Evaluating Appreciative Inquiry:

a relational constructionist perspective

Dorieke van der Haar and Dian Marie Hosking*

Published in *Human Relations*, 57, 8, 1017-1036, 2004

Abstract

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has become increasingly popular as a social constructionist approach to organizational change and development. Many claims are made about its status and value but there are few published evaluation studies. We discuss these matters by setting out our own version of social constructionism - and draw upon this to develop three themes. One key theme is that both AI and social constructionism should be viewed as variable social constructions and not fixed 'things'. This means that AI manifests in many different ways in different local-cultural and local-historical contexts[i]. A related theme is that, if theory and method co-define one another then AI is much more than just a method. Last, when evaluation is also viewed as a variable social construction some evaluation practices will be more consistent with the premises of constructionsim and AI than others. These themes are developed in five parts. In the first, we set out what we regard as some key premises of relational constructionism. In the second part we examine AI, its multiple meanings, and its central premises. We then explore links between relational constructionsim and AI. This brings us to the point where we can introduce evaluation and its potential relations with AI. In the final part we write of how AI and evaluation could be performed in ways that put relational constructionist premises 'to work'. Here we reach the heart of our argument which is to suggest that a relational

constructionist approach to AI could derive enormous benefits from a particular approach known as ‘responsive evaluation’.

Key words: relational approaches, social constructionism, evaluation, appreciative inquiry, responsive evaluation.

Social Constructionism

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is often held to be a social constructionist approach (e.g. Gergen, 1994; Cummings and Worley, 2001; Murrell, 2001). Cummings and Worley (2001) for example *equate* AI with a social constructionist approach to planned change. If we just focus on social constructionism, there are at least two difficulties with this claim. First, the label "social constructionism" means many different things (see e.g., Danziger, 1997). Second, it seems clear that *some* versions provide no basis for claiming that something is or is not – in this case – social constructionist (e.g., Gergen, 1994; Hosking & Bouwen, 2000). We shall begin by introducing constructionisms and continue with a more detailed elaboration of the present variant. This will provide us with the basis for the remainder of this article – where we discuss AI and evaluation and offer 'responsive evaluation' as a (perhaps new) and particularly appropriate way to evaluate AI.

Many social constructionisms

The term "social constructionism" (SC) invites the reader to suppose that there is some (one) thing that is social constructionism. However, any reference to SC is a reference to many themes that can come together in different ways, and with differing emphasis (e.g., Pearce, 1992). Many accounts presented as 'social constructionist' might better be described as constructi*vist or* social constructi*vist* (e.g., Gergen, 1985; 1999; Hosking and Bouwen, 2000). Briefly, constructi*vism* talks about (a) intra-individual (cognitive) activity (see Gardener, 1985), (b) more or less influenced by inter-individual (social) processes, producing (c) knowledge which is a more or less imperfect representation of (d) the world as it really is.This means that, (e) Self and Other (other people, the natural world as Other) are treated as *independently existing*

entities and constructing is viewed as an *individual* act. Work of this sort often uses the language of 'sensemaking'; the theory is about *epistemology* (Newman and Holtzman, 1997), and; the theorist usually focuses on the *products* of sensemaking. Last, those who use the language of social constructionism (f) often position themselves[ii] - unreflexively and tacitly - as *'outside' their own discourse* - writing of others as sense makers whilst continuing to construct self as the (albeit imperfectly) knowing Subject in Subject-Object relation (see Steier, 1991). This means that reflexivity is constituted as an individual act of the scientist/inquirer – to evaluate the quality of their data.

A relational style of thinking

The present account draws upon multiple voices and literatures including, for example, the sociology of knowledge, cognitive and social psychology, interactionism, cognitive and phenomenological sociologies, radical family therapy, (some) systems theories, and critical social anthropology (see e.g. Danziger, 1997; Gergen, 1994; Woolgar, 1996). It is distinctive in at least three ways. First, it *centres change* and views stability an ongoing, active *achievement* or re-construction (Hosking, 2002). This contrasts with other approaches, most of which focus on *what* is constructed (see e.g., Pearce, 1992). Second, rather than treating self and other as independent existences and theorising sensemaking (an epistemological focus) it assumes *inter*-dependent existences *as relational realities.* So, for example, we have nothing to say about language as (mis)representation but a great deal to say about language as it contributes to the *(re)construction* of relational realities. Unlike many social constructionisms, we are not speaking of objective and subjective knowledges

of some independently existing world[iii]. Rather, we are speaking of relational realities as multiple, local-historical, constructions made in language *and other forms of action*[iv]. Finally, we prefer to think of the present variant of social constructionism as a "thought style" (Fleck, 1979) rather than a more micro theory or conceptual framework. The term "thought style" is intended to be 'weaker' than a paradigm but is intended to suggest something more inclusive than the term 'theory' (Chia, 1995; Hosking, 2002). As we have outlined, we are 'starting' somewhere rather different, on the basis of premises that differ from many (constructionist and constructivist) approaches. The time has come to look at these premises in a little more detail.

Constructing as inter-action. Our focus is on relational processes - on inter-action you might say. Inter-action is viewed as constructive[viii] in that it *makes* people and things as social realities. Reality making is achieved in and through co-ordinations of, for example, written and spoken words, non-verbal actions, voice tone, and artefacts of human activities (interior design, house magazines, technology…). But how are these construction processes to be theorised? We cannot speak of "inter-personal" processes - if these are taken to mean what happens between already theorised and independently existing agent human actors (with personality, attitudes etcetera). This is because *we wish to treat relational processes as the medium within which social realities – including what it is to be human and what it is to be 'this particular human' – are constructed*. So, instead we speak of co-ordinations, inter-actions, or text-con/text relations. More narrowly, when acts (texts) are brought into relation they construct relational processes. This means that constructing (a) becomes understood as co-constructing, rather than an individual affair, and (b) social construction becomes talk of relational processes and realities rather than meanings, so to speak, 'inside someone's head'. This way of theorising is closer to talk e.g. of local-cultural

ways of ‘going on’, of praxis, and of “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Acts invite possible supplements. Another way of saying the above is to say that social realities are *made*. But it is not possible to ‘make’ just anything. The conventions of our native tongue, mathematical conventions, change-management practices, science... may *seem* natural and ‘how the world really is’ – but only to ‘the locals’ who participate in their (re)production. Similarly, distinctions between e.g., the past and the present, persons and objects, fact and fiction… may seem ‘obviously true’ – at least to some. But our arguments suggest that *the possibility* of different constructions of what is ‘real and good’ (moral, useful, etc.) is ever present, and suggest that any and all constructions are more or less local, more or less ephemeral affairs. Later we will see that AI can also be thought of as an approach to change or transformation (not ‘just’ inquiry) that can open up possibilities - in contrast to many other change approaches that try to ‘close down’ on, and impose one particular construction.

Construction processes are local-cultural and local-historical. Our reference to ‘local’ is intended to contrast with general, transcendental, or universal presumptions about reality and knowledge. On the first, we are not assuming (or rejecting the assumption of) a singular, fixed reality ‘out there’ and available to be known. On the second, we are not assuming (or rejecting as ‘wrong’), narratives of objective (or subjective) knowledge. Rather our reference to ‘local’ is to be understood as a reference to the social-historic, ‘here and now’, and to ongoing qualities of relational processes and constructions. To elaborate: an act or text references ways of co-

ordinating *already available* and, in principle, is open to new supplements and to changed ways of going on. This makes non-sense (literally) of questions about beginnings and ends and makes a (more or less) temporary punctuation of all claims to closure[ix]. To act as a local is to coordinate in ways that are deemed (locally) appropriate (relevant). For example, we may write a scientific paper and send it to a journal. If our language tools, assumptions, and justifications depart too far from the local-cultural conventions of the journal then the likely supplement (to our paper submission) will be rejection, combined with the likely construction of our actions as those of outsiders - ill informed and/or - just plain wrong.

As we have said, our arguments do not mean that 'anything goes' - as some critics of social constructionism have claimed (see discussion by Burr 1995; Gergen 1994). On the contrary, setting aside[x] the realist assumption and the positioning of people and things as independent, bounded ontologies,[xi] makes prominent and gives new meaning to, processes of construction, talk of possibilities and multiplicity, relations between knowledge and power, and – methodologies of change-work. In our relational constructionist approach, the limits to what might 'go' are conventional and in ongoing (re)construction in relational processes. *They are none the less limiting* - as all will know who have tried to change 'the way we do things around here'.

Multiple reality construction processes. The co-ordinations of which we have spoken make and remake social constructions as *multiple* local realities. An act/text may/may not get supplemented; an act may receive many different supplements and so may differently contribute to *multiple, simultaneous, ongoing* construction processes. In this way of thinking we presume multiple, ongoing realities and processes rather than a singular, fixed, state of things that can be more or less well

known. So, for example, we would talk of different selves being constructed in different relations – rather than speak of a person as 'having' (one) identity. The same goes for 'the world'. Here it is not viewed as a singular, fixed, 'something' (which might be a useful view for certain purposes), but as multiple ongoing local constructions. Since this is important and often misunderstood, we repeat that our talk of multiple realities is *not* to be understood as talk of variants around some transcendental truth about what really is, or as individual subjective knowledge[xii]. Rather we *are* speaking of multiple local-cultural constructions that 'go on' in some sort of relation with each other. Different constructions differently resource and constrain how processes 'go on' and the realities that are made. Different relations may include, for example: ignorance (we are unaware of other realities); apartheid (e.g., we are aware of some Other(s) as different and strive to achieve separate existence), and; dominance (we impose our reality on others, through force of arms, economic means, legitimising accounts such as science or religion and so on). Equally, relating can go on through dialogues[xiii] – listening to other(s) – attempting to keep space open for 'different but equal' rather than different and irrelevant, wrong, evil…

Dominance relations and reflexivity. The construction of a singular and (albeit imperfectly) knowable reality has also been referred to as "subject-object" (e.g., Dachler and Hosking 1995; Fine 1994). The "subject" constructs some self as knowing about and as having warrants to achieve "power over" (Gergen, 1995). Other (people, objects, and events) - constructed (from the subject's standpoint) as knowable and serviceable "objects". Such conventions commonly are referenced for example, in relation to narratives of formalized hierarchical position … perhaps

locally accepted as validating a claim to know better and to be better able to decide how to 'go on' e.g., be strategic, decide what needs to be changed and how… Our present thought style means that subject-object relations and 'power over' are possible *but not necessary*. Another possibility could be to bring together multiple voices, constructing "power to" rather than "power over", and constructing self and other as different but equal (Dachler and Hosking 1995; Gergen 1995; Hosking 1995; Hosking and Bass 1998). Such practices would warrant, not one expertise, but multiple local knowledges (as praxis). Such a way of 'going on' is, in principle, offered by AI.

In the rest of this article we will examine both AI and evaluation as they might be practiced in relation to our relational premises. We shall view both AI and evaluation as social practices that actively construct *particular* identities and particular worlds. We will portray AI practitioners and evaluators (including ourselves) as *part of* their practice (in self-other relation). As will be seen, this has important implications for how we see evaluation and AI 'going together'.

Appreciative Inquiry – a relational-constructionist narrative

Multiple meanings – in practice

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) originally developed Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a complement to conventional forms of action research. In their view - and compared with conventional action research - AI takes a more positive stance, is more collaborative and participative, and is more capable of generating innovative change. Since then, there have been other developments that depart from conventional forms of action research and give particular emphasis to the importance of collaboration[xiv] (see e.g. Zuber-Skerritt, 1996; Reason, 1994; Reason and Rowan, 1981). Here we focus only on AI. We have several reasons for doing so. The most important of these

concerns the question of how AI can be appropriately evaluated giving its centering of appreciation. This issue has not been discussed within the literature of AI. We want to offer one possibility – one that draws from the traditions of relational constructionism and responsive evaluation. In addition, AI has become very popular and is practiced all over the world (Zemke, 1999), e.g. to change the culture of an organization, to transform a community, to create organizational renewal and excellence, to guide mergers and acquisitions, and to solve conflicts (see e.g. Whitney, 1998 and Watkins and Mohr, 2001 for examples). Given this, calls for evidence of its value are increasingly urgent.

AI can be said to mean different things. The literatures contain many definitions and emphases: an organizational transformation tool (Johnson and Leavitt, 2001), a theory of organizing (Bushe, 1999), and a method to foster innovation (Imagine Chicago, 2002); some seem to think it makes sense to treat AI as a theory-independent method (e.g. Johnson and Leavitt, 2001); others (e.g. Watkins and Cooperrider, 2000) present AI as a worldview or paradigm.

Given our relational premises, the question of what AI 'is' must necessarily be answered in relation to each case and its local particularities. One of the key contextual relations will be the "thought style" of the narrator. So, for example, if AI is constructed in relation to rationality, empiricism, and a view of language as representation – what Gergen and Thatchenkery (1996) referred to as "modernist" narratives – the process will be constrained by "subject-object" relations and the *subject's* (researcher/consultant's) constructions. Our critical-relational premises allow another possibility – one that is not available in the modernist narrative – the possibility of *multiple different but equal appreciations*.

As said before, *some* accounts strongly link AI to social constructionism (e.g. Gergen, 1994; Cummings and Worley, 2001; Murrell, 2001; Mellish, 2002); indeed, Cummings and Worley seem to equate AI and social constructionism. However, and as we have said, the present thought style implies that AI does not have to put relational constructionism 'to work'. Our thought style also implies that there is no such thing as *a* relational constructionist method because *all* (so called) 'methods' contribute to the construction of realities. In the third section of this article we will examine how AI *could* be constructed, given our present thought style. But first we will say something about how AI generally is storied by AI theorists, consultants, and practitioners.

The four-D cycle of AI

The general approach - which ideally involves the whole organization - is often described in terms of an ongoing four D-cycle (e.g. Whitney and Schau, 1998; Fuller, Griffin and Ludema, 2000; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001). The latter is organized around an affirmative topic, that is, something that an organization or community wants to develop, learn about or enhance in their way of doing business[xv].

The first phase is about "*discovering"* "the best of what is"[xvi]. The central aim during this phase is to find out and appreciate what gives life and energy to people, their work and their organization. The focus is therefore on positive stories that reflect peak experiences. The second D stands for "*dreaming"* about "what might be". In this phase the aim is to dream or envision how the organization ideally might look in the future. The information from the discovery phase is used as a platform for this (Zemke, 1999). In this way the vision of the future organization is related to, or grounded in, the organization's potential. The aim of the third phase, '*designing*', is to

create or design organizational structures, processes and relationships that support the dream as articulated in the previous phase. In the design phase the emphasis shifts from dreaming about what might be to co-constructing what should be. '*Destiny*' is the last phase. Its aim is to sustain the developments and innovations of the inquiry process and to nurture a collective sense of destiny.

Of course this is a broad and abstract outline of the AI process. There are no firm rules and each process emerges in a different way. Furthermore, the four D-cycle is viewed as a continuous cycle in which the destiny phase leads to new discoveries of community strengths, so beginning the process anew.

AI and relational constructionism

An ongoing cycle. Above we noted that AI is storied as a continuous four-D cycle in which the fourth 'stage' leads into another cycle of discovery, dreaming, designing, and destiny. This narrative is consistent with our earlier outlined premise - that relational processes be thought of as *ongoing* rather than as what happens between inputs and outcomes. AI then becomes viewed as an ongoing process rather than as a 'method' that is applied and which then comes to an end. If we then look ahead to our present interest in evaluation we are invited to wonder when exactly should evaluation occur - when does the process deliver 'the product'? Relatedly, perhaps e-valuation is ongoing in AI and perhaps this could be explicitly acknowledged and storied as part of the process.

Positive and appreciative. A central assumption in AI is that organizations, or in fact any patterned ongoing social relational processes, develop and change in the direction of that on which they focus their attention (see e.g. Cooperrider, 1990).

Indeed, Ludema, Wilmot and Srivastva (1997: 1045) assert: "(…) the ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments upon which we base our inquiry will largely determine what we come to discover, know, and contribute to the world of human organizing". Based upon the belief that organizations grow in the direction of what is studied (inquiry is constructive), the choice of a *positive* topic for inquiry is proposed – as a way to construct positive social realities.

It seems that the positive, appreciative feature of AI presumes socially constructed realities and so presumes that self and other are in *co*-constructive relation. This means that subject-object (S-O) relations are viewed as relational constructions, rather than enforced by 'how the world really is' - and so could be other than S-O. Furthermore, both AI and the relational premises here outlined, because they see inquiry as performative and world-constituting, emphasise the importance of reflecting upon the questions we pose and the nature of our conversations. This said, *our relational constructionist premises have nothing to say about focussing on what is positive.* Indeed, the claim that a "positive" orientation is necessary seems to beg the question of what is positive and to assume that sufficient unforced agreement can be achieved on the matter. Further, the positive injunction could itself be experienced as an imposition and as an attempt to construct S-O or "dominance relations" (see earlier). We are reminded of one (perhaps rather sad) response to the conventional utterance "have a nice day" – "I'll have any kind of day I damned well like!"

Last, if the process is supposed to be possibility-full then perhaps this could include saying (from a certain point of view) – negative stuff – which (from the same or another point of view) could have very positive implications for how relating continues. This leads us to return to and emphasize the importance of our earlier

outlined presumption of multiple realities as ontologies. If AI is intended to give space to constructing such multiplicity then that is certainly putting relational constructionism 'to work'. However, to insist that only positive ways of relating be allowed does not follow from the present relational premises. Indeed, such an injunction could hinder the openness of the process and therefore the realities that can be 'made'.

Here and now, potential not problems. Many writers/practitioners have set out to distinguish AI from problem oriented change methodologies. The latter are suggested to be backward looking in the sense of looking to the past rather than to possible futures (e.g. Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Barrett, 1995; Cox, 1998; Whitney and Schau, 1998; Hall and Hammond, 1998; Zemke, 1999; Bushe, 1999; Fuller et al, 2000; Mantel and Ludema, 2000; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001; Johnson and Leavitt, 2001). In contrast, avoiding a problem orientation is advocated as a way to stay positive and appreciative; as we have said, this is <u>not</u> a consequence of relational premises. However, an emphasis on the 'here and now' <u>is</u>. Our premise that *processes are ongoing* collapses past, present, and future. In this view, constructing is 'here and now' – although historically resourced and constrained – and having implications for what comes next. Further, when realities are viewed as socially constructed the possibility of change may seem much greater than when reality is assumed to be singular, 'out there', and fixed.

Dialogue to open up to multiple local realities. From our relational constructionist point of view, AI is important for the emphasis it gives to dialoguing and for the space it gives to multiple local-cultural realities. Many other change methodologies rely on the assumption of a singular reality and more or less knowing

individuals. This implies that only some people are experts and only some voices should be warranted. So “inquiry” must be by experts (scientists) to find out both how things really are, and how they should be. Similarly, “intervention” - legitimated through reference to fact and necessity - becomes a matter of imposing one local-cultural reality or ‘grand narrative’ on others.

In contrast, AI, when viewed from the present relational narrative, becomes a certain sort of relational process that invites a particular way of participating. The invitation is to open-up to possibilities and to multiple local ontologies. Relatedly, an AI process would warrant not one expertise, but multiple local knowledges (as praxis). Given this way of thinking, the AI practitioner is *part of* (not apart from) the appreciative process and contributes one expertise amongst many. And again, the warranting of some reality construction *stays as local as is possible* so as to enact “power to” rather than “power over”. *Reflexivity now becomes a very important quality of the appreciative process* - rather than an act of the inquirer in relation to his or her reality construction and ‘after’ the intervention has ‘finished’. Now inquiry turns on itself to reflect on power relations and to warrant “power to” construct multiple local ontologies. Such ways of ‘going on’ in relation could be regarded as moral or ‘relationally responsible’ practices (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) - -being ‘with’ rather than ‘for’ or ‘against’ Other). Such a way of ‘going on’ is, in principle, offered by AI. Further, this could also be a way for the locals to (re)construct local knowledges and power relations and so, to act critically.

Challenging assumptions and conventions. It is not only that AI should be positive or affirmative. AI practitioners also argue that inquiry should have ‘generative capacity’ i.e., the capacity ‘to challenge the guiding assumptions of the

culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is 'taken for granted' and thereby furnish new alternatives for social action' (Gergen in Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987: 131). Again, this proposal does not seem to follow directly from our constructionist premises. In particular, there is nothing in our premises that *requires* conventions to be challenged. On the other hand, conventions, by definition, limit possibilities and so may (re)construct dominance relations. So generative processes may open-up multiple social realities and 'power to'. In this way, both AI and relational constructionist premises, can facilitatepotentially "critical" processes - where 'critical' means being sensitive to multiple constructions of identities and relations (including power), and acting to open-up possibilities ('power to'). This said, the question of *how* to challenge conventions is a controversial issue where change methodologies are concerned. Being generative is certainly one effective way to elicit changed ways of 'going on' but this must be carefully done if subject-object relations are to be avoided (see e.g., Farrelly & Brandsma, 1974).

Collaborative – social construction process in which design & application are joined. The AI process is intended to be *collaborative*, providing the opportunity for large numbers of employees and stakeholders to come together to co-create their organization. In this process of co-creation it is important to strive for equality of voice. Differences and conflicts between different voices should not be avoided, but constructively dealt with. When viewed from our relational constructionist stance this does not mean that the process should result in a consensus of all voices. Consensus is not necessary for joint action and is undesirable if it means neglecting differences and excluding voices.

Evaluation and AI

Product-evaluation

Evaluation is often seen as a feedback process to practitioners and organization members about the progress and impact of some intervention (Cummings and Worley, 2001). A common narrative of evaluation stories it as achieved through scientific research in which the ideal design would consist of measurements 'pre' and 'post' intervention, a comparison group that did not receive the intervention, and statistical analysis performed by a detached evaluator (e.g., Cummings and Worley, 2001). In this way, a valid and reliable assessment can be made of differences, and whether these are most likely attributable to the intervention; "unambiguous answers to these questions can come only from careful, controlled, empirical research" (French and Bell, 1995 p. 327).

Swanborn (1999) characterizes the above as "product-evaluation". In our view it reflects the assumptions of critical realism and not the premises of relational constructionism.) To elaborate, product evaluation: (a) gives an important role to distinctions[xvii] between ontology, epistemology, and methodology and; (b) attempts to produce *objective knowledge* about the intervention in relation to; (c) some 'technical' (politically neutral, factual) standard on which all rational beings of 'cognitive goodwill' could agree. Considered in relation to our relational premises, a "product evaluation" approach does not aim to be responsive to multiple local ontologies, imposes one reality construction (in the name of science and rationality) on others, and so reproduces relations of "power over". This means that l "product evaluation" is inconsistent with a relational approach to AI.

If we now turn to the extensive literature on AI we find that *there are few evaluation studies or critical reflections*. We know of only three examples of quantitative empirical studies. They use a pre and post design and compare the changes induced by AI with the changes induced by other change methodologies (Bushe and Coetzer, 1995; Jones, 1998; Head, 2000). As we have said, given a relational constructionist thought style, this evaluation practice will (re)produce dominance relations. Further it is inconsistent with the ("appreciative") assumption that 'descriptions' or 'facts' are necessarily valuational, and with our (constructionist) assumption that methods and 'facts' are both theory laden and *construct* realities and relations. Bushe and Coetzer (1995) perhaps suspect something like this in that they observe that their research methodology seems to contradict the essence of AI. They argue that *the full merits of AI should be assessed by methods that are more consistent with its central assumptions*. However neither Bushe and Coetzer, nor Jones and Head, suggest any possible or appropriate ways to do this.

While there are only a few quantitative studies, many studies make qualitative claims about the value of AI. These include, for example, claims that the dynamic and 'magic' process of AI release great amounts of positive energy, produce outcomes that exceeded everyone's expectations, changes organizational cultures, sets innovative changes in motion, and so on (see e.g. Hall and Hammond, 1998; Whitney and Schau, 1998; Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999, 2001; Watkins and Cooperrider, 2000; Johnson and Leavitt, 2001; Watkins and Mohr, 2001). All referenced cases of AI are positive and in line with its key assumptions. However in our view such claims seem too mono-logical… in need of being given more space to dialogue with other voices. Further, we remain none the wiser about how an AI *could be* evaluated in ways that implement relational constructionist premises. For this reason, we will now

turn to the practice of 'responsive evaluation' as a potential source of relevant possibilities. It will become clear that responsive evaluation, as with AI, emphasizes the importance of propogating polyphony, assuming local knowledges, making use of storytelling, and reflecting upon the local social-historical context in which AI and evaluation are taking place.

Responsive Evaluation

Robert Stake developed the concept of 'responsive evaluation' (RE) as an alternative to 'preordinate evaluation', which he saw as the dominant approach (Stake, 1975). Stake argued that the latter (a) emphasized strong (preferably experimental and quantitative) measurement procedures; (b) legitimizes two kinds of data: goals and outcomes, and; (c) assumes it is the scientist-researcher-evaluator whose interests are centered.

In contrast, Stake wished to make evaluation *responsive*. For him, evaluation would be responsive: 'if it orients more directly to program activities than to program intents; responds to audience requirements for information; and if the different value-perspectives present are referred to in reporting the success and failure of the program' (Stake, 1975: 14). This meant letting the design emerge during the evaluation process (rather than being pre-determined); including data in the form of thick textured qualitative material[xviii], and; reporting in a way that keeps the diversity (rather than looking for consensus) and gives space for others to make their own judgments – based on the data presented. This said, the design and conduct of the evaluation study remained the job of the evaluator.

Many others have become associated with "responsive evaluation". However, it should be emphasized that they mean quite different things by the term (see e.g.

Abma, 1996, 2001; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Greene, 2000; Schwandt, 2001). One important variant is that of Guba and Lincoln (1989) who explicitly adopted a "constructivist" methodology, assuming that mind operations *construct* realities and consequently, that differences in constructions should be discussed and negotiated to produce "more informed" constructions, to correct "wrong" constructions, and to reach a consensus where possible. They invented "fourth generation evaluation" and regarded it as responsive to the extent that (a) it seeks the views of different stakeholders who determine what questions will be asked and what information will be collected; (b) the multiple reality constructions of different stakeholders are made explicit, confronted, and criticized such that (c) differences can be corrected and negotiated to produce shared conclusions and recommendations. The evaluator's role combines the expertise of the scientist with the tasks of facilitation and mediation. They stressed that evaluation should be disciplined and verifiable and they devoted a great deal of effort to developing methods for assessing its quality.

Tineka Abma (1996, 2001) developed a version of responsive evaluation that further departs from the "received view of science" (RVS, Woolgar, 1996) and from Guba and Lincoln's constructi*vist* thinking. Abma offers a *social constructionist* theory/methodology that assumes that multiple social realities are constructed in ongoing relations. We shall now look at her central premises in some detail since they seem to come closest to the present relational-constructionist view of AI.

Responsive evaluation as a relational practice. A key assumption is that realities are socially constructed in social-relational processes. Multiple social realities are made in multiple social relations. However these constructions are no longer viewed as cognitive constructions or as greater or lesser distortions of reality. Rather

they are viewed as local-cultural and constructed ‘in word and deed’, so to speak. In this (social constructionist) view, responsive evaluation must try to make different constructions explicit and understandable rather than seek to explain and to resolve them in some way. Abma, in comparison for example with Stake (1975) and Guba and Lincoln (1989), is concerned with (a) propagating polyphony, appreciating differences and *preserving this diversity* instead of trying to reduce it. Relatedly, (b) the evaluator lets go of the distant, detached, expert role and subject-object relationship with Other. Multiple expertises/local knowledges are assumed and ‘the evaluator’ works with these to facilitate polyphony; the distinction between the evaluator (researcher) and the evaluated objects (researched) is now blurred.

In addition, and consistent with a relational constructionist perspective, Abma views knowledge as a local-historical construction. For this reason, she finds it important (c) to evaluate a program or intervention in its own (socio-historical) contexts, retaining local-contextual details, and focusing on what the locals think to be issues. One of the ways this can be achieved is through story telling. (d) Story telling is regarded an important way to conduct the evaluation process - generating evaluative accounts - through social interactions. In consequence the evaluation report should include stories and dialogues - includes thick descriptions and multiplicity - rather than claiming some narratives as “malconstructions” (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) whilst others are better informed. From a critical social constructionist way of thinking, it can only be power relations that decide which constructions are more or less “sophisticated” (see e.g., O’Neil, 1995) – be that achieved through the evaluators report or through the negotiations to which Guba and Lincoln give so much emphasis.

Reflexivity has a changed role and significance in RE. Indeed, (e) reflection upon (implicit) assumptions and upon the active co-constructing role of the

participants is a very important feature of the process. Reflection upon local constructions, confronting other local constructions, helping people to become aware that they are part of the realities they create... makes these assumptions more explicit and opens up to other possibilities.

Last, when viewed from a relational constructionist perspective, an evaluation process is (f) viewed as emergent in the interactions and relationships between the participants. This means that the developed process of evaluation is only meaningful in relation to a particular (e.g. appreciative) inquiry. Evaluation is no longer seen as a program that can be applied universally and that 'starts' at a particular moment - for example when the AI intervention has ended. In this view, AI and evaluation are no longer thought of as two independent and separate methodologies. Rather, AI and its evaluation are interwoven in co-constructive and reflexive relation and perhaps it is for this reason that so few evaluation studies of AI have been reported. The case described by Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett (2001) is, for example, presented as a successful AI process, but could also be seen as similar to responsive evaluation. This case demonstrates how 120 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) world-wide use AI to unlock deficit constructions, create space for new voices, and to expand circles of dialogue (Ludema et al, 2001); all aspects that are also very relevant during a responsive evaluation. In addition, the involved NGOs aimed to 'celebrate our similarities and differences, understand each other's values, respect each other's cultures, and learn as much as we can from one another' (Ludema et al, 2001: 196); purposes which are again very important during a responsive evaluation. Thus, although not presented as such, this case illustration could be seen as an example where AI and responsive evaluation are interwoven, ongoing processes. We believe it is important to further explore this connection and would like to see more narratives

of AI that are written in ways that open up the multiple realities of participants and give readers greater space to form their own judgements.

Conclusions

In this article we set out a relational version of social constructionism in which relational *processes* are the focus of our interest. We went on to argue the constructive role of this relational 'thoughtstyle' for AI. Our particular interest has been in the evaluation of AI and how this might be achieved in ways that recognise and give space to multiple local realities (as ontologies), emergent, ongoing processes, and reflexivity (as part of the ongoing construction process). In our view, the discourse of 'product-evaluation' assumes a singular reality that can be known (more or less imperfectly) 'as it really is'. This differs from thepresent relational constructionist discourse and assumptions and our purpose here has been to open up to other possible approaches to evaluation. One such is 'responsive evaluation' – at least when it 'puts to work' a relational constructionist thought style.We showed that evaluation of this sort is an ongoing and emergent part of the AI process (and not apart from it), that is jointly constructed by participants, who listen to (rather than talk for) others. Reflecting moments are part of the social construction process, listening to different constructions and dialoging what people want to evaluate, when and how… including the AI process and e.g., whose voices dominate, what is working well and so on. Orienting towards positive constructions may be beneficial – given the performative quality of action. However, given relational constructionist premises it will be important to appreciate that what is "positive" is also a variable local construction, and for someone to rule out critical reflection may be experienced as negative and –

by one person seeking to impose his/her reality on others - inconsistent with other aspects of AI. Last, the facilitation of multiple local constructions and being with the other can be seen as a moral practice; it can also be seen as a "critical" practice (e.g., Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) that is sensitive to, and tries to work with, power relations and inequality.

References

ABMA, T.A. *Responsive evaluation*. Delft: Eburon, 1996.

ABMA, T.A. Opening thoughts, in a special issue on dialogue and evaluation. *Evaluation: the international journal of theory, research and practice,* 2001, 7, 238-252.

ABMA, T. & STAKE, R.E. Stake's responsive evaluation: core ideas and evolution, in Greene, J.C. and Abma T.A., *Responsive evaluation*, 2001, 92, 7-22.

ALVESSON, M. and DEETZ, S**.** *Doing critical management research*. London: Sage. 2000.

ALVESSON, M. and SKOLDBERG, K. *Reflexive methodology*. London: Sage. 2000

BARRETT, F.J. Creating appreciative learning cultures. *Organizational Dynamics,* 1995, 24, 36-49.

BURR, V. *An introduction to social constructionism.* London: Routledge, 1995.

BUSHE, G.R. Advances in appreciative inquiry as an organization development intervention. 1999. Downloadable document at http://www.gervasebushe.com/aiodj.htm

BUSHE, G.R. & COETZER, G. Appreciative inquiry as an organization development intervention: a controlled experiment. *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science,* 1995, 31, 13-30.

CHIA, R. From modern to postmodern organizational analysis. *Organization Studies,* 1995, 16, 580-604.

COOPERRIDER, D.L. Positive image, positive action: the affirmative basis of organizing, in Srivastva, S. & Cooperrider, D.L. *Appreciative management and leadership,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990, 91-125.

COOPERRIDER, D.L. & SRIVASTVA, S. Appreciative inquiry in organizational life, in Woodman, R. & Pasmore, W. (eds.). *Research in organizational change and development*, volume 1, Connecticut: JAI-Press, 1987, 129-169.

COOPERRIDER, D.L. & WHITNEY, D. When stories have wings: how relational responsibility opens new options for action, in McNamee, S. & Gergen, K.J. (eds.). *Relational responsibility: resources for sustainable dialogue.* California, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999, 56-64.

COOPERRIDER, D.L. & WHITNEY, D. A positive revolution in change: appreciative inquiry, in Golembiewski, R.T. (ed.). *The handbook of organizational behavior*, second edition, New York: Marcel Decker, 2001, 611-629.

COX, G. Appreciative inquiry. 1998. Downloadable document at downloadable at http://newdirections.uk.com/ai.htm

CUMMINGS, T.G. & Worley, C.G. *Organizational development and change*, seventh edition, Ohio: South-Western College Publishing, 2001.

DACHLER, H.P. & HOSKING, D.M. The primacy of relations in socially constructing organizational reality, In: Hosking, D.M., Dachler, H.P., & Gergen, K.J. *Management and organization: Relational alternatives to individualism.* Avebury: Aldershot, 1995.

DANZIGER, K. The varieties of social construction. *Theory & Psychology*, 1997, 3, 399-416.

FARRELLY, F. AND BRANDSMA, J. *Provocative therapy*. Cupertino: Meta Publications, 1974.

FINE, M. Working the hyphens: Reinventing self and other in qualitative research, In: Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage, 1994.

FLECK, L. *Genesis and development of a scientific fact.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

FRENCH, W.L. & BELL, C.H. *Organizational development and transformation.* Fourth edition, Irwin: Burr Ridge, 1995.

FRY, R., BARRETT, F.J., SELLIG, J., & WHITNEY, D. *Appreciative inquiry and organizational transformation: Reports from the field.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001.

FULLER, C., GRIFFIN, T. & LUDEMA, J.D. Appreciative future search: involving the whole system in positive organization change. *Organization Development Journal*, 2000, 18, 29-41.

GARDENER, H. *The mind's new science*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.

GERGEN, K.J. The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. *American Psychologist*, 1985, 40, 266-275.

GERGEN, K.J. *Realities and relationships*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

GERGEN, K.J. Relational theory and the discourses of power, In: Hosking, D.M., Dachler, H.P., & Gergen, K.J. eds *Management and organization: Relational alternatives to individualism*, Aldershot: Avebury, 1995.

GERGEN, K.J. *An invitation to social construction*. London: Sage, 1999.

GERGEN, K.J. & THATCHENKERY, T. Organization science as social construction: Postmodern potentials. *The journal of applied behavioral science*, 1996, 32, 356-377.

GREENE, J. Challenges in practicing deliberative democratic evaluation, in Ryan, K.E. & DeStefano, L. (eds.). *Evaluation as a democratic process: promoting inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation*, New Directions for Evaluation, number 85, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000, 13-26.

GUBA, E.G. & LINCOLN, Y.S. *Fourth generation evaluation*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1989.

HALL, J. & HAMMOND, S. What is appreciative inquiry? *Inner Edge Newsletter*, 1998, 1-10. Downloadable at http://www.thinbook.com/thinbook/whatisai.pdf

HEAD, R.L. Appreciative inquiry as a team-development intervention for newly formed heterogeneous group, in *Organization Development Practitioner*, 2000, 32, 59-66.

HOSKING, D.M. Constructing power: entitative and relational approaches. In: Hosking, D.M., Dachler, H.P., & Gergen, K.J. *Management and organization: Relational alternatives to individualism.* Aldershot: Avebury: 1995.

HOSKING, D.M**.** *Constructing changes: A social constructionist approach to change work (and beetles and witches).* Tilburg: Tilburg University Press. 2002.

HOSKING, D.M & BASS, A. Constructing Changes Through Relational Dynamics. *Aston Business School Research Paper Series*, RP9813, 1998.

HOSKING, D.M. & BOUWEN, R. Organizational learning: relational-constructionist approaches: an overview, *European journal of Wwork and organizational Psychology*, 2000, 9, 129-132.

JOHNSON, G. & LEAVITT, W. Building on success: transforming organizations through an appreciative inquiry. *Public personnel management*, 2001, 30, 129-136.

JONES, D.A. A field experiment in appreciative inquiry, *Organization Development Journal*, 1998, 16, 69-78.

IMAGINE CHICAGO http://www.imaginechicago.org/downloads/AI_short_summary.doc

LAVE, J. AND WENGER, E. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

LUDEMA, J.D., WILMOT, T.B., & SRIVASTVA, S. Organizational hope: reaffirming the constructive task of social and organizational inquiry. *Human Relations*, 1997, 50, 1015-1052.

LUDEMA, J.D., COOPERRIDER, D.L., BARRETT, F.J. Appreciative inquiry: The power of the unconditional positive question, in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds.) Chichester, Sage: *Handbook of action reasearch*, 2001, 189-199.

MANTEL, M.J. & LUDEMA, J.D. From local conversations to global change: experiencing the worldwide web effect of appreciative inquiry. *Organization Development Journal*, 2000, 18, 42-53.

MELLISH AND ASSOCIATES: http://www.mellish.com.au/Resources/lizarticle.htm

McNAMEE, S. & GERGEN, K.J. (eds) *Relational responsibility*. London: Sage, 1999.

MURRELL, K. L. Book review of Appreciative inquiry: change at the speed of imagination, by Watkins, J.M. & Mohr, B. *Organization Development Journal*, 2001, 19, 92-93.

NEWMAN, F. & HOLZMAN, L. *The end of knowing: A new developmental way of knowing.* New York: Routledge, 1997.

O'NEIL, T. Implementation frailties of Guba and Lincoln's Fourth Generation Evaluation theory. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 1995, 21, 1, 5-21.

PEARCE, W.B. A 'camper's guide to constructionisms'. *Human Systems*, 1992, 3, 139-161.

REASON, P. (ed.). *Participation in human inquiry*. London: Sage, 1994.

REASON, P. & ROWAN, J. (eds.). *Human inquiry: A sourcebook of new paradigm research.* Chichester: Wiley, 1981.

SCHWANDT, T.A. Responsiveness and everyday life, in Greene, J.C. & Abma, T.A. (eds.). *Responsive Evaluation,* New Directions for Evaluation, San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001, 73-88.

STEIER, F. *Research and reflexivity*. London: Sage, 1991.

STAKE, R. *Evaluating the arts in education: A responsive approach.* Merill: Colombus Ohio, 1975.

SWANBORN, P.G. *Evalueren: het ontwerpen, begeleiden en evalueren van interventies: een methodische basis voor evaluatie-onderzoek.* Amsterdam: Boom, 1999.

THOMAS, J. *Doing critical ethnography*. London: Sage. 1993.

WATKINS, J. & COOPERRIDER, D. Appreciative inquiry: a transformative paradigm. 2000. Downloadable document at http://www.odnetwork.org/odponline/vol31n1/transformative.html

WATKINS, J.M. & MOHR, B.J. *Appreciative inquiry: change at the speed of imagination.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001.

WHITNEY, D. Let's change the subject and change our organization: an appreciative inquiry approach to organization change. *Career Development International.* 1998, special edition, pp. 314-319.

WHTINEY, D. & SCHAU, C. Appreciative inquiry: an innovative process for organization change. 1998. Downloadable at: http://www.os.dhhs.gov/ohr/diversity/read/aiinovative.html

WOOLGAR, S. Psychology, qualitative methods, and the ideas of science. In Richardson, J.T.E. ed. *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods For Psychology And The Social Sciences*. Leicester: BPS Books, 1996.

ZEMKE, R. Don't fix that company, *Training*, 1999, 36, 26-33.

ZUBER-SKERRITT, O. (ed.). *New directions in action research.* London: Falmer Press, 1996.

[i] The authors would like to thank the reviewer for his/her felicitous phrasing.
[ii] 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.
[iii] In other words, a thought style in which ontology and epistemology are separated.
[iv] These assumptions are part of what others have referred to as "postmodernist" ways of thinking. See, for example, Gergen and Thatchenkerry (1996).
[v] It is important to be aware that the term "critical" is used to mean many different things – including Marxist approaches that start with the assumption of inequality and emphasise liberationist objectives for research and change-work (see e.g., Thomas, 1993 ; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000).
[vi] In other words, a thought style in which ontology and epistemology are separated.
[vii] These assumptions are part of what others have referred to as "postmodernist" ways of thinking. See, for example, Gergen and Thatchenkerry (1996).
[viii] Some say 'performative" (e.g., Newman and Holtzman, 1997).
[ix] This also means that the common construction of a separate past (finished), present, and future also is set aside.
[x] note, *not* declaring false – we have no warrantable basis for such a claim and have no need to make it. In the present view, social constructionism is silent about realism and relativism - it is not an issue that arises within this style of thinking.
[xi] Please note the careful form of words. We do not claim that the presumption is false- we have no sure foundations for doing so and would undermine our own arguments by such a claim. We merely note that it is a presumption that we neither care to, nor need to centre in the context of our present interests.
[xii] In other words, we are not speaking of subjective knowledge when objective knowledge also exists. Like relativism, subjective and objective knowledge belong to another style of thinking and not the present version of social constructionism.

[xiii] Elsewhere DMH has spoken of multiloging – as a way to emphasise that multiple simultaneous text-context relations are in ongoing coordination, as well as multiple voices (see Dachler and Hosking, 1995).

[xiv] Developments, such as emancipatory action research (Zuber-Skeritt, 1996) and participative inquiry (Reason, 1994) relate to AI as they also treat subjects as co-researchers. However, we believe that these developments come from a humanist background, whereas AI is grounded in a social constructionist discourse and stresses both the importance of appreciation and transformative change.

[xv] Examples of how the four D process could be applied in organizations can be found in Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001; Fry, Barrett, Sellig, and Whitney, 2001; Watkins and Mohr, 2001; Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett, 2001.

[xvi] This first phase is often contrasted with other approaches to organization development and change that see the analysing of problems as the first important step in the change process (see e.g. Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Zemke, 1999; Mantel and Ludema, 2000).

[xvii] Which, of course, are also socially constructed.

[xviii] Stake (in Abma and Stake, 2001) argues that qualitative, rich-textured, evaluation reports are accessible for a wider range of audience than the often highly quantitative evaluation findings.