

## Change works: A critical construction

Dian Marie Hosking

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### Overture

In this chapter I speak of “mainstream” and “critical” approaches to organization - approaches that ‘go together’ in that each helps to define the other. I use this duality as an analytical and organizing device for the purposes of explication and not as a truth, with better-worse or ‘right-wrong’ implications. The distinction may help readers to ‘bridge’ from the better known “mainstream” to a “critical” approach.

In this context I am using the word “approach” to refer to what Fleck called a “thought style” (Fleck, 1979). A thought style is bigger than a theory but ‘softer” and “weaker” than a paradigm (Chia, 1995). My own may be broadly described as (a) critical, (b) social constructionist, and (c) processual. I focus on ongoing processes of *organizing* (and not organization) and, in so doing, put *change* at the center of my theorizing.

As I outline my approach I do two things. First, I re-construct some traditional issues and practices in mainstream treatments of change and second, I explore some ‘new’ possibilities for change work theory and methodology. Whilst I take the view that there is no such thing as ‘a social constructionist method”, critical constructionism *does* generate and validate some changed forms of change work (e.g., Hosking, 1999). These involve practical acceptance of (a) actors as *part* of – rather than apart from – reality construction processes (b) multiple, ongoing, construction processes<sup>i</sup> (c) producing realities that can be thought of as very real but, nevertheless, local-historical-cultural rather than subjective or objective.

These premises invite further development of *non-hierarchical* ways of organizing that open-up to possibilities and multiple voices<sup>ii</sup> rather than closing down to one way, to one right view i.e., to dominance relations. The need for this seems especially urgent in a world where ‘more knowing’ and ‘more power over’ (hierarchy) seems to produce increasing inequalities in financial wealth and economic infrastructure, destruction of landscapes and communities, pressures to mono-culturalism, and a reduced quality of experience for those whose realities are disputed, distorted or denied . This situation seems intractable to solutions based on more of the same ‘knowledge/power’ nexus – solutions which rarely deliver their

substantive promises (e.g., better diet, better education) – yet at the same time reproduce dominance relations<sup>iii</sup>.

Following this overture, the first movement will (a) overview “mainstream” approaches to person-organization relations, (b) overview some of their implications for organizational change, and (c) finish by introducing a “critical” alternative. The second movement overviews the premises of the present critical constructionist thought style. The third and last movement (a) uses these premises to reflect on mainstream constructions of change (b) uses these premises to develop change work generic themes, and (c) outlines some ways of putting these themes to work

## **Persons act in or on organizations**

Two British authors, Paul Thompson - a sociologist, and David McHugh - a psychologist, made a broad distinction between “mainstream” and “critical” approaches to organizational studies. In the latter they included the literatures of work and organizational psychology (WOP), organization development (OD), and organizational theory (OT). I will start by reflecting on the “logic” of this main-stream of thought.

### ***Mainstream constructions of relations.***

Much of Organizational Behaviour and Organizational Psychology has centred *individuals and groups* ‘in organizations’. ‘The’ organization has been reified as the largely tacit and separate context for individual action, perceptions, satisfactions and the like ( e.g., Miner, 1980). Similarly, much of Organization Theory focused on *organizations* as the seemingly separate context for individual activities, groups, and inter-group relations (e.g., Child, 1977, 1984). Both approaches are ‘mainstream’ in the sense that they treat individuals and organizations *as if* each were a singular, bounded and separate, some-one or some-thing. You could say that a “primary distinction” (van Dongen, 1991) is made between individuals and social institutions - constructed as independent existences - as entities that exist ‘in their own right’, so to speak (Thompson and McHugh, 1995; Hosking and Morley, 1991). This is, of course, a very common commonsensical distinction. In Psychology it is spoken of as a dualism between “individualistic” and “culturalist” approaches (Allport, 1963), whilst in the philosophy of social science it appears as a contrast between “individualism” and “holism” (Hollis, 1994).

When people and/or things are separated this has implications for how their *relations* are understood. The construction of sharply separated and bounded entities goes together with a "subject-object" discourse of relations<sup>iv</sup> (see e.g., Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Fine, 1994; Harding, 1986; Hollis, 1994; Reeves Sanday, 1988). By "discourse" I mean "anything that can be 'read' for meaning...(that) can be referred to as a text" (Burr, 1995 p.51). A discourse can be thought of in terms of *what it does*; the S-O discourse can be said to do three things.

First, the S-O discourse constructs relationships as necessarily being between an active agent and an acted upon (passive) object. For example, organizational leaders and change agents often are discoursed as active in relation to some organisation which is available to be known and changed. Second, the S-O discourse 'explains' actions, relationships, and outcomes through reference to the assumed characteristics of entities. For example, organizational leaders may be (assumed to be) characterized by vision and/or charisma which enables them to be leaders. Third, in the S-O discourse, the entity that is explicitly positioned (by the implicit theorist/narrator<sup>v</sup>) as the Subject is presumed to *make* social realities and relationships: the Subject is the one who acts to know and to influence 'other' as a knowable and formable Object. Continuing our example, organizational leaders are often storied as those who can or should act in order to know their organization and its environment and, on the basis of their knowledge, act to (re)structure relations and so to change organizational performance.

### ***Mainstream methodologies of change.***

Mainstream discourses of entities and relations are reflected in related constructions of organizational change and development. Two methodologies can be distinguished in which *either* the individual *or*<sup>vi</sup> the organization are centred. The first methodology focuses on *individuals* and on *changing individual characteristics*. Examples include Human Relations approaches (see e.g., Guest, 1984), job enrichment, goal setting (e.g., Miner, 1980) and many Organization Development (OD) approaches<sup>vii</sup> - most particularly those that are directed towards developing self awareness, building trust, and clarifying roles and roles relations... (e.g., Dyer, 1984; French and Bell, 1990; Schein, 1987; see discussions by Fineman, 1991; Hollway, 1991; Cummings & Worley, 2001).

The second methodology focuses on *organizations and environments* and the characteristics of each. In this case, organizational change is considered to be planned and achieved through changing organizational characteristics - such as structures and technologies - to match environmental contingencies<sup>viii</sup> (e.g., Carnall, 1990; Evan, 1993). The Aston

Studies provide a well known example in which research measures and empirical findings provide the basis for normative interventions in which the scientific researcher diagnoses the ‘actual’ contingent relations of a client organisation, thus providing the basis for restructuring, should there be a mis-match.

Whether the methodology is directed at individuals or organisations, *both assume Subject-Object relations* and *both are mainstream* in the sense used here. So expert social scientists, organisational leaders, consultants, change agents... are implicitly or explicitly assumed to be the ones who will inquire, come to know, and then – on the basis of this knowledge – design and implement necessary changes.

**Non-critical variations on the main theme** The above account is brief and mutes some variations that do not neatly differentiate person and organization. One increasingly popular ‘blurring’ in organization studies is found in an emphasis on sense making (e.g., Tsoukas, 1994). However many such approaches treat sense-making as an intra-individual cognitive activity (see Gardener, 1985). In other words the discourses are those of “*constructivism*” which, broadly speaking, presents the widely shared view that knowledge is a necessarily imperfect representation of the world as it really is (e.g., Gergen, 1985; 1999; Hosking and Bouwen, 2000). In my view this sense-making approach is *both* an important variation *and* ‘more of the same’. It is more of the same in the sense that mainstream discourses of entities and relationships can be said to remain largely unchanged.

The above mainstream discourse of sense-making embraces important assumptions and points of emphasis about knowledge and reality. First, attention is directed to *knowledge* about the world ‘in its so being’; for example, inquiry is directed to what sense X has made of Y, to ‘what is it’ types of question, and to static characteristics and states (personhood, ‘the’ organisation...). Second, *conceptual language* is primarily interesting for its representative function - to represent “the world in its so being” - to represent independently existing beings such as the world, organizations, and other people. For example, words, numbers, and other kinds of symbols are viewed as standing in for (re-presenting) some independently existing reality. Third, *rational action* is assumed to be shaped in relation to predefined criteria ‘in the world’. For example, these assumptions about knowledge and language mean that rational action (rational decision making, organizational design, rational planning etcetera) must be grounded in inquiry that tries to know how things *really are* and moves (aspects of) the world (e.g., an organization) towards some better state such as a greater probability of survival, increased effectiveness and efficiency (Gergen and Thatchenkerry, 1996, also Rorty, 1991).

Fourth, as noted earlier, people and (parts of) ‘the world’ are centered as separate and independently existing entities, for example, some theorist tries to make sense of organization-environment relations in as objective a manner as possible. Fifth, theorists of sense making continue to position themselves<sup>ix</sup> as ‘*outside*’ their own discourse. In other words they unreflexively and tacitly write of others as sense makers whilst continuing to construct self as the (albeit imperfectly) knowing Subject in Subject-Object relation (see Steier, 1991).

**Introducing critical variations** Critical approaches can be characterised in terms of three assumptions and points of emphasis that differ from those of the main-stream. First, critical approaches assume *inter-dependent existences*. This mutualist assumption treats Self and other as co-constructions - ‘I am because you are’<sup>x</sup>. So, for example, the relation between person and organization is seen as one of mutual creation: through their inter-actions people make organisation which in turn reflects back and influences interactions. Second, language is given the key role of *constructing* social realities and, compared with main-stream approaches, representation is de-centered. Third, attention is directed to multiple, local-historical, *social realities* that are made in inter-actions or what I call relational processes<sup>xi</sup>. This contrasts with the mainstream centring (often only tacit) of a singular and independently existing world of which persons may have objective and subjective knowledge<sup>xii</sup>.

In my present – critical - variant of social constructionism I view ‘persons’ and ‘organizations’, indeed all constructed realities and relations, as produced and emergent in *inter-action processes*. This includes the process of producing research and theory and constructing the identities of researcher and researched. I try to theorise the *how* of social construction and focus on *action* rather than on meanings as constructions ‘inside the head’. My interest is in processes of making, maintaining and changing local realities. Subject-object relations are treated as *possible* social constructions and not as ‘how things really are’ or how they must be in order to produce objective knowledge<sup>xiii</sup>.

### **Organizing as a relational processes.**

In this, the second movement, I will outline my central premises concerning ‘the how’ of relational-construction processes. I draw upon multiple voices and literatures including, for example, the philosophy of inquiry, feminism and feminist critiques of science, the history of ideas, the sociology of knowledge, cognitive and social psychology, interactionism, cognitive,

and phenomenological sociologies, radical family therapy, (some) systems theories, and critical social anthropology. Two key qualities of these premises should be noted. First, they are intended to say something about the “*potentials* of the phenomena that constitute the domain of inquiry” - potentials that may be very differently realized in the varying “empirical flux of events” (Cohen, 1989 p.17, emphasis in the original); in other words, they are *not* to be understood as *substantive* claims. Second, they concern “*becoming realism*” rather than “being realism” (Chia, 1995). In other words, I am talking about ongoing relational processes (a “weak ontology”) and not about entities, attributes, and discrete acts (“strong ontology”; Chia, 1995 p579). Given these qualities, it might be helpful for you to approach the present narrative as ‘strange’ rather than, for example, assuming that you already know about social constructionism and therefore know what I want to say. I will continue with a short overview of key premises before expanding them in relation to (a) issues that arise in *mainstream constructions* of change, and (b) their general (and changed) implications for change-work.

### ***Premises: construction processes***

As I have said, I regard social realities as emergent in ongoing processes. I centre co-ordinations or inter-actions in a narrative roughly similar to Weick’s talk of behavioural interlocks and recurrent interactions (Weick and Quinn, this volume), and similar to Wierdsma’s talk (also this volume) of “transactions” as interweaving activities, relationships, and meanings. These inter-actions are processes of (re)*organizing* local realities; they are processes in which persons and worlds are co-constructed, actively maintained, and changed. But how, more narrowly, may these processes be understood?. From a theoretical point of view this requires a shift from mainstream assumptions about *entities* (independent existences), *knowledge* (knowledge that), *language* (representative), and *rationality* (grounded in ‘real world’ criteria). The following summarises something of what seems required.

***Act-supplement building blocks.*** First, we must shift our line of talk from entities and individual action to inter-action. We need a way of talking about co-construction in inter-action rather than individual acts or meanings ‘inside the head’. Key to this is a shift away from language as representation to language (in the broadest possible sense of the word) as a process of co-ordinated actions. *Co-ordinations* might be, for example, of written and spoken texts. For example, an e-mail is sent (text) and replied to (con-text) or two people have a conversation. Equally, co-ordinations can be of non-verbal actions, things, and events<sup>xiv</sup> - a hand is extended (act or text) and another hand takes it and shakes it (act or con-text). These

can be spoken of as “text-context” relations (e.g., in the case of written texts) or as inter-acts. These co-ordinations are relational unities: an act makes no contribution to reality construction processes unless it is supplemented in some way. With this line of argument we can see that *social construction is achieved in relational processes*. In sum, co-ordinations involve actions, objects, and artefacts available to be made relevant or irrelevant, meaningful or meaningless, good or bad, *by being put into relation* (e.g., Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Gergen, 1995). Related terms for discussing this relational (ontological) unit include “joint action” (Shotter, 1993), co-action, and “performance” (e.g., Bateson, 1993; Newman and Holzman, 1997).

***Multiple co-ordinations.*** The second key point to bring out is that construction processes are made in multiple, simultaneous inter-acts, many of which are tacit. For example, the deceptively simple co-ordination of shaking hands relies upon reference to a great many local cultural practices. For the two hands joining to be constructed as a ‘handshake’ involves many simultaneous con-texts or supplements such as, for example, local greeting conventions, notions of politeness, formality, left and right, meeting and departing.... All these relations need to be learned in the process of becoming a local. Imagine what it is like for a newcomer to the Netherlands trying to ‘bring off’ a competent local performance when greeting another person: when and whom do you kiss, how many times, with which cheek do you start, what kind(s) of relationship does this ‘do’ or make, and so on.

Multiplicity has another important aspect: relational processes may construct *multiple realities*. However, talk of multiple realities has a very different meaning from main-stream talk – where it would mean multiple subjective (‘inside the head’) realities in an objectively knowable world. Here it means that inter-actions make *multiple local ontologies or local cultures*. For example, plant management could coordinate with a corporate mission statement (text) on the basis of con-texts such as discourses of local and of corporate management, of previous change initiatives, of being ‘messed about’... Plant management may construct the mission statement as the latest corporate management joke whilst, at the same time, the HRM department may be using it as the basis for team briefings and development workshops, and e.g., investors may be buying more shares in the company...

***Local-social-historical constructions.*** So, our story so far is that interactions produce multiple local realities. I need to say more about what ‘local’ means in this context, and I need to say more about how inter-actions can be ongoing. First, it has to be the case that some

stability is ongoing – to enable interactions to have a history. We can say that, in the course of relational processes, "stabilized effects" (Chia, 1995, p.586) are produced when actions are warranted or "socially certified" (Hosking and Morley, 1991). These stabilized effects may be identities (e.g., plant manager), social practices (such as greeting conventions), social structures (corporate and local management relations)... And, of course, it could be that some act is not supplemented and so remains un-real, or it may be supplemented – not by being socially certified but by being "dis-credited" as untrue, unhelpful, immoral and so on (Weick, 1979). This is part of what is meant by *social* construction – reality is (re)constructed when one act supplements another, when texts are put into relation and warranted or discredited.

My reference to "*local*" can be further developed by returning to main-stream discourses of knowledge and 'the real world'. First, it contrasts with the mainstream discourse in which *generalizable* knowledge is centred. This is knowledge that remains knowledge across historical epochs and across social contexts. The present reference to "local" is intended to situate reality constructions in particular social-historical processes. Second, my discourse of "*local*" can be contrasted with the mainstream discourse of *the one* reality that underlies and validates or falsifies all knowledge claims. In contrast, my present talk of "local" is related for example, to Rorty's line of talk about "community" (Rorty, 1991) and related notions such as "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However should be emphasised that 'local' (and community) in this sense could be as broad as e.g., 'Western', post-enlightenment constructions, and as broad as 'Science' (the community of scientific practitioners and praxis).

Returning to an earlier example, I am soon identified as 'a buitenlander' (i.e., not local) to some community (lets call it Dutch) when I give too many or too few kisses, tangle noses, or inappropriately attempt to shake hands. Similarly, any scientific claims I might be heard to make might not be warranted by those regarded as competent judges within the scientific community if, in my field work, I try to avoid the position of the knowing outsider. In other words, locals perform their particular local identity (as co-constructors of some community) when they co-act in ways that are locally warranted as 'real and good (e.g., Weigert, 1983)<sup>xv</sup>'. These ways of 'going on' in relation may *seem* fixed and may be (locally) taken-for-granted as 'how the world really is'. However, we should not forget either the essential artfulness - artificial rather than natural - of these "stabilized effects" or the relational processes in which they are constantly made and re-made.

Local processes can be said to have a *historical* quality. So acts supplement an 'already available act, a con-text supplements already available texts: co-ordinations make



and remake (local) history so to speak - in ongoing relations. For example, announcing a new mission statement might well make no sense (non-sense) unless resourced by ‘pre-existing’/available discourses concerning, for example, collective working, management hierarchies, ‘having all the noses pointed in the same direction’... Similarly, a 19<sup>th</sup> century factory worker probably would not have claimed to be “conducting participant observation” when challenged for standing around seemingly doing nothing. And had he or she done so, it seems unlikely that their claim would have been warranted!

Last, processes can be said to *both* resource *and* constrain the future i.e. how the process ‘goes on’. Returning to the above example, accepting or rejecting someone’s claim to be “doing research” will allow the process to continue in different ways. We may say that a particular act invites *a range* of possible supplements – but there is no local culture that I know of where ‘*anything goes*’. Once a particular pattern of co-ordinations becomes “stabilized” (e.g., greeting conventions, subject-object methodologies of inquiry and change-work) then other possibilities have to be improvised and it may be harder to have them validated as relevant, ‘real and good’<sup>xvi</sup>. Such difficulties are especially likely in locales where right-wrong dualisms are already in place as “stabilized effects”.

***Relational realities.*** Last, we have the question of what to put in place of the dis-placed (but not rejected as wrong) talk of subjective and objective realities and ‘the real world’. The present thought style centers reality construction processes - what we earlier called “becoming realism” – and *relational realities*. The latter have been presented as *co-constructions* of self and other, people and worlds: self-making and world (other) making are understood as co-genetic. This means that self *and* other (people, material objects, events, social structures) exist as social realities only in relation (e.g., Mead, 1934; Weigert, 1983). This also means that different relations construct different realities. So, for example who you are (‘identity’) varies as ‘you’ ( a semantic place holder) interact with your boss, life partner, fellow cat lovers etcetera. What the main-stream discoursed as relatively stable entity characteristics now may be seen as *multiple* and *variable* and as *performed* - rather than as *singular and fixed, a-historic possessions*. In sum, relational processes (a) are “reality -constituting practice(s)” (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p.27) that construct markets, management, hierarchy, all social realities... what is (is not), and what is good (bad), and (b) these realities are multiple, local, and performed, rather than singular and transcendent.

***Summary - relational construction processes:***

- Relational processes construct someone and something as real and (perhaps) good.
- Entities and subject-object relationships *can* be constructed - as in mainstream narratives - but
- processes only construct the way someone or something is *here and now*; other relations always are possible.
- Processes are constructed in multiple, interrelated, inter-actions and
- reference co-ordinations already in process.
- Inter-actions resource and constrain how a process goes on.
- Relational processes are processes of self making and world making: self and other are co-genetic.

### **Re-constructing the main streams of organizational change**

These themes can be developed through a re-construction of main-stream, change-related issues. I shall reconstruct just five: stability and change as ongoing; processes constructing multiple realities; change as ‘power over’ and ‘power to’, and; resistance presumes force. Each of these will briefly be reflected upon before introducing the final movement and the possibilities that are enabled by ‘starting somewhere completely different’ i.e., with critical constructionist premises in place.

#### ***Both change and stability are ongoing***

Mainstream discourses construct organizations as relatively stable and singular entities acting in relation to a more or less turbulent environment. Given these (and related) understandings, change can only be understood as moving from one stable state to another (unfreeze-move-re-freeze). The Subject (change agent) attempts to achieve change by empirical-rational analysis of what is, producing knowledge ‘about’ (i.e., propositional knowledge of) how things are and should be, as a basis for influencing – for re-forming Other. These discourses reduce processes (in this case knowing and influencing) to input-outcome and feedback relations within and between entities (Hosking and Morley, 1991).

In contrast, the critical constructionist premises outlined above center *processes and potentials*. Stability is no longer taken-for-granted as a feature of the world ‘as it really is’,<sup>xvii</sup> and change is no longer considered a temporary (though increasingly common) aberration. Rather, by assuming a “weak ontology of becoming” *change (as a process) and stability (as*

repeated re-constructions of some local reality) *are seen as ongoing* and social realities now are viewed as particular, more or less temporary, local-historical achievements.

### ***Change as a construction process constructing multiple realities.***

By shifting from entities and individual acts the locus of change shifts to inter-action processes and *how* they co-construct, reproduce, and change social realities and relationships. This has a major implication for change-work in that inter-actions become *both* the ‘unit of analysis’ *and* the locus of transformation. One radical implication is that *the conventional distinction between inquiry and intervention is no longer helpful*. Remember, in the present context, processes construct social realities as ‘*how things really are made*’ and not as individual, subjective (mis)constructions of how things really are<sup>xviii</sup>. The present view does not presume for example, that the newly announced mission statement is some thing about which all could and should agree, barring ill will and incompetence. Agreement becomes a question of relating, social certification, discrediting... a matter of power - and it is to this that I now turn.

### ***Change as power over and power to.***

Mainstream discourses have been said to assume subject-object relations and to privilege the *subjects*’ constructions whilst silencing Other as object. Examples were given of knowing leaders and knowing scientists gathering information about Other (subordinates, the environment, the research object...) and then using their knowledge to influence, re-form, change Other. Commentators have spoken of this as a relationship of “power over”, that is, as power of Subject over Object (e.g., Gergen, 1995).

Central to the Subject-Object discourse are the mainstream assumptions about reality (ontology or what exists), what we can know about it (epistemology) and how we can build that knowledge (methodology). In the main-stream, knower and known are treated as if separate. Separateness warrants the scientific way of knowing - relative to other (e.g., more inclusive or participative) ways. In the main-stream construction, the world is assumed to be singular and internally consistent, knowledge is measured on a single dimension, and is regarded as (more or less) right/wrong or useful. So, knowing Subjects study Objects to be known and use their knowledge to re-form - to construct ‘power over’ Objects.

Many change-work methodologies reproduce mainstream conceptions of subject-object relations, knowledge, and methodology. Examples include the methodology of conventional action research approaches to organization development<sup>xix</sup>. In the latter case,

knowing scientists reflect back their knowledge of the locals and their practices and, in so doing, also reproduce their (the scientists) discourses of science, reality, generalizable knowledge, how things usually are done elsewhere, notions of better-worse and so on – yet these (implicit) discourses are unavailable for critical reflection. Similarly, many top-down change efforts try to impose one voice – one local reality - to get others to buy in to some shared metaphor, mission, or vision, or to 'be flexible'. Further, they often try to do so through constructing subject-object ways of relating where some change agent (e.g., chief executive) knows what is necessary and tries to influence (bargain, negotiate, persuade, transform...) others to 'agree' with them (e.g., Carnall, 1990; Dyer, 1984).

When considered on the basis of the present relational premises, Subject-Object relations and “power over” are just *possible and not necessary* relationship constructions. Distinctions need not be constructed (a) as binary opposites i.e., as mutually exclusive and opposed, (b) as ‘impermeable’, or as having (c) fixed boundaries. So, for example, inclusive, non-hierarchical ways of relating can be constructed in processes that treat multiple different relational realities as different but equal. This contrasts starkly with the exclusive, hierarchical world of one fixed reality (ontology) and a “totalitarian epistemic concern for consistency” (see van Dongen, 1991). Non-hierarchical ways of relating can construct “*power to*” in the sense of power to sustain multiple interdependent local ways of ‘going on’ in ‘different but equal’ relation (see Gergen, 1995; Hosking, 1995). Shortly we shall see that this is a key theme in relational change-work – how to give free play to multiple local realities or “forms of life” without imposing one form or voice on others<sup>xx</sup>.

### ***There is no resistance without force.***

Resistance to change has been receiving increasing attention as change agents have sought ways to persuade, negotiate... in some way influence others to embrace their own (Change Agent’s) reality constructions. The change agent is theorised<sup>xxi</sup> in relation to discourses of individual action which is rational in the sense of intentional, planned, and knowing. At the same time the Object is constructed (by the Subject) as resisting, known, and potentially formable (see e.g., Hollway, 1991; Giddens, 1979). The metaphor is mechanistic e.g., overcoming resistance arising from inertial forces, organic e.g., overcoming individual defence mechanisms, or political.

Resistance is storied (by the Subject) as something Other (as Object) has or does which has to be overcome - by self as Subject. This can be attempted e.g., by education or teambuilding (see e.g., O’Connor, 1995); “social change can be accomplished only as rapidly

as resistances are overcome and removed” (Jacques, 1947 in Hollway, 1991 p.120). However, the present “critical” discourses indicate that attempts to overcome resistance through more “power over” Others will reproduce subject-object relations i.e., will reproduce the status quo rather than change it. Perhaps this is why change efforts are so often felt to be more of the same, even when the ‘reality content’ seems so different. I might add that, when one reality attempts to impose itself on another, resistance might well be the *locally* rational response. However, rather than emphasise knowledge (of how things really are) and rationality, the present (non main-stream) view directs attention to power relations, to subject-object relations as relations of ‘power over’, and to the possibility of non subject-object relations and ‘power to’.

### ***A critical transition***

The next development explores some possible discourses of change work that go together with critical constructionist premises. These are first briefly outlined as “generic themes”. These themes are then brought together in examples of possible change-work practices.

## **Critical constructionism and change work**

Others have had much to say about how humans may (have) conduct(ed) their affairs without constructing S-O relations. Reflections of this sort have been offered both in relation to Science and in relation to other “communities of practice”. In outline, change-work of this sort might include (a) opening up to *possibilities* rather than closing down through problem identification, solutions, and generalized change programs and (b) constructing a *community-based view of rationality* grounded in “unforced agreement” as reflected in coordinated action<sup>xxii</sup> (e.g., Rorty, 1991). Other discussions stress (c) relational processes as the location for constructing “(im)moral” (and all other) criteria. Being “for the other” - rather than “with” - now may be viewed as the “starting point” so to speak – prior to the construction of subject-object differentiation (Bauman, 1993). If so, perhaps the ‘best’ that many can do to be “reasonable” and “moral” is to “discuss any topic... in a way which eschews dogmatism, defensiveness, and righteous indignation” (Rorty, 1991, p37). This seems to be an argument for opening up to multiple realities - rather than imposing one *local-cultural-historical reality* over others.

### ***Some generic themes.***

I will continue by outlining some *generic themes* that seem important in opening up possibilities, multiple realities, “unforced agreement” and ‘power to’. The themes are relevant both to *inquiry* (now also viewed as intervening) and to *explicitly transformative change-work*. In the former case, practices that may construct inclusive, different but equal relations include participative action research, co-inquiry, collaborative inquiry (e.g., Reason, 1994) and approaches to community social psychology (see e.g., Hosking, 1999; McNamee, 1989). In the case of transformative change work, relevant approaches *may* include, for example: Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Shrivastva, 1987), narrative and re-storying approaches (Barry, 1997), working with metaphors (e.g., Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990), performative work using drama (e.g., Boal, 1992; Holzman, 1999), and dialogical work that addresses how people talk with one another (see e.g., Anderson-Wallace, Blanter, and Boydell, 2001; Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar, 1995; Isaacs, 1993; [http://www.geocities.com/dian\\_marie\\_hosking](http://www.geocities.com/dian_marie_hosking)).

***Knowing and influencing are left joined.*** Inquiry and change-work recognises and gives importance to the influence potential of *all acts* - asking questions, voice tone, words used, posture... including ‘artefacts’ - interview findings, percentage summaries, diagnostic classifications... Any and all of these have the potential to contribute to the social construction of reality<sup>xxiii</sup>. All acts now are seen to have the potential to change<sup>xxiv</sup> how processes ‘go on’ and change agency is ‘located’ in ongoing processes and not in ‘a change agent’.

***Multiple, equal voices.*** Inquiry and change-work attempts to generate and work with multiplicity rather than to suppress or homogenise it through the application of statistical procedures or through management drives to “consensus”. In general terms, polyphony may be constructed in *non-hierarchical ways* that recognise and support difference and that construct ‘*power to*’ rather than what I earlier called power over. This may mean including everyone who has an involvement in some issue through participative change-work. However, it must be stressed that the point of participation is no longer to increase the likelihood of acceptance of someone else’s decision, or to increase the quality of a (consensus) solution. Rather it is a way of including and enabling multiple local realities in different but equal relation.

***Possibilities and positive values are centred.*** The view that relational processes *construct* realities has major implications all change work. For many (though not all) it means working

with what is *positively valued* i.e., working “appreciatively” (Cooperider and Shrivastva, 1987) rather than re-constructing a world which IS problematic... a world of deficits, failure, and blaming. The shift to *possibilities* invites, for example, change work that helps participants learn how better to improvise and helps participants to imagine new ways of going on together (for example “Imagine Chicago” and other similar projects<sup>xxv</sup>). This also may mean evaluating participatively and appreciatively, building in reflexive evaluation as an ongoing quality of change work (see van der Haar, 2002).

***Inquiry and intervention are left joined.*** Since relational processes construct realities there is no requirement (although of course one could) to narrate activities as *either* inquiry *or* intervention - a ‘both-and’ approach is enabled. So, for example, action research gets developed in more participatory ways along with related methodologies such as co-inquiry and collaborative inquiry. Similarly, change-work shifts from the language of intervention to the language of “transformation” in order to capture the notion of change ‘from within’. At the same time, methodologies collapse the structuring distinction between inquiry and intervention recognising that e.g., future searching is future making – for ‘good or ill’. Attention shifts from the discourse of inquiry, for example, to care-full questioning and care-full listening as a way of ‘doing’ different but equal relations.

***Questioning and listening as formative of relations and realities.*** A changed role and significance is given to asking questions, to how they are asked, why, and by whom. Rather than see questioning as ‘finding out’ about some pre-existing reality, questioning now is seen as *forming* and good questions are those that help to enlarge possible worlds (see Harding, 1998) and possible ways of being in relationship. For example, Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Shrivastva, 1987) gives very careful attention to the appreciative question around which the process will be based. Equally, careful attention to listening to Other is a key feature of many dialogical approaches such as the Public Conversations Project, the MIT Dialogue Project (Isaacs, 1993), and Inter-Logics’ work with “conversational architectures” (<http://www.inter-logics.net>). The ‘point’, so to speak, is to give space to Other rather than doing something to or making use of Other.

***Constructing in conceptual and non-conceptual performances.*** This concern with careful questioning and listening has a broader connotation when we accept that realities are constructed in performances that include, but are not confined to, conceptual language. And

inter-actions may often construct Subject-Object relations. Many practitioners work with *how* people talk with, to, and about one another and construct their wider realities and relations. Is the universe friendly? What are the prevailing metaphors – business is war or..? Who talks the most, interrupts, claims authority and expertise, on what basis..? Other, less conceptual performances include (re)enacting local realities, for example with the help of professional actors, or through narrative approaches in which participants learn how to re-story their lives - perhaps learning how to open up to new possible ways of ‘going on’ in relation (e.g., Performance of a Lifetime). Learning how to learn, getting ‘unstuck’, constructing “power to” are central to these approaches and inclusive, performative, change-work achieves a changed significance<sup>xxvi</sup>.

***A deep ecological approach now is warranted.*** When self and other are seen as co-constructed, care of other is constructed as care of the (moral)self. So, for example, discourses of care no longer have to be understood in relation to ‘soft’ Humanist narratives and opposed to a ‘hard’ (factual) world of e.g., economic ‘realities’ and relations that are (rationally) instrumentalised, secularised, and dis-embodied (see Hosking, 2000). In this relational thought style the question *is* the universe friendly would not seem so relevant or helpful. Rather the question is more like how can self and other relate in ways that allow and support inter-dependent, different but equal relations?

### **Change-work practices**

I shall finish with an outline of a methodology which could be discoursed as critical constructionist. However, I do not wish to be understood as describing a constructionist method. The reasons are twofold. First, because *all* ‘methods’ contribute to processes of reality construction. Second, because methods are not ‘freestanding’, rather theory, method, and data are co-genetic<sup>xxvii</sup>. For example, theory sets limits on relevant and useful methods (and vice versa), shapes how method is understood, and shapes what count as data. Many of the practices I will outline *could* be stripped from their present (relational-constructionist) context and claimed to be ‘the same’ as for example, development practices from a humanist tradition or as might be generated on the basis of an ideology of participation. However, this would be to miss the point of the relational premises set out earlier.

***Narrative change works .*** Given the present thought style *all inquiry* can be considered as narrative - whether reporting an experiment, a survey, or making narrative interviews. The



‘inquirer’ engaged in ‘finding out’ is engaged in relational processes – in making self as an inquirer in relation to Other (e.g., Howard, 1991), and in relation to narratives of science, mathematics, professional practice, organization development and so on.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Many approaches to inquiry *explicitly* use the language of story telling or “narrative” and these approaches have become increasingly popular in recent years (e.g., Calas & Smircich, 1991; Sarbin, 1986; Boje, 1995). Work of this sort includes narrative interviews and narrative analysis of the same, but also narrative analysis of written and spoken texts: documents, archive materials, emails, telephone calls, films, magazines... However it should be stressed that narrative approaches include both main-stream and critical variants; here I am focusing on the latter.

As was set out earlier, critical constructionism positions texts as more or less local, embedded in multiple inter-textual relations. The embedded, situated, or local-relational quality of actions/texts has two important implications<sup>xxix</sup>. First, narratives are regarded as social and not ‘individual’, constructions and so e.g., interview transcripts are *not* treated as representations of a person’s subjective knowledge. Second, the purpose of inquiry now may be thought of as being to “articulate *local* and *practical* concerns” (Gergen and Thatchenkerry, 1996, emphasis added). This means articulating *multiplicity*, what some call ‘plurivocality’, and in this way ‘giving voice’ to practices and possibilities that usually are muted, suppressed or silenced. Inquiry is *not* to discover one ‘truth’ or to reproduce a monological construction of change (Dunford and Jones, 2000).

The following table summarizes the story so far:

- Story construction is a process of *creating* reality
- in which self/story teller is clearly *part of* the story.
- Narratives are *social* constructions - not individual subjective realities.
- Narratives are situated – they are con-textualised in relation to multiple local-cultural-historical acts/texts.
- Inquiry may articulate multiple narratives and relations.
- Change-work works with multiple realities and power relations e.g., to
- facilitate ways of relating that are open to possibilities.

***Narrative interviews as inquiry***<sup>xxx</sup> Explicitly narrative inquiry often proceeds through interviews that are relatively unstructured when compared e.g., with questionnaires. In other words, the interviewer leaves space for the Other to tell their story in relation to some broad question such as: “could you tell me about - your experiences of the corporate change program - the changes you have tried to introduce since you arrived...”. Part of the inquirer’s intention is to get out of the way, so to speak, of what the other person wants to say (given this particular question [text]), and to encourage a conversation of equals. Inquirers also will try to be as explicit as possible regarding their relevant narratives such as why they are asking the question(s) and who may do what with the texts so produced. These constructive acts become con-texts by contributing to the particular narrative that is told in the interview. So too do constructive acts of ‘the interviewee’ who could be thought of as producing a ‘twice constructed’ text, so to speak: first, by being “relationally responsive” (McNamee and Gergen, 1999), selecting, and ‘punctuating’ some phenomenal stream of lived experience, and second, by re-constructing the construction in the interview (see Riessman, 1993).

***Narrative analysis of interview texts*** Social construction processes continue when the text is transcribed from a tape recording and decisions are made about what to do e.g., with over-talking, unclear words, pauses, and punctuation. Then the transcription is analyzed - perhaps its more appropriate to say re-constructed - in relation to con-texts such as those of the inquirers own local cultures (gender, professional, ethnic...), ‘thought style’, narratives of purpose... and last – the resulting narrative is re-constructed every time someone reads it<sup>xxxii</sup>.

A critical constructionist thought style implies a *particular* approach to narrative analysis<sup>xxxiii</sup>. In general, it aims to preserve text-context relations, to articulate muted, suppressed, and excluded voices, and in this way to re-situate dominant voices/stories, enable a ‘play of differences’, and open-up new possible realities and relationships. Some speak of this as “de-construction” (Culler, 1982). It involves breaking-up the seeming unities in a text (the organisation, the way we do things around here...), suggesting taken-for-granted dualities (management-employee, old timers and newcomers...), pluralizing, de-entifying, de-naturalizing... re-contextualising and opening-up new possible local practices of power (Boje, 1995; also <http://web.nmsu.edu/~dboje> ).

Boje (2001) has given some guidelines for story deconstruction which can then resource *re-storying* - viewed as enabling many local cultures - and not just one hierarchy and one dominant narrative. Seven interrelated tactics are proposed. These are: search for dualities

(the system-me; positive-negative); re-interpret the hierarchy; look for rebel voices and for the “other side” of the story; deny the plot; find the exception; and trace what is between the lines.

*Example. Boje’s (1995) analysis of Walt Disney Enterprises.* Boje investigated the possibility that there might be stories about Walt Disney and the “Magic Kingdom” that did not fit the (official) universalizing tale of happiness... eg voices of employees & former employees, historians... What were they and how were these competing voices silenced, excluded...? The focus of the inquiry was on the multiple & contentious relations between stories, & on how research can become complicit in constructing one happy story over the competing voices. Boje used the Disney archives: (a) tape & video recordings of Disney leaders making speeches, giving interviews, impromptu conversations... (b) PR films (c) tapes of meetings... Deconstructive analysis: eg looked at multiple variations of stories - not just positive, not just negative – assuming the ‘plurivocality’ of texts & showing how each version ‘covered up’ a great deal of ambiguity; looked at who gets a voice, who does not (eg absence of screen credits for artists, removal of Roy Disney from the studio sign...), and: at how people & things were ‘essentialized’, looking at cacophony & discord rather than ‘the managed harmony of the official story’... showing organizational culture as fragmented & conflicted... a site of multiple meanings engaged in a constant struggle for control.

In the next section we can see how others have tried to put this approach to good effect in change-work.

***Working narratives, multiplicity, and power to.*** This brings us to the point where we can clearly see one way in which inquiry and change work can be interwoven. Narratives can be ‘worked with’ locally’ in a variety of ways that have the explicit intention of change work. So, for example, inquiry may facilitate what some call “design conversations” (Gill, 2001) in which multiple voices/narratives are explored through dialogue<sup>xxxiii</sup>. Other relevant ways of working can include: “dialoging” (e.g., Anderson-Wallace, Blanter, and Boydell, 2001); generating and supporting narrative multiplicity through “appreciative inquiry” (Cooperrider and Shrivastva, 1987); working with metaphors (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990; Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar, 1995); “re-storying” (Barry, 1997) and dynamic narrative approaches to organizational learning (Abma, 2000). Work of this kind articulates differences, boundaries, and power relations, perhaps making space for generating new realities ‘from within’ multiple local contexts (transformation) rather than imposing a singular narrative in subject-object relation.

Of course change-work that explicitly employs a narrative approach is not necessarily tied to a social constructionist thought style. The latter is usually put to work in methods that (a) help client(s) generate their own ways to go on, and (b) avoid presuming a singular expertise and voice. Such approaches assume that: people’s lives are heavily influenced by the stories they tell about themselves; stories are empowering or dis-empowering, helpful or unhelpful; clients may be trapped in stories of “problems” & “helplessness”, past failures... that pathologise self, and; both the ‘change agent’s and the client’s stories should be listened to and reflected back to assist dis-solving and re-storying.

*Example: David Barry’s (e.g., Barry 1997) re-storying work with organisations.* Some of the ways David works with identities and relationships can be summarised as follows. *Influence mapping:* expanding stories, giving them a more coherent and story-like nature and helping tellers to assume a more agentic role; mapping the interrelations between persons and problems over time; mapping the influence of ‘the problem’ on persons (how has this problem influenced your life, organization... perhaps making the problem less monolithic) and of persons on the problem (how s/he has influenced the problem...giving greater sense of agency). *Problem externalisation:* a storied problem is a trap: reflective listening can help to dis-connect the story from the teller...; reframing can loosen that particular reality and invite story teller(s) into a more open space where new possibilities (multiple realities) can be explored; making drawings (visualizations) and written portraits of ‘the problem(s)’,

solidifying & externalizing characters to have conversations with..., sending letters about and to the characters... *Identifying unique outcomes*: finding previously untold story parts (eg when some competitor or context did **not** get the better of them)...and expanding this alternative story line; (imagination, visioning, social dreaming are used in other approaches). *Witnessing the performance(s)*: acknowledging and encouraging storytellers efforts to enact a preferred story eg in conversations, writing letters of reference to client...

Storytelling change-work aims to strengthen marginalized and silenced voices by inviting their (re)telling and recording, through witnessing, through attending to some-one's experience (as narrative). Such change-work brings out and works with *multiple voices* - with multiple constructions - rather than obscuring the multiplicity in totalizing discourses, averages, 3<sup>rd</sup> person, de-contextualised accounts and other practices that aim to speak for 'Other'. Storytelling change-work analyses or in some other way 'starts from' the assumptions, norms, metaphors, language tools, social practices... that resource and constrain possibilities. Work of this kind can open-up new ways of being in relation and new possible worlds

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i A deliberately ‘weak’ concept that is meant to avoid the ‘strong’ claim of being a paradigm, but to convey a similar level of operation – more inclusive than theory, less bounded and totalizing than a cosmology.

ii Here I am *not* re-constructing the common distinction between symbolic and material reality (see e.g., Rorty, [1991] and Berman’s [1990] discussions of the emergence of the “Italian” heresy (Science), “hard” and “soft” differentiation).

iii As additional tools and not as replacements

iv Which will later be referred to as a ‘subject-object’ construction of relations – a ‘hard differentiation’. In such relations, Self constructs ‘Other’ as, for example, different, wrong, and opposing, or as different and ‘in-between’ i.e., as un- fit(ing) some ‘either – or’ category system. Either way, Other – recalcitrant employees, rival authorities, nature... is a threat and has to be changed – usually on the basis of more (local) knowledge and ‘world structuring’.

iv Subject-object discourses are found much more widely than this. Indeed, some have said that they characterize Western ways of thinking and science since Plato (see e.g., Rorty [1991], Berman [1981, 1990]).

v I am leaving discussion of the distincto who makes the distinction out of the story, for the moment – just as mainstream narratives do.

vi As we shall see, this Aristotelian logic of either-or is founded on the Parminidean ontology embraced in what we are here calling the “mainstream” or “entitative” perspective (see Chia, [1995], van Dongen [1991], Hosking [2000]).

vii Cummings & Worley (2001) distinguish between different “generations” of approaches to OD. They refer to the latest generation as “social constructionist” but only discuss Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in this context. However, in my (“critical”, relational constructionist) view it is inappropriate and misleading to separate theory and method and to treat AI as ‘this or that’ kind of method.

viii I have often spoken of contingency approaches elsewhere. In my view they face a serious problem of treating eg person and organization as separate entities and reduce person to the role of providing ‘inputs’ to some statistical interaction. As a result relational processes are reduced to statistical interactions between inputs from person and inputs from context (see e.g., Hosking & Morley [1991]).

ix Through tacit reference to discourses of the “received view of science”- where the distinction is assumed to be ‘in the world’ – or made by an impartial and objective distincto.

x (“the mystery of I and Thou reveals the ‘and’ between both” see e.g., Hoebcke, this volume)

xi These assumptions are part of what others have referred to as “postmodernist” ways of thinking. See, for example, Gergen and Thatchenkerry [1996].

xii In other words, a thought style in which ontology and epistemology are separated.

xiii Again, its simply that “objective knowledge’ is not part of the present discourse. I am not arguing for others to abandon talk of objective knowledge – just for a broadening of relational possibilities – including constructions of Science.

xiv Perhaps not suprisingly, our definition is similar to definitions of “discourse” such as that quoted from Burr earlier. However we do not fully embrace the wider theoretical stance of “discursive psychology” or of discursive approaches that remain unreflexive about their own

social construction; see Gergen [1994] for a discussion of their qualities and relations with relational thinking, also Steier [1991].

<sup>xv</sup> Although it is not *necessary* to be a local to carry off a competent performance – you can participate in becoming a local – by being “relationally responsive” to the invitation (action) of another. See, for example, Catherine Bateson’s [1993] narrative of “Joint performance across cultures: Improvisation in a Persian garden”.

<sup>xvi</sup> Discourses, for example, often are theorized as resources (see e.g., Hardy, Palmer, and Phillips [2000]) – however a ‘both/and’ view is possible once the either-or logic of a coherent and singular world is set aside.

<sup>xvii</sup> And therefore independently of any social construction process - which of course means that we cannot know it as it really is - independently of our ways of ‘knowing’.

<sup>xviii</sup> So, for example, talk of organizations as having “fragmented” cultures rather than one, organization-wide culture, could be given this more radical, ontological (rather than subjective knowledge) meaning (see e.g., Joanna Martin’s chapter in Clegg and Hardy’s *Handbook of Organizations*).

<sup>xix</sup> Which may be distinguished from participative inquiry and other collaborative approaches in which everyone contributes as an expert...attempting to avoid subject-object relations (see e.g., Reason [1994])

<sup>xx</sup> And as I have said, that also goes for the present thought style and its present particularities.

<sup>xxi</sup> And of course, also the scientist-narrator who positions himself outside his narrative.

<sup>xxii</sup> But here I am not talking about knowledge (as is Rorty) but inter-action... and in this case ‘agreement’ means we can go on coordinating our actions without questioning or being questioned; we do not have to share the same story (agree) about what we are doing (see e.g., Hosking and Morley [1991]).

<sup>xxiii</sup> This is very different from mainstream approaches that differentiate data gathering, analysis, intervention design, and implementation. In the latter case, activities are understood *either* ‘find out’/seek to know about *or* attempt to influence ‘other’.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Only the “potential” as it depends on how they are supplemented and whether or not they get warranted as ‘real and good’

<sup>xxv</sup> see e.g., <http://imaginechicago.org>

<sup>xxvi</sup> One reason it does so, and one that we have not had the space to explore, is because of the de-centering of the mind-body split. Now that this is regarded as a construction – and not how things really are – some fascinating and radical possibilities arise. See e.g., Berman, [1981, 1990], Hosking [2000].

<sup>xxvii</sup> The latter is, of course, the approach of the “received view of science” – which acts ‘as if’ theory and data were separate, and strives to make them as separate as possible – in this way constructing data (the context of justification) as what’s important for rejecting or accepting a hypothesis.

<sup>xxviii</sup> So, for example, psychology (Maier, 1988), and ‘science’ (Carrithers, 1991; Howard, 1991) can be viewed as telling particular kinds of stories (e.g., Hosking and Morley, 1991).

<sup>xxix</sup> Beware, many approaches to narrative embrace “modernist” discourses and many are best thought of as examples of “first order constructionism”.

<sup>xxx</sup> Narrative interviews also can be conducted where the emphasis is more on transformation. So, for example, therapists such as Milton Erickson and Frank Farelly, along with NLP practitioners, have shown how questions, body language, juxtapositions ... may have transformative effects – even when ‘the interviewee’ thinks that ‘the interviewer’ is ‘just finding out’ about them.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Or as was said earlier – every time the text/act is supplemented by another act/con-text.

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<sup>xxxii</sup> The term “postmodern” is used by many writers. However the term seems to invoke strong reactions such that a ‘meeting of minds’ (metaphorically speaking of course) is made very unlikely! For this reason, I have avoided using the language of postmodernism in the main text.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Dachler and Hosking used the term “multilogue” (rather than dialogue) in order to emphasise the bringing together of multiple voices/multiple narratives.