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APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY
Social Construction in Practice

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Many of the traditional and trusted understandings of organizational theory and practice have come under sharp question as our organizations become globalized. Theorists, researchers, and organizational leaders are all recognizing that organizational life is part of everyone's life. Organizations are central players in shaping the economy, the political agenda, the physical environment, as well as the sense of community - both locally and globally. Organizational life is deeply intertwined with issues of central importance to us such as how we educate our children, how we integrate diversity into our lives, how we generate a sense of what is valued, and how we rebuild neglected countries, cities, and neighborhoods. In other words, our study of organizational communication is not only about isolated organizations and their communication practices. Organizational life is about *sustainable life forms*. It is an area of study where we come to understand how our actions create the worlds in which we live.

This said, we must accept that the quality of future life on the globe depends on the outcome of newly emerging forms of organizational process. Based on an understanding that the most pressing issues of our time transcend organizational, cultural, and even national boundaries, organizational leaders are experimenting with new cooperative ways of doing business in which the dialogic construction of values, beliefs, knowledge, ethics, and daily practices generates

sustainable results. This interest places communication at the forefront of organizational understanding. How can our forms of practice engender collaborative partnerships where diverse voices, competing ideologies, and opposing traditions can all be heard and respected? Is it possible, we must ask, to abandon our desire to "discover" *the* proper way of making decisions, putting plans to action, mediating conflict, and so forth? Can we, instead, examine organizational practices from an orientation of "interested inquiry" where we explore how various and often competing discursive traditions enable possibilities? Can we do this without requiring consensus, which attempts to erase differences, and instead strive toward transformative dialogue where multiplicity is coordinated rather than obliterated?

The study of organizational practices must focus on the ways in which our joint activities create and sustain communities of participants. It also must focus on how we invite organizational participants to engage in organizational life with a sense of curiosity and respect for different and often opposing traditions, as opposed to a sense of defense and justification of one's own traditions. To recognize the global significance of organizational life requires equal attention to local communities and their traditions.

It is important to remember that the study of organizational life is (1) relevant to all of us, (2) a major venue for broader social transformation, and (3) constructed in discourse -- i.e., what we do together. The reality of any given organization is likely to vary by virtue of the internal or external groups with which it relates. Additionally, the reality of any given organization is real by virtue of *how* people talk and act within, as well as outside of, the organization. We can already anticipate that today's focus on globalization, where organizations from one country or hemisphere partner with organizations from another, multiplies the potential for competing

realities and thus the need to somehow coordinate them becomes essential. This concern must be a major focus of our study of organizational life. Social construction offers us just this focus.

Social Construction

The relational orientation of social construction assumes that meaning is not private, locked away inside an individual but that meaning emerges in the joint activities of persons in relation. To talk of meaning as relational requires that we replace our emphasis on individuals and their internal motivations, intentions, perceptions and so forth with an emphasis, instead, on the coordinated activities of people engaging with one another. We want to focus on people *conversing* with one another, where *conversation* is used in the most general sense encompassing all forms of bodily and verbal engagement.

For the social constructionist, then, communication does not require competent or accurate conveyance of one's meanings to another. Rather, meaning is created in the coordination of activities among people. To that end, meaning is *actively* coordinated by *us* in our on-going activities. As you converse with others, the meaning of your words and actions has the potential to change, shift, and alter. Meaning is never fixed. It is not stable and unchanging. There is, then, no way for me, once and for all, to tell you what I "mean."

Yet to re-orient ourselves away from a view that meaning is in our heads requires a significant shift. And, it is a difficult shift to make. Let me spend some time on this issue, hopefully phrasing it in terms that invite some new conversations to take place among us.

Out of the head and into social practices. It seems only natural to us to accept the idea that meaning is an individual's possession. After all, when I look at you, I see a body that is separate from my own and others. Who would want to question if you have private thoughts,

ideas, motivations, intentions, aspirations, emotions, and more? And is it not the wide variation among our private motivations, intentions, ideas, and so forth that makes living so difficult? Are not all the problems of the world, of social life, linked to the problem of meaning? Poor performance in school is a sign of a student's inability to grasp the correct meaning of the material. Social injustices, like prejudice, are easily explained as the byproducts of those who do not "understand" what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. Genocide, economic instability, religious oppression would cease to exist if we could control meaning.

The problem is that we can not control meaning. And by locating meaning within individual heads, we contribute to the complexity of the problem. If only we could design the *right* style of organizational leadership, we could work more effectively. If we could create pedagogical practices that work for particular topics or types of people, we could educate the masses. These hopes are heavily layered with that sense of rationality and logic which we inherit from our modernist tradition (Gergen, 1992). There is a simple method that will lead us to truth – not only to truth but to truth with assurance.

Such is the promise of the tradition within which we live. This is a tradition that identifies all agency, that is, the ability to act upon the world, within individuals. It is a tradition that assumes that if we simply apply our skills and our knowledge diligently, we will find the answers to life's complexity. It is a tradition that holds dearly to the belief that objectivity is possible and desirable. There are ample times when such a stance is of merit and some times have "the" answer is a relief to people. And, there are equally times when such a stance perpetuates the problems within an organization. Social construction, as a philosophical sensibility or as a way of "living a life," simply casts all models or theories for organizational life

as *discursive options*. In so doing, we are free to invite others into various forms of practice in our attempts to construct relationally sensitive organizations. To speak “objectively” can have as much merit as being willing to entertain dreams and visions of the future. Each discourse has its potential and its constraints. The pragmatic utility of social construction is that, as an orienting sensibility, it invites all discursive variations into the dialogue.

Unlike what many believe, social construction is not an orientation to be classed with political liberalism (Rawls, 1993). It is not a means by which to advocate neutral principles (cf, Fish, 1999 for a treatment of the problem with this notion). Social construction, as a discourse, offers a strong commitment to talking about human affairs as necessarily populated with values, moralities, and ethics. For, if it is within relational enclaves that meaning emerges, it must be within these same enclaves that moralities are given birth. The issue we must confront is what we do when different relational enclaves meet – each equipped with their varying and often incommensurate moralities and beliefs. It is here, in the interstices of these incompatible worlds, that social construction can offer us resources for action. Before articulating what those might be, let me discuss how such a claim can be made.

If meaning is constructed in the joint activities of persons in relation, then any theory or model is not a truth telling but is a very local way of understanding. It is local in that it is produced in relation to others in the immediate circumstances. It is local in that it is coherent and sufficient for those who participate in its making.

With this as a starting place, we can begin to talk about the place and significance of cultural traditions, local conventions, historical canons and so forth in the making of our worlds. This is not an argument about what is *ultimately* right. It is also not an argument about where

truth resides. It is, in all practical aspects, an argument about co-existence. The question is simple. How do we live together in a complex world, inhabited by so many differing beliefs, truths, values, and so forth? Can we put aside the question of *which* truths, values, beliefs are better and address instead the question of coordination? And more to the point, how might we do this in organizational life? Since my work is focused on articulating and elaborating social constructionism as a “practical theory,” issues that I find enormously important in the study of organizations as well as other practical social domains include: (1) what differences in the world can such a theory offer?, (2) what new forms of relationship can the theory inspire?, and (3) how can theory provide us with ways to move beyond impasse, conflict, and alienation toward generative ways of going on together? Given these concerns, I attempt to focus my work on putting theory to practice.

Appreciative inquiry offers us one resource for moving beyond conflicting truths toward coordination of multiple values, beliefs, and activities. Appreciative inquiry, as an illustration of social construction in action, is one approach that invites us to create new organizational realities together – organizational realities that allow participants to *go on together* in Wittgenstein’s (1953) words.

My view is that appreciative inquiry makes its strongest contribution to the field of organizational studies by expanding our resources for engaging with others and thus, for engaging in transformative dialogue. By exploring the potentials for relational forms of practice, as I believe appreciative inquiry does, we can add rich and supple resources to our repertoire of extant practices. The main point of all this work, to me, is to recognize that forms of practice are options not truths.

Appreciative Inquiry as Social Construction in Action: Resources for Relational Practice

Elsewhere (McNamee and Gergen, 1998), I have discussed a range of practices that draw upon – or take as their starting place – the relational construction of meaning. What can we do when we are confronted with diverse commitments and beliefs, when we are faulted for our actions or tempted to fault others for theirs? What can we do when we feel the weight of individual evaluation? It is in these moments that the reservoir of other voices, drawn from our myriad relationships, can be employed to move conversation beyond conflict, blame, deficit, dysfunction, inadequacy and the like toward potentials for collaborative coordination. One way in which these relational resources can be realized is by exploring forms of practice that locate our actions within some relational configuration, rather than *within us as self contained individuals* (Sampson, 1993).

My colleague, Kenneth Gergen, and I have suggested four particular relational resources: internal others, conjoint relations, relations among groups, and the systemic swim (1998). Each of these resources draws upon a dimension of our relational being. And, as I would like to illustrate in what follows, each offers an opening for not only new resources for action but for novel ways to invite others into constructing generative organizational practices. If we acknowledge that the organizational realities within which we live are byproducts of our coordinated activities with others, then how might we utilize these relational resources in an appreciative manner? How might conversations about what works in an organization, what participants in the organization value, what organizational participants imagine as an ideal future function to transform organizational life?

Internal others. We all carry with us many voices, many differing opinions, views and

attitudes - even on the same subject. These voices represent the accumulation of our past relationships. In effect, we carry the residues of many others with us; "we contain multitudes." Yet, most of our actions - along with the positions we adopt in conversations - are one dimensional. Communication becomes quickly patterned, regardless of the many resources we have for transforming our problematic conversations. What we actually do in unwanted, but repeated patterns is represent only a small segment of all that we might do and say. In cases where we are prompted to blame individuals, we might ask: What other voices are available to this person, and to me? Why are they not being heard? How can they be brought into the conversation? How can we bring our many other potentials into action?

It is here that appreciative inquiry becomes a practical application of social constructionist principles. As Cooperrider (1990, 1995) articulates, most of our talk in organizations is based on the premise that "organizing is a problem to be solved." Thus, we engage in "problem solving talk" which requires us to define the problem, analyze what the causes of the problem are, explore why attempted solutions have failed and work to develop an action plan. If the reality we live is constructed by what we do with others, then when we are talking about and relating with each other around problems, we are constructing a reality of problems. Cooperrider's suggestion is that we begin instead with the premise, "organizing is a mystery to be embraced." Starting here invites us into conversations about what we value, about our "high points," and our dreams. When we invite each other into conversations focused on past, present, and future possibilities and successes, our entire set of options shift. We find ourselves engaged in the construction of potential. The literature on appreciative inquiry is abundant with illustrations of just this sort of practice. Researchers and consultants alike have

found generative ways to invite organizational members to communicate with their voice of appreciation rather than their voice of fault-finding which, unfortunately, is the typical one invited into organizational life (see for example, Barrett, 1995 and Hammond and Royal, 1998, to name only two excellent sources).

Conjoint relations. Here our focus shifts to the domain of public interchange or joint action. We are not concerned with action-reaction cycles but with patterns where each action depends on another for its intelligibility. Focus is on the way in which meanings are generated, sustained, and disrupted in relationships. Actions, in themselves, have no meaning. There is no means of extricating self from other. One's actions are never independent. They acquire intelligibility as actions by virtue of others. For example, a hostile action is scarcely hostile but for the treatment of it as such by another. Additionally, when problematic meanings and associated practices become ritualized in a relationship, the suggestion here would be to engage in modes of denaturalization. By this I mean a disruption of the rituals with alternative moves. This requires an exploration of alternative forms of supplementation or interpretation. Finally, when we identify problems in relationships we can consider that it is not only those involved who are at play but what each person does or says gains its coherence from some other relational domain. Can we inquire into those other relationships?

Again, we can note how appreciative inquiry, when coupled with this notion of conjoint relations, can shift organizational practices beyond impasse and conflict. Unlike my earlier suggestion to call upon the “voice of appreciation” in self or other, here our focus might be on valuing how *we* achieve or even do not achieve certain potentials in our organizational life. Can we center our attention on the magic of our *joint achievements* thereby demonizing no one

person? Might we capitalize on how we can move toward preferred futures *together*? One effective way to denaturalize our unproductive but ritualized practices in organizations is to talk about these patterns as cooperative constructions rather than accomplishments of one individual.

Relations among groups. We often use the language of individualism to refer to or describe the operations of larger groups. For example, we say, "the organization decided," or "government controls," or "the family feels." We similarly use this language to talk about relations among groups: "business beliefs about government," or "the Smith family's anger at the Jones." In fact, even disciplinary talk takes this form: political scientists describe nations as struggling or competing, sociologists describe the ambitions of social movements, communication scholars refer to the symmetry of relationships.

By transforming individualist talk to broader social groups we move rituals of individual blame into the relational sphere. We now see the individual's actions as manifestations of larger aggregates. For example, a husband's unprovoked anger is seen as a manifestation of competition in the workplace. Theft becomes an issue of economic class relations. Individuals only serve as exemplars of relationships among groups. Further, we are compelled to understand our construction of another's actions in terms of the larger institutions by which we are constituted. What we define as theft we do by virtue of the our privileged place in the class structure. Yet, within the framework of those engaged in the action, it is seen as heroism or self preservation.

Again, we find that appreciative inquiry, combined with this relational intelligibility, illustrates the powerful potential of social constructionist practice in organizations. By focusing on the significant groups or communities with which members from an organization affiliate, and

by using the discourse of appreciation, we draw ourselves and others into conversations that are marked by what I call *interested inquiry*. That is, we become *curious* about unseen communities and groups that might support or value the actions of an organizational member. Once a contested action or a contested person is located within a broader community where respect, coherence, and validation are forthcoming, the possibility for new conversations emerges. While I might have a difficult time agreeing with your actions or your opinion of how the organization should operate, I can not disagree with your stories about how your decisions have been or could be valued within your significant communities outside of the organization. And by engaging in conversation about these communities, we all have the possibility of finding new ways of coordinating your own activities within the organization.

It is important to note here that appreciating and valuing relations among groups is not introducing irrelevant information into our organizational operations. In the global economy of today, the number of communities and groups that any one person affiliates with is expansive. To silence these voices in our organizational life is akin to allowing only a fraction of each person into the organization. To the extent that we make these other communities irrelevant to our organizational activities, we impede our ability to coordinate the complexities of social life and thus we construct our organizations as *artificial communities* that are dissociated from the wide range of relations we engage.

Systemic process. In many fields, ecology, physics, mysticism, spirituality, there is a presumption that the universe is not comprised of isolated units. Furthermore, any relationship among units themselves are not autonomous. General Systems theory has attempted this sort of argument as has deconstruction theory. The meaning of any event or action is informed by the

whole system of language.

Such a position implies that there are no untoward events to which we have not each made a contribution. Another's problem is also our problem. From this position, we are invited to multiply the discourses of exploration. If any recognizable unit can be related to any other, then the landscape of possibilities for understanding any action is without horizon. How are our problems as an organization related to our family relationships, the state of the economy, increasing crime rates, depletion of the ozone? How can we draw upon and use metaphors, images, technologies from other relational domains? Is there a way in which these might contribute? Can we ask, "how is this action reflecting the context in which this individual works, the state of our relationship at this point, the condition of the country and other events or conditions that might be relevant? How are we all contributing to this kind of occurrence?"

The relational resources offered by the idea of systemic process combined with organizational inquiry that is premised on the discourse of appreciation is illustrative of social construction in action. When organizational members act they are not *telling the truth* or *operating from universal, objective principles*. They are, instead, *inviting* others into particular forms of organizational life. And, if my actions are not seen as *representing* the ways things *should* be, but rather as manifestations of myriad social processes, might we begin to value the variation? Might we begin to take note of the ways in which diversity contributes positively to organizational life? Might we begin to *expect* differences rather than assign difference the status of "problem" in the organization? Again we see that the coupling of organizational inquiry premised on locating the coherence of all and any action with the broader systemic processes positions our organizations to coordinate multiplicity rather than suppress it. To me, this is a

prerequisite for organizational life in today's global economy.

Elements of the Appreciative Organization

There are several organizational practices that emerge from the above discussion. In what follows, I will focus attention on one common aspect of organizational life: evaluation or the review process. Let us consider how relationally oriented practices, generated within the discourse of appreciation and value might refigure evaluation in organizations.

Focus on relational configurations, not individuals. Relationships are the primary source of good and bad, right and wrong. Traditional review or evaluation processes in organizations are attempts to give feedback to members about their "fit" with what is "right or good" for the organization. In the appreciative organization, the expectation is that different segments of the organization are likely to have translated organizational values into different forms of practice. If leadership is valued in one segment, team work might well be valued in another. These differences are not seen as competing but rather as coherent forms of practice and sense making that emerge from the day to day activities of members. The chore of adjudicating which set of values and priorities is "right" gives way to the creativity of crafting opportunities where these different realities can be engaged. In place of the stability and uniformity of the traditional organization, the appreciative organization finds ways of valuing diversity.

Include multiple voices. Organizations are populated by many and diverse members. Each brings a particular form of expertise to the organization. Members working in different departments, ranks, locals, or speciality areas of the organization might not appreciate the talents and abilities offered by members in another simply because they have no connection, that is, no

relationship, with these other factions of the organization. The inclusion of all voices, therefore, provides the opportunity for the nuanced ways in which members contribute to the overall effectiveness of the organization. The appreciative organization creates opportunities for members not directly aligned to come together. Additionally, each organizational member carries the resources for action that have emerged within multiple relationships. Often, what is of value in the organization might be expanded by giving voice to these unheard resources. A solution to a family conflict might, with small adjustments, aid in project success in the organization. Introducing members from distinctly different segments of the organization, who might not otherwise or ordinarily need to know each other or know about each other's work, could potentially improve organizational functioning. When it comes to the process of review, valuing these various voices contributes to the overall sense of an appreciative organization.

Generate participatory practices. To shift from evaluation to valuation in organizations requires inviting all members into the process of review. Standards set by a few relay a message that only those few members are experienced enough to judge the performance of others. "Just any member" can not possibly know what is good or useful for the organization. If that were the case, why would members be part of the organization? Generating participatory practices, particularly in the process of review, allows organizational members to coordinate their various views about effective and productive contributions for the organization. Members who participate in creating the terms upon which they will be reviewed are able to reflect on the strengths they are most willing and able to offer the organization.

Envision effective futures. Where traditional evaluation focuses on one's past performance, the appreciative organization focuses on valuing what might be possible for the

future. Organizational members are likely to become inspired and hopeful as they collaborate with colleagues on how to further develop resources moving the organization forward. The excitement of members' visions for the future ignite creativity in constructing action plans. If colleagues know where another's abilities and interests are focused, the group can work together to enhance possibilities for further development and use of those interests and talents. The entire organization benefits. The appreciative organization is sensitive to today's conditions and tomorrow's potentials while letting yesterday's "good ideas" serve as only one among an array of potentials. An emphasis on the value of members within the organization provides the possibility to focus on the future.

Emphasize and coordinate strengths, abilities, and passions. In the appreciative organization, the focus is on members' interdependencies, on the potential for new meanings to emerge in the fostering of new connections, on respect and caring of all relationship potentials, on dialogue, on possibilities, on situated activities, on continuous conversation, and on stories of success and appreciation. These features leave little room for the tradition of evaluation where dialogue centers on what is not working well. The appreciative organization engages in valuing processes where members are continuously inviting each other into productive and engaging performances. In the appreciative organization, one member's success is every members' success and is catalytic in the continual evolution of the organization.

How might organizations be different if the voice of appreciation and possibility were dominant?

In my own context, a university, I attempt to engage in relational forms of practice such as appreciative inquiry. As a professor I see the classes I teach, the committees on which I serve,

and my general orientation to the organization we call “the university,” as “laboratories” for putting into practice my more theoretical and conceptual writings on the relational construction of realities. All of these contexts, as well as my professional work outside the university giving workshops, seminars, lectures, conferences, and consulting, help me to reflect on the potentials of relational practice and the myriad ways in which to engage relationally.

But it is worthwhile, I believe, to address some of the impediments to these forms of practice. If we are going to succeed in practicing alternatives modes of action in our organizations, it might be useful to acknowledge the hurdles we might confront. In my own organizational context the difficulty comes when I confront the dominant organizational tradition of the university itself. While my classes may serve as mini-oases in the desert of rampant hierarchy and individual traits, abilities, and motivations, I often lose hope for any sort of transformative dialogue for the university/organizational structure itself. I am constantly reminding myself that change in small arenas is significant change and probably the most useful place to begin. Just a few of the changes I have noticed in my own use of relational practices are:

- Taking time, sometimes what seems like an enormous amount of time, in the beginning of a class, project, or implementation of a new program to develop relationships where all members feel their differences are respected on their own terms – even if they are not “accepted” by others or agreed to – reduces “work time” later on for the group. By finding a way to locate each other’s orientation to a given topic, task, project within a set of relationships that are *significant* for each person, we move closer to finding a way to coordinate multiple discourses, as opposed to striving for consensus where no one is

really satisfied. I have found the relational resources mentioned above extremely useful in moving beyond incommensurate beliefs to an appreciation for diversity.

- Defining together what will count as “success,” “improvement,” etc. helps to create a relational context where people can coordinate their multiplicity. Again, these interpretations can only be crafted cooperatively if we *begin* with an appreciation for differences as well as an assumption of actions as coherent and valued in *some* community or group.
- Moving from discussion of abstract principles to situated activities of persons in relation helps to create an atmosphere of participatory engagement. While I can disagree with your position, I can not tell you that the story of your experience is wrong. If we invite others in our organizations to tell us their stories – and more important, if we ask them to tell stories of high points, successes, excitement within the organization – we are more likely to become intrigued, curious, inquisitive, and engaged. In our curiosity and engagement come possibilities for relational engagement of a different genre. The hope would be, of course, to first construct relationships based on value and recognition among organizational members. Stories help us to achieve this goal.
- By recognizing our own parts in constructing the situations we find ourselves in, we are better able to enter into conversation with curiosity for the communities and relationships that give value and meaning to particular actions that we tend to disagree with rather than simply try to eliminate those actions, persons, or issues.

These are only a few of the possibilities that opened when we invite alternative constructions of organizational life.

At this point, it is useful to note that within the constructionist discourse, theory itself is a form of coordinated activity. This is important because we generally give theory the power of description, explanation, and prediction. If our theories can “get it right” about the social world which can be determined through research which continually provides “evidence” that supports the theory, we need only refer to those theories to know how to act in the world with success. If theory is granted this superior status, then epistemology is boxed within a world where one either has or does not have an epistemology that “gets it right.”

However, within a constructionist sensibility, where all that we *know* emerges in the ongoing flow of coordinated activities amongst persons relating, any particular theory serves as a *discourse* for action. A theory invites particular forms of practice and eliminates others. The interesting question to ask is not whether a particular theoretical stance is true or not but what a particular stance allows us to do together and what it prohibits. To provide a constructionist summary of the issue, theory is not taken as a “truth telling” but is recognized as a form of coordinated activity among persons. Thus, theory becomes practical or generative (Gergen, 1994). We are interested in social practices where meaning is achieved relationally. These practices provide varying understandings of social life. All these variations have the *potential* to be generative and transformative but whether any one variation will be or not depends very much on the situated, local activities of participants relating together.

Some closing thoughts

What does this relational view of organizational life allow us to do? What happens when there is no individual freighted with the responsibility for knowing or acting? Instead, joint action is taken as the source of knowledge. A person's actions are responsive to what is going

on, what is being offered in the interactive moment and simultaneously those same actions serve as invitations themselves to certain realities, coordinations, and dances with others. With this emphasis we become curious about the conversations that create the problems, the successes, and the realities lived in organizations.

We face the challenge of fostering organizational environments that invite us to focus on what people do together. We must consider how to attend to the movement of conversations in and around our organizations. This is what gives life to an organization. We are challenged to explore traditions of practice as relational achievements. Organizational life, refigured relationally, sensitizes us to the possibilities for joint action. Without a relational understanding of human interchange we are burdened with the impossible task of knowing and acting correctly. Yet how could we or should we "know" or "act" correctly when there are so many different and even incommensurate communities participating? This problem is amplified as we understand the significance of the global organization in creating possibilities for today and into the future. In our attempts to create effective global organizations, we must focus on giving voice to the multiple discourses present. Perhaps a focus on the discourse of appreciation, of value, of what works, and of dreams could effectively replace our attention on individual characteristics that are assumed to "make" the organization succeed. The focus of organizing in a global world is on changing conversations, not changing people.

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