Social construction as process: some new possibilities for research and development

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abstract: Here we outline one variant of social constructionism - one that emphasises social ontologys as constructed in ongoing co-ordinations of act and supplement. We stress that such processes may be constructed both in written and spoken words, in non-verbal actions and artefacts. Relational processes often construct persons and worlds in either/or relations, however 'both/and' also is possible. We explore some 'new' both/and possibilities in various areas of practice showing, for example, that research: can be viewed as construction; does not have to strive to enact the standard view of science, and; instead might construct inclusive, multilogical, and heterarchical relations constructing "power to" go on in new ways. Whilst social constructionist arguments do not demand any particular methods or relations, we suggest that there are good reasons why approaches of the sort described might be of value, might be more ecological, in todays 'fast', postcolonial, multi-cultural worlds.
keywords: social construction processes; participative world view, polyphony and heterarchical development processes.
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Introduction

Social inquiry is in ongoing (re)construction in activities such as research, writing, teaching and consulting, and conference presentations. All social practices reproduce certain taken-for-granteds about what exists; this is the question of ontology. So, for example, practitioners of the human sciences construct people (with personal characteristics such as motives, and cognitive maps), organisations (with structures, and a mission) and environments (complex, turbulent...). Such constructions of

existence go together with notions of what can be known of these things (epistemology), and how such knowledge might be produced (methodology).

Of course the language tools of epistemology and ontology, like all tools, feel very unwieldy without practice, without 'da capo' and variation. Many practitioners of social inquiry have known a restricted repertoire in which only methodology has been well rehearsed. Perhaps to them epistemology and ontology seem like unnecessary ornamentations best left for the philosophers. Those who try to explore assumptions about what is, and what might be known, often are advised that this is not their field of expertise, that they risk becoming lousy philosophers and seriously dubious social scientists.

Increasingly, critical inquirers are exploring the constraints constructed and reconstructed in their various related communities of practice. More and more seem to feel that the equivalent of monophonic music constructs and reconstructs a very restricted range of possible people and possible worlds. So, for example, restrictions are suggested to be reconstructed in research practices that (a) give central significance to the presumption of a real world, and so (b) centre the researcher as a knowing subject who should strive to be separate from knowable objects and who - in so doing - can (c) produce knowledge (about the world) that is probably true and a matter of fact not value. Rather than linger in critique - first denigrating existing practices in order to justify something different - we wish only to claim that other presumptions and *other research practices also can be justified* (and criticised) *and may open up 'new' possibilities*. In the current renaissance of polyphony, one voice is that of social constructionism. We might say it is a voice with many variations, or we may speak of a polyphony of constructionisms. Here we shall refrain a variant that acknowledges the many contributions of many others whilst trying to avoid the suggestion that this *is* social constructionism. Some central social constructionist premises will be outlined in order to sketch some 'new' possible variants within organisational inquiry, variants that can ask new questions, work with previously unconsidered standpoints, and include questions of value. Some changed conceptions of research, intervention, and consulting also will be sketched, including practices that blur traditional distinctions between researcher and researched, inquiry and intervention, and open up standpoint related questions such as who defines what is useful and who benefits.

Social construction processes

There are many social constructionisms. They share an emphasis on language as communication (rather than representation) and view communication as formative i.e., as 'forming' or constructing persons and worlds. Constructionisms differ (a) in their emphasis on socially constructed 'products' or processes, and (b) in their centring of individuals or communal construction processes, and (c) their reflexive recognition of the researcher's participation in construction processes (see e.g., Pearce 1992). Here, we take a relatively uncommon approach by emphasising processes (not products), by exploring the implications of viewing research processes both as processes of construction (rather than a means to produce data) and as relational processes in which 'the researcher' is inevitably actively involved, *co*-constructing particular people and worlds. This little bit of polyphony invites researchers to do something other than 'report' products and processes - *joining with* now is invited

through some form of collaborative or participative action (Pearce 1992; see also Reason 1994a,b).

Relating as joint action

Talk of 'relational' approaches is becoming more popular in literatures such as e.g., leadership. However, in such talk individual entities usually are presumed such that talk of relating is a reference to what goes on 'between' entities (in contrast to what goes on 'within'). We make no such 'entitative' (Hosking and Morley 1991) presumptions. Rather, our 'starting point' is with communication processes (we will go on to show how individuals are constructed in these processes). By communication we mean immediately to refer to the realm of language and action (see Concepts and Transformation 1996). One view of language is that it stands in for, or represents, how things really are. Another, not necessarily contradictory view is that language is performative i.e., that it brings people and things into being. Our action emphasis joins what often is separated i.e., talk, action, things and events. Language (action) now is seen to include written and spoken words, non-verbal gestures, voice tone, artefacts of human activity such as a logo, a company uniform, interior layout and decor, music... *Action is any act or artefact (arti-fact) that might be co-ordinated with in some way, so constructing a communication*. For example I say 'sit down, and you say 'thankyou', or I hand you a questionnaire and you fill it in, or I nod my head and you nod in reply.
By these arguments relating (language, action, communicating) becomes understood as co-constructed rather than an individual affair. These arguments sustain talk of *co-ordination processes* and not individualised actors and non-human objects. We should add that, in this view, relating is co-constructed, even when acts are separated in time and space. This is the very particular meaning of 'social' in social constructionism - it is not a reference to relations between people as entities. The Zen narrative of 'the sound of one hand clapping' could be a useful reminder that to make something is a co-construction involving many co-ordinations. Co-ordinations might be achieved in two hands clapping, shaking in formal greeting, or playing a piano. More generally, talk of what is co-ordinated with what uses the tools of 'act' and 'supplement' (Gergen 1994; 1995) or 'text' and 'context' (Dachler and Hosking 1995). Of course 'supplementing' some act or text also offers an act that, in turn, might be supplemented - no-thing is *either* an act *or* a supplement but is *both* text *and* context - just as Yin embraces Yang, and con-text embraces text in ongoing relational processes. A reader who co-ordinates with this text by referencing entitative narratives, fixing and de-contextualising possibilities, will not hear us as we wish to be heard.

Acts invite possible supplements

For any act, an infinity of co-ordinations is possible - though not probable. Most of the time some community of practice 'agrees' non-musical equivalents of the tonic scale by staying within the limits of taken-for-granted conventions. For example, suppose I enter the office of someone with whom I have arranged a research interview (act). Possible supplements include: 'other' screams for the police; continues with

what she was doing as though I had not arrived; or insists on doing some ritual cleansing before joining me in my journey into the unknown; each supplement give a different meaning to the act and invites the process to continue in a different way. As we implied in our earlier discussion of 'both/and', acts (texts) are not intrinsically meaningful; strictly speaking there are no knowable brute facts - although well rehearsed conventions may make it seem as if there are (see e.g., Gergen 1994). So the conventions of our native tongue, musical, and mathematical conventions, business practices... seem natural compared to those e.g., of 12 tone serialism/atonality; actions (re)construct stability in the midst of equivocal and changing possibilities Returning to the practices of human inquiry, some acts (re)construct(ed) the 'obviously true' distinctions between e.g., observer and observed, theory and data, language and fact. But our constructionist arguments suggest that the possibility of changed supplements, of different constructions of what is 'real and good', is ever present. This is known, for example, by the Zen master who says 'three pounds of flax' in answer to your question what is the Buddha, by the comedian who walks past your outstretched and ready to be shaken hand, and by the magician who knows that reality is what you can get away with.

Processes are local-social and local-historical

No universal, transcendental, or natural laws have to be invoked to explain the above (Bass and Hosking 1998a). Rather we speak of these processes in terms of *what works in some here and now performance* i.e., we are speaking of local and pragmatic issues. People show themselves to be locals, to be knowing, by co-ordinating their actions in ways that (locally) are deemed appropriate and natural i.e., conventional. For example, I send a research paper to a journal, the referees accept or reject it. This way of co-ordinating works in the sense that it reconstructs a particular set of local conventions about what is real and good and how (as scientists) we may know it. However, as our constructionist arguments have indicated, the 'subdominant' text is that other possibilities and conventions are excluded: if I depart too far from those conventions referenced by the referees (and taken-for-granted by them as right and natural) they will reject my arguments as those of an outsider - as ill informed, as already said (but in more understandable [familiar] language), and/or as just plain wrong.
'Local' has both social and historic aspects. For example, depending on the narratives referenced, standing around and watching others work may be supplemented as 'slacking off' or as research. The latter would have been a very unlikely reference even fifty years ago when social inquiry in business organisations had yet to be 'invented'. In addition, watching others work makes sense as research only with implicit reference to narrative supplements such as, for example, an observer separate from 'other', gathering data, and other local-cultural narratives of science. In our social constructionist arguments, the reference to 'local' is intended to contrast with general/universal presumptions about what is real and what we can know (ontology and epistemology). Further, a '*here and now*', and an *ongoing* quality is intended, but - and this is crucial - not as 'a present' in relation to conventional constructions of past, present and future. Rather, *relating references ways of co-ordinating already in place* and, in principle, is *open to new supplements* and changed ways of going on; past, present, and future are social constructions too - and these too are variously constructed in different 'local' cultures. This view of processes makes non-sense (literally) of questions about beginnings and ends and makes a (more or less)

temporary punctuation of all claims to closure including completing some research programme and finishing the writing up (Hosking and Ramsey 1998). Relational processes, whether constructed as development or therapy, or e.g., as action research... vary in whether or not they punctuate processes with conventions such as a before and after of e.g., 'finding out' and 'applying', with causal presumptions and the like, or try as much as is possible to stay in the moment of a particular co-ordination (e.g., Anderson 1997).

Relational constructionist arguments do not mean that anything goes - as some critics of social constructionisms have claimed (see discussion by Burr 1995; Gergen 1994). On the contrary, setting aside (note, *not* declaring false) the presumption that nature - viewed as how things really are - sets limits on human forms of life makes prominent the limits constructed and reconstructed in social relations i.e., *how things really are made*. Limits to what might 'go' now are viewed as conventional and as in ongoing (re)construction in relational processes. *They are none the less limiting* - as many will know who for example, have tried to publish outside the dominant monological inquiry paradigm, to change their relations with their partner, or to change organisational cultures.

Processes make people and worlds

The co-ordinations of which we have spoken make and remake social constructions as 'products'. This includes everything we know, self and other, including what a Cartesian dualist might construct as mind and as internal and external nature. We have said that *the way someone or something can be and be known is relational* i.e., in relation to particular narratives referenced as contexts. Relating references narratives of self differentiated in (some) relation to other; we could say that ongoing co-ordinations jointly construct knowledge of self and knowledge of other. Further, co-ordinations involve multiple co-constructions of reality from particular self-other 'locations', from multiple moving 'standpoints' (Harding 1986). These arguments imply multiple realities - not as variants around some transcendental truth, or as individual subjective knowledge (setting aside the binary of subjective and objective knowledge) - but as emergent products of multiple co-ordinations. Reality constructions resource and constrain how the process continues, bringing us back (da capo) to our earlier claim that not anything goes. So act-supplement relations may reconstruct 'more of the same', holding stable e.g., particular views of self, relations with others... in "games without end" (Watzlawick Weakland and Fisch 1974); equally, relating may enable multiple, changing, and not yet narrated possibilities. We share with many others the view that certain common ways of acting construct self and other in subject-object relation (e.g., Dachler and Hosking 1995; Fine 1994). We mean something special by these language tools i.e., a subject construction 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 standpoint) as knowable and serviceable. Such conventions commonly are referenced for example, in relation to narratives of scientific or religious authority, ownership, formalised hierarchical position, progress... constructed as warrants for claims to know better and be better able to decide how to continue. One considerable advantage of social constructionisms is that making brute facts into constructions opens up other possible constructions. So e.g., subject-object relations, hierarchy, and power over now are just *possible* constructions and exploration of other possibilities is

invited, including, for example, multiloging, heterarchy, and "power to" (Dachler and Hosking 1995; Gergen 1995; Hosking 1995; Hosking and Bass 1998).

Summary of relational premises.

We have argued that communicating be viewed as a language-based process of relating text (act) and context (supplement). We have widened others' talk about relating to include not just written and spoken language but all actions and objects, in so doing viewing all relating as a "reality-constituting practice" (Edwards & Potter 1992: 27) - including our own research practices. It is the here and now of relating which makes particular self-other co-ordinations real and gives them meaning: self making and world (other) making are just two sides of the same coin. Our relational premises may be summarised as follows.
* relating is joint action,
* constructed in language and other forms of action,
* co-ordinating act and supplement, text and con-text.
* acts invite *possible* supplements, some become conventional, other relations always are possible.
* processes are local -social- historical,
* co-ordinating with text-context relations already in place; co-ordinations limit how a process is likely to go on; not anything goes.
* processes (re)make self in relation to other; they are standpoint dependent,
* they may (re)construct power over or power to.

Research as construction

These relational constructionist arguments make it possible to view research as a process of social construction and to view researchers as part of the relational processes they narrate themselves as studying. The questions raised include those that can be asked of any relational process, including: what kinds of relations are in ongoing construction e.g., hierarchical or heterarchical; what gets locally warranted as real and good, and how? these can be viewed as questions both of knowledge and of power. Further, since relating inevitably combines both knowing and influencing; research processes necessarily join inquiry and intervention. This, in turn, opens up the possibility to give a different and more significant role to the influence - we might say change or intervention - potentials of inquiry. Inquiry and influence are joined in different ways in a variety of literatures including those of research methodology and method (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Reason and Rowan 1981; Reason 1994; Torbert 1981), feminist critiques and philosophy of science (e.g., Harding 1997), community social psychology (Almeida 1996; Sanchez 1996), 'individual' therapy (Anderson 1997) and change work with individuals and organisations (e.g., Abma 1997; Chasin et al 1996; Weisbord 1992; Weisbord & Janov 1995).

View the research process itself as what's interesting

Our changed starting point is with relational processes and not with constructions of ontologically independent persons and a natural world. However, we do not propose to treat ongoing co-ordinations (in the research process) as data to be collected, analysed, and reported in an academic paper, or as instrumental means to some (probably non-local) end. Further, we cannot offer a research report as a

representation of what happened or as a means to report objective data open to replication and generalisation. We do not reject the possible legitimacy of these constructions but we do propose an additional option opened up by relational constructionism - *that the social processes of the research become interesting in themselves* - in their own right, so to speak. In other words, the research process can be viewed as a way of 'going on' in relation, constructing knowledges, doing things, and socially validating them as e.g., good, relevant, and useful... Research is construction; research may be constructed in relation to the standard or received view of science, or may be constructed in relation to other game rules (see e.g., Woolgar 1996).

As we have seen, relational processes necessarily reference discourses already in place (e.g., rules of methodology) and these limit and resource how processes are likely to go on. So, in doing their research, researchers can reference discourses that position self (as researcher) 'outside' the processes and position other as potentially available to be represented on the basis of language. Such constructions would be 'business as usual', where researchers act in ways that construct themselves as knowing, in relation to knowable research objects, act with reference to non-local discourses (e.g., rules of methodology and social science theories), defining the aims of the research and reporting 'the findings' elsewhere. Constructionism invites us to view these acts as intervention, as power over, where the discourses of science dominate in monological relations.

Relational constructionism offers an additional discourse in which the researcher's position is something like Escher painting a picture of himself painting: a view that stresses research as like all other relational processes and the researcher as like all other participants - part of the construction process. Such a construction echoes critiques of science that undermine "science (as) a fundamentally unique kind of activity" (Harding 1986: 38). Instead inquiry is viewed as a social practice, as a way of going on in relationship (e.g., Gergen 1994; Harding 1986), as a local-cultural pursuit with its own constructions of what is 'real and good' in inter-cultural relations with other local cultures. The scientist's standpoint, voice or logos (reason, argument, discourse) can instead be viewed as one amongst many possible voices - one that may dominate and construct 'power over' others - or one that may intermingle with others in heterarchical polyphony.

Turning to the literatures of research methodology and method, participatory action research (Reason 1994) seems best able to facilitate multiloguing, heterarchical ways of relating, and power to. As we understand it, participatory action research (PAR) involves working with others as co-researchers and co-subjects, dialoguing multiple local realities and relations between realities (not seeking resolution or consensus), and constructing power to. "Participation" is intended to reference a *relational ontology* i.e., that self and other only exist in relation i.e., participation is not 'just' a method, a form of governance in a knowable right-wrong world. Dialogue (we prefer to say multilogue) is central to heterarchy and power to. Consistent with our earlier arguments about relational processes, multiloging may be performed in talk, but may also be other kinds of action that, locally, are deemed relevant and useful such as storytelling, painting, plays, and songs. Later we shall see that the literatures on change also offer possibilities that can be constructed in ways that fit with relational premises.

Constructing hierarchy or heterarchy

In our relational constructionism, the assumption of independently existing people and worlds (ontologys), and subjective and objective knowledge of these - knowledge possessed only by people, about the world (epistemologies) is recontextualised as just one possible construction. Multiple constructed realities, multiple logics, now can be constructed e.g., in hierarchical or heterarchical relations (Dachler and Hosking 1995). As we have seen, researchers *can* act as if their (science's) local cultural assumptions - their "context of discovery" - should (invisibly) decide how the research process goes on "while simultaneously skewering the research objects' beliefs and practices to the display board" (Harding 1987: 9). However, this monological, hierarchical approach can be set aside in favour of an *inclusive, heterarchical methodology*. This means letting go of dualist distinctions between the knowing, influencing researcher (therapist, consultant, trainer) and the knowable objects of their activity; it also means constructing research (knowing) as intervention (influencing). Tools of inquiry no longer are languaged as innocent; their invasive effects no longer cloaked in the language of research design or tamed in talk of unintended consequences. Instead, any and all acts, including the researcher's, are considered to resource and constrain how a process continues - to construct particular people and particular worlds. In an inclusive, heterarchical approach all participants are co-researchers - defining aims, what's interesting, locally appropriate methods, how to continue... The researcher, like all other participants, has to work with local, multiple, and cross-cutting acts that might be constructed as bids to achieve power over; s/he must find ways to join with local processes, co-ordinating in ways that enlarge many possible worlds. This is very different from many "action research" and "action science" approaches (see e.g., Eden and Huxham 1996; Alderferer 1993) - approaches that revise, but stay within, the standard view of science (Hosking and Ramsey 1998).

There are approaches to organisational development such as e.g., Future Search that attempt to be inclusive and heterarchical by working with "whole systems" - involving all those affected by some issue - or all who can and want to be involved (Weisbord 1992). Similarly, community development projects may actively involve the entire community as co-researchers - choosing research methods appropriate to the local context, collecting and interpreting data, learning new skills... (e.g., Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Sanchez 1996). And organisational projects (e.g., new vocational rehabilitation initiatives) can be evaluated responsively i.e., in ways that involve all the stakeholders as active participants (Abma 1997). Of course, the scientist-consultants stance is of crucial importance if multilogical, heterarchical relations are what is wanted. She must, as it were, act from within the process (e.g., rather than relying on outsider 'content' knowledge), act to invite collaborative relations, to open up and accept multiple emergent possibilities (unblocking). Put at its most general, the consultants' actions could include anything that might contribute to the construction of multiple (diverse) local ontologys and their 'power to' go on in different but equal relations with others (see e.g., Bass and Hosking 1998a).

Constructing diversity and 'power to'

One increasingly popular change methodology places considerable emphasis on dialogue - which seems, in this case, to mean talk - but not 'of any old kind'. Rather, dialogue is emphasised as a way of relating that can broadly be contrasted with "destructive debate" (see Chasin Herzig Roth Chasin Becker & Stains 1996; Isaacs 1993). Dialogue involves respectful listening for understanding and insight, for

learning about how others view some issue on which self also has a position, learning about underlying assumptions (Isaacs 1993) by which they are connected... to construct a different kind of relationship that loosens notions of right-wrong, better-worse... i.e., to shift from processes that (re)construct hierarchy and power over to 'different but equal' relations.

Additionally, we suggest that there are good reasons to shift away from talk to other ways of acting and co-ordinating. Our reasons are many. Talking about relations: is just another way of doing those relations; invites reconstructions of (what are discoursed as) pasts, problems, who is to blame... - limiting the possibilities for constructing new ways to be in relation; puts the relationship between self and other 'on the table' - usually to invite competition for who will be subject (achieve power over other), and; assumes the possibility of insight and understanding other minds (see Hosking and Bass 1997; Bass and Hosking 1998b). ... In contrast, relational premises invite a shift away from Cartesian constructions of mind, 'internal' cognitive processes, and understanding as one such process. Relational premises invite a shift towards 'multiloging' (Dachler & Hosking 1995), in activities other than talk, in ongoing 'here and now' processes, (re)constructing diverse ontologys and power to, in (more or less explicit) relation to possible futures.

In constructing diversity (as ontology, *not* political correctness) and power to, practices that enable and support different constructions of what is real and what is good are of central importance. This can be contrasted with hierarchical, monological practices that *suppress differences* (implying there is only one relevant expertise) or *try to 'resolve' differences* to consensus, to a common vision, goal, or strategy - as is the case with so many organisational interventions aimed e.g., at culture change, leadership, or globalisation. So, for example, in the case of something like Future Search diverse constructions might be given voice in a variety of settings. These would include a search conference in which consultants propose ground rules and a broadly defined structure of activities allowing participants to produce very different constructions and set up very different 'future' projects with no requirement for consensus. Similarly, in 'responsive evaluation' consultants might work with stakeholders so as to make the space for conflicting discourses to be expressed and worked with, without consensus requirements (Abma 1997). Last, community projects may construct participative ways of working in which community members take responsibility for, plan and implement what they want to do; evaluate in relation to their own criteria; use data collection for consciousness raising; and involve different people, different expertises, in locally needed activities (e.g., Sanchez and Almeida 1992).

In conclusion, action research no is longer limited by the standard view of science and its assumptions about representation, fact and value, person-world relations, inquiry and intervention. Social constructionist arguments that join epistemology and ontology, its changed concept of personhood and of person-context relations, opens up worlds of possibilities with respect to intervention projects and methods. Whilst not requiring a particular method, social constructionism opens up ways of relating that: express and support diverse ontologys in different but equal relation (avoiding subject-object relations), constructing resources for collaboration that can generate new possibilities 'from within' and work with novel and changing constructions from 'without'. Indeterminate approaches to research and development seem to offer much in the way of non-content specific relational skills to support and enrich diversity, to develop many rather than a few. Such an approach can make research immediately and locally useful and can make matters of power and politics central to research and

intervention, now joined. Such an approach, recognises issues of value, standpoint, who benefits...are part of any local culture - any "community of practice" - including that of science. One of the tasks for critical psychology, indeed for the human sciences in general, should be to move these sorts of practices out into other communities, broadening our contributions beyond the theory literatures, beyond written and spoken talk.