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Relational Bridges Between Constructionism and Constructivism

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A good deal has been written about the distinction between constructivist and constructionist versions of psychology. At worst, the two are viewed as competing orientations; one – constructivism – whose focus is on internal, cognitive processes of individuals, the other – social constructionism – whose focus is on discourse or the joint (social) activities that transpire between people. At best, the two are viewed as similar because of their focus on meaning-making processes. George Kelly (1955), a central name in constructivism, can be described as focusing a good deal of attention on the internal processes by which individuals construe their worlds. He was interested in how a person makes *personal meaning*. Yet, as Kelly developed his corollaries (moving from the fundamental postulate to the sociality corollary) he arrived firmly located within the social, performative world of the relational (the focus of social construction). Viewed in historical context, we could easily see that Kelly, influenced by the dominance of the period's individualist discourse of social science and psychology, used this discourse as his *starting* place. He was attempting to understand how it is that people make meaning, how meaning changes and evolves, how it becomes sedimented, and so forth. His central metaphor, *person as scientist*, clearly is in keeping with the trends in psychology at the time.

It is interesting to me that much of the work that has emerged since Kelly's noted volume, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (1955), has placed central attention on *personal* (read: individual) meaning making processes. I wonder if this focus is in some way predetermined by the power of Kelly's metaphor of person as scientist. Yet, probably the most interesting aspect of Kelly's work, to me, is how he eventually pulled himself from inside the head of the person into the social arena. As a constructionist, I would critique any approach that *builds* from the internal, individual *to* the social. Yet, one could also recognize the bold moves Kelly was suggesting at the time of his writing by moving into a relational realm to explore the human activity of meaning making.

Beyond this historical reading of Kelly's work, we must recognize that other noted constructivists, such as Mair (1988; 1989) and Neimeyer (2000) have also amplified and extended the relational aspects of Kelly's constructivism and more and more so letting the residual individualism recede quietly into the background. One might question whether such attempts might simply be renamed as *constructionism* – we are most happy to welcome you into the club – but since there appears to be some commitment to constructivism, let us put issues of naming aside and explore in more depth the relational as the most significant bridge between constructivism and constructionism.

If we only focus on a person's construct system (as many constructivists do – particularly in the work of psychotherapy where the temptation is strong to focus on the individual), we are left with a view that, "Each individual's construct system is . . . private, ideographic, and personal in the way it makes meaning out of the world and the individual's experience in it" (Rosen, 1996, p. 12). In addition to placing all attention on an ideographic, individualist, private

view of meaning, we can see in Rosen's words (above) an objectification of the *personal construct system* through his reference to *it* – as if a personal construct system were a separate entity from the person and his or her experience. This echoes a common constructivist theme that locates meaning within a foundational structure of the person (see McLeod, 1997 for an excellent discussion of this) and ultimately proposes that a construct system is an entity and thus can be objectively examined.

Again, if we shift our focus to the social – recognizing that it is easier for us to do so at this point in history than at the time of Kelly's writing when the idea of psychology as a science dominated – we begin to find a way for two previously incommensurate ways of approaching an understanding of meaning making to, in Wittgenstein's (1953) words, *go on together*. For me, an important point of connection between constructivism and constructionism is the shared desire to engage in transformative dialogue. In other words, whether in psychotherapy or in our academic conversations, I believe that both constructivism and constructionism are most concerned with how social and personal change can emerge such that we are able to co-exist and thus continue to co-create a world and a life together.

What social construction adds to this conversation, I think, is of great significance. Rather than focus attention on mental processes (construct systems, cognition), constructionism urges us to explore the ways in which people engage *together* in their activities. To the constructionist, meaning making is a relational activity (McNamee, in press; McNamee, 2002; McNamee and Gergen, 1999). Knowledge and understanding are not in the person but in the *performance*. Thus, interest in constructs – a hypothetical, abstract notion – is replaced with an interest in communication, discourse, dialogue. It is not what is *in the head* but what people are

doing together that concerns us. With this as our focus, we enter the domain of the relational. I suspect that this is what Kelly was pointing our attention towards in his sociality corollary. If we focus on what people do together, we are taking as our starting point the *relational* as opposed to the individual. Rather than explore an individual in his or her context, we are exploring relational configurations (contexts of many kinds with historical, cultural, and situational traditions and implications) *that give rise to (i.e., construct) any sense of individuality or privateness that we have*. So, as constructionists say over and over again, rather than *start* by examining individuals in order to understand the relational, we propose that meaning-making is a relational process through which we *accomplish* the creation of a sense of individuality.

From this perspective then, our “private thoughts,” the deep-rooted images and beliefs we hold, can be described as internalized *conversations* (relations) with others. Again, we place the meaning making process in the relational, conversational domain. The distinction I see between constructivism (in all its colors and shapes) and constructionism (in the color and shape that I describe it) is rooted in liberating oneself from the modernist discourse where isolated individuals become the unquestioned focus of attention. As I have noted elsewhere (McNamee, 2002), it makes perfect sense to focus on self-possessed individuals because we have definable, distinguishable, non-contiguous bodies. When I look at you, I see your body, your gestures, I hear your words. Yet, if we could see the transfer of heat molecules, we would see that our bodies actually co-mingle. It is hard, a scientist friend of mine tells me, to determine where one “entity” ends and another begins. So, we might now understand the unquestioned belief that we are self contained individuals as an illusion fed by our limited visual abilities. How might our understandings, our theories of human, social life be different if we could see the ways in which

our bodies, our entities blur into one another? Would we then be inclined to fully embrace the relational as our starting point and begin to see individuality as a constructed accomplishment?

One of the primary premises of social constructionism is that, within any community, values and forms of practice will vary from other communities' constructions depending upon the ways in which participants coordinate their activities. Very much in keeping with this premise then, I would like to embrace the "difference" of constructivism, appreciate that difference, and begin to build the means for "going on together" (i.e., for making meaning about the social world in general and psychology in particular). A relational focus provides a way to go on together. The specific relational focus I am suggesting, however, is not a simple attention to relationships as entities. Rather, I am arguing for a more subtle form of relational engagement – the sort identified with dialogic process.

The Centrality of Dialogue

Sampson (1993) distinguishes between dialogue and monologue.

When I construct a you designed to meet my needs and desires, a you that is serviceable for me, I am clearly engaging in a monologue as distinct from a dialogue. Although you and I may converse and interact together, in most respects the you with whom I am interacting has been constructed with me in mind. Your sole function has been to serve and service me. (P. 4)

Bakhtin (1981) describes this self-contained individual of monologism as "a hermetic and self-sufficient whole, one whose elements constitute a closed system presuming nothing beyond themselves, no other utterances" (p. 273). Dialogue, on the other hand, "requires that there be two separable presences, each coming from its own standpoint, expressing and enacting its own

particular specificity” (Sampson, 1993, p. 15). Yet, the “expressing and enacting” that can be distinguished as dialogue is a *coordinated* expressing and enacting. Perhaps Sampson’s description of dialogue does not sufficiently underscore this central aspect. It is the coordination of “two separable presences” that characterize the relational engagement that is necessary for dialogue (as opposed to monologue) to transpire.

My attention here to dialogue and the ways in which participants coordinate their activities together in order to create a context where they are relationally engaged is purposeful on two fronts. First, I believe that both constructivism and constructionism might initiate generative conversation within the common discourse of dialogue. Second, I believe that an invitation to engage in dialogue, as opposed to traditional academic debate, might provide constructionists and constructivists with interesting points of connection while it simultaneously putting the focus of personal and social transformation (that both orientations champion) into practice. As Sampson argues,

To celebrate the other is not merely to find a place for her or him within a theoretical model. Nor is it simply to analyze the role that conversations and talk play in all aspects of human endeavor. Rather, celebrating the other is also to recognize the degree to which the dialogic turn is a genuinely revolutionary transformation . . . (P. 15)

Taking Sampson’s words seriously then, I would like to not only “find a place” for constructivism within my attempt to bridge the gap between constructivists and constructionists. I would like to utilize the centrality of dialogue – of what people do together – in the meaning making process for both constructionists and constructivists. Dialogue requires coordination.

Narrative is one useful way to talk about the coordination necessary for transforming our academic debates into generative dialogue.

Narrative as Relational Meaning

Both constructionists and constructivists have embraced the notion of narrative (Neimeyer, 2000; Gergen and Kaye, 1992). Narrative requires relationships. No story is told in a vacuum. No story is devoid of intermingling beliefs, images, meanings. Stories might be seen as *offerings* into a way of living a life. I say this because it differs so radically from the scientific tradition we inherit from modernism. In science, we *tell it like it is*. Objectivity and reason reign. With narrative, we populate our rationalities – our ways of making sense out of the world – with people, events, context, history, culture, family, and all the quirky things that go along with that. Science depends on rational individuals. Stories, on the other hand, depend on characters, storytellers, audiences. They shift and vary as these elements shift and vary.

I think that the use of narrative points to the relational commonalities between constructionism and constructivism. Rather than argue about the individualist hangover inherent in constructivism or critique social construction for the relinquishing of individual responsibility (as many critics do), attention to the relational aspects of meaning making *can* give us a common focus. A focus on the relational aspects of both allows us to bridge what could be seen as incommensurate differences. We can make a choice: to focus on differences and maintain the discourse of debate (who has the truth and who doesn't) or to focus on threads of similarity thereby creating the possibility to engage in dialogue (relational coordination). While some constructionists and some constructivists disagree about whether meaning making resides in the social domain (performance) or in the private recesses of individual minds, both agree that *what*

people do together is central to the meaning making process. Dialogue, then, plays a central role for both. Mair (1988) suggests, in fact, that if Kelly's metaphor of "person as scientist" was transformed into "person as storyteller," we might capture what Kelly was most interested in capturing: the complexity of personal and social meaning. If we use recent constructivists' attempts (Neimeyer, 2000; and Drewery, Winslade, & Monk, 2000) to focus on narrative, not as a structure, but as a process of meaning making, then we find the gap between constructivism and constructionism recede.

Yet, as rich as the metaphor of narrative may appear, it raises problems that could potentially prolong the chasm between constructivism and constructionism. Gergen and Kaye (1992) point to the common understandings of narrative as either a lens that determines how we see the world or as an internal model of the world that guides our behavior. Since constructivists come from a tradition of privileging the private, cognitive description of meaning-making, there are ample cases where narrative is used also in this private, individualist manner (see Goncalves, 1995; Goncalves, 2002).

The constructionist understanding of narrative is ultimately relational. Here, we shift from a focus on cognitive features of the person to the ways in which people engage with each other. Such a focus directs our attention to language practices as opposed to private thoughts. Neimeyer (2000) identifies the constructivist narrative as intrapersonally focused while constructionist narrative is interpersonally focused. Constructionists describe narratives as forms of action, as social performances. They are not, as more cognitively oriented constructivists would claim, causal schemas explaining our actions. By offering the intra-interpersonal distinction, Neimeyer attempts, as I am here, to bridge constructionist and constructivist

positions. His attempt to do so, in my view, underscores the relational focus that might bridge these seemingly incommensurate discourses in two ways. First, it clarifies the *different* senses of narrative as they are used by constructivists (cognitive, intrapersonal scheme) and constructionists (dialogic performances with others). Second, in clarifying the distinctions (rather than arguing for one over the other) Neimeyer, himself, *performs* just the sort of transformation that I am interested in and, in doing so, offers a connection between the two approaches. For me, a nice way to expand this common link in the relational is to go back to the words of Kelly (a forefather of constructivism - but not the only one) and Wittgenstein (a forefather of constructionism). Kelly, as mentioned above, uses the metaphor of “person as scientist.” He describes a scientist’s “ultimate aim is to predict and control” (1955, p. 5). Whether or not we can predict and control the social world, isn’t it possible for us to see a link between Kelly’s image of the person – a person wishing to make his or her way through life in a way that is coherent (by some relational standards) – and Wittgenstein’s (1953) orienting question, “How do we go on?” Both were concerned with the future. And, perhaps it is in this future (not the past) that the relational commonalities between constructivism and constructionism might flourish. Their shared narrative focus provides a common means for moving away from pathology toward potential, for expanding our resources for action as psychologists and psychotherapists, and for attending to processes of relating as opposed to forestructures of the mind. Our interest is not in *why* a narrative is told but *how* it is told and who populates that narrative.

Narrative can be described as a common means for expanding our resources for action. Much of the debate between constructionists and constructivists centers on the personal/social

(or otherwise stated, the cognitive/performative) distinctions. But, as I mentioned earlier, we can easily describe our private, inner construct systems as a myriad of relations that we carry with us (see McNamee and Gergen, 1999, p. 11-13). Of course, this way of putting things is consistent with the historical and cultural focus of meaning in which constructionists are interested. What we take to be private thoughts now become the confluence of conversations – real, imagined, virtual – with which we have in some way engaged over time.

Having deconstructed the private/social split that has divided constructionism and constructivism, we must turn our attention to how such a deconstruction – how such a focus on the relational – expands our resources for action. In the remainder of this chapter I would like to address the common focus on narrative that has emerged in both constructivist and constructionist work. Yet, it is important to clarify that narrative, as I use the term, refers to embodied, coordinated activities among people. This view of narrative differs from discussions of narrative as a cognitive structure *through which* we view and make sense of the world.

From Narratives as Structure to Narratives as Performance

Specifically, and practically, I would like to propose that the common issue is how the relational aspect of narrative underscores coordination and in so doing provides us with generative ways of focusing on the future and thereby constructing alternative paths for “going on together.”¹ To do so, we must move from a view of narrative as structure to a view of

¹For philosophical reasons, I am choosing Wittgenstein’s focus on *how we go on together* rather than Kelly’s focus on *person as scientist predicting and controlling* because it allows us to operate outside of the discourse of science.

narrative as performance. As a performance, narrative requires coordination with others, and is, therefore, relational. However, I would like to propose that this view of narrative does not require an abandonment of what Neimeyer refers to as the constructivist attention to the intrapersonal coherence.

Earlier I suggested that what we have come to describe as private, inner thoughts can be refigured as *internal conversations* (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) that we carry with us. Whether the conversations we carry are actual, imagined, or virtual, they are relational. They require the voices of others. It might be helpful to grasp the relational nature of our private narratives by thinking of the ways in which we rehearse our anticipated performance in a setting. As I *try out* my lines, my moves, my stance, I hear the voices of other relevant players. Some of those players might be my actual partners in conversation. Others might well be voices of significant people in my life. When we talk about our beliefs, our thoughts, our private meanings, we are really giving voice to our inner dialogue. And dialogue, we know, is populated with others – it is, ultimately, relational.

This description simultaneously allows us to hold on to the focus on narrative coherence that constructivists privilege while envisioning the *private, inner narrative* as a form of relational coordination. Psychological processes are social actions as are all the interpersonal constructions of meaning. One is not more or less relational. One is not more or less performative. And we can use this formulation to fashion therapeutic questions. We can ask, “how many voices/conversations/relationships do I carry?” “how would these other voices tell this story?” In doing so, what we have been characterizing as a form of cognitive coherence can be described as inherently relational. In this way, the static image of narrative structure takes on a

performative, active quality. It is, in addition, a quality that engenders coordination with others (again, either actual, imagined, or virtual) and by so doing, remains within a deeply relational frame. Coordination, as an important aspect of narrative, highlights our interdependencies on others. Additionally, when cast as a network of internal others who we carry in conversation with us, the personal is re-situated as social. Our private inner reaches are fashioned as polyphonic. And, once again, the emphasis on coordination with others – an inherently relational activity – is required in order to *construct a narrative* that plays with the multiplicity of voices.

How might we actually put these ideas into practice and in so doing create a bridge between constructionism and constructivism? Are there any resources upon which we can draw to facilitate such a bridging? Let me suggest three as only an opening to further conversation among constructionists and constructivists interested in dialogues of transformation.

There are, I believe, a variety of ways we can make the intrapersonal, the private, the individual and cognitive structures into more dynamic, relational dialogues that require social coordination. The forms of discourse identified below are not meant as an exhaustive list but rather as a means of generative possibility. My hope is that the following discursive options open us to a view of narrative that collapses the personal/social dichotomy and offers the relational bridge between constructivism and constructionism.

Narratives of legitimation. What are the stories that lend coherence to a situation or a relationship? In the face of conflicting views or sedimented narratives we can note a tendency for abstraction in our stories. Phrases such as “That’s just the way I am,” or “This is the way it should be done” seem to flourish. Doesn’t it seem likely that we speak from these abstract

positions because they appear to carry more rhetorical force? After all, the idea of *a way things should be done* or *a way I can't help but be* seem powerful features of social life – too powerful to overcome. It would be interesting to explore in a focused and detailed manner the relationship between sedimented narratives and narratives of abstraction. But for the moment, let us note that the connection between the two is common (if not properly documented).

It is in precisely these instances that an invitation to a narration of legitimacy could open the door to more fruitful coordinations. Can we engage clients in therapy in detailing a story about how they see their relationship to their present circumstances? I draw here from the work of the Public Conversations Project (Roth, Chasin, Chasin, Becker, and Herzig, 1992). In their attempt to move groups and individuals locked in heated debate on important, “hot” issues, they suggest that opening with a question about each person’s *personal* relationships to the issue invites a move toward dialogue (coordination among disparate views). Couldn’t this same discourse – what I propose here as *the discourse of legitimation* – be generative in psychotherapy? Wouldn’t such a question invite a story, populated by significant others, and illustrative of sincere coordination among participants? And wouldn’t such a question and the story it invites move everyone beyond a the notion that people have their private belief systems and instead toward a recognition of our beliefs and meanings as conversations that require relational coordination?

Narratives of difference. Another range of relational coordination can be energized by inviting clients to coordinate their own narrative of legitimacy with the stories of legitimacy they have either heard others offer or imagine they might offer. This could be others who are in some way related to the difficulty being discussed. They could also usefully be others who the client

might not typically connect with the current situation/issue. Imagining how these “unrelated others” might legitimate a particular scenario, situation, or relationship can facilitate an appreciation for the variation in perspectives on a given issue. Such appreciation resonates with the complexity of social life and avoids the simplistic parsing of life events into dualities such as “right or wrong” or “good or bad.” Once confronted with such a broad range of legitimacy narratives, participants might engage in attempts to coordinate the multiplicity rather than distill the complex into the simple. This form of coordination ensures that multiple voices and relationships in some way (perhaps imaginatively or virtually) participate in personal and social transformation.

Narratives of uncertainty. Once we open dialogue on how others might offer stories that legitimate a particular belief, activity, or situation, we are poised to reflect on our own narrative with a healthy sense of uncertainty. In other words, once we move into dialogue (i.e., coordination) with diverse stories, our own story becomes less sedimented. In the process of transformation, I find that entertaining doubt about one’s own narrative is useful. Here I am not suggesting doubt or uncertainty that is self-critical or likely to create yet another dichotomy (I’m good/I’m not good). Rather, I am referring to the ways in which we might invite our clients in therapy into constructing *complex* narratives that by definition require relational coordination. For example, we could say that sexual abuse can be narrated in many different ways. To the perpetrator, there is one story (the story of legitimation). To the victim there is a very different story (the story of right and wrong). If we employ this idea of uncertainty, might we be encouraged to start our conversations differently. Rather than invite the narrative of legitimation or the narrative of justice, might it be useful to engage in a dialogue about the multitude of

possible stories and the local coherence of each? Might we construct transformation in questioning the dominance of any one story and instead exploring what story helps us *coordinate* all the narratives of legitimation with each other. Narratives of uncertainty encourage us to ask (ourselves and our clients), *How else might we describe this?* This sort of self reflexive inquiry also underscores the relational nature of our own dialogues with ourselves. It illustrates the generative ways in which we can draw upon our own multiple voices in the construction of change.

Narratives of possibility. Finally, we might consider how dialogue about the future, about possibilities rather than pathologies (McNamee, 2002) might underscore meaning making as relational. Here we might consider if there are any narrative possibilities for a different future. In some instances, these stories might be stories of ideal scenarios. In other cases, they might be more “pragmatic” but yield a narrative of possibility simply in shifting the conversation from the past to the future. It is important to note here that dialogue about the future does not ignore or replace narratives of the past. Rather, stories about the past are integrated into the imagined future. Here, it is worth noting that there is a significant difference between positions that disregard the past (a common and misplaced critique of some versions of social construction) and the position I offer here. As a constructionist, I am *very* concerned with the past. However, I am not interested in how or why the past causes the present. Rather, I am interested in the conversational traditions and conventions that are woven into the fabric of the interactive moment by virtue of our emersion in relational networks. And, more directly to the present point concerning possibility and future potential, I am interested in how our conversational traditions, conventions, and narrations of our past are *imagined* into our futures. In other words, how do we

invite others into coordination of potential? It should be clear that narratives of possibility are not simply “pollyanna-ish” fantasies. They are, instead, emblematic of action that is relational in nature. They are emblematic of the interconnectedness of all our narratives as well as emblematic of the diversity of voice we all carry.

Relational Coordination

The narrative genres suggested here stand only as invitations to the many ways we can engage in dialogue – and thus, relational coordination – among constructivists and constructionists. Narrative is a social performance and as such, narrative can be seen as the coordination among relationships. The narrative genres identified above are not new. They simply stand as potential openings to dialogue. I have tried to sketch here the common bond between constructionism and constructivism by carefully selecting the ways in which both theories can optimize a dialogic focus. Our common interest as constructionists and constructivists is on meaning-making. In particular, we concern ourselves with generative and transformative processes of meaning-making that allow people to “predict and control” their lives in ways that facilitate “going on” with others. It is in these areas that I find constructionists and constructivists can embellish each other’s conversations. Surely there are many topics each group can discuss that create and continue incommensurate and divisive debate. My attempt here is not to say such debate is wrong, nor to suggest it is damaging. I wish only to propose some common threads that might help us join in dialogue and thus in the communal construction of meaning about personal and social life.

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