

## The primacy of relations in socially constructing organizational realities

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A long history is attached to the view that socially constructed and that knowledge is in some sense relational. This position has been discussed, and in varying degrees adopted, in areas of philosophy, sociology and psychology, and is most obviously at the forefront of theoretical traditions such as symbolic interactionism, cognitive sociology, phenomenological sociology, and system theory (e.g. McCall & Simmons, 1978; Cicourel, 1974; Schutz, 1962; Mead, 1934; Berger & Luckman 1966; Garfinkel 1967; von Glaserfeld 1985; Watzawick, Weakland & Fish, 1974).

A relational view has gone largely unconsidered in the literatures of management and organization. These literatures are dominated by a perspective that variously has been characterised as 'entitative' (e.g., Hosking & Morley, 1991), as 'possessive individualism' (Sampson, 1988) or as 'realist ontology' (e.g. Dachler, 1988). The term 'relational' means many different things to writers working from different theoretical traditions and practical concerns. In this chapter we work towards an explicit and systematic statement of the central features that need to be addressed in a relational position.

In our view the key issue in any relational approach lies not in matters of content, e.g. competitive vs collaborative relationships, and not in justifying the truth value of propositional statements; the central issue is epistemological. By epistemological we mean to address the following assumptions: the processes by which we come to ask particular questions in the first place (and not others); the processes by which we come to know, and the processes by which we justify claims to reality. What is experienced as real or true depends on (usually implicitly) held assumptions about processes of knowing. In debates about the reality of different knowledge contents many misunderstandings are a result of unreflected taken for granted with respect to the underlying epistemology.

It is on the basis of epistemological processes that individual and social phenomena obtain ontology, that is, are interpreted as real or as having a particular meaning. Epistemological principles are discussed to varying degrees in different literatures. For this reason we will make a beginning by summarizing and integrating them. We do so in order to suggest what it may mean to talk about relational processes in the social construction of managerial and organizational realities. In the first part of this chapter we will discuss the epistemological assumptions of the prevailing entitative perspective and those of the alternate relational perspective. This shows the very different understandings of managerial and organizational realities that follow from incommensurate epistemological assumptions. In the second part we illustrate our arguments by showing how diverse epistemological assumptions result in very different understandings of leadership, networking and negotiation.

## A relational perspective

The underlying epistemology of the relational perspective is best understood in contrasting relation with the epistemological assumptions and related concerns of 'entitative' or 'possessive individualism'<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, we give a brief and critical overview of the epistemological assumptions inherent in the entitative perspective; we then layout the equivalents in a relational perspective.

### *The epistemological assumptions of the entitative perspective*

Possessive individualism has two central epistemological themes<sup>3</sup>. The first is the assumption of a knowing individual, in principle understood as an entity. This is the constituting idea of Cartesian philosophy. The individual is understood to be endowed with a knowing mind whose ontology is differentiated from internal and external nature; 'the mind' is the locus of knowing about nature. Individuals are assumed to have access to the contents of their mind; mind contents and knowledge are viewed as properties of entities, as individual possessions. On the basis of such properties one entity can be distinguished from other entities, such as other people or their environment. It is but a short step from this position to view all aspects of a person as personal properties, possessed in differing amounts. Individuals are treated as if possessing properties such as expert knowledge, mind maps and personality characteristics, as well as physical properties such as height and weight. This kind of individualism also can be seen in the treatment of groups and organizations as some form of aggregation of individual possessions and performances (e.g., Belbin, 1981; see Dachler & Enderle, 1989; Hosking, 1988).

The second assumption follows directly from the first. Namely, individual possessions, including certain interests and goals, are the ultimate origins of the design and control of internal nature and of external nature, including other people or groups. On the bases of his or her personal properties the knowing individual is understood as the architect and controller of an internal and external order which makes sense with respect to the array of the personal possessions. Consequently, if one starts from the common, historically grown definition of individual rationality, the idea of orderly relations among 'known' components of the internal and external world becomes a central principle of understanding self and the surrounding world. As a result, the guiding project becomes the creation and control of order, including social order. It is this assumption that leads some commentators to speak of 'self-contained individualism' and the 'egocentric' metaphor of personhood (Sampson, 1985).

It must be stressed that possessive individualism makes sense with reference to the prevailing epistemology of an objective truth. The Cartesian dogma of a clear separation between mind and nature leads to the need to know internal and external reality as entities separate from the knowing person. The implicit assumptions about person described above make meaningful the epistemological assumption of a required correspondence (so to speak as a mirror) between the 'contents' of mind and the contours of the surrounding internal and external world (Gergen, 1993; von Glasersfeld, 1985). Knowledge is objective as far as the contents of mind match the properties (possessions) of the entity to be known. Thus, criteria of truth are 'physicalist' (Allport, 1955) and knowledge claims are assessed as true or false, right or wrong.

Given our present interests what is crucial is that these epistemological assumptions only allow what we call a subject-object understanding of relationships. When person is understood as a knowing individual s/he is being viewed as a subject, distinguishable from the objects of nature. The latter implicitly are viewed as passive, as knowable and malleable only by the subject. In other words person as subject is active in object relations, with external nature for example by motivating employees, or with internal nature for example through the mind influencing internal states. Since other people are an important part of external nature, it follows that social relations are understood as subject- object relations and can only be understood in this way. Social relations are enacted by subjects to achieve knowledge about, and influence over other people and groups. Relations are considered only from the point of view of the entity considered as the subject in that relationship. Relations, and therefore knowledge and influence, are understood as more or less instrumental for the subject's understanding of order.

Within the epistemological premises of the entitative perspective relationships are explained and understood on the basis of the properties and behaviours of interacting individuals or organizations. As a result, relational processes are left largely untheorized. Relations are given little explanatory power beyond an unexplicated view that influence results from relationships between certain properties possessed by the interacting entities.

The above assumptions are rarely made explicit. Nevertheless the traditional literatures of management and organization make sense precisely because they implicitly reference them. In the second part of this chapter we will illustrate these epistemological processes with respect to leadership, networking and negotiation.

### *Relational epistemological assumptions*

It is important to recognize at the outset that within a relational perspective the borderline between epistemological and other kinds of arguments (often thought of as content issues) becomes very blurred. This is because talk about social relations and social processes is also talk about knowledge, shared understandings, and truth. To simplify discussion, however, we will make an analytical distinction between epistemological premises and social processes and discuss each in turn.

The relational perspective views knowledge as socially constructed and socially distributed: not as 'mind stuff constructed or accumulated and stored by individuals. As will be shown, that which is understood as real is differently constructed in different relational and historical/cultural settings. From a relational perspective the truth value of knowledge becomes a matter of assessing meaning with respect to interwoven narratives recounted within a cultural community .The issue of ultimate truth is shifted from its previously central position and questions of cultural meaning and significance take its place. When knowledge and truth are viewed as a social endeavour then constructions of what we variously shall call understandings, descriptions, or meanings (i.e. knowledge), are always a part of 'what is going on' in any social relational process. Whether the social process is leadership, management, networking, or negotiation, knowing is an ongoing process of relating.

*Knowing is always a process of relating.* In a relational perspective knowing is viewed as an ongoing process of meaning making. A claim to know is a claim to be able to construct the meaning of a running text. In the philosophical tradition of hermeneutics, and in studies of the meaning of literatures whose authors and social context are no longer available for conversation, 'text' usually refers to written or spoken documents. In contrast, we think of text as a narrative about the way something could be understood (known). What we call facts, events, utterances, documents, physical objects or any kind of individual or collective behaviour are texts, in and of themselves meaningless; their meaning is equivocal. In this sense texts acquire meaning only to the extent that they can be related, through narration and conversations, with ongoing stories in the social/cultural context.

To elaborate, to the extent that there are other actors, physically present or symbolized in ongoing narratives, the behaviour of an actor acquires meaning when other actors coordinate themselves to the behaviour through some form of reaction. For example, wildly waving an outstretched hand is knowable only relative to (some of) the multitude of stories in our culture about being separated from a valued person and in a context such as a train slowly moving out of the station. Otherwise the action of 'wildly waving' remains as a potential for absurdity. In other words, meaning or understanding is not a picture, is not something static, something already attached to 'some(thing)'; it is a narrative process in which meaning is constantly in the making. That is why we speak with others (Gergen, 1993; Hodge & Kress, 1988) of a running text. In narration an ongoing text talks about something and makes it real. As we shall see, narration is language and therefore knowledge becomes a 'language game' (Wittgenstein, 1963).

The next crucial point to appreciate is that text is always in mutual relationship with a context. While it is helpful to distinguish between text and context they are mutually interrelated: text implies reference to context and context already contains text (Culler, 1988; Vaassen, 1994). The meaning of a text does not start from a tabula rasa, but always brings to bear a preconception, an already recounted narrative to which a text makes reference. For example, the act of a person signing a document is by itself equivocal. Only by reference to a very complex interrelated network of ongoing narratives regarding the act of writing, the signing of documents, hierarchies of authorities, legalities of contracts, dominance of men over women, etc. can we construct the text of a manager (male) who, through his signature and formal authority, accepts a contract that a secretary (female) has typed and put on his desk for his act of accepting certain obligations and responsibilities. Obviously by reference to a large but limited set of other potential interrelated narratives very different texts about signing could be reconstructed, for instance signing a parking ticket, or a divorce agreement. Thus, the same text will mean different things depending on the particular contexts to which it is referred and in relation to which the text is narrated (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967; Cicourel, 1974). One important way of putting in relation is the referencing of a text to the context of what it is not. Just as light, as a text, derives its meaning in contrast to the context of dark, the text of leader as subject derives its reality with reference to its differentiation from the context of follower as object.

*Relating is a constructive, ongoing process of meaning making, through language, in multilogue.* Given that meanings are made through relating, or referencing, it is these processes that become the unit of analysis so to speak.

We use the term multiloguing to refer to these processes in which meanings are made

in mutual relating, or referencing of texts to contexts. It is in these processes of multiloguing that realities are constructed. Multiloguing is founded in some minimum necessary degree of commonality and collaborative work based on language. As Shotter (1980) and others have shown (Grace, 1987; Vaassen, 1994), language is the coordination of action. From language follows the multitude of ontological assertions, such as 'individuals have minds' or 'relations between people depend on the possessions and behaviours of participants'.

Co-ordination of action involves several interrelated issues. Conversation is impossible if participants refuse to allow each other (that is, refuse to agree) to reference certain contexts. It can continue only if speakers act as though both share the same basic view about what is the topic of conversation (Garfinkel, 1967; Gergen, 1993). In this sense, and based on a language already in place, participants in multiloguing are engaged in ongoing processes in which they take for granted some shared agreement. Of course such a belief is, in itself, a social construction of the participants. Talk about shared understandings or shared meanings is talk about a community of language users in the sense that participants reference at least some interrelated narratives as common contexts for meaning making. This is a crucial point. References to 'shared understandings' do not concern overlapping substantive content, as they would in an entitative perspective. Instead, they refer to usually implicit agreements about a set of interrelated narratives that serve as an interpretative context<sup>4</sup>. In sum, reference to shared understandings or shared agreements is reference to a more or less widely shared sense of a local reality. Local reality or social order contributes to, and emerges from, ongoing processes of multiloguing. This makes clear that the individual cannot be the sovereign author of meaning. Therefore, what is traditionally described as subjective knowledge no longer makes sense in a relational perspective.

This view of multiloguing answers the question of how it is possible for participants constantly to reference texts implicitly and explicitly to different contexts and yet, out of difference, can achieve what are experienced as agreed, shared understandings. In the context of possessive individualism the question does not arise, because (a) truth is defined by the correspondence between knowledge claims and object properties, and (b) collective action and achievements are simply an aggregation of individual contributions.

Many terms are used in the literatures to discuss meaning making processes. They vary in the degree to which they emphasize the social-relational aspects: in live, face-to-face processes for example, by speaking of enactment, discourse, conversations, dialogues, or accounts (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Harre, 1979; Winograd & Flores, 1986; Garfinkel, 1967; Weick, 1979); in the socially distributed knowledge/cultural history of a society, tribe, or subculture, for example, using terms such as stories, narratives, and saga (e.g., Bennett & Feldman, 1981; Clark, 1972; Orr, 1990); or in terms that may be equally useful for discussing present social processes in relation to the past and possible futures -the term communications (e.g., Watzlawick et al, 1974) is more of this kind. We use the terms multiloguing and narrative to talk about knowledge as a process of relating. Next, we turn to explicate their meaning since we use them in rather special ways.

With the term multiloguing we want to emphasize the speaking of many, with reference to many contexts, through language. The term has the advantage of a strongly active, ongoing, processual connotation. Multiloguing need not only refer to explicit live, face-to-face social processes as the term conversation usually connotes. It takes place

implicitly, in the sense that by working on a text (as is happening in writing this text) we are speaking with reference to a complex set of contexts made up of many interrelated texts told within psychology, sociology, philosophy, in our society, or in other communities. If we were asked to tell a story about the contexts to which we are relating in writing the sentences just completed, we could specify some of the (to us) more obvious ones. At the same time, we would get into more and more difficulties, becoming entangled in an increasingly complex network of contexts to which reference could be made. Thus while the meaning of a text is context-bound, the contexts are, in principle, unlimited. With every additional reference of a text to another narrative within the context, the meaning of the text changes. And in trying to reflect on the meaning of the context, it becomes a text whose meaning we understand from another (meta)context. Theoretically this process of meaning making is endless (see Gergen, 1993).

The term narrative is used to mean many widely different things in the literatures. First, it forms part of a vocabulary for talking about cognition, the most common tendency being to treat narratives as just one of many categories. In contrast, a few use the term very broadly to embrace all kinds of cognitive processes or thinking including, for example, scientific theories and mathematical thought (Howard, 1991). Second, there are those who restrict the concept to refer to one kind of knowledge, that is, knowledge as a subjectively imagined fiction or story, as contrasted with other kinds such as factual knowledge. Third, many locate the term firmly in the context of discourse but then distinguish between different kinds of discourse of which narrative is only one. Last, there is the common practice of viewing story telling as one kind of data, different from other kinds of data such as physical objects; the investigator can collect stories of heroes and villains and, in this way, learn something more about a particular organization or culture (e.g., Martin, 1982).

However, when relational epistemological principles are assumed, it is only through processes of narrating that knowledge, or rather knowing, is possible. We use the term narrative to speak of what we earlier defined as text. But with the concept of text as narrative we want to underline our position on a key issue: the impossibility of static, picture-like, entitative knowledge, which has its ontology in the so-being of some fact. In a relational perspective as we have outlined it, factual knowledge is in that sense meaningless - a fact cannot be knowable in its so-being. The literatures convincingly demonstrate that the epistemological assumption of objective knowledge raises many questions for which there are no adequate answers (cf. Gergen, 1993, Vaassen, 1994). Given that knowledge (understanding) presupposes language and language is a process of speaking, knowing is always a process of narrating.

In summary, we view knowing as a process of narrating. This means that (a) narratives are not stored documents (as in an entitative perspective), but are always in the process of being retold; (b) narrating is being in relation, speaking with others, actively engaging in what we earlier called multiloguing and coordinating with others in the neverending construction of a local ontology, that is, a common understanding of local reality; (c) speaking or narrating includes all forms of acting. Notice that this also means it is impossible not to act, since any action (including what appears as not acting at all) is text, ambiguous until others coordinate themselves to it and make reference to other ongoing narratives (cf. Gergen's chapter in this book).

*Meanings are open, have no ultimate origin or ultimate truth.* The relational epistemology, by recognizing knowledge as socially distributed and truth as socially certified, does not privilege any particular knowledge claim as more true, in the sense of

the entitative epistemology, than others. The argument that meaning emerges through the cross-referencing of texts with possible contexts implies that for any particular text, the meaning created does not have to be that way - references could be made to other possible narratives (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Multiple realities, in the sense of multiple meanings, descriptions or knowledge claims are a part of the local ontology in the process of being narrated (e.g., Cicourel, 1974; Garfinkel, 1967). The significance of this epistemological position is considerable. Reality no longer is viewed as a singular fact of nature but as multiple and socially constructed. We see why 'truth' loses the significance it had in the entitative perspective.

*Meanings are bounded by socio-cultural limits.* A relational epistemology greatly broadens the possibilities for meaning and disallows one true meaning. However, there are socio-cultural limits to what will be allowed as real or true, right or wrong, desirable or undesirable; not anything goes. Limits are constructed and reproduced in multiloguing. In narrating a particular text reference is made, usually implicitly, to a cultural context whose meaning is taken for granted. As a result its appropriateness for the reality constructed in the current text cannot be questioned. It is the unavailability for questioning the taken-for-granted context that preserves the status quo (Argyris, 1982; Schattschneider, 1960) and often leads to seeming changes that in fact are simply more-of-the-same (Watzlawick et al., 1974).

This muting of other possible meanings could be seen as an avoided sense-making process. Moreover texts, whose meanings emerge from a particular taken-for-granted cultural context, when viewed from a different cultural context, are usually not recognized or are misunderstood. As a result they are ignored, or devalued as wrong, weak, ineffective or worse (Dachler, 1992). The ubiquitous devaluation and neglect of the feminine voice in science, organizational, and world affairs, offers a good example of how feminine texts simply make little sense when implicitly referenced to a taken-for-granted masculine culture (see, for example Dachler, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Harding & Hintikka, 1983; Sampson, 1988). Possessive individualism and its implied narrative of relationships can be argued to be a context so pervasive and taken for granted in recent western cultures that other relational models are (mis)understood as unrealistic and therefore are almost impossible to reference for meaning making. However, if implicit referencing processes are made explicit, they can be addressed and questioned as text in relation to some shared project (e.g., Schutz, 1962). In this way the limits that previously maintained the status quo can be (re)constructed.

*Socially constructing and referencing narrative themes of self, other and relationships.* A crucial boundary to the meanings of relational processes is the way in which self, other and relationship are understood. We have earlier attempted to relate the story of possessive individualism as a narrative about subject (self or other), object (self or other) and relationship (instrumental; subject-object). In contrast, relational epistemology invites questions about the many possible narratives about self, other and relationship. They emerge in the historical/cultural context of multiple ongoing narratives about personhood and being mutually related. Our point is that the interdependent running texts of self, of other, and of relationship, are fundamental to the social reality in the context of which our behaviour becomes meaningful. In other words, in a relational perspective, multilogues are processes of meaning-making in which narratives of self, other, and relationships are referenced and are themselves in the making. We shall return to develop a more extended discussion of self, other and relationships as narratives and their role in meaning-making processes.

We now can summarize the key premises of relational epistemology as follows:

- a. The claim to know is a claim to be able to construct the meanings of a running text.
- b. Meaning making is a process of narrating and a reflection of the oppositional unity of text and context.
- c. Text and context cannot be separated as if they were entities, since both entail each other and derive meaning only from their opposition or difference.
- d. Meaning is produced through multiloguing: an actively relational process of creating (common) understandings on the basis of language.
- e. Meaning can never be finalized, nor has it any ultimate origin; it is always in the process of making.
- f. Meanings are limited by socio-cultural contexts.

### **Towards a relational perspective in organizational theorizing: some illustrations**

In the second part of this chapter we would like to illustrate the epistemological arguments of a relational perspective by looking at three commonly used explanatory concepts namely leadership, networking and negotiation. We will use the relational epistemology to deconstruct the entitative taken-for-granted which underlie current understandings of social relations. In particular, we will analyse the central concepts of self, other and relationship, as they are referenced in common conceptions of leadership, networking and negotiation. We then can show that a relational perspective makes alternate constructions of social relations possible.

#### *Narratives of leadership*

*Possessive individualism and the narrative of leadership.* Consistent with the meta-narrative of possessive individualism, theories of leadership typically emphasize individuals as entities and locate explanatory force in their assumed properties. Moreover leadership is understood by crosscutting reference to the prevailing narratives of management as the originator of rules and order, guidance and orientation. The meaning of management is embedded in the corresponding understandings of organization as hierarchically structured entities in which the flow of activities follows an ordered preference based on the logic of the division of labour. By implicit reference to such a context leaders are understood to possess certain characteristics on the basis of which, and in interaction with measurable characteristics of their context, they carry out their leadership functions. Leaders are understood as subjects set apart from the objects which make up their context including their subordinates, the subordinates' tasks and the organization. People are leaders based on their superior (compared with subordinates) knowledge and certain other possessions for example, charisma. Given the assumption of these attributes, leaders are understood as active in two respects. First, as subject, it is the leader's goals and interests that are privileged relative to those of the objects of leadership. Second, and on the basis of the above, leaders are the architects of order and control. It is they who are understood to act through leadership styles and behaviours, who influence the values of others, who influence others to make sense of their contexts in certain ways (Dachler, 1988; 1992; Dachler, Pless & Raeder, 1994; Hosking, 1988).

By implication, and in contrast, subordinates are treated as the objects of leadership: as less active, less knowledgeable and as having less access to the (privileged) goals and interests possessed by the leader. It is vital to note that within this narrative of

leadership subordinates cannot, in principle, be understood to be as self developed and self responsible as is the leader. Rather, the central concern is implicitly always that of how the leader/subject gets follower/object to think, talk, or act in ways that reflect the leader's perspective. In the context of the entitative epistemological assumptions leaders become the energizers of their leadership context. They are understood as the prime originators of what happens within their area. They are responsible for their employees' policy compliance, their motivation, and how successfully their group performs, and so on. It is because leaders are seen as the originators of activity that they must carry the consequences when performance is deemed inadequate. A closely related taken for granted is that in leader-member relations it is one voice, that of the leader, which ultimately must prevail. Even if leaders invite participation it cannot be to have open critical discussion in which all points of view have equal legitimacy. Rather, it is the leader's perspective that is taken for granted as setting the limits to what is thought of as right or wrong. Leaders would have difficulties in understanding themselves as in charge if the possibility were accepted that other perspectives are, in principle, equally legitimate.

The meaning of leadership is constructed not just with reference to certain kinds of narratives regarding management and organization. Leadership also takes its meaning with reference to a pervasive socio-historical narrative that some call a masculine culture (Dachler, 1992; Dachler & Hosking, 1993). The observation that a review '...of true leadership traits ...is a description, nearly a caricature, of the dominating, competitive, aggressive, manipulating, and achievement-driven male' (Dachler, 1988 p.264) illustrates a masculine standpoint in the leadership literatures ( Calas & Smircich, 1985). Eisler (1990) and others draw attention to important cultural differences that arise from the division of labour in gender relations. Over the centuries women have mostly been involved in 'care' work (Gilligan, 1982) and males in 'world structuring' work (Dinnerstein, 1976). Out of these contrasting life experiences important cultural differences have evolved as reflected in different understandings of self, of other, and of being in relationship.

Eisler (1990) has used the term 'dominance model' to refer to the understanding of relationships whose meaning is constructed by reference to narratives of the masculine culture. In its different descriptions (e.g., Dinnerstein, 1976; Eisler, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Marshall, 1993) it includes: a self -concept that depends on differentiation and social-emotional separation from others; self determination based on criteria of personal achievement and success; mastery or world structuring and; emphasizing rules, rationality, and general, value-free principles. Within such a cultural context it is taken for granted that leader relationships are: artificial not natural; instrumental not self -developing; short-lived, not long-term and involving. Exchange and path-goal theories of leadership (e.g., House & Mitchell, 1974) are good examples of the dominance model. The dominance model is an implicit narrative in all our leadership theories. This is only to be expected since the entitative epistemological assumptions and the masculine culture derive their reality in their text-context relationships: the masculine culture is context for the entitative perspective and vice versa.

While some leadership theories may appear to espouse a less individualistic, perspective, the implicit assumptions briefly sketched above remain (Dachler, Pless & Raeder, 1994; Hosking & Morley, 1991). For example, some have observed that within the context of understanding organizations as systems of shared understandings and common goals, leadership becomes a process of interpreting and socially constructing organizational reality to provide meaningful definitions for employees (e.g., Neuberger,

1990; Pfeffer, 1981; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Leadership thus takes on an additional function, that is, to provide meaning within an 'interpretation community' (Neuberger, 1990) and to help in making events and expected behaviours more understandable. Others also have suggested that organizational culture can be manipulated by skilful leadership (Schein, 1985; Smircich, 1983). From a relational perspective these theories combine some 'good news' with some not so 'good'. They make useful contributions by considering the symbolic value of behaviour and the fact that through the interpretation of organizational activities social realities are constructed. Against this, they continue implicitly to understand leadership as an issue of individuals, their cognitions and their behaviours. They also give prime focus to the problem of a leader influencing the perceptions, interpretations and reality constructions of the followers. Who constructs organizational realities becomes a central question in these accounts of leadership.

There has been recent and increasing interest in leadership practices such as teamwork, enabling, empowering or coaching. However, such texts of leadership are likely to continue the fundamental meaning of someone in charge and someone as follower. This will be so if leadership continues to be referenced to the implicit assumptions regarding self as subject, other as object, relationships as those of influence and manipulation or, more generally, to the assumptions of the masculine culture. In other words, the larger implication is that the prevailing narrative of leadership, and the contextual narratives it references, severely restricts what is thinkable and doable. In a relational perspective questioning, and so making explicit, the taken for granted narratives is central and opens the possibility for radical change as contrasted with what otherwise would turn out to be more of the same.

*Possible narratives of leadership in a relational perspective.* Within a relational epistemology one cannot specify the contents of leadership, such as certain attributes of leaders. To do so would again reflect an entitative perspective as is happening, for example, in talk about feminine leadership or questions about successful and unsuccessful leaders and how they differ in their leadership behaviours. Rather, a relational perspective invites very different questions. It invites questions about the social processes by which certain understandings come about and represent the social reality with reference to which certain behaviours make sense and not others. A relational perspective of leadership cannot ask questions about 'what' (content) without asking how (process) certain communally held knowledge is created and given ontology. This means that the central question becomes how the 'social' in the social construction of reality is to be understood. As a result, our understanding of relations in leadership needs to be reconsidered.

So, for example, now we may ask how, that is by what social construction processes, a particular enactment of leadership has been socially constructed. Questions need to be asked about the communally agreed upon enactment of leadership (e.g., co-operative leadership) and what it means. Is it simply another name for something that still has a basic meaning of someone in charge, who now thinks it motivating for the followers to be asked about their opinions and have some of them integrated in decisions at the discretion of the leader (cf. Dachler & Wilpert, 1978)? Other questions relate to the degree to which a particular understanding, held within a language group, makes sense with respect to a particular project. One needs to ask whether a particular understanding of co-operative leadership is helpful in more creatively dealing with the current project. Alternatively, the question becomes whether the implicit understanding of 'co-operation' in leadership requires a redefinition by making reference to other kinds of narratives about co-operation, e.g., cooperation in terms of accepting others perspectives as

equally legitimate in finding a common understanding of some problem.

From a relational perspective narratives of gender relations play a crucial role in all social-relational processes, including leadership. In science and public life the narrative of gender relations has been told nearly exclusively by the masculine voice, muting possible narratives told by the feminine voice (Gilligan, 1982; Harding, 1986). From the privileged masculine-cultural standpoint care work is given less importance, less (economic) value than world structuring work. In this context the dominance model of relationships also is given privileged ontology in differentiation from the partnership model, a narrative of the feminine culture. Clearly then, the way self, other and relationship are understood in the text of leadership cannot be understood without referencing the narratives created in gender relations.

In a partnership model identity is constructed from being in relationships, being connected, as contrasted with the masculine construction of identity through separation and competition (cf. Gilligan, 1982). The feminine life experience has emerged from care work so that relationships between different but equal partners are a constituting aspect of relationships. Moreover, relationships are understood as caring. This means sharing responsibility for oneself and for others and respecting other standpoints, giving central voice to the issues of team working and co-operation in the sense of all interacting actors sharing responsibility for their interrelationships; we have more to say about this later.

Of course it follows from the assumptions of the relational epistemology that the partnership model of relations is a social construction like any other. We are persuaded that dominance and partnership are narratives that are socially constructed in gender relations -at least in recent western history (see Eisler, 1990). However the point that is central to our present purposes is that the partnership model of relations cannot be seen as meaningful from the epistemological perspective of possessive individualism. Partnership does not make any sense with reference to understandings of self as subject, other as object, and a subject-object model of relationships; dominance, not partnership fits a subject-object model of relationships. The partnership model can only make sense by reference to the fundamental epistemological assumptions of the relational perspective.

These are examples of the kind of process questions that can be asked about leadership from a relational perspective. It is important to notice, however, that such questions, while clearly implying normative priorities, are above all concerned with how certain understandings of leadership come about and how they are given privileged ontology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Moreover the question is no longer which narrative of leadership is correct. This question only makes sense if we assume knowledge has truth value relative to the contours of the world. Instead narratives of leadership are evaluated in terms of the extent to which they 'enlarge the world' (Knorr-Cetina, 1989) by allowing understandings that up to now have been hidden or muted in the prevailing masculine culture. This also implies that whether a particular text of leadership is given privileged ontology, i.e. has 'epistemological profit' (Knorr-Cetina, 1989 p.94) depends on the extent to which that narrative allows co-ordinated movement with respect to a particular, commonly understood and valued project.

To pursue this line of argument for a moment, consider the recent strategic re-orientations of companies, reducing hierarchy, emphasising team work and co-operation rather than competition. Given such projects, it becomes essential to examine the extent

to which the entitative narratives within the masculine culture actually allow the kind of social relations implied by team-work and co-operation. Many a company has attempted to change leadership through, for example, new visions of management, e.g., managers become coaches and subordinates are called associates. Many also have failed. A relational perspective suggests that this is because they have not questioned and changed the taken for granted assumptions or the 'dominant logic' (Prahalad & Bettis, 1986). What usually gets ignored are the social processes by which leadership is constructed and constantly in the making.

The text of leadership, in the context of a relational epistemology, becomes a question of co-ordinated social processes in which an appointed leader is one voice among many. Within a relational perspective appointed leaders share responsibility with others for the construction of a particular understanding of relationships and their enactment (Dachler & Dyllick, 1988). The issue can no longer be whether it is the brilliance of the leader or the lack of motivation showed by the co-workers that is the reason for the leader dominating the process and outcomes of his/her relationships with others. Rather, leaders and those with whom they interact are responsible for the kind of relationships they construct together (Brown & Hosking, 1986). This implies that besides the content questions raised in discussions, possible differences in understandings of self, others, and relationships, need to be explicitly addressed and negotiated. It is worth emphasising that for someone to raise questions about the ongoing relational processes, for example, of leader-member relations, would be viewed from an entitative perspective as, at best irrelevant, and at worst, taboo. It is simply taken for granted that the relational processes make sense, as they do but only by implicit reference to the dominance model of relationships. However, it is only through multiloguing about the taken for granted assumptions about self, other and relationship that it is possible to construct a common understanding of the relational context with reference to which the content questions in part derive their meaning. Moreover in trying to understand how certain common understandings emerge one could say that the involved actors are participants in co-constructing the 'choreography' (Knorr-Cetina, 1989) in which joint action 'enlarges the world'. The appointed leader's attention shifts to multiloguing, negotiation, networking and other social means of narrating texts concerning the possible meanings of individual and collective actions.

### *Narratives of networking and negotiating*

*Possessive individualism and the narratives of networking and negotiation.* Much of what we have said about entitative conceptions of leadership is equally true of the prevailing treatments of networking and negotiation in the literatures of management and organization. This is to be expected since their meaning is constructed with reference to the same epistemological assumptions and in relation to the same socio-cultural narratives. We will proceed by analysing each of these referents. We will start with the implicit understandings of subject, object, and subject-object relations. However, at the same time we show that these are understood in crosscutting reference to management, organization, and hierarchy. The implicit understanding of social relational processes then is unpacked to show that they are understood from the subject's point of view as more or less instrumental for collecting information and creating social order; negotiation receives extended discussion at this point. Finally, relations are shown to be understood with implicit reference to prevailing masculine cultural narratives and the dominance model of relations.

First, we may examine the ways in which a knowing, active subject is assumed in

narratives of networking and negotiation. In the literatures of management and organization, networking and negotiating are understood as acts performed by an individual, and the person so considered usually is an appointed manager. The networking, negotiating manager is implicitly understood as active: 'moving around', making 'contacts' and building 'contact networks' (e.g., Kotter, 1982; Stewart, 1976). The activity involves talking to others. Of course such talk is not just about anything, or with just anyone, rather it is understood as talk that is strategically linked to the subject's purposes or goals as a manager. In other words, just as with leadership, the act of networking is understood in relation to its implications for managerial effectiveness. One illustration of this general line of argument, lies in the claim to have found that the more skilled manager has larger 'contact networks' (a possession comparable to leadership style), and networks 'more aggressively' (Kotter, 1982), than other, less effective managers. It should be noted that while it is one thing to identify activity as making contact and talking, it is quite another to identify the relational processes implicated in networking. So, for example, when a manager is observed to be spending much time on the phone is this wasting time as some have claimed (e.g., Luthans & Lockwood, 1984) or is it useful networking? It is perhaps ironic that those who study managers and their networks have realised that they cannot easily get at the 'content' of networking (e.g., Kotter, 1982; Stewart, 1976) and yet, at the same time, have failed to consider that this might be because knowledge is not information resident in the text but meaning created in text-context relations.

Second, the underlying assumption of a passive object goes together in text- context relations with the above narratives of the networker/negotiator as subject. The subject's point of view is assumed in references to other as a contact. This linguistic tool reflects the underlying taken-for-granted that other is fundamentally passive. Other is discussed as one who is contacted, but not one who contacts; other is the chosen object of networking but cannot choose; other is never considered as one who moves around. As an object of the subject's regard, the meaning of other is confined to being a contributor to the size of the managers' contact networks (e.g., Kotter, 1982).

Third, we come to the understandings of relations as subject-object relations. The term relationship building is usually offered as a broad interpretation of what making contacts means. However the enormous numbers reported to makeup managers' networks (e.g., Kotter, 1982) make it hard to see how managers and their contacts could together build wide-ranging relational histories in and about their social relations with one another. Apparently they do not; it is taken-for-granted that it is only the networker who is building the relationship. Furthermore, this activity is considered for its potential instrumental value to the networker. There are several interrelated themes each of which reflect this underlying one-way treatment of the relationship. It is the networking manager who defines the purposes of making contact and who is understood to collect information from contacts. By building such relationships it is assumed that the networker can better understand how things really are (knowledge that) and can act, based on better known facts, to structure objects in the world (achieve power over). These last two themes are central to how relationships are understood in entitative treatments of networking and negotiation; we will elaborate each in turn.

Networking generally is understood as a process in which the manager can collect 'live information' (Mintzberg, 1973). In the entitative account of networking information is understood as knowledge about the world. Only factual knowledge is considered. In addition, information is considered 'live' when it is current or timely and, by implication, is thought more likely to be true, relevant and useful to the networker. Live information is

understood to be instrumental in relation to the assumed purposes of the manager as subject, namely: for identifying and selecting policies; to know better how some selected policy should be interpolated, and to facilitate effective implementation. For example, managers are said to use their networks to: 'receive' and 'gather information' (Kotter, 1982, p.63); to 'keep (their) information live and accurate' (Wrapp, 1984, p.8); search or scan as a means to identify issues, policies or problems (e.g., Wildavsky, 1983), or for decision recognition and diagnosis (Mintzberg, Raisinghani & Theoret, 1976). By seeking information 'more aggressively', managers are said to make best use of the 'incredible information processing systems' (Kotter, 1982, p.78) that their networks provide.

Through networking, the mind contents of managers are assumed to be more comprehensive; through moving around their contexts they are understood to better know what is real (e.g., Neisser, 1976) and good. However, the comprehensiveness is actually severely limited since what is thought of as real and good is restricted to data that are considered factual. Implicitly networkers are understood to collect, and act on the basis of, data that reflect objective reality, that is, refer to how the world really is. As a result, all other kinds of data are thought to be subjective, are thought of as myths, or as fictions of the imagination. By being unable to consider other kinds of data as the bases and outcomes of networking then networkers remain blind to other kinds of truths. So, for example, left out of account is the cultural context that gives some event a particular meaning rather than another.

The knowledge base, achieved through networking, allows managers better to know what and who they must influence including the perspectives of their subordinates, organizational practices, structures and policies. This line of argument is reflected in references to managers shaping network members (Kotter & Lawrence, 1974), getting the right vision and personifying it (Bennis & Nanus, 1985), managing meanings, and using networks to help them execute (their) agendas. Again we see the underlying narrative of possessive individualism: the knowing subjects use their knowledge to structure/form the external world of objects -including other people. Of course this is why writers tacitly take the point of view of the subject, taking it for granted that this standpoint is objectively given as discovered in empirical studies.

Power, when referenced to the narrative of networking, is understood to be created and mobilised in live, face-to-face relations rather than, for example, through impersonal written rules and procedures. Furthermore, hierarchy is implicitly referenced in that networking relations are confined to lateral and external (to the organization) contacts, that is, to non authority relations. Networkers are understood to mobilise influence through a variety of influence strategies and, most importantly, through what is called either bargaining or negotiation (e.g., Sayles, 1964; 1979; Wrapp, 1984). Consistent with the narratives we have outlined, negotiation is understood as an individual act. Attention is directed to managers and to negotiation as an activity they may choose when they are unable to use the formal authority of their hierarchical position and/or when that authority seems insufficient. In other words, networking to achieve influence, and negotiating as an influence strategy, are understood as complements to hierarchy and to power based in hierarchy. They supplement hierarchy; they are processes in which managers fill in the gaps, so to speak -gaps left by insufficient authority and inadequacies of formalised organization structures (e.g., Sayles, 1964, 1979; Dalton, 1959).

Negotiation is viewed as a means for the networking manager to win the consent (Sayles, 1979) of others. The meaning of negotiation lies in removing or getting around

multiple perspectives and not in what we have called multiloguing. So, for example, negotiation is described as trading, compromise, give and take (Sayles, 1964); it is exchange, mobilising resources 'to negotiate a trade' (Kotter, 1982, p.73) and to remove trade barriers between individuals (Kaplan, 1984). In addition, the wider meaning of networking and negotiation is understood with reference, not just to influencing individuals but, by forming individuals as objects, to creating what variously is known as culture or social order. Through individual acts of networking, negotiating and the like, leaders are understood to be able to create strong cultures (e.g., Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). In other words, organizations are treated as 'designer goods...fashioned by leaders' (Hosking, 1990, p.182).

We have shown that the texts of networking and negotiating, like that of leadership, are made meaningful in relation to an interwoven texture of referents including subject-object relations and culturally located narratives concerning managerial work and effectiveness, organization and hierarchy. Finally, it is possible to make the connection, again as we did with leadership, to masculine cultural narratives and the dominance model of relations. For example, the social- relational processes of networking and negotiating are understood as functional for: individual achievement and prominence; making oneself separate from and better than others, and; creating social order that is, world structuring - themes that earlier were described as central to the dominance model. Given the present-day connection between dominance and socio-cultural constructions of masculinity, it is probably no coincidence that studies of networking and negotiation typically have focused on male managers -after all, the prevailing western conception of gender relations is that the male is active and the female passive (e.g., Hubbard, 1983). The crucial point here is that the possible meanings of networking and negotiation are seriously restricted by being referenced to the narratives of possessive individualism and the masculine culture. In contrast, a relational epistemology, by asking questions about the processes by which particular meanings are made, opens-up the possibility for networking and negotiation to be referenced to other contexts and so take on new meanings.

*Possible narratives of networking and negotiating in a relational perspective.* The relational epistemological assumptions we have outlined direct attention: to ongoing processes of meaning making rather than to the acts of knowing and structuring networkers; to processes of multiloguing and not to the monologic of talk, making contact, and bargaining, and; to processes understood as ongoing constructions of multiple realities, not to individual acts of gathering information as fact and negotiating to remove differences in perspective. Investigations undertaken from a relational perspective do not take a restricted view of knowledge as only factual, as information about how the world is really, as mind stuff. Instead it is assumed that what is thought of as knowledge is local and temporal, changing with variations in text-context relations.

Our central concern is now to show what the narratives of networking and negotiation could be when referenced to relational epistemological principles. However we must emphasize that, on the basis of relational epistemological principles, it is not possible to say what such processes look like in terms of specific content. This is because knowledge now is viewed as meaning and meanings change with changes in text-context relations. It is relational processes of meaning making that are of interest and particular examples, available as content for analysis, must be analysed in terms of the underlying relational processes. We will give illustrations of how relational epistemological principles lead to different kinds of questions about networking and negotiation. We show that new meanings can be created when networking and

negotiation (as texts) are referenced to changed contexts of management, leadership, organization and hierarchy.

Let us first consider what it might mean to view networking as a conversational process of meaning making. Here, managers who network may be regarded as seeking to understand the meanings of the others' conversational contributions. To do so, they would have to give up the assumption that they and others necessarily mean the same thing by the same linguistic term or expression. A manager, when networking, would be asking questions that invite others to make explicit what is usually left implicit. This could include narratives concerning their identities as certain kinds of professionals (engineers, marketing manager and so on), their concepts of career and advancement, what they define as leadership, and so on. In other words, networking is understood as 'moving around' the narratives that others are referencing for meaning making.

Of course, from a relational perspective, networking is no longer viewed as a one-way street, so to speak. Instead, meaning making is regarded as a joint activity. Further, it is a process of coordinating action on the basis of multiple perspectives. Imagine then, a consultant who is acting from relational assumptions. S/he would have to ask questions about the processes by which the networking manager and others come to know and respect each other's perspective. The processes could be such that, for example, each believes they know the other's different perspective, but do not. Alternatively, each might believe they share the same understanding when, because they are implicitly referencing different contexts, they do not. Equally, the processes might be such that the conversational participants come to agree particular contexts for meaning making. The consultant's task would be to ask questions that lift the networkers on their implicit narratives. Suppose, for example, that in conversation a manager speaks of motivation, with implicit reference to a narrative of self who energizes others and a narrative of others as needing to be activated and controlled. Others might understand the manager's talk of motivation very differently, for example, by referencing narratives of shared responsibility, equal status, and collective empowerment. Only by being lifted on what is usually left unaddressed is it possible for participants to know what each defines as real.

These examples of how networking can be understood from a relational perspective suggest how negotiation takes on a new meaning. Negotiation now is viewed as a process of multiloguing. Instead of trading away differences, so to speak, negotiation is a process in which manager and others may come to know each other's perspectives and construct shared understandings in and about their relations. Relational epistemological principles suggest that negotiating be viewed as an ongoing process of narrating with self and other referencing interrelated narratives to the point that each can reconstruct the other's narratives. In this way, each comes to know the context to which the other references their texts for meaning making. Of course the progression of A's understandings of B's narratives also constitutes a changed context for A's own text; text-context relations are an ongoing change for each participant as together they create some shared understandings in the sense of knowing what the other means by their story. What emerges is a more or less local reality characterised by at least some shared understandings of what is real and good.

In the above sense, negotiating is a process that allows managers and others seriously to discuss and agree aspects of their relationship with one another including related aspects of their wider contexts. For example, management and staff representatives may participate in a process of dialoguing in relation to management's proposal to

initiate a system of appraisal. Management may reference the proposed change to narratives of equity (e.g., differential pay for different competencies), efficiency and flexibility. Management may also implicitly reference an understanding of other as in need of incentives and self as the source and controller of these instrumentalities. On the other hand, staff may reference the proposed appraisal scheme to narratives of rivalry and competition. They may view management (other) as manipulative and construct themselves as self directed and self controlling. Processes of negotiating in the sense described, are processes in which the participants' multilogue, their understandings changing in text-context relationship, creating shared understandings that are emergent. In this way changed texts (such as appraisal) may actually change their meaning because the contexts also are changed through negotiating. This is a very different process from one in which participants argue about the correct meaning of a text without realising that they are implicitly referencing the contexts they have always referenced and therefore are constantly reproducing more of the same, that is, the same meanings.

It is vital to appreciate the implications of this line of investigation: social order, rather than being constructed through 'power over', becomes understood as a social process of relating on the basis of conversation, negotiating shared understandings in the very special sense just described, agreeing particular text - context relations and particular ways of relating out of the many possible relations that could be constructed. No longer is it necessary implicitly to assume that people need to be organized. In other words, it no longer is necessary to assume that a management-subordinate relation is required for this purpose. Instead, relational epistemological assumptions lead to questions about self organizing and the ways in which this is achieved. It then becomes possible to ask questions about organizing, networking and negotiating wherever there are ongoing social-relational processes, rather than just in connection with formal organization and hierarchy.

Similarly, a relational perspective makes it possible to ask questions about the meanings of networking and negotiating in relation to the differing projects of participants. Such projects could include, for example, enjoying a particular way of being in relation, such as partnership relations, in a masculine context where dominance is the norm. So, for example, it becomes possible to consider the ways in which women's groups (Brown, 1992; Brown & Hosking, 1986) or extended families of relatives and partners, aunts, sisters and the like (Grieco, 1992; Grieco & Hosking, 1987) act as self organizing systems in relation to a variety of projects such as gaining employment, supporting the family, performing ongoing social relational processes in which they can enjoy certain ways of being in relationship.

Just as with the entitative perspective of networking and negotiation, the relational understanding of these processes has meaning with reference to the narratives in the feminine culture, especially those that Eisler (1990) and others have called the partnership model. With reference to the partnership model, the meanings of networking and negotiating are socially constructed through their differentiation from the separation and being different that is implied by hierarchy and the masculine-cultural narratives. Networking and negotiation then are seen as processes that produce and reflect connectedness and interdependence as egalitarian relations, and as processes that construct collective authority and responsibility. In the context of partnership, networking may be meaningful in the sense of giving voice to the multiple perspectives of participants, making it possible to negotiate in the sense described above and, in this way, to seek out, recognise and respect differences as different but equal.

In this connection, there have been studies of non-hierarchical ways of organising as they characterise the social practises and values of autonomous women's organizations. The story of women organising, told by a participant observer (Brown, 1992), seems to have many connections and similarities with the narrative themes of partnership and with the above meanings of networking and negotiation. In the women's groups described, one pervasive local-cultural narrative was the negative valuing of stable status hierarchies as formalised hierarchies of power and values and an abhorrence of individual prominence and individual leaders. Instead, leadership was understood as a shared responsibility for relationships and for the ongoing production and simultaneous enjoyment (consumption!) of a certain kind of social order (Brown & Hosking, 1986). Networking and negotiating were prominent social-relational narratives, meaningful in relation to the above conception of leadership and the rejection of hierarchy. So, for example, they organized non-hierarchically and collectively, negotiating relationships to produce agreed (often explicitly) meanings and related social practices. They gave close, continual, reflective attention to how they were socially relating with one another and to how they organized themselves in relation to the cultural narratives of the women's movement. Networking and negotiating were meaningful in relation to narratives of equality, being in (something like) partnership relations, shared responsibility for relational processes, and for enabling all participants in relation to their shared and different narratives (see Brown, 1992). In a social world of local realities there is always the possibility socially to construct partnership rather than dominance.

With these examples we do not want to be understood to imply that women's groups, by being made up of women, are necessarily less hierarchically organized and necessarily will create social realities through reference to partnership. This would imply a characteristic that women possess, in contrast to men, an assumption that makes sense only in the context of possessive individualism. The crucial point of our arguments draws attention to the social construction of a feminine culture born out of the life experiences of women in the course of western history. Since, within the current practices of gender relations, women are more likely to be involved in care work than men, it is not surprising that we find women's groups whose practices reference epistemological assumptions of the relational perspective and feminine cultural narratives. However, it is the general principle that we want to stress which is that through referencing relational epistemological assumptions a truly generative (Gergen, 1993) alternative to the meaning of networking and negotiation is possible.

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### Notes

1. Mannheim (1936, 1952) invented the term 'relationism' to contrast with 'relativism'; see e.g., Berger & Luckmann (1966), Stenner & Eccleston (1994).

2. We shall use these terms interchangeably; in different contexts one term is sometimes more helpful than the other to bring out the particular point we wish to make.

3. We are not offering a detailed and sufficient critique of epistemological assumptions or related treatments of 'content' concerns; the interested reader may find these elsewhere (e.g., Gergen, 1993; Szmataka, 1989; von Glasersfeld, 1985; Feyerabend, 1978; Morgan, 1983; Harding, 1986; Flax, 1987)

4. Garfinkel (1967, p.30) refers to 'intersubjectively used grammatical scheme(s)' or 'rules' which participants invoke to understand the sense of what was said.

5. These authors deconstructed the leadership literatures to show that they implicitly embrace masculine cultural narratives.