a relational constructionist perspective, intervention involves one form of life attempting to change 'other' in relations of 'power over'.

Both stability and change.

It is relational processes that actively construct and maintain stability in the relational constructionist view. In other words, stability is an ongoing achievement, in process. But at the same time, change is definitional of ongoing processes. Relational realities are viewed as always 'in process' and possibility-full rather than permanent, or trans-historical. There is nothing in this view that assumes 'total flux and flow' in the absence of stabilities (Newton 2003: 447). Further, and continuing to contrast with Newton's statements about flux and flow, this view of construction does not view change as a temporary (even if increasingly common) aberration, and does not view flux or change as something that happens to real entities (Newton 2003).

Contrary to criticisms of (other views of?) constructionism, there is nothing in the present view that asserts or implies relational realities necessarily lack 'longevity' (again, contra Newton). Indeed, and as I stated earlier, it might make sense to speak of particular reality constructions as 'post (European!) enlightenment' – which is quite a long time by some standards. Equally, there is nothing in the relational constructionist framework that claims or implies relational realities are 'continuously being (socially) transformed'. And last, it seems

to me to be a serious mistake to assume that relational realities are easily changeable 'just' because they are constructed (e.g., Newton 2003; Parker 1995). There is no 'just' in the earlier outlined set of premises. Further, the criticism seems to imply that the critic has or could have un-constructed knowledge of some independently existing, stable reality. Such a view is hard to take seriously - given its circularity and given contemporary philosophy of social science (Bem and Looren de Jong 2006; Benton and Craib 2001).

Both inquiry and intervention.

In relational constructionism the locus of change shifts away from the qualities and acts of entities to ongoing processes as they reproduce and change relational realities and relationships. This means that relational processes are both the 'unit of analysis' and the locus of stability and change. One potentially radical implication is that the conventional distinction between inquiry and intervention is unnecessary because all processes, whether or not some community calls them inquiry, actively construct relational realities. Of course it is perfectly possible for practitioners to continue to practice inquiry in some sort of subject-object relation and to try to minimise their intrusiveness and effects on other –to produce objective knowledge about reality. However relational constructionism sees this (a) as *just one possible* way of constructing of realities and relations and (b) as a way in which the voice of some science community dominates the shaping of the investigation.

Relational constructionism is also open to more open, multi-logical approaches that are participatory, collaborative, appreciative, and dialogical. Multi-logical approaches make distinctions between inquiry and intervention unnecessary; they can (re)construct soft (rather than hard) self-other differentiation. In this sense, relational constructionism can be said both to invite, and to give a new justification for, multi-logical forms of construction work. Instead

of abstract theory, empirical justifications of the same, and evidence-based intervention, relational constructionist work has the possibility to centre ‘practical – transformative’ practices (McNamee and Gergen 1999; Newman and Holzman 1977). This kind of work can be said to be oriented towards constructing ‘power to’ or ‘power with’ (Gergen 1995; Hosking 1995). Of course work of this kind does not 'banish' power over - a delightfully paradoxical idea. This said, *'power over' is no longer definitional of inquiry and intervention theory/practices* and other possibilities are actively explored and legitimated.

Critical interests and soft self-other differentiation

Power has been a continuing theme in this talk of relational processes – partly because the relational constructionist perspective locates power in language-based processes, including in those processes that some communities call inquiry and/or intervention. From the standpoint of relational constructionism, critical interest requires attention to realities and relations. This means paying attention to the forms of life that are invited and supported, or perhaps suppressed, for example, in practices that some call science, community development or organisational change. Critical interest goes to multiplicity (or its absence) and to relations (e.g., different but equal or dominance). In this perspective, practices that position the researcher as one who knows about 'other' and, on this basis, orients towards the liberation or emancipation of other, are ways of (re)constructing relatively ‘hard’, subject-object relations. In this sense, they may be more conservative than the critical theorist or critical realist intends (e.g., Parker 1995).

Critical de-constructions of (some variant[s]) of constructionism, for example from the standpoint of critical realism, may seek to establish the relative superiority of the latter.

However, another possible critical practice – one opened-up by relational constructionism - is

to explore processes that could enable and support multiple local forms of life rather than imposing one dominant rationality on others. The critical interest becomes one of opening up (rather than closing down) possibilities and an orientation to transformation from within, so to speak rather than inter-vention. Critical interest can now be directed to *how* such political processes might (re)construct ‘soft’ self-other differentiation in different but equal relations (Hosking 2004; 2008); it is to this that I now re-turn.

Dialogue and relationally engaged practices

Dialogue has become increasingly popular in connection with transformative change work. Approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Shrivastva 1990) and ‘collaborative consulting’ (Anderson 1997) assume a relational, dialogical view of person and processes whilst others such as Participative Action Research are attached to a participative world view (Reason and Bradbury 2001). They are ways of working that aim to open up ‘power to’ rather than close down through ‘power over’. Approaches of this sort: (a) work through multiple dialogues, rather than top-down leadership edicts and the avoidance of dialogue (b) work with many different self-other relations, rather than in a single hierarchy of knowledge and expertise, and (c) work with what is already (potentially) available and with ‘stuff’ that the participants believe to be relevant, rather than imposing mono-logical constructions of leaders or e.g., outside experts, and (d) invite and support many lines of action, rather than requiring or imposing consensus. Dialogical processes can facilitate multiple community-based voices and can help multiple communities (as ‘forms of life’) to participate such that other realities can be ‘allowed to lie’ rather than being questioned, grasped, judged and re-constructed by a particular, knowing and structuring agent.

Social science approaches that explicitly centre ‘dialogue’ include the Public Conversations Project (Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin and Becker 1996), work using the language of ‘transformative dialogues’ (Gergen, McNamee and Barrett 2001), ‘dialogue conferences’ (Toulmin and Gustavsen 1996) and the MIT Dialogue project (e.g., Isaacs 1993, 1996). Whatever their particular lineage, these approaches use the term ‘dialogue’ to refer to *a special kind of conversation*. Dialogue, as a special kind of conversation goes on in slow, open and curious ways of relating characterized: (a) by a very special sort of listening, questioning, and being present; (b) by willingness to suspend one’s assumptions and certainties; (c) by reflexive attention to the ongoing process and one’s own part in it. Rather than constructing separate, fixed or closed realities e.g., of self (other) and one’s own (others) position on some issue, dialogical practices open up to relationality and to possibilities, and open-up space for self and other to co-emerge... this is what Bohm called flow (Bohm 2004) .

Dialogical practices that are grounded in a relational view of processes (and so, a dialogical view of person) offer an alternative to dis-engaged, dis-heartening, dis-encharmed ways of being in relation. Dialoging can provide a way out of stuckness, a way out of some seemingly solid, stable and singular ‘I’ who builds individual knowledge about and seeks control over other. Dialoging can help to bring forth and support appreciation (rather than judgement and critique), discussion of what can be done (rather than what cannot) and a sense of relational responsibility (rather than blaming individuals). Dialoging makes space for ongoing emergence, for improvisation. Practicing the ‘discipline of collective inquiry’ (Isaacs 1996), participants learn how to learn, learn to open-up to possibilities – to other constructions of what is real and good.

In conclusion

I hope to have shown that relational constructionism is a social science perspective with its own assumptions about ontology, epistemology and methodology, its own interests and its own possibilities; its potential value lies in this context. It theorises ‘construction’ as ongoing in local-cultural, local-historical processes that make and re-make what it is to be a person (including a scientist), that make (different) social science perspectives, that make organisations and indeed everything that we think of as (un)real, good or bad, right or wrong. This focus on ‘the how’ of relating and on possibilities (rather than what is and is likely to be) directs interest to the ways relational processes (e.g., of inquiry) (re)construct particular relational realities (people and worlds) and construct limits on other possibilities.

Whilst not demanding this, relational constructionism opens up and legitimises ways of working (a) that neither separate inquiry and intervention (b) nor privilege one local rationality (e.g., science) above others, and (c) that centre transformative possibilities (d) through ongoing dialogues and reflexive practices. Relational constructionism provides *a way of orienting to practice, with an interest in facilitating (local) practical effects* and developing practical wisdom. Another way of saying this is that work of this kind focusses on giving voice to multiple simultaneously existing local realities as local rationalities and emphasis shifts to facilitating ‘power to’ go on in different but equal relations. A relational constructionist orientation invites attention to the rationalities (as forms of life) that are invited and supported, or perhaps suppressed, for example, in practices that some call science, community development or organisational change.

This dialogical construction is closely related to the ‘participative’ world view in which *participation is viewed as a relational way of being and knowing* (Reason, 1994). The anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson argued something like this in his ‘Steps to

an Ecology of Mind' (Bateson, 1972). Bateson argued that a proper understanding of mind would see it as extended or 'immanent', not only in the human body, but throughout the entire living world. Like some other social theorists, he argued that humankind's 'fall from grace' was achieved in many dis-engagements or separations such as separating self from other, separating thought from emotion, separating sacred from secular and so on. So a 'return to grace' (Bateson, 1972) or to an 'enchanted world' (Berman, 1981) requires that 'individual mind' be re-viewed as part of 'larger mind' which is 'comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by 'God'' (Bateson, 1972, p.461).

For Bateson and many others, re-engagement is essential for recovering wisdom, ecological balance and long-term survival of the planet. This requires re-connecting with participative ways of knowing, with other as part of dialogical self, with ways that re-join the many 'levels' of mind - including what Bateson called the 'computations of the heart' (Bateson, 1972, p.464; see also Reason, 1994; Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Hosking, 2000). 'Re-connecting' and 're-engagement' means a shift from western individualism and dis-engaged (subject-object), dis-heartened (cognitive), dis-embodied and dis-enchanted (secularised and instrumental) ways of being in relation. There has been a blossoming of 'relational approaches' (e.g., Hunt and Dodge, 2000; Kyriakidou and Ozbilgin, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2004), a rising interest in spirituality and organisation, and an increasing attention to multi-voiced, participative methodologies such as appreciative inquiry. Their potential lies in embracing a dialogical or participative view of person-world making.

References

see journal article