Constructing changes in relational processes.

Introducing a social constructionist approach to change work.

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Introduction

Social constructionist talk has become popular. It is increasingly spoken of in business schools, conferences and many areas of practice, for example, involving some sort of change work. However, despite the singular label, social constructionism is not 'one thing'. The term embraces many different traditions in the history of ideas, implicates important variants, and is continually evolving. Social constructionist thinking is 'put to work' in many areas of social praxis, for example, in the practices of family therapy, civic involvement in community governance and participation in major infrastructure projects. However wider understanding and application seems to be hampered by assumptions readers 'bring to' writings in the area- assumptions that often conflict with key taken-for-granteds in social constructionist narratives. This is an all too common difficulty where communications are 'across paradigms' or are 'intercultural'. In addition, social constructionist arguments are not easily expressed in conceptual language. The latter is not the best medium in which to express the multiple, simultaneous, and equivocal nature of social construction processes. This article endeavours to provide an approachable introduction to what we call 'relational constructionism' in the context of organisational development and consulting work. It is only one view, though one that we feel 'fits' with the thinking and practices of many of our fellow consultants.

Sophie's Mum's world…looking in on reflective practices

> S Hi Mum, how was your conference…what was it…'It's a relational world'? It sounded really relevant to stuff I'm doing at college and you did say you'd tell me all about it when you got back…

> M Wow Sophie, slow down. I don't know where to start…it was great but...

> S You said it was about relational constructionism. What's that- is it new? What's it got to do with organisational development and change?

M No, its not new - actually the ideas go back a long way. We could take some time on it now if you want to but would you mind if we tried to put relational arguments to work as we go.

S Great, lets give it a try.

M OK. Lets start with where you are, so to speak… by connecting with some ideas with which you are already familiar. Then we can introduce other possibilities. What do you think?

S Sounds fine.

M All right. If it drifts in the direction of a lecture just throw something at me.

Glaciers: the unfreeze-transform-refreeze model.

M There was a guy called Lewin…if you haven't heard of his work yet…you will. One of the things he was known for was his approach to organisation development or 'OD'. He suggested that organisational change could be thought of as a process of unfreezing, transforming, and re-freezing. Notice the metaphor by the way, we'll have to say more about them. So, Lewin's metaphor invites us to think of organisations as relatively stable states - like a block of solid water - an ice cube or a glacier. And if you think about it, when we speak of something as if it were in a certain state that goes together with notions of boundaries and defining characteristics. In the case of organisations, characteristics include size and shape or structure. So the metaphor of glaciers invites a whole lot of related notions including the idea that to achieve change it is necessary to add energy to 'unfreeze' the present state - to melt the ice - to get the water to flow - and in this way, to create a new form that then would need re-freezing to make it stable.

S That's interesting. It sounds like this way of thinking about organisations is a bit similar to some ways of thinking about people. I mean people are supposed to have boundaries and characteristics that define who or what they are - and change is viewed as change in those characteristics. Isn't that right? And if organisations are things, like glaciers, where does this leave people - frozen in or frozen out ??!! Wild…

M A worrying thought, hmmm? But can we pick up on what you said about understandings of persons. You're absolutely right… OD practices *do* embrace understandings of persons and relationships - and understandings about how these in turn are related to the organisation's state and its possible need to change. Like you said, organisational members, like organisations, often are considered as 'things'- as beings with identifiable characteristics. So, some might say 'I *am*' a stable extravert… no comments thank you! It might help to know that OD has been heavily influenced by humanistic psychology - by people such as Maslow and Rogers (who we have talked about before). So there's been lots of attention to peoples' values, their feelings and emotions and their perceptions of themselves and others. Maybe this is why OD interventions often used to assume that self awareness is important, along with accurate perceptions of other peoples' feelings, values and the like. So, with these assumptions as a starting place, how do you think 'the OD narrative' is likely to 'go on', so to speak?

S Well, lets see. I suppose that relationship difficulties and organisational problems would have to be 'explained' in terms of peoples' feelings and misperceptions.

M You've got it, absolutely right. We will see the same thing in a moment when we look at where the freeze-unfreeze metaphor 'lets us go'. Yes, in this way of thinking, relational problems are understood to arise from misperceptions. They might be misperceptions of self - that's when people speak of lack of insight or 'self understanding'- or misperceptions of some 'other thing'- an organisation and its goals - or some other person.

S People often talk about perceptions and misperceptions don't they?

M Yes, I suppose its got a lot to do with western psychology and our notions about how we know ourselves and the rest of the world. So, you are familiar with the idea that what a person may know - about 'self' or 'other' is a representation in the mind. Contemporary cognitivist arguments show that representations cannot exactly 'mirror' the real world. Rather, mind operations, feelings, and the like, distort perceptions. This means that we always act on the basis of some *construction* - rather than representation - which may be more or less accurate but *can never be known to be perfect.* This is what your psychology books talk about as constructi*vism*'.

S Right, but now this is getting to be a lot to keep up and running. I know you don't like them, but could we have some bullet points?

M Ok - lets use that lovely white fridge door to write them on - that's an appropriate place isn't it?! So, I think the stereotype of a 'Lewinian' approach would look like the following, here, you write: (Sophie writes)

- *Individual and organisational goals are potentially compatible,*
- *Conflict is caused by misunderstandings,*
- *Conflict is resolved by openly confronting differences in perception,*
- *The open display of feelings and emotions is valuable,*
- *People have a capacity and desire for personal growth,*
- *Working relationships can be improved by enhancing self-awareness,*
- *Collaboration and trust are better than conflict and secrecy.*

S OK, that's good, makes sense to me. So, lets now look at what a Lewinian melt down merchant would do.

M Right. Let's call these various arguments and assumptions a Lewinian story or 'narrative'. Given this narrative, OD practitioners would have had to build their *knowledge* of what they presume to be real - what we've been talking about- individuals' values, their perceptions, goals and the like. They would have used opinion surveys, group discussions and other data collection techniques to 'diagnose' the state of things, so to speak. Without going into any detail, activities such as survey feedback, mirroring and the like would have been used to 'offer back' this knowledge to the client- to improve local diagnostic or problem solving and planning skills. In *this* narrative, a key feature of OD work is to give the client insight in the presumption that this will facilitate a process of unfreezing.

S So, more knowledge is seen as a good thing?

M Yes. But notice that its 'knowledge' coloured by OD consultants' 'mind operations' by *their* narratives of persons, organisations, and change. We've talked a bit about what some people assume to be real (organisational and individual beings with certain characteristics) but these go together with assumptions about what is good (insight, harmonisation of goals...). Of course, everybody makes assumptions and we can't avoid it. And usually we

don't reflect on them, we just act. And this view of the importance of knowledge often goes together with an emphasis on *dialogue*. Dialogue often is thought of as a way to build knowledge - about self and other - and to correct misunderstandings. See, we've come full circle. And now this brings us to what OD has regarded as *intervention*. Problem solving discussions, group exercises, role negotiations and the like have been understood to transform values, relations, negative feelings and perceptions through dialogue and increased insight.

S But this isn't the only narrative of OD, right?

M Right. I've only been working through what you already know as a way of getting into some relational constructionist ideas…that's something like the notion of 'pacing' so as to make it possible to lead somewhere new. Now might be a good time to make explicit one of the basic arguments. This is that *any* set of assumptions about what is real and good - and that's what we have been talking about is to be viewed as *local* rather than universal. And constructing things *one* way - for example through the metaphor of a glacier - makes it very difficult to imagine things any other way. Think of when you used to claim that I never listened to a word you said. Its actually very hard to 'hear' someone no matter how hard you try - when they are making implicit reference to totally different assumptions - because we reconstruct their narratives in the context of our own.

S Wow, that's a lot to hold on to. Let me see, if narratives are *local* - then what we have called a Lewinian approach *could* construct dominance relations - good old imperialism egh?. How do these 'Lewinians' know that what *they* take to be real and good *is* relevant to the local cultures they are working with?! Headline, 'Lewinian consultant dumps own assumptions on natives'! Hang on, its more than that. If people are trying to relate on the basis of *very different*, *local*, assumptions…whilst *presuming* that they're universal…then it puts assumptions about insight in a very different context. That's incredible stuff.

M Well, of course, it's not just a problem for this stereotypical 'Lewinian' view of understanding and insight. These arguments about local assumptions, practices, narratives…- call them what you will - also seriously undermine *wider assumptions* about knowledge and dialogue. For example, can you know what others know when you are relating with them on the basis of totally different assumptions and, in this context, how on earth will dialogue help?

S Mmm, sort of like playing together two musical themes in which each has a different melody and rhythm and the notes clash.

M I guess. Sorry, I should have remembered that you're not so visual…I'll try to remember that in my metaphors. By the way, have you noticed that what we're doing together is rather like weaving - setting up particular narratives or themes that can be returned to, joined with, and taken on. Lets see... think of it as a musical argument - introducing themes or musical subjects, developing those - and perhaps introducing new subjects - and then recapitulating.

S Yeh, and what's doubly clever is that you've just set up a motif, a little melodic figure about knowledge and dialogue, to which you're going to return aren't you ha - think I wouldn't spot it?

M Jees, daughters! Now, where was I? Ah, yes, power. As you said the other day, the 'academic' OD literatures used to emphasise the OD consultant's role as supportive and facilitating. But if you think about what we said about *local* assumptions, OD relations might involve *'power'* of one narrative *over* others. What if, for example, the Lewinian

metaphor (or what others have done with the poor guy's stuff) could be argued to reflect white North American presumptions about what is real and good. You've read South and Central American writers like Isabel Allende and Carlos Castaneda. Can you imagine what *knowledge* might mean to a Yaqui Indian who believes that they can be many different beings - a tree, a stone, a butterfly…and what about *insight*!?

S I think I know what you mean. Perhaps its like when the young Beethoven first played his second Sonata for the Viennese…they thought it was terrible nonsense …and the Paris audience was the same when Debussy introduced them to musical impressionism... can you imagine, they actually booed and hissed in the middle of La Mer?!!

M Thanks, I'll use that…sounds like a perfect example of contrasting presumptions of what's real and good- the stuff of inter-cultural relations ! But now lets develop these themes by looking at *how else* OD might be constructed. But before we do, there's a few more assumptions we need to make explicit about the ways planned change is understood - given narratives of things with characteristics that can be melted, transformed, and refrozen. Do you want to find out if you can generate them? Let's add them to the fridge door.

S Well, OK, lets think (writing):

planned change is:

- *linear: from state A to state B.* It's

- *progressive: B is an improvement on A.* I also get the very strong feeling that it's

- *destination oriented: the point, so to speak, seems to be 'getting there'- arriving at B – which is the transformed state*

  Mmm, and maybe one more... change is

- *based on creating dis-equilibrium: to destabilise the stable state(s)* - sort of like a musical transition from one subject to another. But now I give up.

M Well that's brilliant. It all fits together doesn't it…the assumptions you 'start with' set limits on how you can 'go on'- not 'anything goes'. Its like a sonata in the hands of Mozart or Hyden… it could 'go on' in so many different ways but there are limits beyond which it would no longer be called a sonata. But lets not get side-tracked…there are a couple more assumptions we need to make explicit. Remember your crack about organisations as glaciers and people being frozen in or out? It means that in the glacier metaphor, change is:

- *planned and managed by people who exist separate from and act on things: change agents are understood to act from 'the outside', on the basis of outsider assumptions. It also means that stability is the norm, so change is*

- *unusual, being movement from one stable state to another.*

  S OK, that's enough pacing… the point of all this was to provide a context which would allow us to move into the 'new' text of social constructionism, right?

  M Yes, although we have been putting relational arguments to work in order to do this. Lets try making another connection - by looking at what some have suggested to be a totally

different and opposing set of assumptions about change.

S Oh, that's easy. If I think of dialectical approaches such as Taoism or Buddhism I can certainly story them as making assumptions that are opposite to the ones we've just looked at. Let's see. So, change isn't linear,

in a contrasting dialectical view change might be viewed as:

- *Cyclical: the cycles being continuously repeated; not progressive but*

- *Processional: continuously moving but with no presumption of 'getting better'.*

- *Journey oriented - travelling - not arriving; and*

- *A matter of restoring and actively maintaining equilibrium. Its*

- *Constructed in and by people who are part of (not apart from) things - part of the great oneness you could say. And change is*

- *Usual…because everything is flow.* There, how's that?! Is that relational constructionism?

M Well, yes, in the sense that the narrative is relationally constructed - as is the Lewinian - and in the sense that what we are doing here together is a relational construction process. But we haven't yet explicitly and systematically set out our premises. First, I want to go back a bit and pick up an earlier theme. This is the role of metaphors. Remember I asked you to think of a set of assumptions that could be viewed as opposite to the Lewinian.

S Yes.

M Could you also view these two narratives, not as opposites, but as talking about completely different things, and work with the notion that to see one in the context of the other, shapes how you can understand it.

S Aha, I see what you mean. We are forcing our understanding of dialectical themes, or more generally, any text, to fit our pre-existing narrative *con*text.

M Yes. In my view, relational arguments invite us to hold any model, metaphor or template lightly and be ready to let it go. I know quite a few who think that there is not much new in relational constructionism - so why all the fuss - and why all the heavy language tools…'why can't they write in plain words that we can understand?!' But of course it's not possible to 'start' without a context already in place. So, for example, a European might take it as entirely natural and obvious that people and organisations are relatively stable states. But if I assume for example, that Buddha is someone separate from other people and things I will never understand Buddhism 'from within' as it were, on the basis of its own taken for granteds.

M Are you speaking as a relational constructionist here Mum? Is *this* what its all about? I have to go out soon!

S Well, of course I am. Everything I've said has been from a constructionist standpoint. Remember what we said earlier about assumptions. Any practice that implicitly or explicitly claims something 'is' (organisations are..; relational theory is...) and is 'good'

reflects more or less *local presumptions*. So, in the course of our ongoing practices - in the course of this conversation - we've been socially constructing social reality! But RC as a set of arguments and premises - that's another matter. Perhaps its now time to make explicit some of what's 'real and good' in constructionist thinking. Now we've established a context lets set up our 'new' text and a new metaphor..can we try the metaphor of whirlpools? I'll write it down on the side of the water cooler for now. Shall we 'stop' for a while and 'start' again tomorrow?

S If you want to play with these arbitrary distinctions…OK… that's fine with me.

Whirlpools: relational processes, development, and change

(Next day, over supper).

S Ok, so where are we up to. I was glad of the break…it gave me a chance to mull things over. As I remember we finished with a new metaphor. Did I also catch a hint that I should be careful about dragging in assumptions from other local theories.

M Well, yes. But we can't start without any taken for granteds…we saw yesterday that we always 'go on' on the basis of contexts, of narratives, already in place - that was what we spoke of as weaving or constructing a musical argument. But some of the assumptions we reference may get in the way of understanding 'from within'. In the case of constructionism I think I know what some of the 'interfering' assumptions might be because they are so widespread - at least in the contemporary western cultures I know something about. So, shall we start by setting them to one side.

S Why 'set to one side'? Sounds pretty wishy washy..can't we just throw them out?

M Well, again, it hooks back in to some of the arguments we set up earlier. If we assume theories are local, and ours exists in relation to others, then we have no firm basis for treating other theories are *wrong*. At least, we can't make this as a *general* claim - true for all times and all peoples. They would only be wrong, from a particular local standpoint.

S Right. I'm ready, suspend away!

M Here goes. A big one to start with: w*e have to suspend the narrative that treats individuals and organisations as if they were relatively stable beings with characteristic*s.

S Hey, wough, lets not go *that* far! If we do that, hmm, then there is no-one left to have feelings, to have a mind er to have knowledge… to act! Just *who* is going to diagnose and intervene to achieve organisational change? And how can you now talk about *relations*? If we do this then *relations can't be between entities* - cos we've chucked 'em out. And that means that talk of relations can't be a reference to whether people are nice or nasty to each other - so what are they?! Wow, I've just realised that our narratives of intra-personal and interpersonal processes will have to go! I think I'm going out of my mind - sorry - just a metaphorical slip. I wish we hadn't started this.

M Sorry Soph, that's the trouble with *talking* about this stuff. It can *sound* crazy. But there *are* other ways of narrating people and worlds. Actually, it seems to me that none of this seems so daft when narrated without words and - where you are concerned - music might work a lot better. Talk is just one kind of action and words can be very excluding.

S Allright. I'll try to stay loose and see where all this goes. But I need some notion of what

to put in place of the things we've just abandoned…what's all this stuff about whirlpools…
you wrote it down…

M Well, it's a metaphor for what we've been doing all along. We've been co-ordinating
with each other. Or, more accurately, our *actions* have been in ongoing co-ordination. One
of us acted - said or did something - and the other supplemented it. And depending on how
an act was supplemented, the process continued in a certain way - like a musical argument.
A different supplement probably would have invited the process to go on in some other
way. So, for example, you supplemented the Lewinian model with a dialectical one. Had
you punched me on the nose instead - as Buddhist masters always seem to be doing - the
process would have gone on rather differently! We've used the terms 'text' and 'context' so
we could say that *co-ordinating is an ongoing process of relating text and context or act
and supplement.*

S Why do you sometimes say 'text and context', and sometimes 'act and supplement'?

M Well, for me they do similar jobs. The main thing is that we're always talking about
actions but sometimes it seems very odd to use action language. Hang on, lets have a look
at a visual illustration…we can use that Magritte poster you have in your bedroom.

S Which one?

M Well, actually, pretty well any of his paintings will do. But I was thinking of the one
called 'ceci n'est pas une pipe'- and its a depiction of a pipe.

S So?

M Well, its a jolly handy for illustrating text-context relations. Lets call the visual image of
the pipe the 'text', and the written words the 'context'. So how does the picture strike you?

S Well, I like it cos it's bizarre.

M Yes, and that's an excellent metaphor for relating. No, I didn't mean relations are bizarre,
although relating can often involve paradox, especially when assumptions of thingness and
representations of things are referenced. What I meant was that it's a good illustration of
how meanings are made - you put the text in relation to the context and said 'how can a
picture of a pipe not be a pipe'. In so doing you seemed to be confronted with a paradoxical
relation - 'c'est bizarre'. But had you taken the significance of it being a *picture* of a pipe…
you would have made a different meaning…and in that case no paradox would be felt. So,
I'm speaking of *a process of actively putting in relation* - be it with words, gestures,
physical objects or movements.

S Let's see if I've got this. If we switch to the terms act and supplement we could try
another example. What if I walk towards you holding out my hand; lets call that an act. You
taking my hand and shaking it would be a supplement…that's a co-ordination isn't it?

M Exactly, and the process can 'go on' in different ways depending on how I supplement
your act. If you think about it there are all sorts of possibilities…I could walk past you,
ignoring your outstretched hand; I could spit in it; I could wrestle you to the ground and so
on. Many other supplements would, in principle, be possible - although I might not be able
to improvise too many more - particular possibilities are more likely to be imagined or
improvised than others - depending on *particular* local cultural conventions (contexts).
Depending on the supplement, the process can 'go on' in different ways, constructing a

greeting, a personal injury, or enlightenment!

S Mmm, well I feel as though I'm hearing you - hey, now I'm tuned to them I'm finding metaphors everywhere. I guess we should recapitulate some of these narratives and develop them some more, huh - just like ijn a musical composition. But first lets explore what these relational processes do in this view.

M Right, I guess that *now* we can bring persons and organisations back into the picture. Earlier we noted that these often are narrated as relatively stable beings with characteristics. So each of us is storied as if we have *an* identity, as if we relate to an 'outside' world of others - other people, organisations and so on. And we think of perceptions - of self and others - as being more or less 'accurate'. So this all looks rather different now. Relational constructionist narratives say that relational processes *make* who a person *is* (identity or 'self') *in relation* to some 'other', and that 'making' is going on all the time. So as you act, and some other co-ordinates with your action, this is making who you are in relationship - and of course - who or what they are - in relationship. In this sense, self and other are joined - not separate objects. It's more like a polyphonic musical performance- *'people and worlds' constantly are in the making.*

S Well that's interesting - so then we have to do something different with the metaphor of mind?

M Yes…we 'suspended' that earlier- remember? So we are *not* now starting with the assumption that the world is made up of things with characteristics such as a mind and knowledge…a narrative in which processes happen within and between things. This is crucial. Instead we are *starting with processes* - with narratives in which knowledge becomes *knowing* - viewed as an ongoing process of co-ordinating in which self and other constantly are in the (re)making. We would say that who you are at this moment is an ongoing construction in relation to 'other'- to me - and to others' (people and objects) to whom you refer, explicitly or implicitly.

S Then I have all sorts of possible supplements available…let me see…I can *think* about that one (muses)…or I could punch you on the nose… OK, try this co-ordination as a way of developing this process - how should I understand this talk of 'implicit' references?

M Well, we've already done quite bit of work on these. Remember just before you went out yesterday we talked about 'holding metaphors lightly' and...

S (interrupts) Nice one! A metaphor to talk about metaphors!

M Hmm, you're getting too good at this stuff! I wanted to return to an earlier narrative- that it's not possible to co-ordinate without contexts already being in place - by the way that's why we started with the caricature of Lewin's model. By 'in place' I mean available to be referenced - and contexts might be referenced implicitly or explicitly. Have you ever wondered how on earth that proverbial Martian could possibly ask 'take me to your leader', let alone understand any reply? He - or is it she - would have to be able to produce and to understand the English language, how the term 'leader' is used, its cultural significance, and so on… these are all *implicit references in this particular case.*

S Go on.

M Or, suppose that when you go out this evening I say 'and don't be late*tonight*!'…what would you probably do?

H Oh, that's easy, I'd probably stomp out and slam the front door.

S Why's that then?

> H Because I would suppose you were making a tacit reference to my being late last night,
> implicitly assuming you had the right to tell me what to do, assuming you could control…

> M Yes…OK…you've got it! Obviously its time to go technical and it's probably a good
> point at which to pull some of this together. What this adds up to is that to say that
> *constraints on relating are local, communal and historic.*

> S Ok, consider me suitably disciplined…but now *you* need to unpack that triple whammy
> huh.

> M (Groan). Right…well, if we just reflect on our own co-ordinations for a minute, we can
> see that, as we have gone along we have made reference - we have 'looped back' to earlier
> conversations - just like a musical composition - and to other narratives such as, for
> example, your university studies. And we agreed earlier that theories or frameworks or,
> more generally, ways of 'going on' are *local* rather than universal. And all this talk about
> co-ordinations should have shown that how a process goes on - and therefore how you and I
> can be in relationship - is *jointly* constructed. That means a hell of a lot - but for now we
> could say this is part of what 'relational' means- relating is a *communal process.* For
> example, neither one of us has power over how the other co-ordinates with what we do. So
> how the process goes on cannot be determined ahead of time.

S Why don't we put these up as star points - the water cooler is looking indecently bare?

M Good idea. So what have we got? (reads)

relating:

- R*elating is an ongoing process of co-ordinating.* So, to that we must add

- *Co-ordinations relate text and context, act and supplement.* (H writes).

- *Relational processes are processes of making selves and worlds.*

- *Much of what's ongoing is tacit.*

- *How processes go on reflects constraints that are historic, local and communal*

> S Looks fine to me - for now. Would this be a good time to turn to how *change* is
> understood - though I suppose we should rather say 'narrated' cos it doesn't sound so
> cognitive - on the basis of these assumptions. I can see that the story is going to be very
> different if we no longer assume stable states and relations between entities. And when
> entities are assumed, change is produced by a change agent acting *on* the organisation *from
> 'the outside',* so to speak, yes..?

> M Yes. So, in the glacier narrative, change is achieved by adding energy, for example,
> through face to face confrontation and discussion of differences. This is what creates dis-
> equilibrium, transforming the 'field of forces' - another of Lewin's metaphors - holding the

status quo in place.

S So in Lewin's narrative, if no energy is added from the outside then presumably the status quo is maintained; no unfreezing; Ok. So now let's go back to relational processes. The relational line of argument assumes that ongoing processes of co-ordinating are making organisation 'on line' so to speak. So, at least at the level of processes, *change is the norm.*

M Yes. But let's hold on to that… (writes)

- C*hange is the norm and stability is actively achieved and maintained*

S OK, but then we need to talk a bit about how stability is 'actively achieved'

M Again, we've already talked about this… particular co-ordinations or patterns are repeated…you could say that the past is reconstructed in the present. In this sense, the process can be thought of as circular rather than linear - more like a whirlpool you could say. But, if you think about it, reproduction of the status quo might sometimes be helpful and sometimes not. For example, you might find it helpful and supportive to know that someone usually will have supper ready when you get home. However other repetitions may be less helpful. The negative aspects are signalled through talk of 'games without end'. You and I get into them sometimes, everyone does.

S Give me an example

M Well, we could go back to the example of a possible relational dynamic where I say 'don't be late' and you co-ordinate with the implicit relationship message - that I can tell you what to do - and, to reject this relational message, you have to be late. I then feel I have 'more cause' to repeat my injunction the next time you go out… and so the co-ordination is repeated and repeated.

S So, actually, particular stable patterns of relating involve a hell of a lot of energy. They are ongoing achievements. Its like a whirlpool being stuck in the same place instead of being able to flow on in new directions. Hey, wow, it makes me think of Chinese medicine…they talk of 'stuckness'- and treatments are intended to get your energy or 'chi' moving again - it seems quite a good metaphor for what we're talking about.

M It seems to me that this conception has very important implications for relational approaches to change. We relational practitioners don't have to think of ourselves as having to inject missing energy… it's already there. *Now* we have to take care not to stifle it, not to swamp for example by insisting on shared values and shared vision - by imposing one set of reality constructions - or by demanding closure. It's more a matter of releasing energy, of liberation.

S It sounds a bit like knocking off the policeman's helmet as an act of charity because its obviously too tight for him! But then, what's liberation for one is vandalism or terrorism for another.

M Yes, you're right… relational approaches can't start with fixed notions about 'what *is*' liberation. Rather their orientation must be towards how to relate in ways that open up possibilities. 'Liberation' is not something you or I *do to* or *for* others. *And no one can know ahead of time what will work in any particular case*. It's not like finding a new wash powder that always gets things whiter! So I can't now go through a bunch of recipes about *what* someone must do when taking a relational approach to change or OD. Maybe we had

better put up another star, we need to add (writing)

- *Change is from within and is defined by how the process goes on*

S (ignoring this)You mean we can't 'clean up' other people's acts for them?!

M In a way. Lets put it like this. Relational approaches don't provide already known 'answers' to already known problems. We don't sell 'leadership through quality' or BPR or Japanese management techniques… we don't act as knowing experts working in relation to 'unknowing' novices- like the guy in the ad telling the ignorant housewife what washing powder she should use!

S I'm not sure I understand. You are an expert aren't you? That's what you get paid for. What about constructionism - you know things I don't know?

M I know (ahem!). This one took me ages to work out and you are right, it's far from obvious. This question of knowledge and expertise goes to the heart of what I'm calling a relational approach. (Pauses). I think there are two related aspects. The first connects with our earlier identification of multiple *local rationalities.* Given these, neither you nor I could be '*the*' expert since knowledge is not 'one thing'. This connects with the second aspect - how we've theorised relational processes. It's *these* that make who a person is, as it were, at that moment - in that ongoing process. So, if you call me an expert, I would have to say that this is a *local* construction of *our* relationship. Further, it's a construction that others might not warrant, including you in a few years time.

S Ok, so we can view your expertise not as a personal skill you carry around with you so to speak, but as a co-ordination in which I supplement your acts as 'expert' in relation to a particular dialogue and so on.

M Yes, it might help to make a distinction between content and process. It's a very problematic distinction but it might help us to bridge from where we are to where we want to be. Content oriented approaches are like recipes for baking this cake or that pudding. Process approaches acknowledge that there's a sense in which this is what cooking is all about but focus on the chemistry and physics of 'how cooking goes on'- in this way someone learns how to cook - and they can invent their own recipes. Of course, to become involved in processes requires some content - something has to be cooked. So you could say that 'my' expertise is made evident each time I get involved in some local cake making. However, its *part of*, not apart from those activities, its connection and not separation... There's a sense in which it doesn't exist except in relation, in this case, in relations between you and me - amongst other things. And my 'expertise' is validated or contested in its practical contributions to how processes go on.

S Right… but am I also hearing some connections with our earlier discussion of the 'Mass Meltdown' approach to OD - so in the relational approach there's less readiness to impose one's own recipes on others, is that right?

M Yes. It also gives us a new way of thinking about an old problem. Let's put up another heading.

- *Change agents may unwittingly collaborate in the construction of resistance to change.*

So, a major preoccupation for change agents has been said to be how to use their expertise to 'overcome' resistance to change. I think the language of 'overcoming' is very significant.

Many have taken for granted that resistance is wrong and is the result of misperceptions and/or emotions getting in the way of rationality. But relational arguments, by viewing constructions of what's real and good as local rather than universal, *make rationality a local matter* and a matter of standpoint. If a change agent attempts to impose one rationality then, from other local standpoints, this is attempted change from the 'outside', it's attempting 'power over' others and so constraining multiple local possibilities. The current fashion for training change agents (leaders, chief executives...) in negotiating and influence techniques - viewed as methods of implementation - is just 'more of the same'. Relational arguments imply that such methods *construct* resistance. Indeed, from a relational perspective there is no resistance to change without change agents attempting 'power over' others. And attempts to overcome resistance will construct more of the same as each tries to achieve 'power over' the other. This can embroil the would-be change agent in the sort game-without-end we spoke of earlier…it is an example of a class of situations in which an attempted solution is itself the problem.

S So what would relational lines of argument suggest?

M Well certainly not putting in more energy by doing more of the same.

S Yes, and ?

M Ok. Here's one possibility. (writes)

- *Maximum potential for newness is achieved by working with **tacit** aspects of co-ordinations*

So we've discussed co-ordinations and noted that they necessarily rely on many implicits or taken-for-granteds that limit or constrain how processes go on. But co-ordinations *both* constrain *and* resource - providing (more or less) potential for new ways of going on… so changed tacits can open-up new possibilities.

S Of course one way to do so would be to make what's implicit explicit and discuss them… we talked about that earlier huh, that's what Lewinian arguments imply.

M Yes, but now notice how carefully I phrased the last star point. In my view a relational practitioner is likely *tacitly* to attempt leverage of tacits.

S Oh I get it! If you explicitly *question* conventions, what's become normal practice, this is likely to be supplemented by resistance. Its what we just talked about - the ways in which the consultant and client might act in relation. Commenting on someone else's actions would implicitly claim superior knowledge or 'power over' and acceptance of the critique also would constitute a warranting of that relationship.

M Exactly! Some people call that *the dialogue trap*. Its a very easy one to fall into. I think that some variants of social constructionism also fall into it - getting people to make explicit their differences and discuss them.

S OK, so let's bring these points together then shall we

M (writing)

- **A relational view of change**:
- *Change is the norm and stability is actively achieved and maintained*

- *Change is from within and is defined by how the process goes on*
- *Change agents may unwittingly collaborate in the construction of resistance to change.*
- *Maximum potential is achieved by working with tacits.*

S Well Mum you've certainly gave me a lot to think about. But I must admit I was expecting a more detailed specification of content - you know - what you would actually *do* in some change work.

M Yes... but just think about the relational principles we looked at earlier. So, for example, if cultures are local and historically situated then it's not possible to produce universal recipes.

S I guess part of the problem is that I'd like a bit more closure, yes I know, I can be reflexive too - don't laugh. I think it's also because written stuff feels like it's a long way from action.

M Well anyway, it gives you some idea but written texts can only give you a partial impression.

S Yes, the performance of a Bach fugue is so much more than the score. And each performance is different. Perhaps it's time to stop talking about it and to participate in some other kind of conversation…how about some Bach?

M Sounds great! But more generally, I would say lets open up this conversation to include other voices… lets hear what others have to say…

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