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Expanding Organizational Practices: Lessons from Therapeutic Conversations

Sheila McNamee and Harlene Anderson

sheila.mcnamee@unh.edu and harleneanderson@earthlink.net

This issue of the *AI Practitioner* features a range of collaborative practices originating in the field of therapy but which are gaining broad-scale use within organizations. These practices share with Appreciative Inquiry a focus on our actions and conversations with others. Like Appreciative Inquiry, the therapeutic conversation, when approached as a collaborative activity, provides us with opportunities not only for social, personal and relational transformation but also with a renewed focus on *language practices* rather than a focus on isolated individuals and their traits or motivations.

Articles in this issue focus on a constructionist understanding of language – that is, an understanding of language as a *performance* that requires others. We find that sensitivity to an appreciative stance invites others into collaboratively constructing their organizational realities together. Specifically, this issue underscores the constructionist philosophical stance that unites both Appreciative Inquiry and collaborative, dialogical orientations to organizations and therapy. Our hope, in editing this issue, is to highlight *forms of practice* as more central to our work in organizations than any particular technique or strategy.

We believe there is a danger in translating a constructionist stance into a set of techniques for organizational change work. When constructionism (or any of its elaborations, such as Appreciative Inquiry) becomes a set of disembodied techniques that the professional *employs* in order to produce change, the dialogic spirit of this philosophical stance is abandoned. To that end, the articles in this issue offer illustrations of collaborative, dialogic work in organizations where resources for action (not techniques) place our attention on what organizational members are *doing* in interactions and how their activities constrain and enable organizational transformation.

We begin this issue with an article by Sheila McNamee who details the central connections among social construction, dialogue and appreciative practices. Her offering here creates the backdrop against which each subsequent article elaborates the therapeutic influence of each author's work within organizations.

Harlene Anderson's article follows this opening piece. In this piece Harlene describes some of the very basic ideas that inform her work in organizations. These ideas draw directly on the constructionist notion of dialogue and underscore the centrality of listening, hearing and speaking as well as attending to one's inner dialogue. Harlene's article is followed by Eero Riikonen and Sara Vataja's conceptual extension of appreciative practice. They introduce us to several European philosophers who focus our attention on style as opposed to content. This distinction resonates with Harlene's focus on relational/dialogic processes rather than any particular form of action. We see this point reiterated in each of this issue's offerings since the constructionist stance alerts us to the bridging of incommensurate discourses rather than attempting to make the incommensurate commensurate (McNamee, 2004). In other words, it is the process (or style) that we focus on, not the determination of who agrees or who is correct. Riikonen and Vataja illustrate the importance of this focus on style/process/bridging, as well as the utility of using metaphors related to the arts, within their own organization.

The conceptual ideas introduced in the first three articles are illustrated in the remaining pieces. Each article highlights the centrality of adopting a participatory/collaborative stance within organizations. Celiane Camargo-Borges, Carla Guanaes and Emerson Rasera from Brazil describe the attempts within the Brazilian Healthcare system to introduce more participatory practices among community members and multi-disciplinary healthcare professionals. In their article, they discuss some innovative ideas that are transforming the organization of healthcare. In one community, dialogic processes are being introduced as a central feature to encourage interdisciplinary as well as professional/community member collaborations. Sylvia London, from Mexico City, also describes the way in which she has used collaborative therapeutic practices in her work with a law firm. Her consultation centered on finding new ways to bring members of this organization into dialogue, using instruments from the positive psychology movement in concert with a constructionist understanding of action and meaning. Her work not only helped develop a stronger sense of community among the law firm partners but also opened discussion on the previously taboo topic of gender distinctions within the firm. Her article speaks to the power of collaborative processes to move organizational members beyond difficult issues such as diversity and gender.

Picking up on the theme of challenging issues, Emerson Rasera (Brazil) offers another illustration of collaborative work in describing his own transition from group therapist to project manager of a non-governmental organization. He illustrates the utility of collaborative, language-centered work with a group of people living with AIDS who gathered first as a self-help group and eventually transformed into a political action group. Rasera's focus on relational process and his own participation in that process illustrates the power of dialogue as opposed to technique.

Finally, we end this issue with two offerings focused on management and leadership.

Caroline Ramsey from England draws on the therapeutic work of Frank Farrelly in teaching management courses. She offers her description of a connection between Farrelly's work and constructionist ideas by pointing to Farrelly's two orienting assumptions. Farrelly assumes that clients have the potential to change their actions and he assumes that any change in a client's actions is part of broader social processes. Ramsey describes how she uses Farrelly's ideas in her teaching, hoping to encourage managers (or future managers) to be attentive to their collaborative relations with others and the conversational resources they might use in organizational work.

Jorma Ahonen from Finland also looks closely at the role of management in his article. He develops a theme that we see woven throughout this issue: how to take tools and techniques popularly used in organizational work and transform them into dialogic processes. Ahonen shows how the use of the popular 360° method created conflict and distance within an organization. Learning from this experience, he describes how he designed a "dialogic 360° method" for evaluating management within an organization. By establishing mixed conversational groupings (e.g. managers-employees, colleagues, and CEO-managers) interspersed with reflecting conversations within the management team, Ahonen was able to create new relations among organizational members as well as create a sense of relational leadership and responsibility.

We find these articles exciting in their unique yet overlapping interests in featuring relational processes over techniques for social and organizational transformation. We hope these pieces offer stimulating ideas, innovative practices and provocative reflections on your own practice in organizations.

Sheila McNamee and Harlene Anderson
Guest editors, August 2006

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Connections among social construction, language and collaborative understanding

Sheila McNamee
sheila.mcnamee@unh.edu

It is not unusual for psychologists, particularly those who are clinically trained, to focus their therapeutic attention on organizations. This AI Practitioner issue features nine practitioners. Eight of these nine can claim a primary or "original" identity of "therapist." The ninth has been influenced by clinical work. Each story describes how therapeutic practices have influenced the authors' consultation and work within organizations. It is important to note that the therapeutic literature these authors draw upon converge in their constructionist orientation. The most important feature of this collection of essays is the philosophical and pragmatic articulation of constructionist ideas. By anchoring their work within a social constructionist philosophy, these authors privilege language practices over individual

capacities. To do so requires a focus on communication – what people do together – as constitutive of our worlds and meanings. The very simple point that constructionism offers (and yet many find difficult to understand) is that language does not simply describe what is “out there” in the world; language practices literally make our worlds.

This idea is troubling to many people because they interpret constructionism as promoting a form of “anchorless morality.” The critic will quickly claim that when we talk about the world (meaning) as created in our interactions with others, the logical conclusion is to “make the world different” if we don’t like the world as it is. However, this is said from within a philosophical duality that implies the real world on one hand and a “made up” (constructed) one on the other hand. The problem is that this is a misunderstanding about constructionism. Since constructionists do not accept the realist premise (i.e., there is a real world “out there” to be uncovered or discovered), constructionists also do not accept the duality of a “true reality” vs. a “made up reality.” The constructionist focus on language as constitutive of our worlds encompasses the very real world within which we all live. A person is not free to simply “make her own reality.” We need others to cooperate in the construction of our worlds. Instead of appearing to ignore or disrespect “what is really there,” the constructionist is relationally responsible (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) to the very local, situated aspects of any given interaction. To us, constructionism is genuinely moral.

Perhaps the easiest way to summarize this important point of departure for constructionists is to note that we are not arguing about whether or not there is a physical world “out there.” We are simply pointing out that *the way we talk about that world* as well as *the way in which we coordinate our actions with others within that world* is more important than the “fact” of any physical reality. Additionally, when we talk about organizations, we are talking less about buildings, materials, and objects and attending more to *people* and their ways of relating. Therapeutic process and organizational life informed by a constructionist stance focuses our attention on how our words and actions *invite* others into particular performances with us. Within organizations, as in personal relationships, we often unwittingly invite others into realities that are hierarchical, oppressive, strategic, and problem saturated. The idea shared by all of the offerings in this issue illustrate that if we attend to our coordinations with others - that is to the language practices we employ – we can make choices about what sorts of relations we invite ourselves and others into.

Thus, in therapy, as in organizations, placing our emphasis on what people are doing when they interact, rather than on the qualities, traits or motivations of separate individuals, yields a very different way of understanding human interaction. The interesting thing about centering our attention on language is that first, we cannot escape language. We live in language. Yet language is malleable – we can select different ways of talking and acting thereby inviting different sorts of responses from others. Appreciative Inquiry, as one elaboration of this constructionist stance, highlights the power of shifting our talk from a focus on problems and their solutions to valuing what works well, what we enjoy, and what gives life. Of course, the latter focus, in addition to creating a very different relational/organizational context within which to operate, invites us into dreaming and imagining our future. Contrarily, if we see problems as needing resolution before we can

move forward, we find ourselves trapped in contexts and relationships where imagination can be stifled. In the face of “real problems,” most traditionalists ask what the point is of dreaming and imagining a better future.

Another feature of the constructionist concern with language is that the notion of techniques or strategies that will promote wellbeing (as Riikonen and Vataja propose in their article) or social transformation is replaced with a sensitivity to how one can create the opportunity for dialogue. As Harlene Anderson describes in her essay, dialogue requires the presence of participants who are ready to listen to and respect the other. Dialogue requires a ‘witness’ form of thinking. Thinking of dialogue in these terms does not prohibit talk of problems. The articles presented in this issue offer illustrations of how the simple attention to language practices enhances participants’ abilities to move in and out of conversations that invite the search for new conversational resources – resources that might move the organization beyond conflict or oppression and toward a form of relational coordination and construction of a collaborative understanding.

Our hope in editing this issue is that any tendency to use appreciative practices as a tool or technique will be diminished. Our goal is to open our understanding of Appreciative Inquiry and what we consider resourceful practices to the richness of dialogue. Here, we draw on Stewart and Zediker’s (2002) description of dialogue where they describe a required “tensionality.” That is, participants “hold their own ground while letting the other ‘happen’ to them.” It is this quality of dialogue, this aspect of collaborative presence and attentiveness to our embodied activities that best captures the constructionist philosophy and the range of therapeutic models that can inform our work in organizations.

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