Co-Operative Processes: An Approach From Social Constructionism

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Abstract

Organisational worlds increasingly are felt to be fragmented, equivocal, and constantly changing. 'Today's' knowledge may be found to be more local than anticipated and seems quickly out of date. Factors such as globalisation and web-based communications mean that organising involves interdependent relations between diverse and changing interests and identities. How then to facilitate & support co-operation in this 'postmodern' context? The present contribution suggests that social constructionist arguments about possible people and possible worlds may have much to offer. More narrowly, arguments about the *processes of social construction* - rather than socially constructed 'products' - are offered. These will suggest one view of how identities, relations, and cultures are made, maintained, and changed in ongoing processes. Of particular importance is the argument that construction processes very often construct 'mono-logical' relations between separate and independent identities where knowledge is 'about' Other and power is 'power over' Other. However social constructionism opens up other possible ways of relating - *multi-logical* ways in which identities and cultures are understood to be interdependent, power is 'power to', and knowing is in action. This chapter finishes with an overview of multilogical 'construction principles' and practices.

Introductory reflections

Many of you will know works by the Flemish painter van Eyck. One of his most famous is called 'the betrothal of Arnolfini' and was painted in 1434. It is a most remarkable work. It was painted at a time when the dominant 'story of art' (Gombrich, 1972) was as the 'mirror of nature' - before philosophy or science succeeded with similar claims. Enacting that 'story', van Eyck painted the room, the newly married couple, a little dog at their feet, in the most glorious lifelike detail. However, and importantly for the present narrative, he included a mirror reflecting the scene - perhaps as a comment about what he, the artist, was doing. The mirror showed the couple and *the reflected image of himself painting the painting*. In this way he foreshadowed a view that became widely held only much later - that reality is always known by some-one, from some-where - by an artist, scientist, manager, change agent… This suggests that reality constructions necessarily involve relating, and that they embrace some thing(s) about the knower and the stories to which she or he makes reference.

In the current example, our talk of knowing by 'some-one' from 'some-where' could be illustrated with reference to van Eyck's stories of him Self (identity) as an artist, of Other as patron who must be pleased, of 'art' and 'good art', of Other artists, of historical time and so on. More generally, reality constructions become understood as more or less temporary and local 'fixings' of multiple, highly equivocal possibilities. Had the painting been by another artist, in another era, embracing different notions of 'marriage' and its significance then other possibilities would have been 'fixed', and in different ways, at least for a while. These reflections suggest social realities, instead of being centred as what's interesting, be de-centred in favour of a focus on the *social processes* in which they are constructed. These can be viewed as (a) processes in which particular possibilities are made available and co-ordinated with, contested, temporarily fixed and maintained; (b) processes in which other possibilities remain unavailable or are offered but rest as 'failed co-ordinations' (Gergen, 1995). Before developing these premises further, I would like to offer you - the reader - a position, a 'some-one' (identity) and a 'somewhere' from which to co-ordinate with the 'here and now' of these arguments. I will do this, by suggesting some 'space clearing' - some narratives that it could be helpful to put to one side - and by proposing some guidelines about how to 'give space' to new possibilities.

Space clearing and not knowing

Consider the term 'social constructionism' as a text and, in this sense, comparable to a painting or indeed any artefact of human activity, objects 'in nature', talk, or non-verbal actions. Like any other text, 'social constructionism' can be made to mean very different things depending on the stories to which a knower makes reference. The term is perhaps most commonly used to refer to the cognitivist notion that the mind actively engages with 'what's out there' such that knowledge combines 'what is in the head' with 'what is in the world' (Hosking and Morley, 1991p.24). Another way to say this is that someone's knowledge of 'the world' or 'other' necessarily includes something of themselves. This is a long established position, for example within European psychology, and is commonly referred to as *constructivism* (see e.g., Gergen, 1985). Another, related, position emphasises that 'intrapersonal' cognitive processes are strongly influenced by 'external' social processes, notably, by relations

with other people. The term *social constructivism* has been used for work of this kind (e.g., Bowen & Hosking, 2000).

The present *social constructionist* view 'starts' somewhere completely different. Rather than assume individuals as entities with characteristics performing internal operations on data from an external world, communication processes are the 'starting point' for analysis. These processes are viewed as the vehicle in which identities, cultures, and intercultural relations are continuously constructed and re-constructed as social realities. Most social constructionist work focuses on socially constructed 'products', that is, on what realities are made. Some work, my own included, focuses on the *processes* in which identities, cultures and intercultural relations are made - on 'the how' rather than 'the what' of construction (see Pearce, 1992).

I am especially interested in what my colleague Rene Bouwen and I have referred to as the *quality* of ongoing communication processes (Bouwen & Hosking, 2000). As I implied earlier, a 'postmodern' world seems to call for co-operative processes that construct and maintain differences in equal, both-and relations. But how may different and perhaps conflicting reality constructions co-exist in this way? We know that communications between people and cultures, when they involve differences of this sort, often construct 'either-or' relations of right-wrong and better-worse. 'Hearing' Other is made difficult, for example, by the use of different language tools, by using the same tools to mean very different things, and by implicit references to very different constructions of identity, relationship, and other local cultural narratives. This is just as true of communications between, say, different philosophy of science positions, as between different stakeholder groups discussing some proposed major infrastructure project or environmental issue.

How then to make space for new possibilities, how to hear 'other' as they would wish to heard? This question is one to which I will return after sketching some premises about processual-constructionist processes. For the present, however, let me suggest how you might give space to the present narrative.

- Assume you don't know - about social constructionism.
- Try to engage with 'my text' by making as few assumptions as possible.
- Turn the assumptions into questions (perhaps holding these for later).
- Try to be non-judgemental - e.g., avoid right/wrong evaluations.
- Try to 'give space' to possibilities.
- Avoid closure/turning inwards/breaking the relationship.
- Try to 'know from within' (try to BE Wittgenstein's fish knowing what it knows)Theorising Social Construction Processes

Theorising Social Construction Processes

Introduction

The central themes of the present, social constructionist, view have been developed over many years in many literatures. The latter include, for example, interactionist

social psychology, cognitive psychology, the philosophy of science, feminisms, micro-sociology, and postmodernist histories of ideas and cultures. Interests have included the development of radical systems theories and related intervention practices, family therapy, feminist and postmodern deconstruction of texts, emancipatory and liberationist agendas, and social and deep ecology movements (see e.g., Gergen, 1994; Berman, 1981). More detailed accounts of social constructionisms can be found elsewhere (e.g., Burr, 1995; Gergen, 2000) as can extended narratives of social construction processes (see, for example, Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Gergen, 1995; Hosking, 2000).

Exercise: Relating = Co-ordinating

2 people do a handshake & freeze & hold it; others/observers then publicly reflect on the possible meanings of the image such as lovers parting, a drug deal... Explore possibilities for a while then everyone forms pairs: each starts with a frozen image of a handshake, 1 person breaks out (other stays frozen) & 'reflects' on possible meaning of the image by making a new co-ordination - now what is the story? Continue making & re-making co-ordinations for 5 minutes or so.

Co-ordinations

In distinguishing social constructionism from constructi*vism*, I suggested the 'unit of analysis' be communications and not entities and relations between entities. Communications can be thought of as processes of co-ordinating texts or acts. So, for example, we may speak of relating text and con-texts or speak of some act being supplemented by another act - as in the above illustration. These terms may be used interchangeably to include written and spoken words, non-verbal acts, voice tone, signs, artefacts of human activity, and 'natural' objects. Processes involve multiple simultaneously ongoing co-ordinations - including many that are tacit. Furthermore, some supplements are more likely than others in particular social-historical settings. In the above example, some of the multiple, simultaneous, perhaps tacit, supplements could include a smile, a firm grasp of Other's hand, not wearing gloves (regarded as impolite in some cultures and times), not too firm a grasp, stories about this particular 'other' and relationship with them, notions of etiquette and so on. Whilst these might be implicated in the construction of a polite social greeting, other supplements might construct the formal preliminaries to a boxing match. In sum, many different supplements always are possible, making different meanings and allowing & inviting the process to continue in different ways. The above exercise and illustrations may be considered as a *metaphor for all communications,* regardless of form.

Making people and worlds

The above discussion treats processes of relating or co-ordinating as performative. In other words, co-ordinations *make* someone and something - make them real - and make them value-able or de-value them. These are processes of world making and people making; they make Self & Other and relationship. The earlier described exercise might (re)construct an amorous lover, a shy partner, a loving embrace, a continuing relationship, the preliminaries to a fight and so on. So what kinds of co-ordinations make what kinds of people & worlds? Lets see.

Exercise: Mirroring

2 persons or 2 rows of persons face each other. 1 person or row acts by

making a series of slow movements, changes of expression… so that

Other can 'mirror' - pairs should try to synchronise as exactly as possible.

Now the actor should speed up and Other should continue to try to mirror.

What happens to the co-ordination processes?

Recent Western constructions (for example, in 'scientific' practices) differentiate and relate Self and Other as separately existing and bounded entities with different & defining characteristics (e.g., Hosking and Morley, 1991; Sampson, 1993). In such case, talk of 'relations' means relations between entities. In such constructions, one entity is active - acting to know and to 'form' or shape Other - viewed as knowable & formable. This has been called a 'subject-object' construction of relations - relations that are *exclusive* (either-or) & *egocentric* (see e.g., Fine, 1994; Harding & Hintikka, 1983; Hosking, Dachler, & Gergen, 1995; Plumwood, 1993). Possible examples include: leader and follower (in hierarchies), local-culture A & local-culture B (e.g., in colonial or hostile take-over relations), and the mirroring exercise when the actor speeded up and Other had to try to follow. In subject-object constructions, *knowledge* is (a) 'about' some separately existing & singular world of other people and things - is propositional ('knowledge that') and (b) is either objective or subjective, and (c) may be true or false. In subject-object constructions, *influence* is achieved through the subject's acts/texts achieving 'power over' other those of Other(s).

A social constructionist perspective also makes possible a very different view of relations, one that might be called *inclusive & eco-centric*. In this construction, self and other *co-exist*. In other words - and very importantly - this is a relational ontology. *Knowing* now is viewed as an ongoing process of making multiple social realities in multiple ongoing co-ordinations. In the course of these processes, influence can be achieved through 'power over'. However influence also can be constructed in *power to:* to 'go on' in inclusive (both/and), eco-centric relationships, such that different knowledges can co-exist without imposing some hierarchical order of value such as right-wrong or better-worse. How this might be achieved is the subject of the remainder of this discussion.

Multi-loguing and the 'power to' make multiple realities
Earlier I invited you to co-ordinate with this text as if you were 'not-knowing' about social constructionism and suggested something of what this might involve - what to do and what not to do. Buddhism speaks of 'beginners mind' to refer to ways of co-ordinating that are open to possibilities. Acting with 'beginners mind' also means

holding lightly to what we take to be knowledge, including Buddhism - and social constructionism. Multilogical processes also seem to 'go on' as summarised below.

Emphasis on making - & -	not 'finding out' or analysis
Here & now focus -	not pasts, problems, or planning
All acts/texts allowed to have potential for changing constructions of what's 'real & good' -	not assuming that one reality should dominate (mono-logical), not one change agent
Opening possibility spaces - being open to what could be - to	not 'closing down', fixing, or freezing - not emphasising what 'is'
Accepting multiple ways of being and multiple worlds & -	not one reality, not one truth
Letting go De-personalising one's thoughts	not holding onto possessions including ideas or a particular sense of identity, or a particular sense of 'other'…
Focus on how, including regular reflection on processes A methodology of processes	not focusing on 'what is', & not neglecting processes of reality making

Perhaps the story of Marpa may help us to understand some of what might be involved.

> Marpa sets off on a long journey to India to collect Buddha's teachings (knowledge). He is returning after many years away having acquired, at great personal cost, many books and scrolls. He is in a boat, crossing a lake, when the boat tips and he looses all his books and scrolls into the lake.

Perhaps too, we may learn from this story that ecological ways of knowing may not come from books, may not be best put into conceptual language, and may not be matters of fixed reality. If so, we might be well advised to direct attention to developing methodologies for 'moving around' different constructions of some-one and some-where, for listening from within, and for reflecting on the self and world-making processes to which we contribute - egological or ecological.