Constructing changes: A social constructionist approach to change work (and beetles and witches)

Rede

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Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus,

Zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders,

Overture

My chair position is in Organizational Psychology – with particular reference to development and change. And so it seems natural to take this opportunity to say something about each of these areas. I propose to begin by looking at the literatures on 'organization' and to distinguish between two very different approaches - "mainstream" and "critical" (Thompson and McHugh, 1995). To make just two distinctions of course involves huge generalizations and glosses major variations within each category. However, doing so helps me (and I hope you also) to identify my own approach, its assumptions, and its implications for understandings of organization, development and change.

My own work can be regarded as one sort of "critical" approach. In common with interactionist traditions in, for example, organizational sociology, anthropology, and social psychology, I treat "organization" not as a noun but as a verb. For this reason, I prefer to speak of *organizing* and *treat development and change as intrinsic to organizing processes.*

My particular approach is a form of social constructionism, a form that, following Fleck (1979) and Chia (1995) seems appropriately referred to as a "thought style"[i]. I will outline my thought style in a way that (a) allows me to draw out some changed understandings of traditional concerns in mainstream treatments of change, and (b) provides a context in which to explore some implications of my relational constructionist position for change work. On the latter, I take the view that there is no such thing as 'a social constructionist method' (e.g., Hosking, 1999). However, relational constructionism does generate and validate some changed forms of change work. These involve practical acceptance of (a) actors as *part* of – rather than apart from – reality constructions (b) a world of multiple realities - as ontologies[ii] (c) realities that might best treated as non-consistent and non-comparable (and not as multiple subjectivities).

These premises invite further development of non-hierarchical ways of organizing[iii]. The need for these –- seems especially urgent in a postmodern world where 'more knowing' and 'more power over' seem to produce increasing inequalities in financial wealth and economic infrastructure, destruction of landscapes and communities, and pressures to mono-culturalism. This situation seems intractable to solutions based on more of the same 'knowledge/power' nexus. In the present view, such solutions are 'more of the same', a category mistake, reproducing yet more unequal relations[iv].

Well, a good number of promissory notes have just been issued and so it is time to develop these themes. The first movement will overview "mainstream" approaches to person-organization relations, along with their implications for organizational change, and will finish by outlining a "critical" alternative – differentiated from the mainstream in terms of its different "critical"

assumptions. In this way I hope to provide you with a gentle introduction to what may well be a very unfamiliar thought style – to be developed in the second movement - that of relational constructionism. I will finish with a discussion of relational constructionim and its implications for change-work

Persons act in or on organizations

Two British authors, Paul Thompson - a sociologist, and David McHugh - a psychologist, have been kind enough to provide a distinction that seems useful for our present purposes. They did so in the course of discussing the literatures of organizational studies including work and organizational psychology (WOP), organization development (OD), and organizational theory (OT). They suggested that these literatures could be usefully discussed in terms of a broad distinction between "mainstream" and "critical" alternatives. I will overview the former in this section. In doing so, I concentrate on the "discursive logic" of the mainstream narrative. I present what I think theorists (a) treat as real (b) understand as relations between realities, and (c) do to position themselves in relation to their narrative. I then turn to how this discursive logic gets 'put to work' in constructions of organizational change before finishing with a different ("critical") discursive logic – as a theme to be developed in the second movement.

Separate, subject-object relationships.

When I first went to work in a university business school I was asked to teach Organizational Behaviour (OB) – also referred to as Organizational Psychology – to our MBA students. I soon found that these literatures largely focused on *individuals and groups* 'in organizations' where the latter were left as the largely tacit and separate context for individual action, perceptions, satisfactions and the like (see e.g., Miner, 1980). My colleague, John Child, then continued by introducing students to Organization Theory (OT). On examining these literatures (I was interested to know how they theorized organization) it seemed that (what I later came to understand as mainstream theorising) largely did the reverse i.e., largely focused on *organizations* as the seemingly separate context for individuals' activities and constructions (see e.g., Child, 1977, 1984). Both approaches constituted what Thompson and McHugh (1995) called "mainstream" in that they treated individuals and organizations (and more generally, social cultures and structures) *as if* each were a singular, bounded and separate, some-one or some-thing. You could say that a "primary distinction" (van Dongen, 1991) was made between individuals and social institutions - constructed as independent existences - as entities that exist 'in their own rigght', so to speak (Thompson and McHugh, 1995; see also Hollis, 1994; Hosking and Morley, 1991). This is, of course, a very common commonsensical distinction. In Psychology it has been referred to as a distinction between the "individualistic" and "culturalist fallacy" (Allport, 1963), whilst in the philosophy of social science it has been expressed in terms of a distinction between "holism" and "individualism" (Hollis, 1994).

When people and/or things are separated this has implications for how their relations are understood. The construction of sharply separated and bounded entities goes together with a "subject-object" discourse of relations[v] (see e.g., Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Fine, 1994; Harding, 1986; Hollis, 1994; Reeves Sanday, 1988). A "discourse" - "anything that can be 'read' for meaning…(that) can be referred to as a text" (Burr, 1995 p.51) can be thought of in terms of *what it does*. The S-O discourse seems to me to do three things. First, it constructs relationships between an acting Subject and an acted upon Object. So, for example, this might be between an organizational leader or change agent (for example as Subject) and an organization (as Object), or between an employee (as Object) in relation to an organization (as Subject). Second, the S-O relationship is 'explained' through reference to the assumed characteristics and/or acts of entities – particularly those of the Subject. So, for example, organizational leaders may be (assumed to be) characterized by vision and/or charisma (e.g., Lord, DeVader, and Alliger, 1986; Bennis & Nanus, 1985), organizations may be assumed to have structures and cultures, and leaders may be assumed to be able to form (shape, mould) organizations – in S-O relationship (see e.g., Child, 1977; 1984). Third, the entity viewed (by the theorist/narrator[vi]) as the Subject is presumed to make social realities and relationships: the Subject is the one who acts to know and to influence 'other' as a knowable and formable Object. Continuing our example, organizational leaders are often storied as those who can or should act in order to know their organization and its environment and, on the basis of their knowledge, act to (re)structure relations and so to change organizational performance (Child, 1972; Rifkin, 1996).

So, if mainstream discourses make sharp distinctions between person and organization, organization and environment, and construct their relations as Subject-Object, how does this shape possible conceptualisations of organizational change and development? It is to this issue that I invite you now to turn.

Mainstream Constructions of Organizational Change.

Mainstream discourses of entities and relations are reflected in related constructions of organizational change and development (see e.g., Fineman, 1991). Two approaches can be distinguished in which the theorist centres *either* the individual *or*[vii] the organization. The first focuses on *individuals* and changing individual characteristics. Examples of this sort include Human Relations approaches (see e.g., Guest, 1984), job enrichment, and goal setting (e.g., Miner, 1980). They also include many "first" and "second generation" (Cummings & Worley, 2001) Organization Development (OD) approaches[viii], particularly those that are directed towards developing self awareness, building trust, and clarifying roles and roles relations... (e.g., Dyer, 1984; French and Bell,1990; Schein,1987; see discussions by Fineman, 1991; Hollway, 1991; Cummings & Worley, 2001). The complementary approach focuses on *organizations and environments* and the characteristics of each. In this case, organizational change is considered to be planned and achieved through changing organizational characteristics - such as structures and technologies - to match environmental contingencies[ix] (e.g., Carnall, 1990; Evan, 1993).

This summary of mainstream or "entitative" (Hosking and Morley, 1991) constructions is of course only a brief and simplified account. It glosses some subtle and important variations that do not quite so neatly and sharply differentiate person and organization. An increasingly popular 'blurring' of this sort is found in an emphasis on sense making (e.g., Tsoukas, 1994), and some offer an all too rare turn towards change processes (e.g., Wilson, 1992). In my view these are *both* important variations *and* 'more of the same'. They are more of the same in the sense that mainstream discourses of entities and relationships can be said to remain largely unchanged. To elaborate a little, many sense making approaches treat sense-making as an intra-individual cognitive activity (see Gardener, 1985). This goes together with other "modernist" assumptions: (a) *knowledge* is knowledge about the world 'in its so being' – though often inaccurate and so better referred to as belief (b) *conceptual language* has a representative function - to represent independently existing beings (the world) - organizations - other people… and; (c) *rational action* is shaped in relation to predefined criteria 'in the world' (see e.g., Gergen and Thatchenkerry, 1996, also Rorty, 1991).

And so, for example, we find approaches that narrate individuals as effecting strategic or planned change on the basis of cognitive maps 'inside their heads' and by achieving 'power over'- over already theorized and already existing entities. In the present view, this is "social constructi*vist*" thinking (Gergen, 1985; 1999). Narratives of this sort constitute a revision rather than a departure from mainstream accounts in that two key discourses remain. First, theorists continue to narrate separately existing entities and mind operations (Bouwen and Hosking, 2000). Second, theorists continue to position themselves[x], unreflexively and tacitly, as 'outside' their narrative i.e., as knowing Subjects in Subject-Object relation (see Steier, 1991).

Of course where there is a main-stream there must be other streams that go their different ways on the basis of different assumptions. Or, to make a slightly different point, it is possible to go "upstream" (see Chia, 1995) to include the many ambiguities and blurry distinctions or 'soft differentiations' that have been forgotten or tidied in the processes of constructing persons and organizations, scientist and research object in S-O relation. This brings us to the point where we can look at what Thompson and McHugh referred to as critical approaches. A brief examination of their qualities will provide a bridge to the relational constructionist themes that will be developed in the second movement.

Critical Variations.
Thompson and McHugh (1995) identified a range of "critical" approaches to persons and organizations. These include critical social psychology, social action theory, Marxism, and related theories. Three shared assumptions identify critical variants. First, rather than assume independent existences, they assume *inter-dependent ontologies* so, e.g., person and organization are viewed as co-genetic or as co-constructed. Second, rather than assume that language

represents independently existing realities – language is considered to *construct* social realities. Third, rather than assuming knowledge (objective and subjective) of some independently existing world, theories focus on s*ocial realities that are considered to be multiple, local-historical, and made in action.*[xi]

It must be said that these three critical assumptions have been developed in many ways in very varied theoretical frameworks often intended to do very different jobs. One such variation is a diverse set of arguments and premises to which Ken Gergen once gave the collective term "social constructionism" (see e.g., Gergen, 1985). However, it must be stressed that the term social constructionism[xii] is used to refer to a number of radically different theoretical positions, many of which could not be called critical in the sense used above. Some could be called constructi*vist or social constructivist*[xiii] (Gergen, 1985; 1999). Others could be called "first order constructionism" (Steier, 1991 p.4). Both soften the distinction between person and context (through talk of sense making). However, they both leave subject-object differentiation in place through tacit re-construction of the "received view of science" (Woolgar, 1996) in that the scientist-narrator positions himself outside (and independent of) his own distinction (there is no distinction without a distinctor; see e.g., van Dongen, 1991; also Pearce, 1992). In addition, many social constructionisms focus on socially constructed products [xiv] rather than processes (e.g., see Pearce, 1992; Hosking, 2000) and centre conceptual language, meanings, and epistemological issues (see e.g., Newman & Holzman, 1997).

The present version of relational constructionism aims to do something rather different. As we will see, I view 'persons' and 'organizations' - all constructed realities and relations - as produced and emergent in relational processes. Second, I focus on the *how* of social construction rather than 'the what'. Third, I focus on *action* rather than meanings. In this way, subject-object relations are treated as social constructions rather than 'how things are' or how they must be in order to produce objective knowledge[xv]. The account that follows is written in a very particular way. It is intended to support an exploration of some of the possible implications of a processual - constructionist framework (a) for inquiry and (b) for the pragmatics of change work.

Relational-Construction Processes.

In this, the second movement, I will outline my central premises concerning 'the how' of relational-construction processes. I refer to 'my' approach only because, as I have said, there are many social constructio*nisms*. The following account draws upon multiple voices and literatures including, for example, the philosophy of inquiry, feminism and feminist critiques of science, the history of ideas, the sociology of knowledge, cognitive and social psychology, interactionist, cognitive, and phenomenological sociologies, radical family therapy, (some) systems theories, and critical social anthropology (e.g., Bateson, 1972; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Berman 1981,

1990; Burr, 1994; Cicourel, 1974; Garfinkel, 1967, Gergen, 1994; Harding, 1986; McNamee, 1989; Sampson, 1993; Slife & Williams, 1995; Watzlawick, 1978; Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch, 1974; Woolgar, 1996).

Before outlining my central premises, it might be helpful to do some space clearing. In other words, I will try to anticipate some narratives that you might bring to this text (as con-texts) – and ask you to try to suspend them. I should say, if I have not already, that I am not trying to persuade you that relational constructionism should be regarded as more truthful or more useful than any other approach, or that it should replace other approaches. To do so would be inconsistent with my own thought style and inconsistent with my earlier call to develop non-hierarchical possibilities in addition to subject-object relations.

So, time for some space clearing. I should start by saying that the premises I will set out are *not* offered as *substantive* claims. Rather, they resemble Giddens' social theory of structuration, (e.g., Giddens, 1979) in that they express the "*potentials* of the phenomena that constitute the domain of inquiry" - potentials that may be very differently realized in the varying "empirical flux of events" (Cohen, 1989 p.17, emphasis in the original). Second, this way of talking about relational construction can be said to constitute a "thought style" (Fleck, 1979; Chia, 1995) that includes a number of themes in "postmodern" thought (e.g., Bauman, 1993; Gergen & Thatchenkerry, 1996). Perhaps most importantly, the present narrative assumes a "weak ontology of becoming" rather than a "strong ontology" of entities, attributes, and discrete acts (Chia, 1995 p579). What this means will become more clear as we go along. Last, I should say that this processual-constructionist approach is, as yet, little explored in the field of management and organization studies[xvi]. For these reasons it might be helpful to approach the present narrative as 'strange' rather than as a variant on some familiar theme.

How construction processes can be viewed will now be briefly outlined. Development and variations will follow – but in context – that is - in relation to talk about organization and change.

Overview of construction processes

In the present view, realities - of personhood, of organizations, cultures, relationships - are constructed and reconstructed in ongoing processes. What some view as entities such as organizations or persons - 'out there' - are here regarded as social realities constructed in relational processes. But how may these construction processes be understood? Clearly I cannot start with the acts of "self contained" individuals (Sampson, 1993). Instead, I centre ongoing, multiple, and simultaneous act - supplement relations. These are the 'moving production sites' in which multiple realities emerge. These are processes of (re)*organizing* local realities. Put another way, they are processes in which persons and worlds are co-constructed, actively maintained, and changed. I will now say a little more about each of these interwoven themes.

Act and supplement. Realities and relationships are constructed in written and spoken (conceptual) language as well as in co-ordinations of non-verbal actions, things, and events[xvii]. This contrasts with many social constructionist approaches that focus on conceptual language (e.g., in conversation) and meanings. I borrow from others, using terms such as "text-context", "act-supplement" to speak of what is co-ordinated (related) with what; I use these terms interchangeably. Text-context (act-supplement) co-ordinations could include a handshake or some other non-verbal gestures; could be conversations about markets and strategy, could be the playing of a string quartet, a public planning meeting, or the construction and maintenance of a polder. Co-ordinations involve actions, objects, and artefacts available to be made relevant or irrelevant, meaningful or meaningless, good or bad, *by being put into relation* (e.g., Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Gergen, 1995). Related terms for discussing this relational (ontological) unit include "joint action" (Shotter, 1993), co-action, and "performance" (e.g., Bateson, 1993; Newman and Holzman, 1997).

Multiple co-ordinations. Construction processes consist of multiple, simultaneous and interrelated co-ordinations, many of which are tacit. Take, for example, some newly announced corporate mission. Such a text could be brought into relation to multiple con-texts such as, for example, discourses of local and of corporate management, of previous change initiatives, of being 'messed about', of a strategic re-orientation… And not one reality but multiple social realities may be made in the course of such co-ordinations. Some may speak of the mission statement as the latest management joke, it may be used as the basis for team briefings, referenced in development workshops, become a key narrative in stock market activities and so on.

In addition, multiple *simultaneous* co-ordinations are implicated in the construction of every reality. For example, the deceptively simple coordination of shaking hands relies upon reference to a great many local cultural practices to do with greeting, polite and impolite forms and when one is used rather than some other – with whom – in what relations… Imagine what it is like for a newcomer to the Netherlands trying to 'bring off' a (locally constructed) greeting – when and whom do you kiss, how many times, with which cheek do you start, what kind(s) of relationship does this 'do' or make, and so on.

Local-social-historical constructions. In the course of relational processes, "stabilized effects" (Chia, 1995, p.586) - be these identities, social practices, social structures - are (re) produced as some actions are warranted or "socially certified" (Hosking and Morley, 1991) whilst others are simply not supplemented or are "discredited" (Weick, 1979). 'Local' in the present context should be understood in contrasting relation to generalisable or transcendental knowledge of some external reality. It is related to Rorty's line of talk about "community" (Rorty, 1991). It should be stressed that 'local' in this sense could be as broad as 'Western', post-enlightenment constructions e.g., of Science. Becoming a 'local', being warranted as culturally competent, is achieved by relating in ways that are locally warranted (Weigert, 1983). So, in the examples

above, the outsider is soon identified when they give too many or too few kisses, tangle noses, or inappropriately attempt to shake hands. Equally, 'insiders' perform their identities (as co-constructors of some community) when they co-act in ways that are locally warranted as 'real and good[xviii]'. These ways of 'going on' in relation may seem fixed and may be taken-for-granted as 'how the world really is'. However, we should not forget either the essential artfulness - artificial rather than natural - of these "effects" or the processes that make and re-make them.

These local social-relational processes also have a *historical quality*. An act supplements some preceding act, text is related with con-text… And regularly repeated co-ordinations or performances 'do history', so to speak. As an example, announcing a new mission statement might well make no sense (non-sense) unless resourced by discourses concerning, for example, collective working, management hierarchies, 'singing to the same song sheet'… Similarly, a 19th century factory worker probably would not have claimed to be "doing research" when challenged for standing around seemingly doing nothing. And had he or she done so, it seems unlikely that their claim would have been warranted!

Last, local-historical constructions can be said to *both* resource *and* constrain what follows. For example, the process is likely to 'go on' differently depending on whether or not someone's claim to be "doing research" is accepted. We may say that a particular act invites a range of supplements – but *not anything goes*. Once a particular performance becomes "stabilized" (e.g., greeting conventions) then other possibilities have to be improvised and it may be harder to have them validated as 'real and good'[xix]. Such difficulties are especially likely to be encountered when subject-object relations – that do use discourses or 'right' and 'wrong' are already in place as "stabilized effects.

Relational realities. The processes outlined *co-construct* people and worlds: self-making and world (other) making becomes understood as co-genetic. This means that self *and* other (people, material objects, events, social structures) exist - as social realities - only in relation (e.g., Mead, 1934; Weiggert, 1983); this is why I use the language of *relational* constructionism. Identity and other assumed entity characteristics no longer need to be viewed as singular and fixed (a-historic), no longer function as defining characteristics of someone or something (transcendental). Rather characteristics (such as identity) become understood as multiple and variable (e.g., a different self in different relations), and something that is *done* rather than possessed.

In sum, relational processes (a) are "reality-constituting practice(s)" (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p.27) that construct markets, management, hierarchy, all social realities… what is (is not), and what is good (bad), and (b) these realities are multiple rather than singular and transcendent.

Summary - relational construction processes:
- Relational processes construct someone and something as real and (perhaps) good.

- Entities-with-characteristics *can* arise and subject-object relationships can be constructed - as in mainstream narratives - but
- processes only construct the way someone or something is *here and now*; other relations always are possible.
- Processes are constructed in multiple, interrelated, act-supplement (text-context) relations, and
- reference co-ordinations already in process.
- Act-supplement relations resource and constrain how a process goes on.
- Relational processes are processes of self making and world making: self and other are co-genetic.

Constructing Changes

These relational constructionist propositions cast mainstream constructions of change in a very different light. They also offer some interesting new possibilities for change work. I shall discuss these matters in turn.

Reflections on mainstream constructions of organizational change.
Here I invite you to join in a 'da capo' reflection on earlier, (mainstream) approaches to change and to consider some of the new possibilities that arise in the present approach. In so doing we can bridge to some specifics of this relational constructionist thought style for change work.

Both change and stability are ongoing.   We have seen that mainstream approaches represent organization as a relatively stable and singular entity that is independent of people and their actions. Given these pre-understandings, organizational change can only be understood as a discreet, linear, and progressive movement from one stable state/set of characteristics to another. In this view change is achieved through empirical-rational analysis, producing knowledge 'about' (i.e., propositional knowledge of how things are and should be) as a basis for achieving 'power over' other as object (e.g., Hosking & Bass, 1998). In this mainstream, entitative view, processes are reduced to input-outcome relations, within and between entities (Hosking and Morley, 1991). Such a view offers very little help with the 'the how'- with the pragmatics of change processes.

In contrast, the present premises are about processes and potentials - the 'content' is not pre-specified. Stability is no longer viewed as some normal feature of the world 'as it really is'[xx] and change is no longer considered a temporary (though increasingly common) aberration. Rather, by assuming a "weak ontology of becoming" *both* change - as a process - *and* stability - as ongoing re-constructions of reality - are seen as the norm. Entities and their characteristics (people and personalities, organization and organizational structures and cultures…) - if constructed - now are viewed as regularly reproduced *achievements* constructed and maintained in ongoing co-ordinations.

Change as a construction process constructing multiple realities.   To shift assumptions about what exists away from entities and individual acts is to shift the locus of change to co-action - to relat*ing*. Attention now goes to processes and how they construct, reproduce, and change social realities and relationships: patterned co-ordinations become both the 'unit of analysis' and of transformation. Note, however, that processes may simultaneously construct *multiple* social realities – as *'how things are'* - and <u>not</u> as subjective knowledge[xxi]. The present view does not presume for example, that the newly announced mission statement is some thing about which all could and should agree, barring ill will and incompetence. Rather, relations between realities now are viewed as matters of *power* rather than as differing knowledge about how the world really is, when some knowledge claims are deemed (by someone - by some community) as more true than others. It is to the matter of power that we turn next.

Change as power over and power to.   I have suggested that mainstream assumptions privilege *subjects'* constructions in subject-object relations. Commentators have spoken of subject-object relations as a relationship of "power over", that is, as power of Subject over Object (e.g., Gergen, 1995). The Subject-Object (S-O) construction has also been argued to be central to the "Received View of Science" ('RVS', Woolgar, 1996; also e.g., Berman, 1990; Harding, 1986; Rorty, 1991). Central to the S-O conception is the separation of ontology (what exists), epistemology (what we can know) and methodology (how we can know). This separates the knower from the known and privileges the scientific way of knowing. In this construction, the world is presumed to be singular and internally consistent (back to Parminides), knowledge is measured on a single dimension and is regarded as (more or less) right/wrong or useful. So, knowing Subjects study Objects to be known and use their knowledge to re-form - to construct 'power over' Objects. Many mainstream change methods seem to me to embrace these assumptions. For example, they seem to do so whenever change-work reflects the RVS (see above) – as in, for example, conventional action research approaches to organization development[xxii]. Equally, (someone's) attempts to get all organizational participants to 'have all their noses pointed in the same direction', to buy in to some shared metaphor, mission, or vision, or to 'be flexible' (e.g., Carnall, 1990; Dyer, 1984).. also could be supplemented as 'power over'.

Mainstream conceptions only allow subject-object relations, that is, "hard differentiation" between Self and Other (Berman, 1990; van Dongen, 1991)[xxiii]. Both S and O are treated as if they have a separate existence in a relation of unequals (S is active and dominates O). In contrast, relational-constructionist premises allow that 'power over' is just one possible relationship construction. At least two other logical possibilities arise: "soft differentiation" and no differentiation. The latter may have characterised communities such as "Great Goddess cultures" and could be characteristic of deep meditative, mystical, and strongly romantic states (Berman, 1981; Hosking, 2000; also Le Shan, 1974). The absence of differentiation may be impossible or at least very difficult when relating on the basis of conceptual language – particularly subject-verb-

object languages[xxiv]. Indeed, 'no differentiation' may only characterise relating in the stream of phenomenal experience where, as Wittgenstein said – we run out of words and best remain silent. This said, soft (as opposed to hard) differentiation clearly is possible: distinctions need not be constructed (a) as binary opposites i.e., as mutually exclusive and opposed, or (c) as 'impermeable', or as having (c) fixed boundaries.

Inclusive, non-hierarchical ways of relating can be constructed in processes that treat multiple different realities (in the ontological sense) as different but equal. This contrasts starkly with the exclusive, hierarchical world of one fixed reality (ontology) and a "totalitarian epistemic concern for consistency" (see van Dongen, 1991). Such ways of relating could construct *"power to"* in the sense of power to sustain multiple interdependent local ways of 'going on' in relation (see Gergen, 1995; Hosking, 1995). Ken Gergen (1995) illustrated this with his example of the bridge club and the bowling league – who, for example, may separately construct their own local realities in different but equal relationship. Shortly we shall see that this is a key theme in relational change-work – how to give free play to multiple local ontologies or "forms of life" without imposing one form or voice on others[xxv].

There is no resistance without force. Mainstream approaches to change often construct a world in which Others resist change – a world in which the means must be found to overcome this. Indeed 'resistance to change' has been receiving increasing attention as change agents have sought ways to persuade, negotiate… in some way influence others to embrace their own (Change Agent's) reality constructions. In such approaches, the Subject – in this case, the change agent - is theorised[xxvi] in relation to discourses of intention, agency, and planning of change; the Object is constructed (by the Subject) as resisting, known, and potentially formable (see e.g., Hollway, 1991; Giddens, 1979). The metaphor is either mechanistic e.g., overcoming resistance arising from inertial forces, or organic e.g., overcoming individual defence mechanisms arising from previously adaptive behaviours.

Resistance is storied (by the Subject) as something Other (as Object) has or does which has to be overcome - by self as Subject. This can be attempted e.g., by education or teambuilding (see e.g., O'Connor, 1995); "social change can be accomplished only as rapidly as resistances are overcome and removed" (Jacques, 1947 in Hollway, 1991 p.120). However the present perspective indicates that attempts to overcome resistance through more "power over" will reproduce subject-object relations i.e., will reproduce the status quo rather than change it. Perhaps this is why change efforts are so often felt to be more of the same, even when the 'content' seems so different (TQM, BPR, visioning…). I might add that, when one reality attempts to impose itself on another, resistance might well be the locally rational response. Power and local process are emphasised rather than knowledge (of how things really are) and rationality.

In the next piece of development I explore some possible change work practices that are

suggested by this relational constructionist thinking. I should emphasize that these practices must be considered as tied to the premises and arguments just outlined and not as 'free standing' methods. So, for example, when I talk about practices that work with how people talk with one another, or that work with metaphor, this should be understood in relation to what has already been said about self-other relations, language as performance, and making realities and relations.

Relational constructionism and change work

In what follows I shall not describe 'a constructionist method'. Put simply, the present way of thinking means that there is no such thing as a constructionist method - of organizing, inquiring, or change-work. Theory, method, and data now are viewed as co-genetic[xxvii]. For example, theory sets limits on relevant and useful methods, shapes how method is understood, and shapes what counts as data. Another way to speak of this collapse of differentiations is to say that my reframing in terms of processes makes theory – or rather theorizing - into a process of co-construction. And fframing theory this way makes it hard to avoid seeing it as intervening. [xxviii] I should also warn that many of the practices I will outline could be stripped from their present context and claimed to be 'the same' as e.g., development practices from a humanist tradition or e.g., as generated on the basis of an ideology of participation. However, this would be very much to miss the point.

Perhaps especially important to note is that in what follows I will focus on relational change work that emphasizes and values ways of relating that are not Subject-Object. Something has already been said about non S-O constructions, their validity, and possible usefulness. Earlier I introduced this theme by outlining logical and pragmatic reasons for my interest. These were that *radical change* in change work requires a category shift from S-O relations and that such a shift might be more useful in an increasingly interconnected, fragmented, and unequal (relational) world. As we shall see, such alternatives involve many interrelated and - in some sense -'small' changes. Together these may open up new possible ways of 'going on' in relationship.

Others have had much to say about how humans may (have) conduct(ed) their affairs without constructing S-O relations. Reflections of this sort have been offered both in relation to Science and in relation to other "communities of practice". I am afraid that, at this stage, I can only gesture towards relevant discussions. Change work of this sort might include (a) opening up to *possibilities* rather than closing down through problem identification, solutions, and generalized change programs and (b) constructing a changed, 'weaker', community-based view of rationality grounded in "unforced agreement" as reflected in coordinated action[xxix] (e.g., Rorty, 1991). Other discussions stress (c) relational processes as the location for constructing "(im)moral" (and all other) criteria. Being '"for the other" - rather than "with" - now may be viewed as the "starting point" so to speak – prior to the construction of "hard", subject-object differentiation (Bauman, 1993). If so, perhaps the 'best' that many can do to be "reasonable" and "moral" is to "discuss any topic… in a way which eschews dogmatism, defensiveness, and righteous

indignation" (Rorty, 1991, p37). This seems to be an argument for opening up to multiple cultures – as multiple realities - rather than imposing one *local-cultural-historical reality* over others.

I will finish by outlining some *generic* themes in relational constructionist change work. I will do th rather than talk about particular approaches to inquiry or intervention - which I prefer not to fix as either this (e.g., S-O) or that (not S-O). In the case of inquiry, practices that set out to construct different but equal relations include participative action research, co-inquiry, collaborative inquiry (e.g., Reason, 1994) and approaches to community social psychology (see e.g., Hosking, 1999; McNamee, 1989). Work explicitly intended to be transformative and non S-O *may* include, for example: Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Shrivastva, 1987), narrative and re-storying approaches(Barry, 1997), working with metaphors (e.g., Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990), performative work using drama (e.g., Boal, 1992; Holzman, 1999), and dialogical work that addresses how people talk with one another (see e.g., Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar, 1995; Isaacs, 1993; *http://www.geocities.com/dian_marie_hosking*). Work of this sort is ongoing in my department of Policy and Organisation Studies and we plan to develop this further in a program of research and development on the 'quality of relational processes'.

Themes characteristic of <u>non</u> S-O change work can now be summarised as follows.

- *Knowing and influencing are left joined.* Transformation work recognises and gives importance to the potential for influence of *all acts* - asking questions, voice tone, words used, posture… including 'artefacts '- interview findings, percentage summaries, diagnostic classifications… Any of these may contribute to the social construction of reality when supplemented[xxx]. All acts now are seen to have the potential to change [xxxi] how processes 'go on' and change agency is 'located' in ongoing processes and not in 'a change agent'.

- *Multiple, equal voices.* Renaissance polyphony replaces plainchant in the performance of multiple, equal voices (see Bouwen, 1997). Ways are looked for to generate and work with multiplicity rather than suppress or homogenise it through the application of statistical procedures or through management drives to "consensus". In general terms, polyphony may be constructed by *working in non-hierarchical ways* that recognise and support difference and that construct *'power to'* rather than what I earlier called power over. This may mean including everyone who has an involvement in some issue e.g., through participative change-work (e.g., Future Search, Appreciative Inquiry…). However, it must be stressed that the point of participation is no longer to increase the likelihood of acceptance of someone else's decision, or to increase the quality of a (consensus) solution. Rather it is a way of including and enabling multiple realities (as ontology).

- *Emphasise possibilities and positive values*. The view that coordination processes *construct* realities has major implications for transformative change work. For many, it means working with what is positively valued i.e., working "appreciatively" (Cooperider and Shrivastva, 1987) rather than re-constructing a world which IS problematic… a world of deficits, failure, and blaming.. This shift to possibilities invites, for example, change work that helps participants learn how better to improvise and helps participants to imagine new ways of going on together (for example "Imagine Chicago" and other similar projects[xxxii]). This also means evaluating participatively and appreciatively, building in reflexive evaluation as an ongoing quality of change work.

- *'Inquiry' and 'intervention' are left joined.* Since relational processes construct realities there is no requirement (although of course one could) to narrate activities as either inquiry or intervention; a 'both-and' approach is enabled and the received view of science (see earlier) is de-centred. This 'repositions', for example, conventional approaches to action research that use scientific inquiry to gather data which then will be fed back and used as the basis for interventions. In non S-O approaches the language of "transformation" is often used – rather than intervention – to better capture the notion of change 'from within'. Further, rather than focus on and 'fix' 'inquiry', attention shifts, for example, to –

- *Careful questioning & careful listening.* A changed role and significance is given to asking questions, to how they are asked, why, and by whom. Questioning now is seen, for example, as *forming* - good questions are those that help to enlarge possible worlds (see Harding, 1998) and possible ways of being in relationship. For example, Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Shrivastva, 1987) gives very careful attention to the appreciative question around which the process will be based. Equally, careful attention to listening to Other is a key feature of many dialogical approaches such as the Public Conversations Project, the MIT Dialogue Project (Isaacs, 1993), and Inter-Logics' work with "conversational architectures" (http://www.inter-logics.net).

- *Constructing in conceptual and non-conceptual performances.* Part of what is involved in our concern with careful questioning and listening is the wider recognition that realities and relations are constructed in performances that include, but are not confined to, conceptual language. So, for example, many of us work with how people talk with, to, and about one another and construct their wider realities and relations. Is the universe friendly? What are the prevailing metaphors – business is war or..? Who talks the most, interrupts, claims authority and expertise, on what basis..? Other possibilities include (re) enacting local realities, for example with the help of professional actors, or through narrative approaches in which participants learn how to re-story their lives - perhaps learning how to open up to new possible ways of 'going on' in relation. Learning how to learn, getting 'unstuck', constructing "power to" are central to these approaches and inclusive, performative, change-work achieves a changed significance[xxxiii].

- *A deep ecological approach* now is warranted. When self and other are seen as co-

constructed, care of other is constructed as care of the (moral)self. So, for example, discourses of care no longer have to be understood in relation to 'soft' Humanist narratives and opposed to a 'hard' (factual) world of e.g., economic 'realities' and relations that are (rationally) instrumentalised, secularised, and dis-embodied (see Hosking, 2000).

Time to Stop - Talking About - It.

"Two good friends, Chokei and Hofuku., were talking about the Bodhisattva's way. Chokei said, 'Even if the arhat (an enlightened one) were to have evil desires, still the Tathagata (Buddha) does not have two kinds of words. I say that the Tathagata has words, but no dualistic words'. Hofuku said, 'Even though you say so, your comment is not perfect'. Chokei asked 'What is your understanding of the Tathagata's words?' Hofuku said, 'We have had enough discussion, so let's have a cup of tea!'" (Suzuki, 1970, p.54-55).

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have become old friends. They include Caroline, Ralph, Talli, and my marvelous and brave students in BOW - Denise, Femke, and Marieke; thanks also to those still to come.

Ik heb gezegd.

References

Notes

i A deliberately 'weak ' concept that is meant to avoid the 'strong' claim of being a paradigm, but to convey a similar level of operation – more inclusive than theory, less bounded and totalizing than a cosmology.

ii Here I am *not* re-constructing the common distinction between symbolic and material reality (see e.g., Rorty, [1991], and Berman's [1990] discussions of the emergence of the "Italian" heresy (Science), "hard" and "soft" differentiation).

iii As additional tools and not as replacements

iv Which will later be referred to as a 'subject-object' construction of relations – a 'hard differentiation'. In such relations, Self constructs 'Other' as, for example, different, wrong, and opposing, or as different and 'in-between' i.e., as un- fit(ting) some 'either – or' category system. Either way, Other – recalcitrant employees, rival authorities, nature… is a threat and has to be changed – usually on the basis of more (local) knowledge and 'world structuring'.

[v] Subject-object discourses are found much more widely than this. Indeed, some have said that they characterize Western ways of thinking and science since Plato (see e.g., Rorty [1991], Berman [1981, 1990]).

[vi] I am leaving discussion of the distinctor who makes the distinction out of the story, for the moment – just as mainstream narratives do.

[vii] As we shall see, this Aristotelian logic of either-or is founded on the Parminidean ontology embraced in what we are here calling the "mainstream" or "entitative" perspective (see Chia, [1995], van Dongen [1991], Hosking [2000]).

[viii] Cummings & Worley (2001) distinguish between different "generations" of approaches to OD. They refer to the latest generation as "social constructionist" but only discuss Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in this context. However, in my ("critical", relational constructionist) view it is inappropriate and misleading to separate theory and method and to treat AI as 'this or that' kind of method.

[ix] I have often spoken of contingency approaches elsewhere. In my view they face a serious problem of treating eg person and organization as separate entities and reduce person to the role of providing 'inputs' to some statistical interaction. As a result relational processes are reduced to statistical interactions between inputs from person and inputs from context (see e.g., Hosking & Morley [1991]).

[x] Through tacit reference to discourses of the "received view of science"- where the distinction is assumed to be 'in the world' – or made by an impartial and objective distinctor.

[xi] These assumptions are part of what others have referred to as "postmodernist" ways of thinking. See, for example, Gergen and Thatchenkerry [1996].

[xii] Some prefer to speak of "relational" constructionism – e.g., to emphasize that the realities of self and other are co-genetic, are co-constructed (e.g., Hosking, Dachler, and Gergen [1995]).

[xiii] Social constructivism continues to separate the individual and internal cognitive processes from an independently existing world, talking of how knowledge of that world is constructed on the basis of mind operations.

[xiv] What eg Newman & Holtzman [1997]- whose work I only recently come across - call "fetishised objects"

[xv] Again, its simply that "objective knowledge'is not part of the present discourse. I am not arguing for others to abandon talk of objective knowledge – just for a broadening of relational possibilities – including constructions of Science.

[xvi] but for related work see e.g., Campbell, Coldicott, & Kinsella [1994], Cooper & Law [1995], Hosking, Dachler, & Gergen, eds [1995].

[xvii] Perhaps not suprisingly, our definition is similar to definitions of "discourse" such as that quoted from Burr earlier. However we do not fully embrace the wider theoretical stance of "discursive psychology" or of discursive approaches that remain unreflexive about their own social construction; see Gergen [994] for a discussion of their qualities and relations with relational thinking, also Steier [1991].

[xviii] Although it is not *necessary* to be a local to carry off a competent performance – you can participate in becoming a local – by being "relationally responsive" to the invitation (action) of another. See, for example, Catherine Bateson's [1993] narrative of "Joint performance across cultures: Improvisation in a Persian garden".

[xix] Discourses, for example, often are theorized as resources (see e.g., Hardy, Palmer, and Phillips [2000]) – however a 'both/and' view is possible once the either-or logic of a coherent and singular world is set aside.

[xx] And therefore independently of any social construction process - which of course means that we cannot know it as it really is - independently of our ways of 'knowing'.

[xxi] So, for example, talk of organizations as having "fragmented" cultures rather than one, organization-wide culture, could be given this more radical, ontological (rather than subjective knowledge) meaning (see e.g., Joanna Martin's chapter in Clegg and Hardy's Handbook of Organizations).

[xxii] Which may be distinguished from participative inquiry and other collaborative approaches in which everyone contributes as an expert…attempting to avoid subject-object relations (see e.g., Reason [1994])

[xxiii] Of course Alfred North Whitehead had much to say that is of direct relevance to these concerns. In particular, his discussion of "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" and its assumption of thingness i.e., material and social things assumed to have some simple location in space/time [1985]… what Chia calls "being realism".

[xxiv] Fennellosa [1969] has some very interesting things to say about Chinese pictograms that apparently express activity/ action - like 'sun rising' – rather than fixing 'things'in subject-object relation.

[xxv] And as I have said, that also goes for the present thought style and its present particularities.

[xxvi] And of course, also the scientist-narrator who positions himself outside his narrative.

[xxvii] The latter is, of course, the approach of the "received view of science" – which acts 'as if' theory and data were separate, and strives to make them as separate as possible – in this way constructing data (the context of justification) as what's important for rejecting or accepting a hypothesis.

[xxviii] I am grateful to my colleague Erik Manschot for a conversation in which we produced this (to me) felicitous way of expressing the point.

[xxix] But here I am not talking about knowledge (as is Rorty) but inter-action… and in this case 'agreement' means we can go on coordinating our actions without questioning or being questioned; we do not have to share the same story (agree) about what we are doing (see e.g., Hosking and Morley [1991]).

[xxx] This is very different from mainstream approaches that differentiate data gathering, analysis, intervention design, and implementation. In the latter case, activities are understood *either* 'find out'/seek to know about *or* attempt to influence 'other'.

[xxxi] Only the "potential" as it depends on how they are supplemented and whether or not they get warranted as 'real and good'

[xxxii] see e.g., http://imaginechicago.org

[xxxiii] One reason it does so, and one that we have not had the space to explore, is because of the de-centering of the mind-body split. Now that this is regarded as a construction – and not how things really are – some fascinating and radical possibilities arise. See e.g., Berman, [1981, 1990], Hosking [2000].